

Nuclear Analysis and Fuel – The Glory Days

Tales from the early days of Veeco nuclear engineering BP (Before Procedures)

Disclaimer: The author apologizes for any errors in these reminiscences (damn, I actually spelled that last word correctly without having to look it up) but reminds the reader that he is 79 years old, so the old brain may have some cobwebs forming.

The group was originally called NFE for Nuclear Fuel Engineering. Later the name was changed to NAF for Nuclear Analysis and Fuel although rumor has it that it was suppose to be NFA for Nuclear Fuel and Analysis, but ended up NAF due to a clerical error.

The Necrophilia Challenge

In writing the above disclaimer, the author was reminded of the contest we once had where any engineer who could get a technical or topical report, of which he was the author, reviewed and approved with the word 'necrophilia' in the disclaimer (back then all reports had a disclaimer section) would be rewarded with a steak dinner at the restaurant of their choice. Although some tried, no one ever collected the prize, evidence of the extremely high standards the department had for review and approval.

The TSO Room

Upon moving to OJRP, we initially had no cubicle walls. Therefore, to avoid too much work disruption, management placed all TSO terminals and the line-impact printer in a room fondly known as The TSO Room. Management was also smart enough never to venture into that hallowed space.

A new engineer shows up named Socrates. (I kid you not. Believe he was Indian.) At that time, we were running on the mainframe where all work was shared. Socrates was tasked by his supervisor, (known fondly to his group as Mr. Ed, the Talking Horse), with writing a computer program, which if memory serves me, served no useful purpose whatsoever.

Socrates would modify his program, compile it, run a test case and print off the results for examination. Unknown to Socrates, after each successful test, another engineer with far superior computer knowledge, would switch out Socrates' code with a program of his own. The next time Socrates would run the program, the printer would print out a few hundred lines of the sentence, "Socrates, you're an idiot!"

Socrates would read the new printout, giggle like a blithering idiot, scratch his head and then look at his code to try to figure out what went wrong, at which point the jokester would replace the new program with Socrates' original. I don't recall how long this went on nor if Socrates ever completed his program.

Jokeoff

Originally, programs were run with punched cards. Then that miracle of technology showed up, the TSO terminal. For the first time we had to logon and logoff to perform computer tasks. One day the wife of yours truly brings home from her work a battered and hard to read list of Pollack jokes. Jean asks me if I could type up the list of jokes to make them more legible. I respond that I can do better than that. I'll type them into a computer file at work and we can print off several copies. (The things one will do to please a spouse.)

The next day during my lunch break (I swear to God, it was during my lunch break), I'm in the TSO room entering the jokes into a text file. Another engineer, Dangerous Dave, asks me what I'm doing. After I tell him, he makes a copy of the completed file.

He then writes a program called Jokeoff that accesses the file of Pollack jokes. Now instead of logging on a TSO terminal, one can enter Jokeoff instead and have a random Pollack joke from the list displayed on the screen. For some reason, there are also two other co-conspirators involved, making a group of four culprits in total.

At that time, we had an IT programmer named Herb sourced out to the nuclear engineering group. Herb was kind of a quirky individual, if you get my drift.

One day Herb is working with a couple of the system analysts. He tells them, "Wait to you see like those nukes did now," and proceeds to Jokeoff. Unbeknownst to Herb, since the last time he Joked-off, another of the conspirators went into the file and did a global change of "Pollack" to "Herb." The TSO screen displays, "What do you call a pimple on Herb's ass? A brain tumor."

I said that Herb was quirky, meaning for one thing, he couldn't take a joke. Herb has a tantrum and blows the whistle on Jokeoff. The next thing you know, the four conspirators (me included) are in Marty's office, our director at the time. Marty (more on him later) was a ring-banger, that is, a West Point grad. You knew that Marty was mad, because his nostrils were flaring. Anyway, he's attempting to read us the riot act, and proposing various possible consequences for our actions, when Ben, one of the conspirators, says, "Marty, you can't punish us. IT says this is under their jurisdiction and only they can punish us." Ben was not only a good engineer, he was a student of human nature.

Marty, seeing his authority challenged, says (nostrils flaring) something like, "What! They can't punish my boys. Only I can punish my boys." End of story.

Marty

Marty was my first supervisor. He was really cheap. How cheap? If someone gave a potluck party, Marty would bring a bag of chips and then leave with all the leftovers when the party was over.

A few months after I started at Vepco, being a bachelor at the time, Marty asked me if I would house-sit his home and take care of his dog (I guess he was too cheap to put the

dog in a kennel) while he and his wife Barbara (“Babs,” a really nice woman, we all kept wondering what she saw in Marty) were on vacation. I agreed. Marty tells me to help myself to anything in the fridge and gives me the key.

