



Overseer's Undercurrent: Sounds of Hunters Point's Silence

May 19, 2006

A power generating station is never entirely silent. Even while on operating hiatus for maintenance, a plant emits a variety of sounds: the constant buzz of transformers or the safety beep-beep-beep of trucks and lifts as they move back and forth across the yard.

During full operations, much of this noise is drowned out by the generators, the hum of fans, the rumble of pumps, or the whoosh and churn from water-discharge pipes.

On the day of my last visit to Pacific Gas & Electric's Hunters Point power plant, I can appreciate the more subtle sounds from the surrounding India Basin shoreline - lapping waters and crying gulls. As I walk across the small parking lot to the office entryway, I feel like I'm entering a Museum of Industry of the 20th Century - one that is complete with a 1960s-era control room, a mid-1970s combustion turbine, vintage pumps, tall stacks, and features that date all the way back to 1927, when the plant was built.

Three days before its scheduled shutdown, this plant already has generated its last electron, ending more than 75 years of service.

Almost exactly eight years have passed since PG&E and San Francisco reached an agreement to close the Hunters Point station and tear it down. Back in 1998, the utility was still contemplating divesting the plant, as it would eventually do with the neighboring Potrero station and most of its other thermal power plants. Efforts to replace the aging plant with new, state-of-the-art merchant generators - notably the ill-fated SF Energy project proposed by AES Corporation - ran afoul of the community's demands for environmental justice and elimination of the Bayview-Hunters Point area's industrial legacy. (The community is largely African-American and lower-income.)

The city was actively considering taking eminent-domain actions to condemn the plant. It became clear that it was long past time to close this particular power plant. It became a liability.

Yet, no matter what residents and politicians thought about the plant, it was still necessary to provide "reliable" power to the city. Nearly a decade would pass before alternative means of providing that reliability were put into place, via new transmission lines. But that alternative also encountered opposition from some locals along the way. Finally, the effort has paid off.

The day before my visit, the workers at Hunters Point held a small party in the lunchroom. They were filling out their time, tying up loose ends and clearing out their desks. The feeling was a little like the last day of school - after exams are finished and before the final bell rings.

Many of the station's 54 staff members will retire, others will relocate, and a few may have to look for new jobs. I spent some time with plant manager Greg Bosscawen and a couple of the long-time plant operators, Lonnie Sweets and Ernie Sotto, before their final day.

Lonnie, in particular, has a veteran's perspective on the situation, having started working at this plant in November 1968, less than a week after exiting the Navy. "I got out on the 8th, applied for a job on the 9th, took the test on the 10th, took the physical on the 11th, and started work on the 12th. I've been here ever since," he told me. "I think I've had enough." Mostly, Lonnie's retirement plan involves sleeping late, restoring a vintage car, and trying to keep out of his wife's way.

Ernie, with about 30 years at the plant, is a bit more reticent to talk about his plans. "I'm gonna miss this place," he said simply. "I'll miss the guys I work with."

Greg still has a few years left. He is planning to move over to PG&E's generation projects under construction at Contra Costa and Colusa.

After selling off most of its thermal power operations as part of the grand energy industry restructuring (while maintaining its nuclear and hydroelectric plants), and losing nearly all of its nonutility operations to bankruptcy, PG&E is getting back into the generation business. The utility's few remaining experienced plant staff members, such as Bosscawen, are critical links between the old and the new.

So is this old power plant.

Long before there were many residents to complain about having to look at it, or breathe in their worst fears of power plant pollution, or worry about toxic contamination, Hunters Point was a welcome fixture.

Lonnie Sweets remembered the old neighborhood. "This whole place has changed. The meat packing plant used to be down where the post office is. The city dump was right out the back, there, and a tallow plant was down the street. From our back gate, out past Coca Cola at Third Street, were all wrecking yards. All mud and water."

Now, Cargo Way is paved and Evans Street consists mostly of warehouse buildings and offices. Houses on Innes Avenue that even five years ago sold for less than \$200,000 are now sporting asking prices of up to \$700,000.

"We've pretty much held this city up," said Lonnie, recalling his most challenging day at work - the day of the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. "We were still running, but we were barely running, knowing we were the only ones keeping the lights on. Running around trying to keep the boilers and generators up."

The plant didn't shut down then, and it proved crucial in helping restart the system after widespread collapse. But that's ancient history.

In a few years, there will be little left to remind people about the power station, its once-valued place in the community, or the folks who invested many decades of their lives to keep the plant running safely and reliably. Perhaps the plant site will become another addition to the shoreline park; maybe it will house a new generation of cleaner, quieter energy technologies.

No one knows right now, and there's still a lot of work to do to make whatever future happen.

The Hunters Point generators have been silenced, and that's a good thing. But it's also good to listen for the echoes from the past, because they remind us of how we arrived at the place where we are.

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