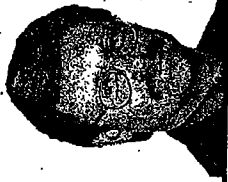


The cleanup plan is a reality



William Peci

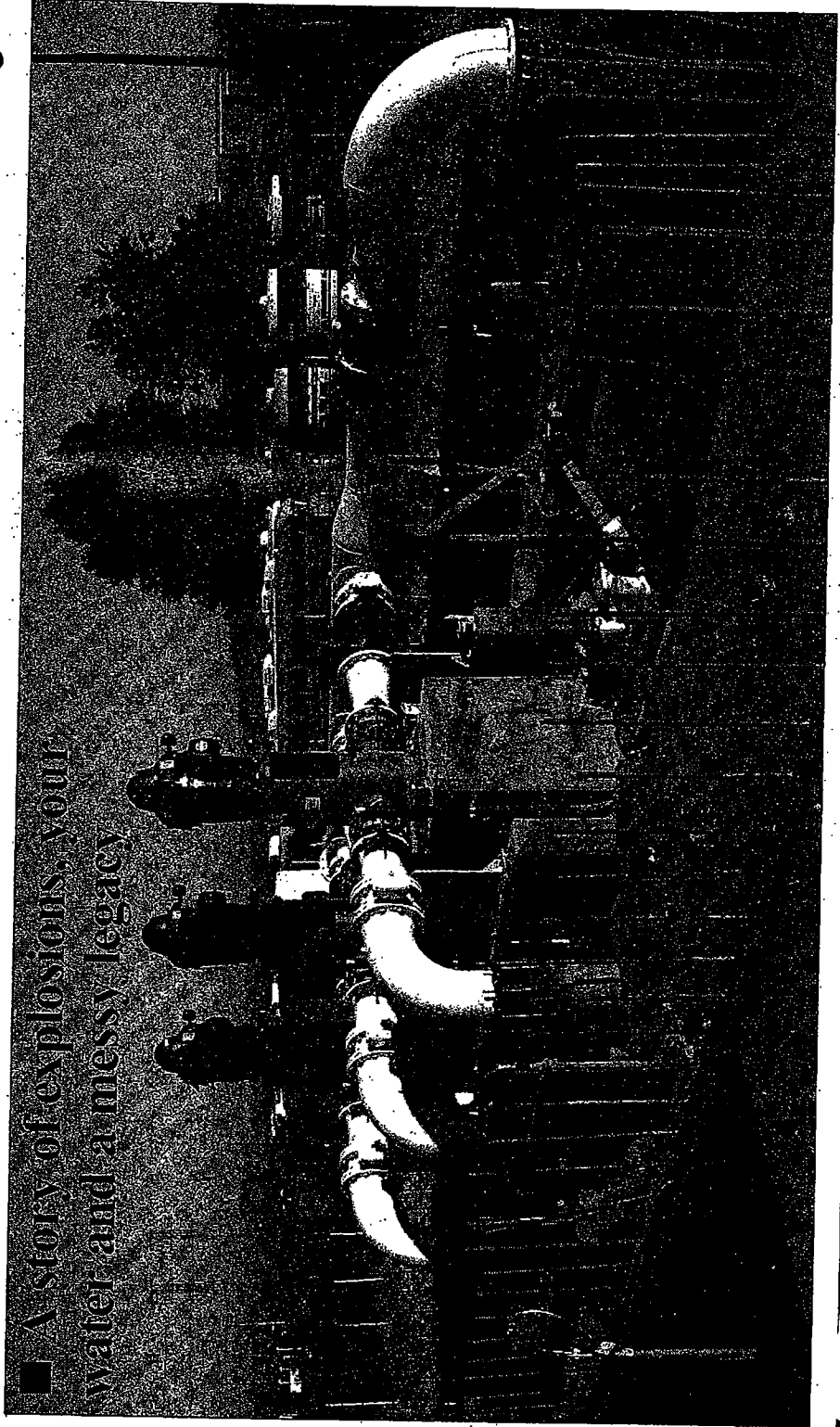
Once upon a time, there was a factory where they made things that explode.

It was on a 996-acre piece of property in the center of our valley, and people who lived here became accustomed to the sounds of explosions as factory workers tested their wares — military flares, fireworks, munitions and the like.

The Bermite munitions manufacturing plant — later to be known as Whittaker-Bermite — was a key player in the Santa Clarita Valley's job market, and was also a cog in our nation's military-industrial complex.

Local residents didn't think much about it at the time, but making and testing things that explode can be a rather messy business.

