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# M.C. Gill

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# M.C. Gill

*These historical profiles in CF's series to celebrate pioneers in the composites industry and the record of their accomplishments go beyond chronological documentation to explore personalities and examine the cultural and personal circumstances that nurtured these industry leaders and set the conditions for their success.*

# the pioneer



Above: The Quonset hut location served as warehouse space back in the early '50s.

Left: "The original American pioneers were a different breed," Gill said in an article for L.J. Quinn. "They opened new frontiers, fought those who would stop them, improvised, sacrificed, made do and worked hard. Innovation and determination were their watchwords."

# roducer

## *And Why Shouldn't He?*

Positioned with a straight-backed air of jurisdiction behind a large, pristinely varnished desk, Mr. M.C. Gill barely looked up when months ago I first walked into his office. Without any cues from those of his employees I just met, my gut immediately told me—no doubt—it is “Mr.” Gill. Maybe it’s “M.C.” to those who know him better, a pair of street-wise, dice-rolling initials nobody really wants to mess with. But for now I’ll stick with the honorific. Here’s a man, I thought, who earns respect the old fashioned way, who learned business and life when grapes poured wrath and folks gladly stressed the lumbar to pluck a penny out of the gutter.

Not to imply, however, the hardscrabble life hasn’t prompted comic relief and charming quick-witted returns. Get his voice mail and Mr. Gill offers “...if you detect no smile on my face, we have a bad connection.” And there’s the story I read in the *Spirit Lake Beacon* by Laurie Rahn about his pet monkey Satan, how he carried it with him on train rides to Estherville Junior College in Iowa when he was a freshman. “He lived up to his name,” Gill quipped when I asked him about the white-faced ringtail.

From struggle too comes humility and the art of giving back. Last spring he donated \$7 million to the University of Southern California’s Center for Composite Materials, a more spiritual than monetary give-back to his alma mater. “This gift, in a small way, expresses my appreciation for what I received from the school,” he told the USC newsletter *Momentum*, “and what it helped me accomplish.” College officials even opted to rename the center the Merwyn C. Gill Foundation Composites Center.

But as he offers me a seat, I glance the magazines perfectly cascading down his desk—*Chief Executive*, *Advisor*, *Red Herring*, *New Yorker*—erudite publications flanking the latest *Wall Street Journal* and *The Forbes Scrapbook of Thoughts on Business Life*, all perfectly set on 90-degree angles. And to hear him at 92 in our five-minute conversation, “We like to have competitors to beat, they make for a good environment,” it somehow became instantly clear that behind the laissez-faire facade the exotic Mr. Gill has stories to tell, miles and miles of scrapbook tales wrapped around a century, a city, and an industry. When I quietly suggest to Marketing Manager George Sorensen that when I come back in a few months to do the interview maybe those close to Mr. Gill can sit in to help trigger all those memories, he looks at me like I’m a cross between a lost beagle puppy and a reckless driver who just ran over one. “M.C. doesn’t need any help,” he bluntly reminds me.

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**By Andrew Rusnak**

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That alone (Greatest Generation and first impression aside) is good enough for me—stories warehoused and catalogued in a keen mind, venerable, born when they called it the “horseless age” to watch men walk on the moon, to have the high-temperature phenolic laminates he made for Apollo 11 *on the moon*, his computer strategically positioned off to his left and his '74 Khamsin Maserati with the “Go-Gil-Go” tags visible through the window. He still comes to the office six days a week with a brown bag lunch and expects the same effort from his managers. And there’s the responsibility, prestige, and sweat in the claim paid for with a \$6,000 initial investment: “The oldest, continuously operating manufacturer of reinforced plastics—composites—in the world.” I bet he was hard on his kids.

“September 11 is famous for a couple reasons,” he said, his voice smooth but a tad too quick to be completely comfortable with the irony. “We suffered a great tragedy in this country and that was the day our company was founded. That would be September 11, 1945.”

Several months later, October. M.C. and I are maybe four hours into our interview when up pops this telling little anecdote. From his cavernous, Conrad Buff-designed office, where the echo of speech bounces back like talking to oneself in a mirror, M.C. recalls the details. At least some details. He wants me to paint the picture, but only offers a big four-inch brush. Southern California, early '40s, the war years. Somehow, they'd maneuvered into conversation, the way strangers in bars do sometimes.

“There was no physical attraction or anything, but she found me interesting,” he remembers.

Careful not to create any misunderstandings, his mind kicks like an 18 year old trying to explain a sneak-peek at a cheerleader to his girlfriend. She, the woman in the bar, more than twenty years his senior, around 55. He, still a young, plucky entrepreneur who “didn't have two nickels to rub together until I was 30 years old and war broke out in Europe.” I notice the magazines are gone from his desk, replaced by a half-dozen projects in neat piles, one of which contains photos of a commercial airliner cargo bay, sections shredded to bits by a dog that chewed through his cage during a long flight.



M.C. Gill and early employee Agnes Stover examine a sheet of wall fab, circa 1946. “I spent six years in the garage trying to find something to sell,” Gill remembers.



M.C. Gill's third plant location in Montebello.

“I was sitting at the neighborhood bar, Pashas, where I used to go,” M.C. continues. “I think it may have been New Year's Eve, I used to have a drink by myself, watch people, and think.”

He works me, the reporter, with a pair of deep-set, orbicular eyes, gimlet eyes that hunger and restore, and surgically install. In this case, camaraderie, confidence. We're not exactly on the verge of locker room banter, but he wonders if I understand. I do. It all puts me in an old Mickey Rooney movie or a Ring Lardner short story. Caution be damned, he takes a swing and we build a little trust.

“She was talking to someone next to me and we got into a conversation. She told me, ‘You're a producer, some people are consumers, but you're a producer,’ and I understood myself better from then on. I should have got her name. I don't remember what we were even talking about, but here was an unbiased opinion from an outsider and I never forgot it.”

There were other, epiphanic moments of identity. Long before M.C. came to know himself as a producer, he conceived the gift of the sale.

