

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The sprawling RMC Lonestar cement plant in Davenport has several rock-solid claims to fame.

Making civilization's magic powder

By MARIA GAURA
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DAVENPORT — As you approach the town of Davenport at night, the RMC Lonestar cement plant looks like a city of lights on the horizon. Closer up, the lights reveal a city of industry, with towers of steel and gargantuan machinery grinding and rolling 24 hours a day.

Jutting abruptly from the serene

north coast landscape, the Davenport plant may be the most visible heavy industry in Santa Cruz County. But many people who drive past the plant have no idea what is produced in the giant kilns and silos. Some think it's a PG&E generator; some think it's an oil refinery.

Nothing could be further from the truth. RMC Lonestar is in the business of digging up rocks, blasting them with 2,000 degrees of heat and

crushing them into cement — "the magic powder of civilization."

With its lush green landscape, the north coast seems like an incongruous spot for a major manufacturing plant. But the Davenport site was chosen because of its proximity to shale and limestone deposits and the ocean, necessary for shipping in the early 1900s.

The history of the Davenport cement plant is rooted in the California Gold Rush of 1849. With the discovery of gold, the population of San Francisco exploded, from 40,000 in 1850 to 342,000 in 1900. Building materials were hard to come by on the frontier — cement had to be shipped to San Francisco from as far away as London and Rotterdam on wooden sailing ships.

In October of 1905, construction began on the Davenport plant, which was envisioned to become the second largest cement plant in the United States. Then came the

quake and fire of '06, which devastated San Francisco and increased the demand for stable, fireproof cement to rebuild the city.

With a redoubled effort, workers completed the plant in 1907, and ships loaded with Santa Cruz Portland Cement began steaming out. Lonestar officials note with pride that Santa Cruz cement was used to pour the foundations of both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge, as well as the locks of the Panama Canal, the Transamerica Pyramid, the California Aqueduct, the Oakland Coliseum, Candlestick Park, San Francisco Airport, Interstate 280 and Highway 101, and thousands of other projects.

In the past, making cement was a dirty, labor-intensive industry. Men dug the rocks, hauled them to

the plant and loaded them into kilns which were stoked by hand. Ash and smoke from the kilns dirtied the air, and cement dust from the plant's stacks dusted homes, cars and countryside for miles around Davenport.

But over the years, environmental law and technology have helped clean up the operation, and in 1981 the plant entered the modern age with a complete renovation.

Fully computerized, the Davenport plant is now one of the most technologically advanced in the world. Enormous grinders crush rocks into powder, and blowers

blast tons of coal dust into monstrous furnaces. Blistering heat radiates from the rotating kiln, and the noise of the machinery shakes the bones.

But the plant is eerily vacant. Hard-hatted workers can be glimpsed in a lunchroom or walking the office hallways, but no human hand is needed to stoke the furnaces, operate the blowers, adjust the mix of raw materials or test the final product.

About 140 people still work at the plant, down from the 230 or so needed to run the operation before the conversion.

The plant's computer center is quiet and modern, with a bank of computers resembling the set of Star Trek. Virtually every function

of the plant is controlled by computer and a handful of engineers in the operations center.

Before 1988, the plant was owned by Lone Star Industries, a cement and building materials manufacturer that owns 13 cement plants in the United States and seven in South America, as well as numerous quarries and ready-mixed cement plants.

But last year, the ownership was transferred to RMC Lonestar, a California partnership of Lonestar California Inc., New York Trap Rock Inc., and California Readymix Inc.

The three partners are subsidiaries of Lone Star Industries

and RMC Group PLC (Public Limited Corp.) of England, one of the world's largest producers of cement products and building materials. RMC operates in a dozen countries and has annual earnings in excess of \$3 billion, according to RMC Lonestar Vice President James O'Connell.

