EDJ The IEDC Economic Development Journal
734 15th Street, NW Suite 900 • Washington, DC 20005
Volume 15 / Number 4 / Fall 2016

"What Are They Going to Call It?"

By C. Mark Smith

For 38 years, Sam Volpentest peddled wholesale groceries and sold beer. Then he survived cancer and spent the next 46 years promoting his community and building its economy. Finally, one of the projects he landed made history.

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In September 1990, Sam Volpentest celebrated his 86th birthday and nearly three decades of labor on behalf of Tri-Cities Nuclear Industrial Council (TCNIC) and Tri-Cities Industrial Development Council (TRIDEC) located in southeastern Washington State.[1] A former tavern owner turned community activist, Sam was already 45 and had completed one career when he first arrived in the Tri-Cities in 1949. He survived what was thought to be life-ending cancer when he was elected as president of the small Richland Chamber of Commerce in 1959. Because of his personal friendships with members of Washington's powerful congressional delegation, Sam soon became the "go-to-guy" for anything requiring federal funding in the Tri-Cities.

Along with the publisher and editor of the *Tri-City Herald*, he created TCNIC in the early 1960s in response to persistent rumors that the federal government was going to shut down the eight plutonium production reactors at Hanford. The 670-square-mile Hanford Site, acquired by the Army in 1943 as a part of the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb, was the region's largest employer. The production reactors were deactivated between 1965 and the mid-1980s, and Sam led the efforts to replace them and their economic impact with other projects and missions, most noticeably, an effort to create a multiple-reactor commercial energy park at Hanford to produce electricity that would be shipped throughout the West.

TRIDEC, a more diversified economic development organization, had been formed over Sam's strenuous objections in 1985 during a new economic crisis that resulted following the failure of several proposed Hanford programs and the collapse of the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS) which resulted in the largest bond default in American financial history. Sam had been persuaded to stay on at TRIDEC in charge of Hanford programs.

The Tri-Cities had grown by only 14,000 in the decade between 1980 and 1990 and Richland's population had actually declined by 1,263 residents. A landmark agreement between the Department of Energy and state and federal regulators demanded that Hanford workers and the broader community adopt a completely new culture that was oriented away from production and toward cleanup of the Hanford Site.

C. Mark Smith (right) presents Sam Volpentest with IEDC's Chairman's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Economic Development at a community gala on the occasion of his 100th birthday.

ADOPTING TO A NEW CULTURE

Old attitudes, both "inside and outside of the fence," needed to change if they were to achieve any real progress. Too many contractors, DOE managers, and community leaders were associated with the way things had always been done in the past at Hanford. Sam came to understand that there were those at DOE headquarters in Washington and locally who saw him and congressional contacts as a limitation on their own freedom of action to pursue the difficult challenge that lay ahead. There were still others in the community and around the state who believed that he was past his prime. Yet others wondered what would happen if something were to happen to him and felt he should be training a replacement. When people asked him about his retirement from TRIDEC, he was evasive. "I'm torn between wanting to do something else besides work for a change. But on the other hand, I don't like to walk away when there's still something to fight for or work to be done."

WORKING ON NEW PROJECTS

He worked on a new series of projects at Hanford, still hoping to find programs that would create new jobs and replace those lost during the boom and bust periods of the past 20 years. One such project was the Superconducting Magnetic Energy Storage System program. Begun in 1986 SMES, as

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He is the author of numerous articles in professional journals and is the author of two books of political biography including *Community Godfather: How Sam Volpentest shaped the history of Hanford and the Tri-Cities* from which this article is extracted. In 2015, he published a history of Lewis & Clark on the Snake and Columbia Rivers, *From the Mountains to the Sea*, designed for cruise boat passengers. He is currently working on a biography of 10-term Washington congressman, Doc Hastings. (www.cms-author.com)

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ABOUT SAM VOLPENTEST (1904–2005)

1921-1942	Wholesale grocery salesman
1942-1949	Managed businesses for others
1949-1959	Tavern owner
1962	Cancer survivor
1963	Tri-Cities Nuclear Industrial Council
1985	Tri-Cities Industrial Development Council
1963-2004	Community Cheerleader, Registered Lobbyist, Community Icon
2004	Winner of IEDC's Chairman's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Economic Development

it became known, was an important component of the Reagan administration's proposed laser missile defense system. However, it fell prey to the elimination of many of the Reagan administration's defense-related priorities after the election of President George H. W. Bush in 1988.