Post WWI (“the war to end all wars”) and dead romantic sensibilities that lead to widespread economic deprivation. It's 1922 and a 12-year old boy runs the town of Terril in Northwest Iowa, population 420 (current population, 383)—“Ever been there?” M.C. teases—on the prow for a buck. Probably in the back of a comic book or magazine snatched from the stacks in his father's pharmacy where he cleaned spittoons, swept floors, and jerked sodas, he spies an ad for The Bluine Manufacturing Company of West Concord, Mass. Thoughts bounce to a mother's bluing kettle, in which she briefly dips whites to fix a sparkle after they're washed and before she pins them on the line to dry. “It is all the rage!” the ad bursts. “Everyone wants it. You want it.”

Bluine manufactured bluing, but not as a liquid in bottles like other manufacturers. The company turned instead to an innovative process, impregnating butcher's paper with bluing while using sugar as an adhesive. According to *The Concord Magazine* ([www.concordma.com](http://www.concordma.com)), the paper was dried and cut into small squares, 12 to a pack, which proved lighter and cheaper to ship via the U.S. mail. The company recruited school children around the country for door-to-door sales, each 12-pack sold for a dime. Prizes

were awarded based on sales volume. “For the really accomplished,” *The Concord* reports, “there were early home movie projectors, bicycles, and BB guns.”

At 12, Kid Gill as he was known around town, opted for the movie projector which he immediately turned into a basement venture, charged neighborhood kids 10 stick pins to watch a 35mm, 10-second loop of “girls with veils dancing in open space. You get the idea?” M.C. asks, sly eyes twinkling, recruiting, easy with the recall of 80-year old 10-second details. “Later on, I got in touch with a movie theater and found out where they got their films. I wrote a letter and found I could get a particular film for seven-and-a-half dollars a day, a movie with Gladys Walton called “The Untameable.” I never quite got to that point, but, you see, the entrepreneur in me showed up right away.”

Into the night, stood with a pole at the end of the pier at his parent’s summer cottage at Lake Okoboji after taking orders from neighbors for sun fish, one-eyed pike, and yellow perch. Sold vanilla ice cream to the same neighbors. Earned a \$20 gold piece when he was 15 selling more *Sunday Des Moines Registers* than anyone in the State. Against his mother’s advice, he banked it. A week later, the bank closed, the gold piece thrown into the pit of the Great Depression. “I always had this fear of going broke,” he says, almost inviting the challenge. “I still do.”

He sits perched on the edge of his chair, restless, fidgety, and dapper is the only word for a cut designer suit. Though beyond the boyish “Who, me?” expression and what comes off like an itch to rush outside and hit some baseballs, M.C. relishes telling his life story. And why shouldn’t he?

He returned to Terril in 1989, a guest of the citizens after he helped finance Terril Plastic Molders and the town fathers voted to rename the only park “Gill Park” in honor of his parents.

“Being an innovator and a pioneer doesn’t mean you can run a company,” he responds after I ask him to explain the difference. “The ability to innovate doesn’t have much to do with the ability to show a profit and keep the organization going. Matter of fact, they’re not closely related at all. I’ve seen this over a period of years. Many pioneers bring a business to a certain level, then they either fail or sell out.”

We’re interrupted by a phone call informing M.C. of a meeting he has with

representatives from the University of Southern California where a foundation for composites research is set up in his name. The meeting isn’t on the calendar—calls one of his managers to attend, but he can’t make it. M.C.’s not sure how it slipped by, but with true entrepreneurial wit, wonder and rankle give way to *the itch*, a chance to demo spontaneity, be the center of a challenge. And why shouldn’t he?

I offer to wait in his office, the meeting is on intellectual property rights, most likely

with proprietary confidence, but M.C. invites me in. He’s vintage power trader with the kind of walk, shuffle really, that draws others into his forceful wake. Everything for him starts with a physical dimension, size it up, his cerebral gusto and aplomb take him to at least an aura 6 feet 5 inches tall. I shake hands with M.C. Gill Professor, Steven Nutt, Licensing Associate, Melody Yang, and Christopher Stoy, external relations CEO, and grab a seat at the far end of the conference table.

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Abstract art, like the design on M.C.'s tie, where power relationships between colors and shapes are left up for grabs, works with vintage airline posters on the walls in this part of the building. Outside, it's a gray Southern California morning, but, much more than a marine layer, there's the rare forecast for showers later in the day. Yang, very business like, respectfully launches into a well-juiced explanation as to why M.C. should apply for a full patent to protect his ideas on a particular technology. So well presented, it comes off as a no-brainer. A college dissertation will be published several months hence anyway, making the well-invested technology fair game in the public arena, so the full patent makes perfect sense.

M.C., however, appears not to get it, or doesn't bite. He sits relaxed, leaned back in his chair, cocky at the head of the table. The others, like heliotropic buds, angle toward him. Twenty minutes later, frustration on a gentle rise, Yang circuitously finds the same rational points. Then, Nutt seeks to subtly and inadvertently adjust conversation toward a band of logic everyone can jump on. Stoy throws in occasionally from what he thinks is Gill's point-of-



M.C. was close friends with Hall-of-Fame cartoonist Karl Hubenthal, who was nationally syndicated and very well known. Hubenthal captured Gill's ever-present sense of humor.

like two moneyed thoroughbreds sprinting toward the finish, just say ok, ok. Everyone waits for M.C., not sure what'll happen next.

"Is that what you want? You want me to put into words what I want?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have no trouble with that," M.C. concludes with an

view also in an attempt to help everyone find the same station.

Still there's a disconnect. M.C. vacillates, either sits on the fence or strafes his guest's thought trains with questions. And why shouldn't he? This is not new to him. The M.C. Gill Corporation has acquired dozens of patents in its 57 years. Only to apply for this particular full patent, however, seems obvious. So, what's the hold up? "I'm not worried about competition," he patiently claims. And, "Money gained would be reinvested in USC research and development," he gently lays a perk on the table. But no conclusive answer here, so at the same time the meeting reaches a dead spot, the dramatic tension intensifies, becomes palpable ... apply for the patent, apply for the patent, apply for the patent ...

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ironic twist. Everyone grins. When he says he'll get his lawyers on the full patent paperwork, there's a slight, but happy "finally" in the air.

