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# 5 years after shuttering, fate of Alcoa, workers still unclear

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Posted: Thursday, November 7, 2013 12:00 am

By Jordan Overturf [jordan.overturf@theeagle.com](mailto:jordan.overturf@theeagle.com) | 3 comments

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Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series focusing on the city of Rockdale since Alcoa announced the major curtailment of local operations in September 2008.

ROCKDALE -- Five years ago, Rockdale experienced something previous generations had only talked about. The Alcoa aluminum smelting operations were closed

down after 56 years in Milam County.

Lee Parsley, who started working for Alcoa in 1989, was one of a fortunate few who skirted the layoffs. About 1,500 of Parsley's co-workers weren't so lucky.

"I was looking at the seniority list ... and I knew I had a job," he said during an interview in late September at his restaurant, Lee's Landing.

The 5,000-plus residents of Rockdale were stunned on June 20, 2008, when Alcoa, the largest employer in the city, announced it was shutting down half of its smelting operations and planned to lay off hundreds of employees.

The layoffs began Aug. 31, and a month later half of the employees were out of a job. A lot of folks were more concerned about their own welfare, rather than if the town could survive, Parsley said. Parsley is one of 55 employees working at the plant's atomizer, the lone profiting machine at the industrial complex. He said there are still some people wondering "what's next?"

"We're still minus a lot of jobs," he said.

Residents, business owners and city officials said the one thing they have learned in the past five years is that townspeople aren't giving up on Rockdale.

"We're a workin' man's town," said Stella Booker.

She and her husband, Roger, have owned the Kountry Inn Motel on U.S. 79 for 36 years. In the good years, the Kountry Inn would have rooms filled with contractors staying for weeks at a time to work at Alcoa.

Pat Grimes, a part-time desk clerk at the Kountry Inn, was working for the motel a short while when the Alcoa announcement came. She said it was like the whole city was in mourning. The motel's restaurant was packed with people and quiet as a church, she said.

"The last time I experienced something like that was when Kennedy was assassinated," she recalled. "We just didn't know what was going to happen."

City Manager Kelvin Knauf said the town was gripped by uncertainty.

"We didn't know how bad it was going to get," Knauf said.

Parsley said the city's saving grace was the Luminant Power Plant. At the time, the power plant was getting ready to build a new unit at its facilities, adjacent to the Alcoa operations. Parsley said he knew a lot of people who went to work for the power plant.

"Without the power plant, that would've been a big kick in the face to take that many jobs away," he said.

Unfortunately, the work at Luminant dried up once the construction was completed. At least once a year, the hotels in town will welcome contractors who work for a week or two and then head out to the next job.

Over the past five years, activity at Alcoa's Rockdale Operations has dwindled. The Sandow mine, which was used to dig for lignite, the fuel for Alcoa's power plant, is in the final stages of reclamation. That work is being handled mostly by contractors, Alcoa spokesman Jim Hodson said. The smelter operations were curtailed indefinitely in January 2012, when two of the potlines were dismantled. The remaining four potlines -- the same number the plant had when it opened in 1952 -- are maintained for future production. Alcoa spokespersons maintain that the potlines could be reopened, but there is no date for when that might happen.

The one part of the Rockdale operations that continues to produce is the atomizer, which is used to make aluminum powder, a product that has been used in fuel for NASA's rockets, paint for automobiles and thousands of other applications.

#### Support from Alcoa

Christa Bowers, Alcoa's manager of media and corporate relations, said that the company continues to evaluate its options with the Rockdale operations.



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mitted to the communities in which we operate, including Rockdale," city and local area through local grants and volunteer support."

Workforce Solutions of Central Texas, said Alcoa hired the company to market. Many had never had to put together a resume. Some

in federal grant money from the Department of Labor. The grant programs for the Alcoa workers.

ough nursing school. After being laid off, it took Skrhak a while to unemployment benefits, but didn't know what job he could take after those expired. Part of him thought the company would reopen the plant, as it had in the past.

"I talked to a guy at church, who told me 'The good Lord wouldn't expect you to sit on your hands and wait,'" Skrhak said. "I was just fortunate I was able to go to school and get a job."

He lives in Rockdale with his wife and four sons, and drives an hour to work in the intensive care unit at Scott & White Memorial Hospital in Temple. He said his new job is physically and mentally exhausting. And it doesn't pay as much as his work as an Alcoa mechanic. He works a second job framing houses in Rockdale, which he said offers a bit of catharsis from his shifts in the ICU.

Jermain said Skrhak was one of a small group that entered an educational program. Others took courses in HVAC repair, crane operation, CDL certification and heavy equipment school.

At the height of the layoffs, unemployment in the city was above 10 percent. Visits to the Workforce Center had risen to 1,500 per week, Jermain told The Eagle in December 2008.

Unemployment is hovering around 7.2 percent, the national average for September. Jermain hasn't seen many Alcoa employees in the last few years, unless they're coming in to use the public-access computers.

Skrhak and Jermain said that some of the Alcoa workers transferred to other facilities in Tennessee and Indiana. Some still live in Rockdale and go to the Point Comfort operation for work. Even with the Alcoa shake-up, Skrhak said, it's "still the same Rockdale."

But it's not the same Alcoa.

#### Future plans

Besides the dismantling of potlines and reclamation of the mine, the company has openly marketed the facilities to other businesses.

The Lower Colorado River Authority in September declined a deal with Alcoa to purchase 34,000 acres of land and the water rights. The deal was a more than a year in the making and started to show signs of trouble in January, according to an article published in the Rockdale Reporter.

Other failed attempts to sell assets came from a land deal in 2010 between Alcoa and Velocita. Alcoa is still entertaining the possibility of selling its atomizer.

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"Alcoa is currently exploring interest by a third party to purchase the Rockdale atomizer assets. And we'll work over the next few months to determine whether a sale agreement can be reached. During this review period, employees and customers can expect the atomizer to continue normal operations," Bowers said.

At best, the future of Alcoa's Rockdale operations is murky. As for the past, Bowers cited fluctuating market conditions and the rising production costs to power the smelters.

"Unfortunately, the Rockdale smelter was not competitive with other smelters globally," she said.

Parsley, who was one of the workers dismantling the potlines in 2011, said he is certain the plant will not reopen. He's working 32 hours weekly and said the atomizer only has one order to fill for 2014. That is unusual, he said, because the orders for the next year are usually booked up to six months in advance.

Parsley does think the facilities could be a good fit for another company, whoever that might be. But after five years of waiting and wondering, Parsley is still asking himself, "What's next?"

Tomorrow: Rockdale officials are working to reinvigorate the city's economy by focusing on economic development and tourism.

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Posted in Local, Business on *Thursday, November 7, 2013 12:00 am.*

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**Shortde** posted at 10:09 am on Thu, Nov 7, 2013.



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I live in Texarkana,Tx. and Alcoa shuttered the rolling mill here in 2009. We have not heard a peep out of Alcoa since. I worked there for 22 years.

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I was wondering the same thing, too.

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