I show up the next day to find the fridge not only bare, but no dog food. I go to the store to stock up on groceries for the week and dog food. The day before Marty returns, like any self-respecting bachelor as I haven’t done the dishes all week, I decide to finally do the dishes. Marty has a dishwasher, so I figure I will make things easy and use his dishwasher. Now having grown up without a dishwasher, I wasn’t that familiar with dishwasher procedure, but I figure they probably need some sort of special detergent. The only thing I can find is standard dish detergent. (Apparently Marty never used the dishwasher either.) So, I figure, what the heck, that will probably do the trick. I pack the dishwasher, pour in some detergent, turn it on, and retire to the living room.

A little while later I hear the dog barking in the kitchen where the dishwasher is. Marty’s kitchen has a carpeted floor. (The first and last kitchen I’ve ever seen with a carpet.) I enter the kitchen to be greeted by a floor covered with suds.

Fortunately, I had time to clean it up and dry the carpet before Marty returned the next day. You better believe that by then I had taken whatever was left of the food I purchased back to my apartment, leaving the fridge just as I had found it, empty. I did leave the dogfood.

Marty returns and in payment for my services (turns out the only offered payment) asks me if I would like a beer, to which I respond, “Marty, there is no beer.”

“Just what is it that you do?”

Marty decides that it would be a good idea to have a monthly seminar for his group where each meeting a different manager from elsewhere in the company would describe to us what their group does. First up was George, manager of the new Strategic Planning group.

Marty introduces George and tells us that George is going to explain what his group does. George displays the organization chart for his group, talks about it for a few minutes and then says, “Any questions?”

One of the engineers in attendance is Frank. Frank can be very blunt and has little patience for fools. Anyway, Frank asks the obvious question. “Just what is it that you do?”

In response, George displays his group’s organization chart again and proceeds to repeat the previous presentation. When done he says, “Any other questions?”

Frank again. “I still don’t understand exactly what it is that your group does. Could you explain that in more detail?”

George (if memory serves me) gives Frank a frustrated look as if to say “Didn’t I just do that?” and immediately proceeds to go over the organization chart again, ending with, “Any other questions?”

Frank, in an angry voice, “Just what the #\$*#@! do you do?”

Marty steps in and says, “Well, it looks like we’re out of time,” thanks George for his fine presentation, and dismisses the meeting.

Turns out that was the first and last of these seminars.

Postscript: George reported directly to the company’s president. (Well, that’s one thing we learned from his organization chart.) Not long after the seminar, the president of Veeco was killed in an automobile crash. About a month after that, George’s Strategic Planning group was disbanded by the new president.

By Ockham’s razor, the most plausible hypothesis as to why is as follows. The new president calls George to his office one day and asks him, “What exactly is it that your group does?” George whips out his organization chart and ...

F-delta-H

Last Marty story. I did not personally witness this, just heard it through the grapevine.

At one point in his career, Marty was the manager of licensing at one of the stations. By that time he had acquired the nickname F-delta-H which stood for “F—king dickhead.”

Story is that one day someone calls station licensing. Marty’s administrative assistant answers the phone. The caller says, “Let me speak to f—king dickhead.” Without missing a beat, the administrative assistant responds, “Marty’s not in today.”

Dave Dziodisz (sp?) – “He whose name no one can pronounce, let alone spell.”

Having an alcove near Dave’s allowed one to eavesdrop on Dave’s conversations. One of the more memorable ones was when Dave was on the phone one day, apparently with someone from Human Resources. I have no idea what the conversation was about, but it ended with Dave shouting, “Lady, you are a pimple on the ass of progress,” before slamming the phone down on the cradle.

(Interesting. That’s the second time in this document that the image of a pimple on an ass has come up.)

The Riverside Social Committee

As the group was pretty much composed of young, male engineers, we would routinely organize a night out at a local southside establishment called the Riverside Restaurant. The appeal of this place was not the food, but a bevy of exotic female dancers, complete with music and a runway. Being engineers, to better organize these excursions, soon to be known as ‘perversion excursions,’ a committee was formed, the now infamous Riverside Social Committee. One of the tasks of the committee was to issue post-excursion reports.

One night, even our manager, Dave shows up. That night came close to being a disaster as Dave almost got his tongue stepped on by a dancer.

We even got Syed to attend the Riverside, before he got married. For some reason I find inexplicable, Syed was very popular with some of the dancers. I was sworn by Syed to never tell his wife of his wild behavior at that establishment.