Once I was the process engineer on a tiger team tasked to address a bonding problem on a production line set up to assemble commercial airline thrust reversers. The leader of this team was an executive vice president for a large aerospace company. Representatives from design, program management, and procurement rounded out the team. The project was high visibility. As determined via time studies, millions of dollars could be saved by speeding the cure cycle of a particular fairing bond operation. I was several years out of college, with an English degree to boot, couple years as a tech writer, one year of lab and floor experience, and no idea how or why I was picked for this job. The Veep was old school, no degree, started out as a riveter during the war, rose to the top through hard work and the good old boy network, and was about six layers of management out of my reach in a stifling bureaucracy.

Our first meeting in his office he proceeded to pass around chocolate caramel candy, and with everyone on a hard chew he went around the table and reamed us all a new butt. When he got to me he accused me of a few things I'd never heard of—we'd never met—then slammed my whole Advanced Manufacturing Technology department. It felt like my chair had been jerked out from under me. There I was, on the floor with a sore rump happily gnawing away on candy. Two days later, same scenario. He was, however, good about post-ream backslaps and atta-boys that sent us all scurrying back to our jobs with gung-ho. By the third meeting, I had a plan to effect a local cure with a substitute sealant with the same peel and tensile properties as the adhesive that took a week to cure. I tested it, wrote the report, got it approved, others got the credit, and I fell back to obscurity.

The lesson here is my tiger team boss broke the mold, disrespected protocol and status quo, fractured conventional dynamics of meeting discussions—no matter what. He couldn't tell the difference between a fairing and a chicken wing, but he knew what questions to ask and how to ask them. M.C., in this meeting anyway, didn't go for scream and burn, it might not be his style. And even though there was probably no other result that could've been reached, he

nevertheless put the USC team (and me) off balance, off center, off guard. He can't help it. It's in his blood. It *is* his blood. It's why he's not a 92-year old "has been," but a 50-year old "is still," and most importantly an 18-year young "am being." Stubborn? Eccentric? You bet, proud of it. So many clichés in a language—rules were made to be ..., tip scales, upset apple carts, walk high wires, round peg ..., I'd rather be business bungee jumping—even when they degenerate to irony, can only come from behavior deemed culturally valuable. Think, question, frustrate, defy, invent, annoy, act, question, frustrate again, defy again, convince—produce and sell! M.C. will never retire from who he is, and why should he? Follow your bliss Joseph Campbell said. Not too many know what or where their Bliss is. Gill has a true Bliss dressed in animated California sangfroid political cartoon and Midwest fear of empty pockets. It's there in his employee's eyes, their remarks, still trying to figure where the boss is coming from, or is going to come from next, but knowing he's in his element all the way. Decision making as art. To Be or not to Be is to challenge or not to challenge. Anything short of this is death. I don't imagine it's changed much since September 11, 1945.

"In this little town of Terril, they didn't have a tennis court," M.C. recalls. "We're talking about 1926 or '27. So I put up the first tennis court, behind my dad's drugstore. Then I put up lights. They weren't even playing professional baseball at night then. I put up backstops, a net, and we started a league. A lot of the players were businessmen, and they couldn't play during the day. Every once in a while we'd hit a ball and knock out a light, so we'd stop, get a ladder, and put in a new one. When I came to California, I saw lighted tennis courts, they may have done it before me, I don't know. But I'm the kind of guy who does that. Just because it isn't known doesn't bother me. I can't see any reason why things can't work, I want it, I do it. I guess that's the most significant thing."

Later that afternoon, when I left M.C.'s office it did rain in Southern California, the



Resin-mixer Ike Dominguez, circa mid-60s. The Gill Company pre-impregnates it's own fabric.

first time in half-a-year in the L.A. basin someone told me.

When Bruce Stafford came to work for the M.C. Gill Corporation in 1972 after a difficult layoff from a major oil company, he felt good about the future. He thought he found a home. There was, however, one nagging thought. The man who owned and ran the company, whom he liked and respected very much, was ... well ... old.

"I thought he'd retire soon," Stafford, who served as director of operations, remembers. "'Then what?' I asked myself. 'Do I have longevity here?'"

When I sat in M.C.'s office last October, chatting with Stafford about his own recently announced retirement, that same man who hired him 30 years ago, M.C. Gill, continued to sit erect on the edge of his chair, holding tight to a subtle but imperial grin of satisfaction.

Because of his bantam adolescent physique, M.C. played only one minute of varsity football at Terril High. Because of his scrappy competitive nature and a late-bloomer growth spurt, in 1927 when he got to Estherville Junior College 12 miles outside town, he helped quarterback the wolves to a state title. One can still easily spot his endorphin addiction. Business wins must feel like touchdowns and homeruns, meetings like dugouts or huddles, walking around the plant like stepping to the plate or moving up over center for a snap count. Fear of striking out equals fear of being broke. Sports, for the USC Trojan football season ticket holder, have always been *the* working metaphor.

After three years at Estherville, M.C. transferred to the University of Minnesota, his ambition, to become a chemist. Years before he'd inherited one of his Uncle Bill's chemistry books which started to catalyze some as yet inchoate interest. Uncle Bill, a pharmacist, partnered with M.C.'s father in the drug store business until he died young in 1917 when M.C. was seven. When M.C. got to high school, "They asked each senior what he wanted to do after graduation and I chose chemistry because nobody else even knew what it was," he remembers. "But it appealed to me somehow."

Name recognition and size became important commodities to Gill, and Minnesota was then the second-largest university in the United States. Despite the big campus, the sports-parallel-life-parallel-sports lessons continued to bounce his way. At Terril he played basketball as a senior, played well at guard the coaches said. At Estherville they told him to hang up his sneakers. With the Golden Gophers of Minnesota, however, he started on the scrimmage team and ran against the varsity in practice. *Learn to start over.* And when he

got to class, the professor couldn't believe he didn't know anything about ions, even badgered him about it, so M.C. had to repeat a few chemistry classes before he could step up. "That's where I learned chemical engineering," *learned to start over.* "Chemical engineering is process engineering, where you produce things, which is more in line with my nature."

