THE TEXAS CITY DISASTER

To Monsanto Stockholders, Employees and Friends:

As soon as we learned of the crushing misfortune that overtook Texas City, Mr. Rand and I, who were in the East, flew to the scene. Before landing, we circled the holocaust. You have heard it described in the press and over your radio. The reporters did not exaggerate. Exaggeration would have been impossible; our language is too inadequate.

The French liner Grandcamp, burdened with 2500 tons of ammonium nitrate, was berthed at a quay immediately opposite our own. More ammonium nitrate, which has an explosive power about one-half as great as T.N.T., was on the dock at which she was loading. About half-past eight on the morning of April sixteenth fire was noticed on the Grandcamp. Soon after her crew abandoned her, and the nitrate exploded, subjecting portions of our plant to an impact we believe to be equivalent to 250 five-ton block-busters exploding simultaneously. Because the atomic bombs were exploded high above Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the blast beneath them we believe may have been less severe than that suffered by parts of our plant.

Our warehouse—a steel and brick structure—was flattened; not a splinter remained upright. The main power plant was similarly crushed. As the blast fanned out, walls of manufacturing buildings fell, windows of the plant office and laboratories shattered, roofs were ripped off, and pipe lines carrying inflammable liquids were torn apart. A huge wave, rushing in from the basin where the ship had rested, inundated the area while the explosion's heat ignited the benzol, propane, and ethyl benzene pouring out of the ruptured pipes and storage tanks. Savage and cruel fires, feeding on these inflammable liquids, scalded those who had survived the blast and were fleeing to safety; they cremated those who had fallen, and melted and twisted steel supports and girders.

Preventing effective rescue, these fires raged two days, sending up a mile-high Vesuvian wick which joined the Titanic smoke columns arising from the near-by storage tanks of oil refineries, forming a pitchy umbra over the racked and grief-laden community.

Because our payroll records were kept in the plant and were scattered by the blast, we are without an accurate list of those on duty at the time. We employed 658 persons in this plant. After most careful checking, we believe that 451 were on duty at the time. Of this number, 154 were either killed or are missing and believed dead; more than 200 required hospitalization; and 95 of the more seriously injured are still in hospitals. Some of them are not expected to survive. While there were many miraculous escapes from death, few escaped without the proverbial scratch! Almost all those not requiring hospitalization needed some medical aid.

In addition to our own casualties, 123 employees of outside contractors were engaged on construction in our plant. As most of them were working in areas of greatest exposure, their ratio of death and severe injury was greater than our own. Of the combined forces in our plant, the dead, missing, and believed dead total 227—more than one-third of the whole area's total.

While Fate usually plays no favorites, our technical staff suffered the heaviest proportion of casualties. J. R. Mares, General Manager of our Texas Division, was fortunate; he did not reach the plant until a few minutes after the Grandcamp exploded. But glass was blown into the brain of H. K. Eckert, our Plant Manager. Although he remained for a few days in a critical condition, he is expected to recover. Charles Comstock, the Division's Technical Director; B. F. Merriam, Chief Plant Engineer; R. E. Boudinot, Production Manager; R. D. Southerland, Safety Engineer; and F. A. Ruecker, Chief Power Plant Engineer, and all his staff are dead. Robert Morris, Assistant Plant Manager, survived, although the plant jeep in which he was riding, seeking a tug to pull the Grandcamp into the bay, was hurled high in the air and overturned. He was saved by the giant wave which covered him. With punctured eardrums and painful bruises, he rescued many trapped office workers.

Of seventeen young and promising chemists who were supervising production in different departments, sixteen perished, leaving behind many young widows and families of tiny ones. To this list may be added other technical men who are still in critical condition.

Several other company officials came to Texas City...
to help, organize, and plan. Among the first arrivals were Dr. Emmet Kelly, our Medical Director, and some of his staff. A plane-load of nurses and medical supplies was also flown in.

Friday, Mr. Rand and I accompanied Dr. Kelly on his round of the hospitals. As we visited with our own stricken and saw the conditions of others, it was impossible for us to contain emotions. But we heard not one word of recrimination nor any attempt to fix blame. Each accepted his anguish stoically as the lot which Fate had cast for him. We attempted to solace wives sitting beside husbands whose lives were in the balance. Their manner was brave but their eyes betrayed the torment of their souls.