Another was the $230 million, 200,000-square-foot Environmental Molecular Science Laboratory (EMSL), built by the U.S. Department of Energy on Battelle's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) campus, located adjacent to the Hanford Site. EMSL is a state-of-the-art research laboratory where scientists and researchers from all over the world can undertake research into the world's greatest environmental, health, and energy challenges at the molecular level while still interfacing with the physical and life sciences in an integrated and collaborative manner.

A third new project Sam worked on had nothing to do with Hanford's nuclear past. The Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory (LIGO) was a large-scale physics experiment designed to detect gravitational waves that were believed to have originated hundreds of millions of light years away from earth during the creation of the universe. Those waves were thought to be so small that they would be roughly equal to one-tenth of a trillionth of the diameter of a human hair. They had first been predicted by Einstein's Theory of General Relativity in 1916. The proposed observatory would measure these waves using laser interferometers – mirrors suspended at each corner of an L-shaped tunnel two and a half miles long on each side. Precision laser beams in the interferometers were supposed to sense the slightest motions of the mirrors caused by a gravitational wave.[2]

Credit: Tri-Cities Economic Development Council photo.

As executive vice president of the Tri-Cities Nuclear Industrial Council, Sam commissioned the first set of marketing materials used to attract new contractors to Hanford. Here, he is making a pitch to visitors in 1970.

With Senators Henry M. Jackson (left) and Warren G. Magnuson at the height of their legislative powers in 1980.

Sam Volpentest's success as a hot-shot wholesale grocery salesman is evident in this 1925 family photo.

LANDING THE LIGO PROJECT FOR HIS COMMUNITY

In 1989, Gene Astley, a former associate laboratory director at PNNL, received a call from a physicist at the lab who told him that the National Science Foundation was looking for two sites in the United States to build LIGO observatories. One of them was slated to be located in Livingston, Louisiana, which was represented by Senator J. Bennett Johnston (D–LA) who had replaced Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson (D–WA) as the chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and was also a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. There were 18 candidates for the other site. The Battelle physicists believed that Hanford was a perfect place for one of the observatories, but felt they could not become involved without causing LIGO's sponsoring institutions, the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to eliminate a Hanford location as a contender.

As Astley remembered it, the leading competitor for the second LIGO site was somewhere in Texas. He went to Sam Volpentest at his office at TRIDEC and told him that they needed to meet with scientists at Battelle and Sam's contacts in Washington, D.C. to make sure that Texas didn't beat out Hanford as the other site. "Texas! I'll take care of that," Sam said. "What is it?"

"It's a Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory," Astley responded.

"What are they going to call it?"

"LIGO," Astley replied.

"I'd better write it out . . . . What is it again? Oh, never mind. I don't want to know."

Astley explained the concept to him again. "Oh, OK. I can remember that," and Sam flew off to Washington, D.C. the next morning.[3]

"Sam came back from his trip to D.C. saying that he thought it should be possible to beat out Texas. From

Credit: Caltech/MIT/LIGO Lab

LIGO Visitor's Complex after completion of the 2010 upgrade. LIGO is located at the Hanford Site near Richland, Washington.

then on I never had to say another word to him. He just went out and got done what needed to be done. Hardly anyone ever knew he was doing it. He never said a word about it until the deal was locked up." Sam worked for the next two years on the project. "I didn't look over Sam's shoulders. Once he had an assignment, you just stood back and let him do his thing. He had lost the 200 BeV Accelerator to Texas and he wasn't going to lose another project to them."[4]