But the thought, upon graduation, so he says now, of producing chemical processes as well as heliotropic good moods in the only local job market of Duluth's dark, frigid, iron range did not stir the romantic sensibilities of the young Merwyn C. Gill. *Learn to start over even—especially—if it's self inflicted. Comfort in routine or status quo can make cowards of us all.* Or, "It was just too cold," *a reasonable excuse for restlessness* after three years in Minnesota. Regardless, the instincts began to kick with thicker measures of self awareness even if it meant *leave behind the incomplete baccalaureate degree from the prestigious university. Southern California here I come.*

This move turns out to be more about baseball, chasing fields of dreams, girls, and

"I like organic chemistry over inorganic anyway, so I better go to Southern California where my mother had gone in her youth and loved it." Maude Gill's stories of candied Hollywood, where she'd gone to live with her older sister after their parents died young, always tugged on the youthful Merwyn's cavalier spirit. The organic Eureka State also will pump a constant supply of fresh opportunity into M.C.'s veins for (I can't say the rest of his life here for he is unpredictable) most (is it safe to say?) of his working career. Maybe it was the sun, maybe about being 23, head strong, full of piss and vinegar, making a mark, and maybe because it was 1933 and there was still plenty of room to maneuver, find a suitable frontier in and around L.A, a seductive place and time for a young man with entrepreneurial passion.

From the Hilton Garden Inn in Arcadia, I tell the cab driver I want Easy Street in El Monte, a distance of 6.42 miles per MapQuest.

"Where?" he asks.

"Easy Street," I say again, suspecting his

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English to not be so good.

"Where?"

"Easy Street. E-A-S-Y Street," I spell it out, patiently, remembering I was on the receiving end of this confusion myself the first time George Sorensen gave me the Gill company address. "Where? Where?" I'd asked.

He nods his head and I settle back with my notes for what I think is going to be a short 10-minute ride. This is the time my mind kicks into hyper-drive, frantically searches for perspective and theme for the upcoming story. For some reason, I think of my nerdy attraction to "old people," something others like to poke fun of. Like a horseshoe magnet in a grade school science lesson, I pick up the filament memories of older generations, the back-in-the-day jeremiads, and spin illusions of suffering but somehow magically better worlds. The romance of not having, to build everything from nothing, that most primitive of tests, but all settled in a past that, for them, is still affectionate, still decided, still dangerous, still ... stronger than any fear I have of resolving the romance. I ride this hypocrisy

to the gray edge of the sublime and listen to their stories, stories of war, stories of love, stories of work, stories of hate, self hate.

I came of age surrounded by WWII veterans, my friends' fathers, grandfathers, and uncles who worked their lives in steel mills, auto factories, and can companies, who spent their retirements driving to Florida in Cadillacs, nodding off on park benches in front of statues that honored them, mowing the grass before fourth of July parades marched by their tidy Baltimore row homes, sinewy arms extending from tight-sleeved T-shirts, tattoos from the Philippines bleached and faded to a supple stain, always a bushel of blue crabs seasoned with Old Bay steaming on the grill in the yard. They told me stories, and I listened. Even when they didn't tell stories, they told stories and I listened. Sometimes the story was an amputated arm or a post-traumatic, shell-shocked spasm at



**"The ability to innovate doesn't have much to do with the ability to show a profit and keep the organization going," Gill, who can do both, says.**

a bus stop late at night under a harsh street lamp in front of the VFW. Sometimes the story was that their sons—my generation—followed them into the mills, enlisted in the Army, drove trucks, welded railroad track or became cops. Sometimes their sons went to jail, became addicts, or took suicide runs down abandoned stretches of access road in their hopped-up Camaros and Firebirds. Less often they went to college to escape the dying blue-collar world of their fathers. And now I'm telling a story about a 92-year old man who lived through that world, and the one before that, and, now, thrives in this world which has yet to be defined, or is defined by lack of definition. A man who tells me later his ninth grade teacher made him sand and refinish his desk after he carved Kid Gill and Grumpy (another moniker) into the wood. A man who still gets up early every morning, throws on a suit, jumps in his Jaguar or Maserati, fights the L.A. freeways, runs his company of several hundred people, and clearly remembers life in America when Warren Harding was President. There's something unfathomable, unutterable, and sublime about those who've witnessed the push and atonement of generations, unfathomable beyond anything they do, have done, or can tell you. They protect and pass on an obscure profound truth that rides behind the superficiality of deep-set eyes, clean desks, and buzzing factories. I'm fairly confident I won't live to 92.

"Excuse me, where you say again?"

We must've been driving for about 15 minutes before the cabbie snaps me out of my reverie. I glance outside and notice the "Friendly El Monte" water tower.

"Easy Street," I repeat, "4056 Easy Street." I then show him Sorensen's business

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card. He calls the dispatcher and explains the dilemma in Spanish. They talk for a while, the meter continues to run, and I struggle to sort through an array of aggressive Hispanic inflections for signs of assurance that we can figure out where we're going.

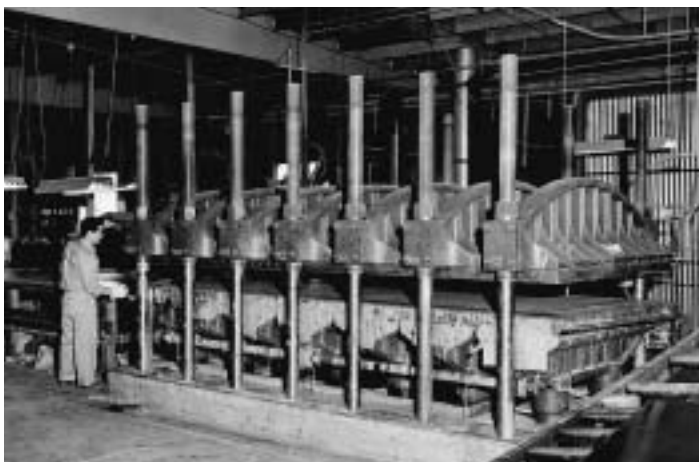
"OK," the cabbie turns to tell me, "I know now."

I go back to my notes, my thoughts, the oral history of generations...

Ten minutes later, I notice we are stopped at a dead end in an industrial park. The cab driver glances around confused. He shuts off the meter at \$20, thinks for a second, turns the cab around, works through a maze of side streets until suddenly we both peer up through the window at a street sign ... Easy Street. (Later, I'd learn the sign is popular among thieves, and has had to be replaced several times.) I hear a half yell when I climb out the back seat and see the friendly secretary at the door motioning me over. She sits opposite M.C.'s office, separated by several glass walls and a pristine atrium that resembles a slice of Edenic rain forest.