■ A story of explosions, your water and a messy legacy



We have good news: More than two decades after the last explosion at the Whittaker-Bermite site, we here at the Castaic Lake Water Agency are nearing completion on a much-anticipated water treatment project that will, once and for all, resolve the messy legacy left behind by Whittaker-Bermite.

And, it's not a fairy tale. The cleanup is, at last, a reality.

What's next?

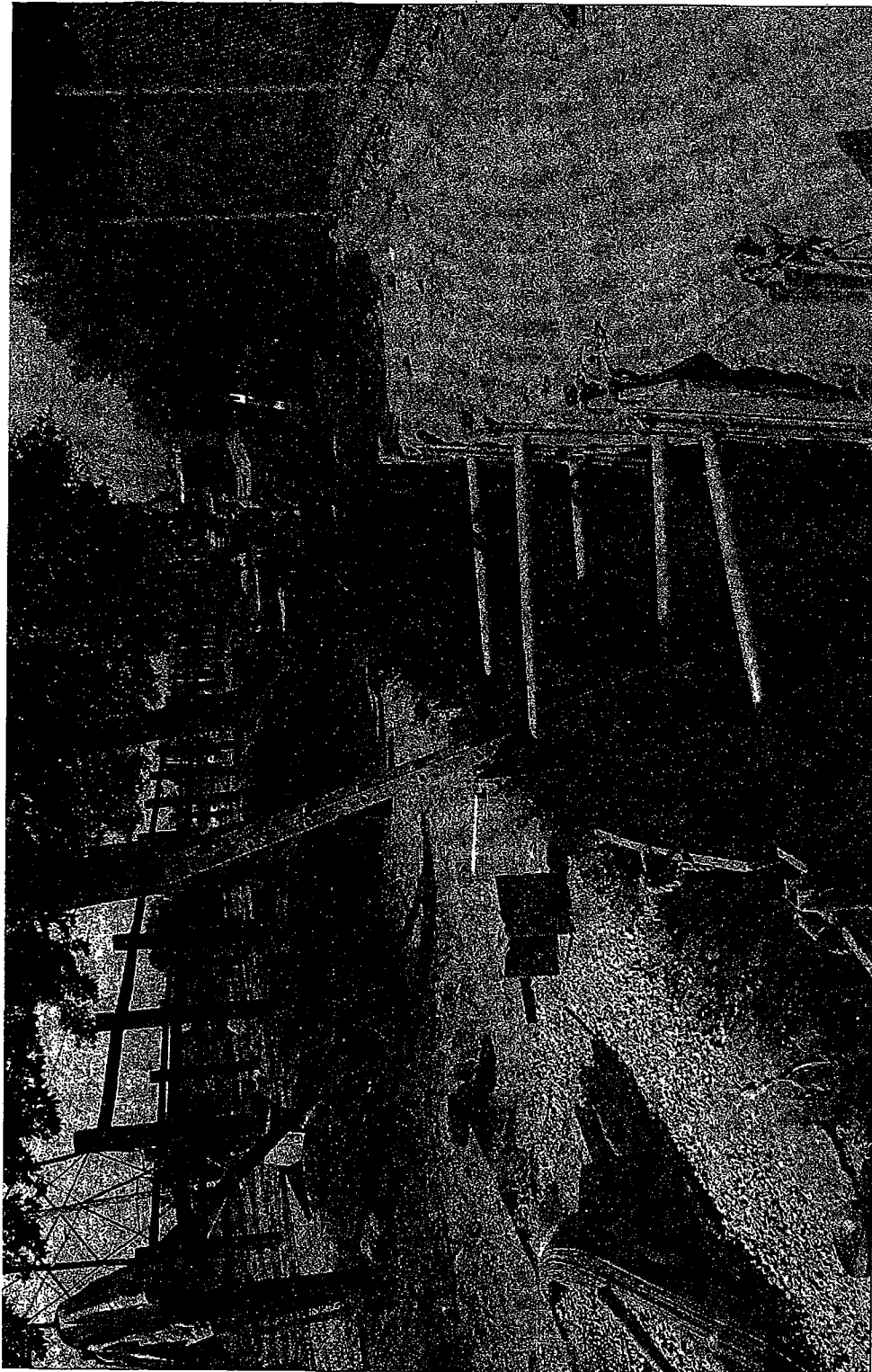
After approximately eight decades, manufacturing at the Whittaker-Bermite facility ceased in 1987, and it was only a matter of time before the question started to be asked, "What's next for that property?"

The site is, for all intents and purposes, the geographic center of our once-sparingly populated valley.