Sam flew back to Cambridge, Massachusetts to deliver one of his patented Tri-Cities sales pitches to the officials at MIT. A former TRIDEC staff member remembers flying around in a small Cessna with officials from Caltech during one of their several visits to the Tri-Cities. "We really wined and dined them."[5] Gary Petersen, Sam's longtime associate at TRIDEC, remembered that Sam used to sit in his office at TRIDEC and practice saying the words – Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory – over and over again out-loud so he could repeat them flawlessly when he talked to others about the project. He was still able to repeat the tongue-twisting name ten years later at the unveiling of a special wall dedicated to him at the Volpentest HAMMER Education and Training Facility. "He loved to be able to repeat the complicated names. He didn't understand the science behind them, but he gave the impression to others that he did."[6]

PUTTING HIS OWN SPIN ON THE LIGO PROJECT

It took a little longer than expected to work out the details of locating the facility on DOE land at Hanford. The location was almost scuttled when a story appeared in the *Washington Post*, under the headline "Nightmare of poisoned earth – Volatile mess at Hanford," during a critical time during the negotiations. Sam had to step in and repair the damage the article had caused and convince the scientists at Caltech and MIT that the Hanford site had merit because of its scientific community; it was not just a waste site.[7] Sam worked closely with Senator Bennett Johnston (D–LA) on the project, becoming personal friends and creating a lasting relationship.

The groundbreaking for the LIGO observatory at Hanford took place on July 6, 1994. Sam, of course, put his own unique "spin" on the project. "I think it is a tremendous thing (because it) proves to the rest of the country that we're not a garbage dump out here."[8] On February 1, 1996, Thomas E. Everhart, president of Caltech, wrote a letter of appreciation to Bud Russell, then TRIDEC's chairman, recognizing Sam for his help on the project:

> As an ally, Caltech and NSF could not have found a better person than Sam Volpentest. His loyalty to LIGO is only superseded by his tremendous advocacy for the long-term overall interests of the Tri-Cities area. For what Sam has done and continues to do, Caltech is very grateful.[9]

FAILURE AND EVENTUAL SUCCESS

At the cost of $365 million, LIGO was the largest and most ambitious project ever funded by the National Science Foundation. It took five years to calibrate the lasers, but LIGO began its search for cosmic gravitational waves in August 2002. The first search for gravitational waves began in 2002 and concluded in 2010 and found no gravitational waves.

A complete redesign of LIGO's instruments was completed in 2010 and 2014, making LIGO's new interferometers 10 times more sensitive. Then, on September 14, 2015 at 2:50 a.m. the LIGO detectors in Livingston, LA, and Hanford, WA, made the world's first direct detection of gravitational waves, heralding a new era in astronomical exploration. The gravitational waves detected by LIGO on that fateful day were generated nearly 1.3 billion light years away as two black holes collided and merged into one.[10]

History was made on that day because an 85-year-old local economic developer named Sam Volpentest had enough competitive spirit left in him to get on an airplane and do the nuts and bolts work that was necessary in order to land an important project for his own community and deny it from going to another state. For this, and a lifetime of other work worthy of our profession, Sam Volpentest was awarded IEDC's Chairman's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Economic Development on the occasion of his 100th birthday in 2004.

ENDNOTES

1. The Tri-Cities MSA consists of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland, Washington. They are separated by the Columbia River and have an estimated population in 2015 of 275,000.
2. As it turned out, even this level of sophistication was inadequate to sense the smallest waves. As this is being written LIGO is being upgraded to place upgraded detector subsystems into the existing infrastructures which is expected to generate a ten-fold improvement in sensitivity and yielding a thousand-fold increase in the volume of space that LIGO can survey.
3. Gene Astley, interview with the author, February 22, 2013.
4. Gene Astley, interview with the author, March 6, 2013.
5. Lindsey interview, February 22, 2013.
6. Gary Petersen, interview with the author, November 14, 2012.
7. "LIGO observatory rolling to Hanford," (ed), *Tri-City Herald*. February 23, 1992. D2.
8. "Groundbreaking for LIGO today," *Tri-City Herald*. July 6, 1994. A3.
9. Thomas E. Everhart, letter to Bud Russell. February 1, 1996. Volpentest family papers.
10. http://www.tri-cityherald.com/news/local/article59750346.html. (Accessed February 12, 2016).