M.C. isn't in yet. Sorensen meets me in the waiting area, introduces me around, to C.E.O. Ken Boudreau and others, before we end up in the front lobby/museum where, in antique cases lining the wall, rest the early artifacts of Gill's commercial struggles, from cafeteria place mats to complex anti-ballistic composite laminates. And on the opposite "wall of fame," a panoramic display featuring the logos of every company Gill has worked with since 1945, more than 400, from N.A.S.A., Rolls Royce, G.M., and Boeing, to PPG, Owens Corning, Ashland, and Dow. M.C. Gill is "the world's largest manufacturer of original equipment and replacement baggage compartment liners for passenger and freighter aircraft," according to the web site. But the resume of icons on the wall signals more than the latest company promotion. It pushes one to gaze, to piece the hundreds of names and symbols into the wonder of thousands of meetings, telephone calls, field tests, documents, R&D experiments, material acquisitions, production runs, quality tests, packing crates, hours, days, years, careers, retirements, failures and wins—Air New Zealand, Air Alaska, Air France—the list seems endless—Piper, deHavilland Canada, Lufthansa—a history of modern aviation.

Sorensen then puts me in a room and pops in a Gill company video, a family affair on the lawn just outside the plant, complete with dignitaries and dedication ceremony for the freshly named "Merwyn C. Gill Way" which now intersects Easy Street—all to the background ballad of Frank Sinatra's "My Way:" *And now the end is near/And so I face the final curtain/My friend I'll say it clear/I'll state my case, of which I'm certain/I've lived a life that's full/I've traveled each*



Vintage press operations at M.C. Gill.



For years M.C. struggled to find something to sell. Early products included place mats and lamp shades.

*and ev'ry highway/But more, much more than this/I did it my way.*

From the get, I took M.C. as an atavistic, refreshing "my way" kind of guy, a restoration in literary terms of a time when America was "built." But I didn't take him as an "or the highway" kind of guy. He likes to mix it up too much, likes to teach, mentor, peddle character. Through the eyes of some he may appear balky to a fault, but the numbers over the years speak for themselves, and Mr. My Way, Mr. Producer, Mr. Consummate I can sell you a song of vitality, success, and final causes, appreciates and respects the same gumption in his own staff.

"He'd called me in for a third interview," says Sorensen, later at lunch as he relates the story of his hiring. "I was getting frustrated. I finally pointed to the phone and asked him to call the personnel manager and tell him to hire me, that I can do these things for him, that I can do this job."

After Ol' Blue Eyes winds down, *For what is a man, what has he got?/If not himself, then he has naught/To say the things he truly feels/And not the words of one who kneels*, I make my own way, with Sorensen, down the corridor to M.C.'s office.

During the interview I immediately notice the neatly stacked piles of to-do projects on M.C.'s desk, the compulsive precision of his office, scores of accolades, certificates, plaques. Since his oldest son Steve left to start his own business, he's been left to run things once again, although he's always been Chairman of the Board and has kept an office at the plant. I ask him who he's cheering for in the World Series, both teams, the Angels and the Giants, are from California. "Well," he contemplates, "I'm partial to the National League, but the Angels are the home team." Then he pops out of his seat, slides over to grab a balsa bat fashioned into a cane, brandishes it, then lets me in on, "I'm thinking of getting back into the business," of balsa bat/cork ball kits for young kids. You see, he and cousin Jay Lighter (who later became publisher of the town paper), "we're talking about 14 years old here," used to cut the cork floats out of seine nets and use them as baseballs. "Then, about 1940 or so, I conceived the idea of making a baseball bat out of balsa wood. We imported balls from Portugal, where the cork comes from, bought the balsa from Ecuador, then put out a game."

In a January 12, 1954 letter, from Chicago, on Edgewater Beach Hotel stationery and in the symmetrical letter spacing of old typewriters, Rogers Hornsby—seven batting titles, a better than .400 average for three seasons, two triple crowns and MVPs—wrote a letter. "Dear Mr. Gill," it started. "Received your letter of December 14, also the bat-N-ball. Of all the games on the market pertaining to baseball, I feel that you really have a very good idea in helping the youth of America to take the proper interest in the

fundamentals of baseball. I am sending your letter to Mr. Robert J. Enders, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, 6, D.C. who is conducting my television show. He might be interested and could help you introduce your product to the public."

Hornsby's letter and the original bat-N-ball are on display in the antique cases in the lobby. In the early '50s the company sold 15,000 thousand units to boys' summer camps in Maine and New Hampshire, and to Los Angeles-area department stores, but it never jived with the composites business, so M.C. eventually gave it up. Till now. "I'm thinking of going to Wheaties," he throws out, *learn to start over*. "I could even sell these to Dodger Stadium as giveaways. My next door neighbor is Rod Dedeaux, the coach at USC who won 10 or 11 national championships. I'm thinking of maybe getting Rod involved with this thing." Baseball, an unforgiving game of quick, taunting inches in the mind as well as on the field, runs deep with legend in the Gill family genes.

"They told me my grandfather was one of the best pitchers in Northwest Iowa in the late 1800s," M.C. says. "They would pay him to come pitch, he was that good. He was considered large, about 5-ft., 10-in., 185 lbs. My dad was quite small, 5-ft., 4-in., 125. The best I ever did was 5-ft., 7-and-one-half, and I got to 155 pounds once."

In high school, the 118-pound Gill played right field and batted cleanup. Estherville J.C. did not front a baseball team, but the local community sponsored the semi-pro Estherville Eagles and Gill batted against traveling teams, some from the Negro leagues, with names like the Texas Black Spiders and the Kansas City Monarchs. When he got to Minnesota, however, he was cut twice from freshman baseball. The first time, he complained about not getting



M.C.'s sons, Phil and Steve try to talk an Angel into a little fungo with Gill's balsa bat and ball.



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a fair shake (he'd dribbled into the baseball season on the Golden Gopher's spring basketball program and missed tryouts), and the second time for thinking he could play third base when he was a natural out fielder. "Most of the people who know baseball would understand why they cut me off at third," M.C. says. "Well, when I got to USC, spring comes like the first of February, and I got that itch to play baseball again, so I went out for freshman baseball."

