Grape vineyards dominated the California land on which the Kaiser Steel plant was later built.

The Henry J — a sub-make of the Kaiser automobile line — was produced from 1951-54, and named for Henry J. Kaiser himself. The compact, economy car was also marketed through Sears, Roebuck and Company as the Allstate.
Ginny Balsano Mulloy saw a lot of steel mills growing up in the Mon Valley, but never one with palm trees. “It was the first thing you saw when you went through the gate into the mill. The palm trees. And the flowers. It wasn’t like any of the mills we had back home.”


That could be because Kaiser Steel was built some 50 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, amid the chicken farms and walnut groves of San Bernardino County. “A blast furnace out among the oranges” struck even the world-weary Gunther as incongruous. In the geography-bound world of 1940s America, California steel made about as much sense as Beaver County citrus.

Henry J. Kaiser, the man behind Kaiser Steel, made a career out of confounding expectations. Part industrial tycoon, part progressive New Dealer, Kaiser presided over a vast and eclectic empire of interests on the West Coast that included shipyards, dams, cement factories, and housing developments. What bound them all together were fat government contracts. In 1914, he got a contract to pave roads in British Columbia. During the 1930s, he thrived on massive public works projects like the Boulder and Grand Coulee Dams. Between 1941 and 1945, he produced close to 1500 ships for the U.S. Navy at his freshly minted yards in Richmond, Cal., and Spokane, Wash.

Kaiser Steel was conceived through the same logic. With the threat of a Pacific war looming, Kaiser persuaded the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to loan him $110 million for a facility to supply the West Coast with steel. In April 1942, nine months after the first bulldozers began plowing up the sleepy farming town of Fontana, Kaiser Steel was rolling out armor plate.

Even with standing orders from the U.S. Navy, Kaiser Steel was a gamble: the scattering of towns named Pittsburg in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas testified to the failed dreams...
of once hopeful industrial entrepreneurs in the West. In Fontana, the obstacles to making steel seemed as daunting as anywhere. The nearest coal deposits were 800 miles away in Utah and New Mexico. Iron ore was closer but could be extracted only at considerable expense. Even water was scarce at times. Add to this the concerted opposition from Big Steel, and it would seem that Kaiser Steel – Fontana was doomed from the first heat.

But Henry Kaiser was prepared to import anything and everything, including a skilled workforce. Then as now, making steel was part science, part instinct. To get it right, you needed workers with the sort of hands-on know-how that only experience could impart. So beginning in 1941, Kaiser Steel began scouring the industrial heartlands for a few thousand good men. "They came recruiting people all through the area," recalled Joe Mollis, a Brownville native then working at Youngstown Sheet and Tube. "They said they needed people with experience. You had to be a craftsman, so that's how most everybody left."

Within the year, Kaiser had 5,000 men working at Fontana, including a sizeable contingent from Western Pennsylvania. Some thumbed their way out. Others arrived by car with families or friends. John Piazza, who would become vice president of Kaiser's steelworkers union, came out with several buddies from Johnstown in 1948. Ginny Mulloy drove out with her parents in 1945; more than 20 relatives were already working at Kaiser, including a cousin in personnel who found jobs for both Ginny's mother and father. Joe Mollis remembers running into lots of fellas who had worked with him in Youngstown, including a cousin who was the plant's labor relations man.

Fontana wasn't a hard sell. Places like McKeesport, Braddock, and Aliquippa offered honest work and a decent lifestyle, but Fontana did them one better: a unionized steel job in the land of barbecues, patios, and swimming pools. New arrivals joked that it was Aliquippa with sunshine.

It would be hard to overstate the appeal of Southern California's temperate climate, but what lured and kept most young steelworkers is what they didn't find. Kaiser Steel probably produced as much air pollution as any Pittsburgh mill, but Henry Kaiser's penchant for cleanliness and manicured lawns gave Fontana an "Oz with Smokestacks" aura. Ginny Mulloy remembers crews of gardeners working around the clock: there were even flower beds inside the mills. "It wasn't drab like the ones back home."

Nor aging and obsolete, as Joe Mollis recalled: "The rolling mills were modern, the blast furnaces were built a lot better, the coke plants were very good. It was just much better than the ones back in Ohio and Pennsylvania." Fontana's shimmering newness was so unlike the popular image of a milltown that even Hollywood took notice. "Steel Town," released in 1952, starred the vivacious Anne Sheridan, but the unsung star of the mostly forgettable movie was Kaiser Steel, which cooperated fully in the film's production.

Another distinguishing feature at Kaiser was the absence of a rigid caste system. Henry J. promised opportunity, and most workers who signed on, so long as they possessed skill and ambition, found it. "That was [his] philosophy," Mulloy recalled. "If you were a good worker, he wanted you, and he usually wanted your family, too." If anything, Kaiser presented an inverted pyramid which put white ethnics on the
top. Many Slovak and Italian workers found themselves in the peculiar position of giving orders to native-born whites, usually Dust Bowl migrants who had moved from field to factory during World War II.

Fontana also avoided most of the political turmoil that engulfed many Pittsburgh mill towns in the 1940s and '50s. Whereas U.S. Steel, Republic, and Bethlehem fought the CIO and United Steelworkers at every turn, Kaiser embraced them, believing that a happy, unionized labor force increased profits. In 1946, Kaiser was the first steel maker to sign a contract with the CIO agreeing to a wage increase, a move which helped avert a strike and increased plant efficiency 15 percent. During the nationwide steel strike in 1959, Kaiser was the first to settle with striking workers. Kaiser's gambit angered Big Steel but allowed his 11,000 workers to return to work before the competition. "To break a union is to break yourself," Kaiser reportedly said.