A young girl—shattered and barely conscious—who had been in charge of payroll records, seemed to be worried only about the loss of her records. Another girl, bandage-swathed and disfigured forever by flying glass, touched us to the quick by saying softly, "Oh, I'm so sorry for Monsanto, losing so many fine men." Many evidences of unselfishness, heroism, pluck, and courage were unveiled to us.

By Friday morning, except for the benzol storage tanks which continued to burn, most fires in our plant had subsided. We visited the ruins. Fires still raged in both Humble and Republic Oil Companies’ near-by tanks, raising a huge Bikini-like pillar of pall 3,000 feet into an otherwise clear sky, where it was joined by the gray of our own benzol. There, both plumed and stratified, forming a gloomy awning of darkness which drifted on southerly winds. Monsanto pilots flying to St. Louis that afternoon reported that these clouds stretched to Missouri’s southern border.

The smoldering rubble in our plant still hissed as fire boats played streams upon it. Squads of Red Cross men were engaged in the dangerous work of removing bodies. Bulldozers had cleared pathways through the rubble, along which we passed stretcher after stretcher bearing the charred organic remains of employes. It was heart-breaking and gruesome; memories of it will haunt us forever.

Attempts to assuage the grief of the victims of such a disaster are ineffective, this being within the province of Time alone. But Mr. Rand and I believed that our stockholders would approve alleviating the financial problems attending the changed circumstances of so many of our employes. Hence we offered immediate payments of $1,000 in case of each death to each widow or nearest dependent. Almost all employes of over three months’ Monsanto employment were covered by our Group Insurance plan, and as accidental death doubles the payment, the beneficiary of an insured hourly employe will receive $6,000 to $8,000 in insurance. Since insurance payments increase in ratio to salary, the widow of a man who earned $7,500, for instance, will receive $17,500. Our Treasurer and a representative of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company began making payments forty-eight hours after the blast.

In addition, Texas law requires in such fatality cases the payment to the widow or beneficiary of $20 a week for 360 weeks—$7,200. Our legal liability in this respect is covered by Liberty Mutual Insurance Company, who will make the payments.

We requested all cases of special hardship to make known their needs to our Texas City Personnel Officer, who was granted authority to deal liberally with them.

We also announced that hospitalization costs of our employes and their dependents who were injured, not covered by the employes’ Blue Cross scheme, would be borne by the Company and that full base salaries and wages would be guaranteed to them during both hospitalization and convalescence; and, further, that all who suffered permanent injuries preventing re-employment would receive individual and liberal consideration beyond compensation for which we are legally liable.

Our hastily established housing group has made temporary repairs to the homes of 148 employes, and more are being cared for as rapidly as material becomes available. We are surveying all housing damage and other losses suffered by our people, and our Texas Division officers are instructed to do all possible to alleviate hardship.

We arranged to pay for the transportation of the remains of employes whom we had moved into the area and for the transportation of their families and household goods to their former homes, if they desired. We also guaranteed widows of those we had moved into Texas City against any loss of the equities they had acquired in their homes, in the event they desired to move away.

Hourly employes who are able to work were guaranteed their wages through April twenty-seventh. Thereafter, we hope to find employment for most of them in the work of clearing the site and reconstruction.

To provide for the cost of these payments which are beyond our legal liabilities and to reward outstanding cases of heroism, our Board of Directors has appropriated $500,000. All of our legal liabilities will be discharged by our insurance companies. We hope our shareholders will approve the use of this part of their profits to alleviate the misfortunes of the men, women, and bereaved families of those who worked for them.

But the contribution Monsanto as a company is offering is not the whole story. Monsanto employes are also showing their feeling for the sufferers in the disaster area. Various Monsanto plants have started voluntary collections, a spontaneous personal expression of their sympathy.