Only, as a transfer student, his freshman status was long spent. A schemer code kicked in and Gill proceeded to "borrow" a friend's name, Verne Summers, who later became a judge and who, "If I ever needed someone to sit in judgment of me," M.C. says (here he reminds me of a sorcerer trying to mix a magic elixir of chance, character, and success), "I'd choose him because he'd be fair. You see, I was set to graduate in 1936 and Verne was going to graduate in '39. They didn't give me a letter for playing, but a numeral, with my graduating year on it. When I wore the sweater, I'd take the nine and turn it upside down, then I'd give it back to Vern and he'd turn it back.

"And my claim to fame is that Johnny Beradino played shortstop. He went on to the majors and played for the St. Louis Browns for about 10 years. I used to wonder why everybody was so interested in him and it turns out he played in 'Our Gang' as a boy. He went on to play gangster roles in movies and appeared on soap operas."

The cool night air, saturated with the floral nectar that inspired pre-smog, 1930s Southern California, seeps through the open window unnoticed and surrounds many hours of studying chemical engineering for a young Merwyn Gill.

"I had the best room in the house, the upstairs room with the fireplace in it," remembers M.C. of his days in a boy's house on 36th Street, now Childs Way on the campus of USC. By now, there were no regrets about the move from cold Minnesota to warm Southern California. He was playing ball, getting a top-notch education, and unfurling his sail.

One evening, while working some chemical equations, he heard a whistle riding the evening breeze.

"I walked to the window and saw two women who looked the same in the girl's house about 50 feet away, the Wildy twins, Ellen and Evie. They just moved in and we got acquainted that night, went down to the drugstore for a Coke, I was with Evie. Then

my roommate Dick Bean, who later worked at Lockheed, and I took them on a date one afternoon. I remember we cut watermelons and ate them. Well, that evening we went down to the Palomar and Dick wanted to go with Evie so I said, 'alright, I'll swap with you' and I went with Ellen."

The famous Palomar Ballroom on West Second street in Los Angeles, home of the West Coast swing craze that swept California—Charlie Barnet, Benny Goodman—and the nation. It was a regular hangout for M.C., a jazz-loving bachelor who remembers loitering in his dad's pharmacy after hours, tuning the radio to jazz broadcasts from Chicago's Aragon and Trianon Ballrooms.

"I was there one of the first nights Benny hit town, nobody gave a damn about his music until he hit Los Angeles. I used to go stag, and they would have girls sitting around on couches and you would go pick one of them up and dance around in front of the bandstand see. Helen Ward sang and Gene Krupa played drums. But that night I was with Ellen. She wasn't much of a dancer and I didn't particularly like to dance, but we made a stab at it."

I notice our interview has grown more comfortable. Gill gently reaches back into industrial age Americana—he owns more than 400 jazz records—weaves historical details into his own personal story. Thoughts roll through the air like clouds on a warm summer day. We could be sitting on milk cans in front of the general store listening to the radio. He may not know it, but he's becoming my favorite uncle. There's plenty of room for my nerdy sentiment here because it's 1939 not 2003. Plus, I can't resist the metaphysical dimension, the unfathomable mystery of age and life, not to mention success.

M.C. and Ellen continued to see each other, becoming an inseparable pair in the eyes of their classmates. Gill took a degree in chemistry in '36, and another in chemical engineering in '37. Ellen graduated in '38 with a bachelor's in business and merchandising. She then decided to return to Nebraska to run her father's creamery, "another manufacturing situation," M.C. analyzes. With Ellen's decision, the two parted ways.

"We were apart for a year before I asked her to marry me," says Gill. "She came back to see if she was still interested, and she was, so she went home for a month to close



things out. We were married May 21, 1939 at my aunt's home in Hollywood. Dick never did marry Evie. She's still alive and lives in Santa Barbara. I see her once a year, or something like that."

On July 4, 1941, the Gill's first child died at birth. "My wife then went back to work as a bookkeeper for Lanz, a company that made clothes for celebrities like Hedy Lamar and Doris Duke, who my wife modeled for," says Gill, the painful memory now assimilated into the irony of destiny. "I've often thought about this. We saved every dollar she made, about \$6,000, and that enabled me to start the plastics business." Three children, sons Steve and Phil, and daughter Debaney followed. He whips off the birthdays as a way to test his memory, something he does often and better than those half his age. "My second son was born November 28, 1942, my third son, September 19, 1944, and my daughter came along on October 28, 1946."

M.C. likes to construe connections between generations, likes to point out atavisms. I ask him if his children ever took an interest in the business. "My daughter tried it a couple times and didn't like it. She likes racehorses, married a guy who was a trainer. That probably comes natural. My wife's mother took care of horses and my grandfather raised racehorses, had the best trotter in Northwest Iowa I'm told, at least at the county fairs. But neither my sons, my father, or myself gave a damn about horses, so

it finally showed up in my daughter. My sons went to college, Phil took chemical engineering, which is what I am, at Oregon State. Steve graduated from the school of business at USC They both came to work here after graduation, but it may have been better if they went to work, got some experience, somewhere else first. But I reasoned that in a fast developing industry like this, you get behind quickly. They both now work someplace else anyway. Phil runs a business making contoured parts in press molds. We bought out one of my customers when he died and Phil went back there to Nebraska to run the company with the option to buy and so bought it. Steve is in on the ground floor, a pioneer, in an ice machine company that sells to third world countries."

I also want to ask M.C. if he was hard on his kids, having been part of that world, the only generation in Twentieth Century America to truly go without. I remember my Great Depression grandmother's irritating, meticulous, brow-beating, even paranoid, advice for saving money. Seems like a reasonable question to me, one that has to do with passing on important values.

"Hard on them?" he asks, curiously.

"Do you think you were hard on them because of the way you had to struggle?"

"No, no, that's the thing about my generation, we went through the Great Depression. I think a lot of us spoiled our kids so they wouldn't have to go through it. My daughter was part of the hippie generation in the mid 60s. My sons were too old for that, but that was the generation that revolted against mine and the way we were doing things. My daughter and I, her family, are close, but all I knew growing up was hardship. I didn't suffer any so I'm not complaining. I just didn't have any money to spare."

And then I remembered I had to duck every time I opened my grandmother's freezer as little frozen packs of everything tumbled out because she hoarded more food than she ever could eat, but always it was for others, not her, and she always shoved a buck in my pocket when I left the house.

