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Cassidy

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the whole optoelectronics and LED business," Torok says of his old company, and certainly Monsanto was a key player. "LEDs are used in just about every application, house lighting, cars ..."

All these years later you could almost hear the pride in the man who arrived in the United States from Hungary as an 11-year-old who didn't speak English. As a product of Silicon Valley, Torok, 65, knows you can never go back. But you can remember and you can even gather together with others who share those same memories.

That's how Torok, a former manufacturing manager, came up with this idea of a reunion, a gathering of the old Monsanto gang, which is no doubt scattered across the country and around the globe. He recruited an organizing team of about four. They contacted George MacLeod, the guy Monsanto sent out from St. Louis with 15 engineers in 1968 to open the Cupertino LED factory. They called those they knew and those they knew called those they knew. They hit the Internet.

And they rounded up 100 willing souls, who will gather at MacLeod's Sonoma County winery in early May.

REUNION DETAILS

For more information on the May 5 reunion, see <http://monsantoreunion.weebly.com>.

"We thought we could do better," says Torok, who notes 4,500 people worked for the operation at its peak. "We're trying to get the news out."

Of course, there's time.

For vintner and host MacLeod, the fact that anybody would want to get together all these years later says something about the nature of people who come together to build the future — and not just at Monsanto, though that's his frame of reference.

"What we did with that little group, we actually changed the way the world is going to be lighted," says MacLeod, 90, whose MacLeod Family Vineyard is in Kenwood. "The whole world is going to be lighted with light-emitting diodes."

Who really knows? But the fact is that LEDs are already everywhere — on appliances, digital gadgets, in homes and offices, flashlights and automobiles. That they are in automobiles — including as headlights and taillights — is a delicious irony for MacLeod.

MacLeod tells the story of his 1969 or 1970 trip to Detroit to show off the light of the future.

"We went to GM. We had a mock-up of an automobile dash-

board with these light-emitting diodes in it. They practically laughed us out of there."

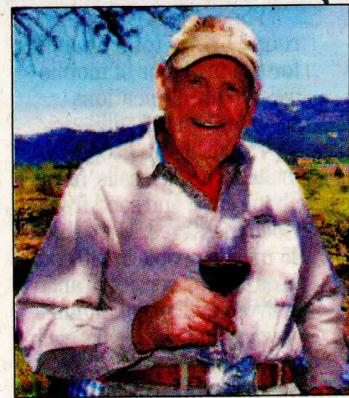
The world wasn't ready. But that didn't stop the Monsanto crew. Within three years of opening the plant on Bubb Road, the size of the factory tripled, MacLeod says. The company also had opened factories in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was a capital-intensive operation, one Monsanto corporate found unappetizing. It sold the division off in 1978 and MacLeod headed to Sonoma, but not without some memories and the satisfaction of having made a difference.

Oh, and those sources I called Torok about? I was looking for Bay Area people who had jobs in manufacturing and lost them five, maybe 10, years ago. It's part of a bigger project I've undertaken. In the coming months, I'm going to explore manufacturing in the Bay Area — who's doing it, why, and what does the future of manufacturing here look like. I've just started my reporting, but I've shared some of my early assumptions, conclusions and questions on my blog at <http://mikecassidy.wordpress.com>.

I'll be interested to hear your suggestions on the directions in which I should be heading.

Contact Mike Cassidy at mcassidy@mercurynews.com.

LED DEVELOPERS



COURTESY OF GEORGE MACLEOD

Monsanto sent George MacLeod, now 90, to Cupertino in 1968 to launch the company's LED efforts.

Monsanto pioneers light way in valley

It's easy to forget while fighting the morning commute, or while stifling a guffaw at your boss's latest brainstorm, but there is something ennobling about work.

There is a human need to accomplish something, to create, to contribute to the bigger world around us. And there is nothing like actually making something that you know is good.

I was reminded of all this last week when I called John Torok. I wanted something from him, some sources for a column, but he gave me something else entirely: an opportunity to reflect on why many of us get up and go to work day after day.

If Silicon Valley were a ball field, Torok would have touched most of the bases — Fairchild; National; HP; startups, successful and not. But one gig stuck with him for decades. For about eight years in the 1970s and '80s, he worked in Monsanto's optoelectronics group, a long-gone pioneer in the development of light-emitting diodes. Yeah, LEDs.

"They really commercialized



MIKE CASSIDY

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