The valley had grown around the Whittaker-Bermite property, and after the munitions operation was finished, the property resembled a sort of developmental "hole in the doughnut," bordered on the north by Soledad Canyon Road and on the west by Railroad Avenue.

A proposal was put forth called "Porta Bella" to build shopping centers and 2,911 homes on the property where Bermite workers once ventured outside to blow things up.

The plans for the property would later change again and again — and remain in limbo to this day — but it was then that questions started to be asked: What did all that munitions testing do to the soil and, below



Courtesy photos

Top: A new pump station is being constructed near the bridge over the South Fork of the Santa Clara River on Magic Mountain Parkway, near the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Magic Mountain Parkway. The station is necessary to pump treated water for distribution to the Santa Clarita Water Division's service area. Above: The bicycle trail along a portion of the South Fork Trail has been temporarily rerouted during construction of the new pipeline that will carry water to the Castaic Lake Water Agency's much-anticipated perchlorate treatment plant.

that, the groundwater?

As it turned out, quite a bit. Santa Clarita Valley residents over the ensuing years became familiar with something called perchlorate, a chemical byproduct of rocket fuel that has been

linked to human thyroid problems.

Perchlorate from the Whittaker-Bermite property had seeped into the ground and contaminated a portion of the SCV's vital underground water supply.

While the contaminated soil is being collected and treated using microbes (often-referred to as "onsite remediation"), coming up with the right method for treating the groundwater has taken longer.

The good news is local residents are not receiving drinking water that is contaminated with perchlorate. Initially, though, there was a lot more bad news than good news.

■ The perchlorate con-

tamination was spreading to four of the deeper drinking water wells that draw from the Saugus Formation — an underground reservoir that underlies much of

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our valley.

So those wells had to be shut down in 1997 to keep the contamination out of the municipal water supply.

■ The contamination had the potential to spread further, and in the ensuing years it could potentially impact additional wells if nothing was done.

■ Cleaning up the contamination would be technically feasible but expensive.

Many local leaders became involved in the effort to ensure that the perchlorate contamination would be cleaned up, and it took more than a decade of hard work — and a lawsuit filed by CLWA and three of the local retailers against the property's current and former owners — to get the cleanup process in motion.

Officials from CLWA, the retailers, the city of Santa Clarita and others rightly recognized that cleaning up this contamination was vital.

In addition to being the right thing to do from an environmental perspective, the cleanup was important because the plume of contamination had the potential to spread.

Our groundwater supplies are a valuable local resource — something we've all become acutely aware of during the current drought.

Now the perchlorate pendulum has swung in favor of good news rather than bad. Thanks to a favorable settlement of the Whittaker-Bermite lawsuit, we are nearing completion of a \$5 million treatment plant and \$14 million in pipelines, all of which are being built at no expense to local residents.

The pipeline and treatment plant projects are being funded by the responsible parties and will soon begin removing the perchlorate from the well water and enabling us to put two of the previously closed wells back in service.

This operating scenario will also prevent the contamination from spreading.

It has been a long, arduous process but, at the end of it all, we will

have restored the lost well capacity and treated the contamination at no public expense and no risk to public health.

The construction, which began about a year ago, is expected to be completed this spring. This is no longer a case of "what if" or a "some day."

The treatment plant is real, it is nearing completion, and so is the pipeline that will carry water from the contaminated wells to be treated.

The treatment plant, which is about 85 percent complete at its location along Bouquet Canyon Road in Saugus, will employ ion exchange technology. The process involves passing the contaminated water through a resin that removes the perchlorate from the water.

The 3.5-mile pipeline is under construction in the area of Valencia Boulevard, Magic Mountain Parkway and the South Fork Trail. We have worked hard to minimize the inconvenience to businesses, bicyclists and motorists, and even modified the construction schedule to accommodate the Santa Clarita Marathon earlier this month.

Much of the work has been done at night to mitigate the impacts of construction-related road closures.

When the pipeline is ready this spring, the treatment plant will be ready, too.

Thus will end the tale of the explosives factory and your groundwater. No longer are they blowing things up in the hills of Santa Clarita, and we will have in place a reliable way to ensure that perchlorate is no longer a threat to our groundwater supply.

The contamination will be cleaned up and we will, of course, all live happily ever after.

If you would like additional information about the Castaic Lake Water Agency pipeline construction project, please visit the project Web page: www.clwa.org/pipeline_construction_project.

William Pecsí is president of the Castaic Lake Water Agency Board of Directors. His column reflects the agency's views and not necessarily those of The Signal.