A nanogenerian who has punched his way through life—still punching—is a kind of primitive worship for me. Not ga-ga rock star infatuation (my grandmother annoyed me with her harangues, although I admired her punching power and my lesson was got), but a kind of transcendence, an oracle, something that never can be completely got, or got at. Type in “ninety years old” on Yahoo and almost a half-million sites pop up. Because American culture when M.C. came of age was what it was, a panoramic bitch-free zone that sponsored the precarious and devalued failure no matter how important it was to success, the reach of age became a victory in and of itself—bigger, stronger, longer, becomes better and the American way.

“I tied him this year,” M.C. said, the pride of longevity a flash on his playful brow. “My father was in the drugstore business from 1902 to 1959, 57 years. Well, I tied him this year. I never thought I would because I started at 35 and he started at 21.”

It was a hot, late-summer afternoon in Montebello when M.C. walked into his landlord’s liquor store on Washington Boulevard and bought a Coke to cool off. He was eight years out of college, and for

some time the mantra that played his brain since his youth had grown louder, the same one that pushed him door-to-door as a boy in Terril hawking packs of bluing, the one that told him to “entrepreneur,” as a verb, to act, to produce and sell.

Many of Gill’s college classmates waited until graduation before going to work for oil companies at \$150 a month. But M.C., with fear of empty pockets in the depths of the Depression, took a job with U.S. Rubber in East Los Angeles just before graduation for \$90 a month.

“I had the first job in the graduating class,” he recalls. “It was a big company, and rubber is distant from plastics, but I took the job. I got a raise after the first two weeks, a nickel an hour, then in another two weeks got another dime. I got up to 85-cents an hour pretty fast.”

Hard times forced U.S. Rubber to furlough many recent hires in the late 30s. But M.C. hung on and excelled in the company’s rotation program, mostly as a quality control engineer, testing tire treads for plasticity and hysteresis. By the time the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of ’41, his employment stretch

had reached five years. The war, however, changed everything. Factories were commissioned to produce what the military needed, and in the case of U.S. Rubber, it was bullet-resistant gas tanks for fighter aircraft. Although he was the last engineer to be pulled from the rubber side of the business, and his bosses allowed the newly wedded, well-liked M.C. to bypass seniority rules to work a swing shift instead of graveyard, he had “zippo” interest in the work itself—*time to start over*—not knowing years later the M.C. Gill Corporation would be involved in projects for bullet-resistant gas tanks.

“So I caught on with AO Smith Corporation in research and development,” he says. “They had two subsidiaries out here, Smith Meter, who made meters for the oil industry, and Sawyer Electric, who produced electric motors. I worked on submersible pumps that the Navy used when a ship was attacked. They’d drop one to a dozen of these into the hole where the ship was hit to pump water out as fast it came in. It was a real small, compact, five horsepower motor, and the water had to go through the windings to keep them cool. I (*The Producer...* continues on p. 50)



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*("The Producer..." from p. 35)*

worked on the insulation to keep the motor from shorting out and we were successful in that. That was one of my contributions, since I was deferred, to the war effort."

But life at AO Smith fizzled after three years—*learn to start over until you find your place*. M.C. saw the corporation devoting most of its time and energy welding automobile frames for Detroit. Although his boss was the nephew of the company president back in Milwaukee, "he was a welding expert, running the research lab.

And I looked at that situation and decided it wasn't going where I wanted to go so therefore I wasn't going anywhere, so I started looking around."

M.C. paid an employment agency \$100 to help him land a job in plastics. He felt drawn to the fledgling materials industry, sensed its profitability and potential impact on modern life. The war was coming to an end and, after years of depression and the greatest conflict the world has ever seen, optimism started a slow march into the American psyche. A time to invent—jet

engines, suburbs, new materials—settled within view on the short horizon.

The employment agency hooked Gill up with Dave Swedlow, a "pioneer of pioneers, in fiberglass reinforced plastics," according to M.C. who "saw the future" at Swedlow's Garden Grove plant. Swedlow developed continuous cast acrylic sheet technology during the war years. The combination strength and transparency of acrylic made it the material of choice for fighter aircraft canopies and windshields. The eager Gill interviewed for the job of director, but lost out to Frank Hopper.

"I really had no experience in the field," M.C. remembers. "Hopper had worked for the Shell Development Company up in the Bay area and knew about resins, epoxy resins anyway. Swedlow used polyester resin. This is 1944-45. Polyester resin came on the market in 1942."

As it turned out, Hopper needed to hire someone to run the R&D lab, so, after perusing the stack of resumes and intuiting a spark in M.C. during an interview, he hired him to investigate post-war items. But the war ended abruptly as atomic bombs instantly vaporized Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And Swedlow, who was renowned as an innovator, but had difficulty running the business and showing a profit, went broke in a hurry. Once again M.C. hit the streets—*learn to start over until you find your niche*.

He tipped the green, frosty bottle back and let the ice-cold Coke sooth his parched throat.

"I know of a two-car garage over on Montebello Boulevard near the Union Pacific station," said George Whately, M.C.'s British landlord, on that hot day in September.

"I really can't afford much," Gill replied. "I've looked all over East Los Angeles and nothing."

M.C. had decided to start his own business, a never-turn-back decision for those select few who actually make it. Everything that he'd done up to this point, every test and capricious idea, everything he was, culminated in the fortuity of hot weather and a thirsty visit with a friend. Despite being discouraged in his hunt to find an affordable location and to set up his own shop, he took down the address, checked out the garage, and was happy to land it for \$40 a month. With Ellen's financial help, and with the prosperous birth of two healthy boys (and a daughter

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that would come a year later), Peerless Plastics Products was launched, September 11, 1945.

After 50 years of marriage, Ellen died in 1989. The loss, M.C. says, was like “someone cutting off your arm, it’s a whole new ballgame.” Ellen, as treasurer, had been a spiritual mainstay, an integral part of M.C. Gill Corporation’s success, bringing her USC education and personal insight to bear on the myriad products, processes, and

people that make up the company’s history. “We’re a team here, and Ellen and I are the coaches,” Gill told a reporter some 14 years ago. “We run our team much like a Vince Lombardi, or a John Wooden, or a Paul Brown. Do it our way and we’ll win and we’ll grow.”

