Joe Hudson: Trona's Iron Man
By Ruth Justis - Daily Independent
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The dictionary says dedicated means devoted. Ask long-time employees at Searles Valley Minerals and they will tell you dedicated equals Joe Hudson.

Hudson was recently honored by plant management for completing 55 years of continuous service. (Add to that another year plus that he worked before being drafted.) On top of that, Hudson has never called in sick in all those years.

“I keep asking Joe when he's going to retire so I can be the oldest employee,” said Arzell Hale, director of governmental affairs and public relations. “He's like the energizer bunny, he just keeps going.”

Hudson came to Searles Valley in 1952 with his father, who had been laid off at a tungsten mine that closed down in Kansas.

“I got one whiff of the place and I was ready to go back to Kansas,” Hudson said. “We didn't capture the gases then like we do now and it really smelled bad. My dad said he couldn't afford to send me back to Kansas and I should get my lazy self off the couch and go to work. I hung around a couple more days complaining, then went up and applied. I went to work the next day — all you needed was a social security number.

“Once I got started, I really enjoyed working with everyone. I can only remember one argument with a co-worker; we got that settled and became friends,” he said.

Hudson was 18 in 1952. He remembers driving around the valley in his pink 1941 Ford convertible.

“I thought my convertible was pretty cool; pink with a black top. My buddy got a purple Mercury and that was pretty cool, too. So, I painted my Ford's fender skirts purple,” Hudson said.

He had worked for a little over a year when he was called up by the draft.

“When I started at American Potash and Chemical Corporation (AP&CC), I was a sample carrier. When I left for the military in 1953, I was making potash in centrifugal tubs. Everything was manual in those days. The tubs spun the liquid out of the product and we had to stand there and scrape the dry product off the sides of the tubs. Now, most everything is computerized.”

Hudson completed his military service and returned to Trona in 1955.

“When Joe came back, he deserted us and went to work for Stauffer Chemical at Westend. They were paying 13 cents more per hour,” Hale said.

“I hired on at Westend as a 'flunky,'” Hudson said. “Later, I got to help with the startup of the Borax line at Westend. I stayed at Westend until 1977, then helped start up the Argus plant. I worked there until 1990, when I came back to Trona. I've been here ever since. Now, I work in boric acid — my favorite job. The most interesting, though, was starting up the Argus plant.”
Over the 50-plus years, Hudson has worked for seven different companies at the Trona plant — AP&CC, Stauffer Chemical, Kerr McGee, Harris Chemical (North American), IMC, Sun Capital, and Nirma.

“I remember once being sent to Chicago to fire coal-fired boilers for Stauffer. It was winter and they kept me for 2 ½ months. The temperature stayed at zero all day. I was really glad to get back to the desert,” Hudson said.

“My dad worked at Westend for 14 years. He passed away in 1971; my mom died when I was seven,” Hudson said.

In October 1955, Hudson married his wife, Delores and the two set up housekeeping in Trona. They had three daughters and lived in Trona for 35 years before moving over the hill to Ridgecrest. They have been in Ridgecrest 21 years.

“When the girls were little, we had three horses and a pony. When they grew up, we changed to jet skis. They're a lot of fun for the six grandkids and the 10 great-grandkids. I work four 12-hour days, then have four days off. We like to take the grandkids and go camping or over to the lake to ride the jet skis,” he said.

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