



Tacoma, WA - July 13, 2006

Kaiser stack goes 'kaboom'

Port set to raze aluminum smelter for new container facility

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Published: July 3rd, 2006 01:00 AM



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Explosives planted in more than 200 holes drilled around the steel-and-concrete base of the Kaiser Aluminum smokestack topple it Sunday on the Tacoma Tideflats. It landed in line with an orange rock that marked where contractors intended it to fall. A former employee won a contest to participate in its detonation.

Related Information

[Watch video of the demolition](#)

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<http://www.thenewstribune.com/video/070206/smokestack.html>

Eugene Whitcombe placed his hands on the plunger and briefly considered his history with the Kaiser Aluminum Smelter.

In 36 years at the Port of Tacoma plant, Whitcombe, 66, rose from sweeping floors to management. His job was held open for more than a year while he recovered from an aneurysm he suffered in 1990. His uncle worked in the plant before him and his stepson after.

Then, with his 3-year-old grandson Paul Rogers Jr., he helped destroy part of the plant that has been such a big part of his life.

In front of a crowd of several hundred, Whitcombe pushed the plunger as explosive charges toppled the 500-foot-high Kaiser Aluminum smokestack at 8:03 a.m. Sunday.

Explosives placed in more than 200 holes around the stack's 26-inch-thick steel and concrete base shattered the concrete that bound the structure to the earth.

In a matter of seconds, the stack slowly slid forward and then picked up speed, toppling like a falling tree as gravity pulled it down. It hit a dirt landing pad, in line with an orange rock that marked exactly where contractors intended. A cloud of dust rose over the Tideflats.

Tacoma residents heard and felt a pair of blasts, one at the initial detonation and one when the stack hit the ground. The sound and vibration were powerful enough to wake some people.

"I wish they would have left the thing standing," said Whitcombe, who entered a contest to push the plunger. "It was something, you know, you always see."

Whitcombe's part in the demolition was only ceremonial; the explosion was initiated by a computer that set off each charge milliseconds apart. The stack, built in 1968, was a symbol of the 96-acre industrial site that will be razed during the coming weeks to make way for a new container operation.

The plant was built in 1942, and operated by the Olin Co. during World War II. Kaiser bought it after the war.

At its height, the facility employed 350 and was capable of producing about 73,000 metric tons of aluminum a year. Kaiser officials said the plant was closed in 2000 because it couldn't compete with more up-to-date facilities overseas.

"The people they had down there to run the plant and the workers were an excellent crew," Whitcombe said. "I'd still like to see the plant running."

The Port of Tacoma Commission bought the property in 2003.

Before the demolition, about 100 tons of waste were removed from the stack and sent to Arlington, Ore.

More than 50 million pounds of metals will be recycled, and concrete from the stack will be used as a base for asphalt to cover the new site.

“The Kaiser plant has been dormant,” said Mike Wasem, a spokesman for the Port of Tacoma. “What it will become again is productive. It’ll become a site that supports jobs for our region.”

The prospect of something new coming from the old made the demolition a little easier for Whitcombe, he said. That and the joy it brought his grandson after Whitcombe won the contest Kaiser held to select a guest demolition expert.

“I showed him pictures of the stack in the paper. I said, ‘If I win this, we’ll go make this thing go kaboom,’” he said. “That’s all he could talk about for the last week. When he found out he was going to go push the plunger with grandpa, his eyes got as big as saucers.”

kaiser smokestack facts

Constructed: 1968

Height: 500 feet

Materials: Concrete and steel

Diameter at base: 40 feet

Diameter at top: 26 feet

Leftover soot inside: About 100 tons