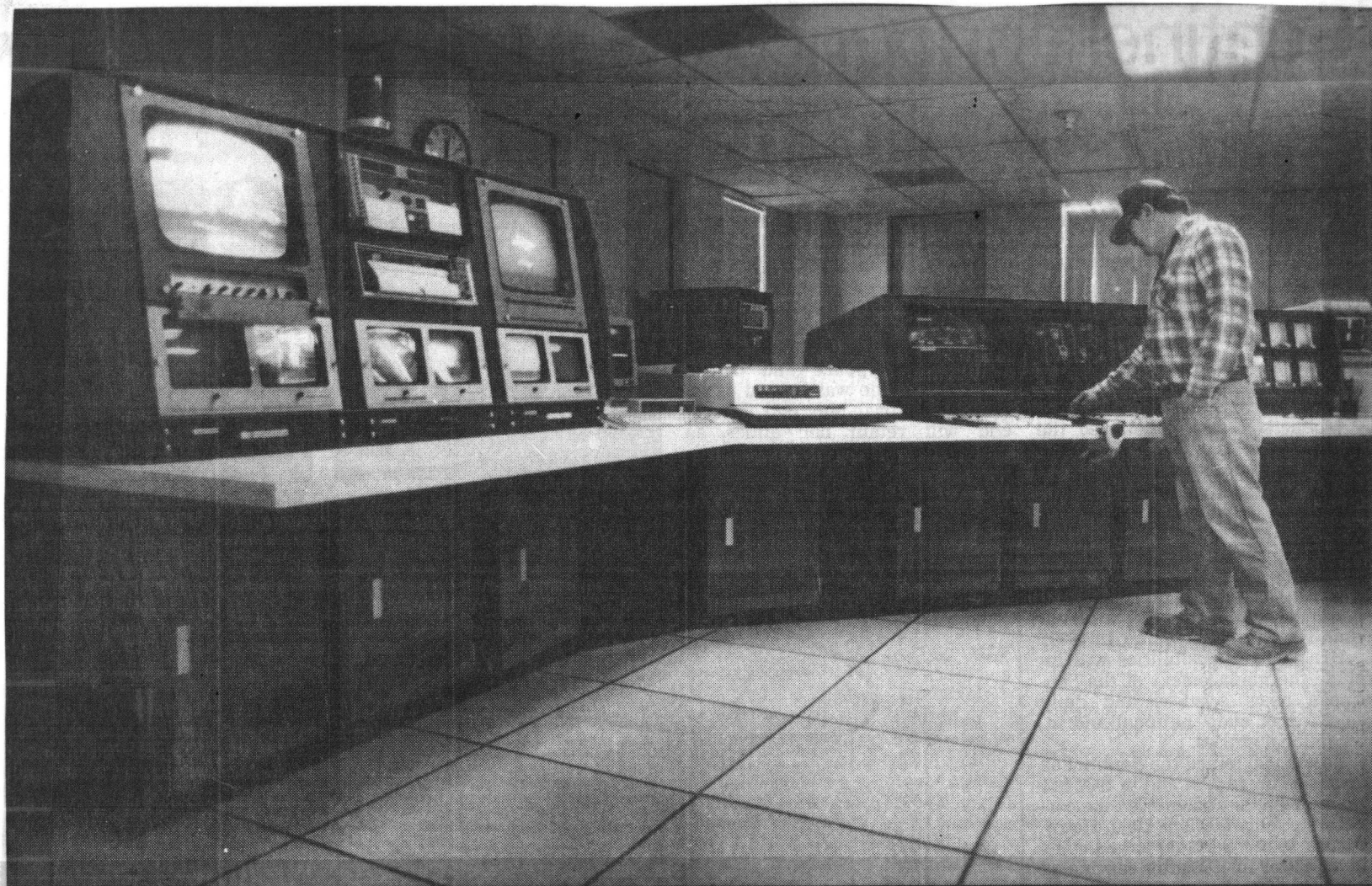
O'Connell won't say how much it cost to modernize the plant, and is reluctant to reveal any financial information about the business. But the investment has obviously been worthwhile for the company — it now produces about twice as much cement per worker as it used to, and the quality is controlled to a degree not possible without com-

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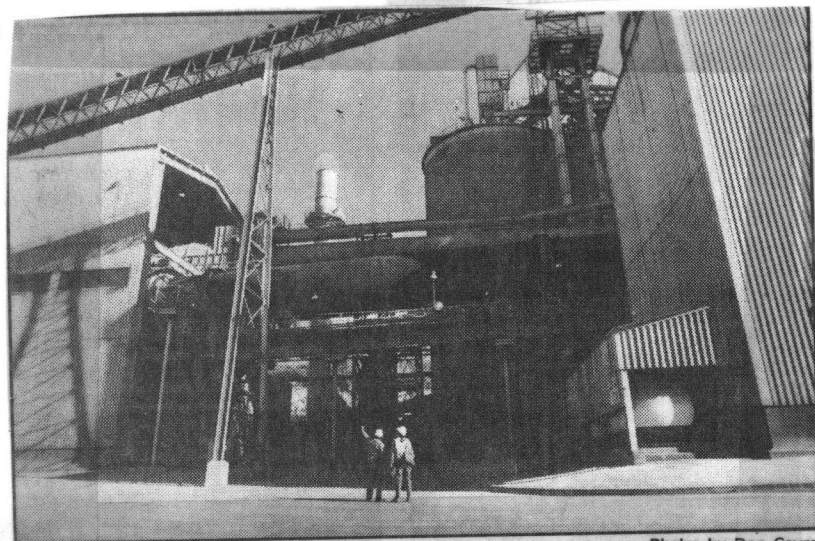
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puter analysis.

The plant has also turned out to be more efficient than planned. Originally designed to produce a maximum of 775,000 tons of cement a year, the plant is now capable of producing 875,000 tons a year, plant officials say. In December the county granted the plant a permit that will allow it to increase its production.



Virtually every function of the plant is controlled by computers and a handful of engineers in the quiet control center.



Photos by Dan Coyro

Conveyors, kiln and silos tower over worker and visitor.