After a couple years of such merriment, disaster threatened as the Riverside Restaurant closed. But as we all know, engineers love a challenge and the Riverside Social Committee was up to the challenge. The committee sent out a number of exploratory expeditions to find a replacement. Detailed post visit reports were subjected to extensive engineering analysis. Success. An establishment called the Last Chance, even farther southside than the Riverside, was selected as the new perversion spot. Not only did the Last Chance offer exotic dancers, it was the most redneck establishment I have ever had the pleasure of being a customer of. The walls were adorned with Confederate battle flags, and if memory serves me, each evening there was at least one rendition of Dixie to which everyone in the establishment stood.

One night Socrates (see above) decided to join us. Now Socrates was not only Indian, but an Indian of dark complexion. None of us was sure how this was going to go down in such a redneck, all-white establishment, but except for the constant stares that Socrates received from the other clientele, sitting there savoring his beer and the entertainment with a shit-eating grin on his face, all seemed to go well.

During its heyday, the highest honor an NFE engineer who was leaving the group could receive was the Riverside Social Committee's coveted Order of the Tassel, attached to which was a tassel donated by one of the establishment's dancers. One of the recipients was none other than Jim Rodes, future president of the company. I suspect that to this day Jim no doubt has his Order of the Tassel framed and proudly displayed in his home.

The Computer Card Deck Fiasco

Before TSO terminals, everything, code, data, whatever, had to be punched on computer cards. Originally the group was housed in rented office space in the Seventh and Franklin building. The mainframe computer was in the old Vepco building annex across the street. One day Woody is crossing Franklin street carrying with him in a box the monthly nuclear fuel budget typed on several hundred computer cards.

Frank and I were watching him cross the street from Frank's office on the fifth floor when Woody drops the box in the middle of the street. Cards are strewn everywhere. Many hours of work down the gutter, some of it literally. Frank and I just stood there and laughed. I mean really, what would you have done?

The Dead Mouse File

Before computers, documents were put in a brown folder and a routing slip attached to ensure that all recipients would read it, sign it, whatever. Eventually, each document of importance would end up in that vast repository of paper known as Records Management, with Records being the final recipient on the routing slip. Now that the

readers are all on the same page about routing slips, on to the story of the dead mouse file.

Weather permitting, our elite group of nukers would often enjoy our brown bag lunches in Capitol Square Park, all the while bravely defending our food from vast hordes of squirrels and pigeons trying to sneak a bite. One day, one of our group, Steve, notices a dead mouse on the lawn. Steve, being the kind of guy never to pass up an opportunity for humor, takes the deceased mouse back to the office, puts it in one of those brown folders, attaches a routing slip, and drops it in the office mail.

To this day, we have no idea of the ultimate fate of that mouse. Perhaps its remains still reside somewhere in the deep recesses of Records Management.

Toga Parties

A hit film of 1978 was National Lampoon's *Animal House*, the highlight of the movie being the infamous toga party. The nukers of NFE saw that as a challenge and sponsored our own Toga parties, photos of which are still available on my website, dracorex.com.

Highlights of the parties included the building of human pyramids, torchlight parades (always wanted to do the Monte Python bring-out-your-dead thing in the neighborhood, but couldn't find a cart), best toga contests (Gus usually won with his Nepalese designer togas), Tom's pranks including mooning the guests from our second floor window, Kevin's impersonation of a dwarf (or was it midget?), Dave's diaper toga, and so on. My memory of the details is somewhat foggy, not because of all the years that have since elapsed, but because, like my one attendance at the Munich October Fest, I don't remember how they ended.

Veeco Engineers Impress Westinghouse

As part of the Westinghouse uranium contract settlement, the NFE engineers were constantly traveling to Monroeville to attend Westinghouse training courses, usually by flying Agony Airlines. There was a long walkway from the parking lot to the Westinghouse building. One morning it had snowed. While the group of Veeco engineers were making their way up the sidewalk to the building, Tom hit Syed with a snowball. Syed went ballistic and proceeded to chase Tom around the grounds yelling and screaming like some demented Sudanese dervish.

Latter that day, during a training break, a Westinghouse engineer asked me if I was part of the group with the screaming crazy person that morning. In defense of my employer's reputation, I denied knowing anything about it. Must have been the Duke Energy group.

Gus Leaves Early

Gejendra (sp?), known to everyone as Gus, was our token Nepalese engineer. When we were located on the second floor of the old Veeco building, quitting time was 5:00 p.m. There was no clock in the office so everyone depended on their watch for the time,

or in Gus' case, on a clock on his desk. Unbeknownst to Gus, one day someone set his clock a half hour fast. Gus sees his clock displaying 5 o'clock, so he puts on his coat and proceeds to head to the stairway. On the way he runs into Roger, his supervisor, a ring-banger like Marty. Roger, displaying a scowl, asks Gus where he is going. Innocent Gus answers, "Home. I always go home at this time." Roger hits the roof.

Fortunately, the culprit (I don't remember who) confessed and got Gus off Roger's crap list.