There were two times during the interview when M.C. welled up, when I could see the sentimentality of an imperfect man looking back with repressed emotion on a long life: when he talked of his first

wife’s death, and when he told me that his father put a quick end to his boxing career. Pugilism, of course, was a good way to make some cash in those days, main events at the local hall or summer fair at Lake Okoboji paid \$50-\$60. “I could hit pretty hard for my weight, and I never got cleaned, but my father didn’t want any son of his walking around at 26 on his heels.”

M.C. remarried in 1992 to Hestor Bester, a South African originally hired at Gill as an accountant by Ellen. “Ellen didn’t take any chances and hired her on the spot. But I waited three years before I married the second time. You always get that kind of advice, after a divorce or a death.”

Very happy in his relationship, M.C. tells me that his stepdaughter Annelize also is interviewing him for a college project that focuses on how decisions in life culminate in who you become, “which is something I totally believe in,” he says. “At the age of 92, this guy you see sitting before you is a result of decisions he’s made along the way. She’s documenting that on video as part of her graduating thesis from the Art Center College of Design.”

And some just have a special knack for putting fate and fortuity together, no matter if we make decisions or decisions make us. I look at a multi-million dollar business man who decided he was thirsty 57 years ago, then chose to check out a nondescript two-door garage on Montebello Boulevard on a whim and scrape together \$40 a month for rent.

“Sometimes I couldn’t even raise that,” he continues. “It was about 600 square feet, half of it was covered for two cars. Later, I covered the other half.”

Gill felt free to carry on with development of post-war items, since Swedlow went out of business. But he’s careful about how the past is interpreted. “I don’t want the impression to be that I developed these things and started my own business,” he carefully reminds me, ushering integrity to the fore. “They went out of business completely, and as far as anyone knew, weren’t going to get back in.”

So M.C. put to task in the garage—place mats, lampshades, table top overlays—cultivating items for what was expected to be a burgeoning consumer market. He hired Agnes Stover, Chuck Siebold, and Mac Mahoney as laminators. His college roommate Dick Bean, and associates Chuck Davis, and Jim Jeffers were made stockholders. But, in this era of post-war California entrepreneurs, Dave Swedlow wasn’t done.



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A short while later, he started his business back up again.

“So, I’m dead in the water,” says M.C. “All the things I thought I was going to do, he was already well established and took it all back. I spent six years in the garage trying to find something I could sell.”

Lean years, desperate years. In the kitchen of his apartment, in the oven, Gill cooked samples he fabricated in the garage, fumes wafting to the upstairs tenants. The life of an entrepreneur is a mythological journey, the archetypal journey of the classic hero-warrior, full of tests, questions, and dark secret passages created to free oneself from the taunting demons of doubt. Use a kitchen oven to start a business? The same one Ellen used to bake muffins? There even came a point when, discouraged by his lack of progress, M.C. asked Ellen whether she wanted to be married to a corporate engineer with some job security and a steady paycheck, or a lifetime entrepreneur.

“Do you know Bullocks?” Gill asks, with a barb of expectation. “Well, that was a top department store in Los Angeles. They had outlets in Pasadena and Palm Springs, and

**Actress Janet Leigh models a print dress fashioned after Gill’s wall fab design.**

they had put up a post-war home as a model at Wilshire and Highland Avenue. I sold them on putting up our wall fab in the kitchen and laundry. I don’t know how many millions of people went through that post war house, but that was the first product we ever made. I would advertise, get leads, and go out and sell.”

The home, built by Welton Becket, is still there, listed as a historical landmark.

From the windows of Union Pacific Trains that blew to a stop in Montebello, passengers scanning the short horizon could spot the Wall Fab sign atop Peerless Plastic as the garage sat across the street from the tracks. M.C.’s wall fab, plastic, washable, wall coverings, after improvements became Gillfab during the next block of frugal



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years and helped him stay alive as a businessman. In the company archives is a photo of actress Janet Leigh, mother of Jamie Leigh Curtis, modeling the latest Gillfab design with a matching print dress, circa 1950s. Peerless expanded to become the M.C. Gill Corporation in '51 and took up residence in a Quonset hut on Truck Way. Despite the reminder of Janet Leigh on the kitchen walls, hard lessons these were, to entrepreneur, to pioneer.

Soon, the market for post-war plastics began to shift away from consumer items toward high strength, corrosion-resistant specialty products for commercial aviation. By 1955, M.C. gambled all the company's profits on a new low-pressure press that allowed him to dabble in larger laminates with higher mechanical integrity. By the early 60s, Gill was the leading supplier of cargo compartment liners to Douglas' DC-6, and soon supplied replacement parts to commercial airlines. The press, baptized "Press 2," is still in operation at the El Monte facility.

M.C. started to feel the uncertain pangs of success, only as good as his next project. Instead of nickels, he now, perhaps, could

rub two dimes together. And to this day, despite the company's international reach—Alcore, in Edgewood, Md.; Alcore, of Brigantine in Anglet, France; Castle Industries of California; and M.C. Gill Europe/Insoleq in Northern Ireland, all Gill companies along with distributors and sales agents in Israel, Italy, Japan, the Mid-East, South Africa, Spain and Portugal, South Korea, Germany, Ireland—and despite extensive R&D efforts, manufacturing his own honeycomb core and pre-impregnated fabric, despite implementing CAD, CAM, and CNC, quality control labs, despite purchasing and operating more than 25 presses over the years, fabricating composite and aluminum panels of myriad thicknesses, dimensions, strengths, and despite vertically integrated management and the wall of fame cataloguing more than 400 companies Gill has done business with, M.C. has this to say: "You never let it rest. This will go on until my health fails or I lose my mind, intellectually. My dad didn't lose that and he lived until he was my age, and his mother lived to be 99. She didn't lose her faculties either. She had all her marbles when she died so maybe it won't happen to me... You

slip some, you're not as good as you were. I can't keep as many balls in the air as I once did. But I can do a lot of things now I couldn't do before because I've got all these good people working for me and we're going to get more in building five to triple or at least double our R&D efforts. We'll get more experienced people, you can't just pick them off the street."

Many times during the interview, when referring to those he's known, M.C. says he or she "died a few years ago," friends, acquaintances, business associates, "everyone's gone now." But, as I watch him suffer through another bout of restless energy, I don't think he'll ever want to imagine a world without him in it. And why should he? After all, the mystical embrace older generations have around the world, around the past, is all about the future. **CF**

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