At Oak Ridge, where Monsanto operates the Clinton Laboratories, a number of the employes are giving the equivalent to a day’s pay. At Trenton, Michigan, donations have been coming in with cooperation of the union. Seattle and Vancouver employes of Monsanto’s Western Division are contributing. The Phosphate Division sales office at Birmingham, Alabama, the Western Division sales office at San Francisco, California, the main office at St. Louis, Missouri, and the Central Research Labo-
ratories at Dayton, Ohio, all sent in generous donations. At Carondelet, Missouri, and Anniston, Alabama, plans are under way to assist employes of the stricken plant. By no means can this be the entire story for the multitude who gave in the time of need.

Due to the magnitude of the disaster and the anxiety for news, some erroneous statements were circulated. We should like to correct some of them.

The ammonium nitrate aboard the Grandcamp did not originate in any Monsanto plant; Monsanto does not manufacture ammonium nitrate. Nor was it being loaded at our dock, nor was it destined for any of our plants. We do not use it.

Our Texas City plant did not use or manufacture any explosives. Several inflammable products such as benzol and propane constituted its raw materials. It manufactured monomeric styrene and polystyrene; the former is inflammable but the latter will only support combustion like wood—the distinction between an explosive and an inflammable material being that the former can be detonated on impact and the latter bursts into flame when ignited.

There were no major explosions in our Texas City plant. None of the minor ones, described by our surviving staff as “puffs,” was great enough to cause any damage outside our plant area. The main fires in our plant were in the storage tanks and tank cars of benzol, propane, and ethyl benzene, an intermediate in the manufacture of styrene.

Our Texas City operation was not considered a hazardous one—no more so than oil refining, which it resembled. It carried the same insurance rates as oil refineries.

An irresponsible criticism of the plant’s design by an employee of a contractor who had been engaged in its construction received wide publicity. Unfortunately, a repudiation of his statement by the president of that company was not widely publicized. There were no construction faults accountable for even a part of the disaster. In rebuilding, we expect to utilize the same type of construction. No manufacturing plant is designed as a fortress, nor could many fortresses withstand a blast such as came from the Grandcamp. The plant also contained fire protection approved by our insurance companies; it was adequate to cope with any foreseeable contingency.

There were rumors in financial circles that our insurance coverage was inadequate. The plant and contents were insured for $14,750,000, which covered the plant inventory of approximately $1,000,000 and the depreciated value of its buildings, machinery, and equipment on a 90% co-insurance clause. As we have no estimates of reconstruction costs, we do not know how far our insurance receipts will fall short of them. In addition, the plant was covered by $7,500,000 of Use and Occupancy insurance and $2,500,000 of Public Liability insurance.

Of course the loss of such an important unit will have an adverse effect on future profits, although Use and Occupancy insurance will compensate during the coming twelve months in large degree. But the greatest loss will be in the potential profits from several derivatives of styrene which we planned to manufacture and which must now await either the rebuilding of the Texas City plant or supplies of styrene monomer from other sources. We are actively exploring every avenue. We are hopeful of securing a substantial supply but it is not likely that we can purchase enough to carry on with our recent program.

Our plant was the first to produce styrene for the manufacture of synthetic rubber so desperately needed after Pearl Harbor. It is now gone and with it many of the men—chemists and engineers who contributed to perfecting the processes in the laboratory and in the pilot plant stages. Working literally day and night in the dark days of 1942, their ideas and designs took shape in the mass of pipes, apparatus, columns, mortar and bricks at Texas City. The physical part of the men and the plant have gone, but not the products of their minds. This will live on. Based on their contributions and that of others, we will build again at Texas City on their foundations. The results of their work will continue to serve their fellow men.

The Company has many friends. Hundreds of messages of sympathy and offers of assistance poured into our offices from customers, competitors, individuals, and suppliers. Many came from far corners of the earth. All were comforting and appreciated.

I should like to pay tribute to the splendid work of those remarkable organizations, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Volunteers of America, the Boy Scouts of America, the United States Army’s medical staff, the staffs of the hospitals in the area, and the officials of both the State of Texas and the City of Texas City, for the way in which they responded to the challenge of the emergency. The manner in which the Monsanto staff overcame the initial shock and established an effective organization to command a most difficult situation, then immediately planned the future, was gratifying in the highest degree.

Sometimes it takes a tragedy to bring forth the better qualities of human beings. Our visit to Texas City made us proud to be Americans and especially so to belong to the exceptionally able group of them making up Monsanto.

April 30, 1947