

## Superconductor staff reunites 10 years later

10:02 PM CDT on Saturday, July 23, 2005

By SHERRY JACOBSON / The Dallas Morning News

It is difficult to find much physical proof that the largest scientific experiment known to mankind was being constructed in rural Ellis County just a decade ago.

The 16,000-acre site has sprouted housing developments and small ranches in recent years. A massive laboratory, the size of five football fields, is now a refrigeration factory. And the 17 vertical shafts leading to a huge underground tunnel are filled with dirt.

The Superconducting Super Collider is gone but for the memories of thousands of workers who worked on it and hoped it would discover the origin of matter.

Some of those people just won't let it die.

Several hundred former Super Collider employees and contractors gathered Saturday at the Red Oak Municipal Center to commemorate the official closing of the scientific project in 1995. Congress pulled the plug on the \$10 billion experiment in 1993, but it took another two years to shut it down.

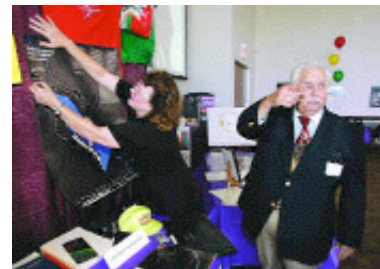
The reunion organizers said they combed the Dallas-Fort Worth area and beyond to locate former co-workers who shared their strong emotional connection to the Super Collider. A few of the people who were found did not want to stir up old feelings about the failed experiment. But many more were enthusiastic about getting together.

The reunion brought together not only people but the only remaining evidence of the Super Collider: T-shirts and posters with the project's name on them, photographs and pieces of rock that had been excavated from the underground tunnel.

Pieces of memories

Examining the motley collection was a highpoint of the gathering.

CLICK IMAGE  
TO ENLARGE



JOHN F. RHODES/DMN  
Patti Winters of Waxahachie, Andy Rico of Dallas and several hundred others with Super Collider ties gathered in Red Oak.

**Also Online**

[Dallas buyer wants SSC land](#)

"It's great to see everything," said Roy Schwitters, former director of the Super

Collider and now a physics professor at the University of Texas at Austin. "Obviously, there are some mixed feelings, but I just love the enthusiasm that brought these people together again."

Albert Mendoza of Mesquite said he couldn't pass up the chance to connect with his old co-workers although he couldn't help thinking about the lost opportunity the Super Collider represented.

"A lot of people don't realize the technology that could have spun out from this," the Texas Instruments worker said. "It could have revolutionized the electronics industry."

If it had ever been completed, the 54-mile underground ring of magnets would have been used to force subatomic particles to collide, perhaps simulating the beginning of the universe.

"Everything about it was so exciting," recalled Richard Fielder, a former Collider program specialist who helped to build the project and then dismantle it.

"Everybody thought this was the future for our children and our grandchildren," he said of his fellow workers. "People worked nights, weekends and holidays. Even those of us who didn't quite understand the science were completely dedicated to the project."

Although it had the makings of a wake, the gathering felt more like a high school reunion. Some people had come from across the country, but most were from Texas.

"This is just to reminisce and find out where people are and how they're doing," said Arthur Forsythe, who worked for DART and subsequently retired after leaving the Collider staff in 1995.

"I was surprised at the number of people who stayed in the Dallas area. A lot of people must have liked it here and decided to stay."

Penny Ball, a physicist who came to Texas from the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York, said she opted to stay in Texas because she had built a home in DeSoto. But she also felt her job prospects were not too good at age 55.

"The kind of people who stayed were older and closer to retirement," said the now semi-retired consultant. "They didn't want to move around anymore."

At its peak in the early 1990s, the Super Collider's staff included more than 2,000 people, plus thousands more contract workers, who were helping to build the giant particle accelerator.

\$2 billion, then scrapped

After investing more than \$2 billion, members of Congress abandoned the project, citing cost overruns, poor management and assorted other problems for

their decision. The stunned Collider workers were left to find other jobs and reconstruct their lives.

"It was like a death in the family or going through a divorce," recalled Robyn Forsyth, who did accounting and payroll for the project and now is the budget analyst for the city of Midlothian.

"Most of us found other jobs," she said. "Whether or not we were happy about them was something else."

Most of the scientists left Texas after the plug was pulled, but they have not forgotten how it felt when the project ended so abruptly.

"It was an awful feeling," recalled Raphael Kasper, who was associate director of the Super Collider. "It went pretty quickly from excitement and the challenge of building something new to dismantling something before it was done. It was a terrible loss."

Dr. Kasper, now the vice president of research at Columbia University in New York City, said he has given much thought to what killed the Super Collider, including the political process that placed its budget on the federal chopping block each year.

"Voting against the SSC became at some point a symbol of fiscal responsibility," he said of the congressional vote. "Here was an expensive project that you could vote against."

Still, several former employees referred to working for the Super Collider as the "best job I ever had."

"It was one of the most fantastic opportunities I've ever had, and probably the most fun and the most challenging," said Gary Swenson, a former program manager who now works for a San Marcos high-tech company.

"I'm telling you, I just loved it," said Margie Davison, who once helped write the Super Collider's environmental impact statements. Today, she works for a Midlothian steel plant.

"There is not a day that I don't think about what was lost," she said. "But I'm not bitter about it like some people. I'm more grateful that I had a chance to be part of it."

From near and far

Janice Westmoreland, who helped organize the Collider staff's early social events, said she was amazed how the international staff of scientists and engineers coalesced with a small army of local workers to become "one big family."

"We had Nobel Prize winners here," said Ms. Westmoreland, now a local interior designer. "And the fun part, for me, was giving speeches to school kids,

Rotary clubs and women's groups about what the SSC was. It was exciting just to be educating people."

In the end, it was mostly the local workers who stayed to put the project to rest.

Karen Murphy of Dallas, who started out in quality assurance at the Super Collider, survived 13 rounds of layoffs, eventually ending up with an inventory job in a warehouse in Red Oak.

"I counted every nut, bolt and ink pen they could find," said Ms. Murphy, who still lives in the area. "I don't know who wound up with all of it."

Mr. Fielder, now a purchaser for General Dynamics in Garland, said he was one of the last three employees at the Collider site. Until 2000, he oversaw teams of surveyors that were carving up the site so that the land could be sold. He also helped to dispose of warehouses filled with abandoned equipment.

"It was pretty depressing, but I was glad to be a part of it because I felt like I was doing something with it, rather than just throwing it all away," said Mr. Fielder, who did not attend the reunion. "The least we could do was find a home for all of it."

E-mail [sjacobson@dallasnews.com](mailto:sjacobson@dallasnews.com)

---

Online at: <http://www.dallasnews.com/s/dws/bus/stories/072405dnmetreun.2826353.html>