During the war, Kaiser housed employees in mobile homes and hastily converted chicken coops, but postwar workers were encouraged to buy their own homes in suburban developments. Ginny Mulloy's family stayed a few months in "Kaiserville" after they arrived, but by 1949, they'd purchased a house with a fenced-in yard. There were rough parts of town — Fontana, after all, was home to the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang — but compared to the substandard housing in most steel towns back east, Fontana was middle class and modern. "It wasn't like back home, where all the back yards ran together," Ginny recalled. "Here you had privacy."

And if new arrivals went looking for the houses on the hill that signified the ruling class or the entrenched Scots-Irish Presbyterian elite, they would have been disappointed. Plant managers drove into Kaiser Steel from nearby, red-tile roofed developments, much like the ones pictured in TV sitcoms from the 1950s and '60s. Think Robert Young in a white hard hat, and you've got a pretty good image of Kaiser management.

It was about as mild-mannered as a steel town could get. And on warm Saturday afternoons, almost everyone — union steward and manager alike — could be found duffing on local fairways.

Beneath these smooth California surfaces, Western Pennsylvania did manage to poke through. This was especially evident inside the mills, where natives from these parts exerted a disproportionate influence. Dino Papavero, head of the local 2869 during the 1970s, was an Aliquippa native. His right-hand man, John Piazza, came to Kaiser from Johnstown. Most of the folks in personnel, like Ginny Mulloy's cousin, also had ties to Western Pennsylvania. Even the small talk had a steel belt flavor. In some parts of the mill, workforces were so thick with expatriates from these parts that
heated arguments broke out over whether the Pirates or Indians would have the better season.

Fontana’s social clubs supplied an even better measure of what historian Mike Davis has described as “the transposed culture of Pennsylvania millworkers on a semi-arid utopia on the edge of the desert.” The city had its California night clubs, but the real center of social life was the lively Slovene Hall which hosted dances and wedding receptions, “Deerhunter” style, year-round. It became the favorite (and perhaps only) California stop for Frankie Yankovic, the self-proclaimed Polka King, no doubt pleasantly surprised to find such a receptive audience for his music on that side of the country.

In fact, there seemed to be a club for every Western Pennsylvania-transplanted nationality. Dino Papavero wanted a place

where Italian Americans could eat ravioli and play bocce, just like back home in Aliquippa, so in 1955 he started the Italian American Club; the governor even attended the dedication. Thursdays became known around Fontana as Spaghetti Night at the club.

At times, it was like being an immigrant all over again. When Joe Mollis arrived in 1948, there wasn’t a single Greek rite church in the Golden State, so he and a group of fellow Slovaks petitioned the Greek Catholic bishop back East to establish a parish in Fontana. “We had a lot of Slovaks that worked in the mill, a hell of a lot, so we notified the bishop. I remember, because the bishop told us ‘There’s nothing in California.’”

Mollis and his fellow Slovaks convinced him otherwise by brandishing a list of all the Slovaks who worked in the mill. In 1955, they purchased land and immediately began raising funds. “We paid for our church making pierogie. Our women would make them just before lunch and I’d come down to the mill with about 200 dozen. We used to sell ‘em all. We had our church by 1958.” Mollis ended up serving as cantor at St. Nicholas Greek Catholic Church for the next 40 years.

Fontana had its share of mill gate bars too, where workers, just like back home, would cash their checks on payday and knock back a few boilermakers. (One popular after-work stop was a liquor store enterprisingly named The Keystone.) It seemed like the only thing missing was the corner Isaly’s dairy store, but Mulloy even took care of that on trips back to Charleroi: “Before I left, I’d buy 20 pounds of chipped ham at the local Isaly’s, along with ravioli from Servoli’s. You couldn’t get that kind of food back in California.”

On one of those trips back home, Mulloy’s father ended up staying for three months; “He missed his friends, the close-knit neighborhoods.” But he eventually returned to Fontana, and most who moved out stayed, limiting their contact to
occasional visits. Mollis still returns to Ohio and Pennsylvania to visit friends and family — his mother stayed behind in Niles, Ohio — but he never considers moving back. “Fontana is like home, but it’s better than home. And you just can’t beat the weather out here.”

The weather again. But the weather couldn’t prevent Kaiser from suffering the same fate that befell nearly every steel plant in the 1970s and ’80s. After the company installed a state-of-the-art basic oxygen furnace in 1962, it basically ceased making improvements and upgrades. By the 1970s, it was no longer competitive. In 1983, Kaiser Steel declared bankruptcy and shut down, throwing thousands of Kaiser employees out of work. Most of the plant was literally crated up and shipped off to a Japanese firm for $110 million — the same sum it cost to erect the plant in 1942.

Today, where Kaiser once made steel, the California Speedway is a major stop on the NASCAR circuit. In California, even abandoned PCB-laden mill sites do not sit fallow for long.

“They thought this whole town would fall when Kaiser left,” says Dino Papavero’s widow Sharon. But Fontana has actually prospered in the wake of Kaiser’s departure. Between 1980 and 2000, the city’s population nearly doubled, thanks to California’s insatiable appetite for housing and real estate. The population is close to 120,000, nearly three times as large as during its peak steel town days in the late ’50s.

The imprint of all of those steelworkers is still discernable, though fading. All four of Fontana’s Catholic churches are thriving, but Masses are now in both English and Spanish for their largely Hispanic congregations. The Slovene Hall is still open for business and polka is still being played, but most of its business comes from hall rentals. Subdivisions once colonized by ambitious cranemen and blast furnacemen and their families have given way to young professionals with no connection to manufacturing. Many of the former steelworkers, now in their 80s, seem to have been efficiently sequestered into a handful of downtown highrises.

In Fontana, the Aliquippa’s gone. All that’s left are the palm trees. And the sunshine.