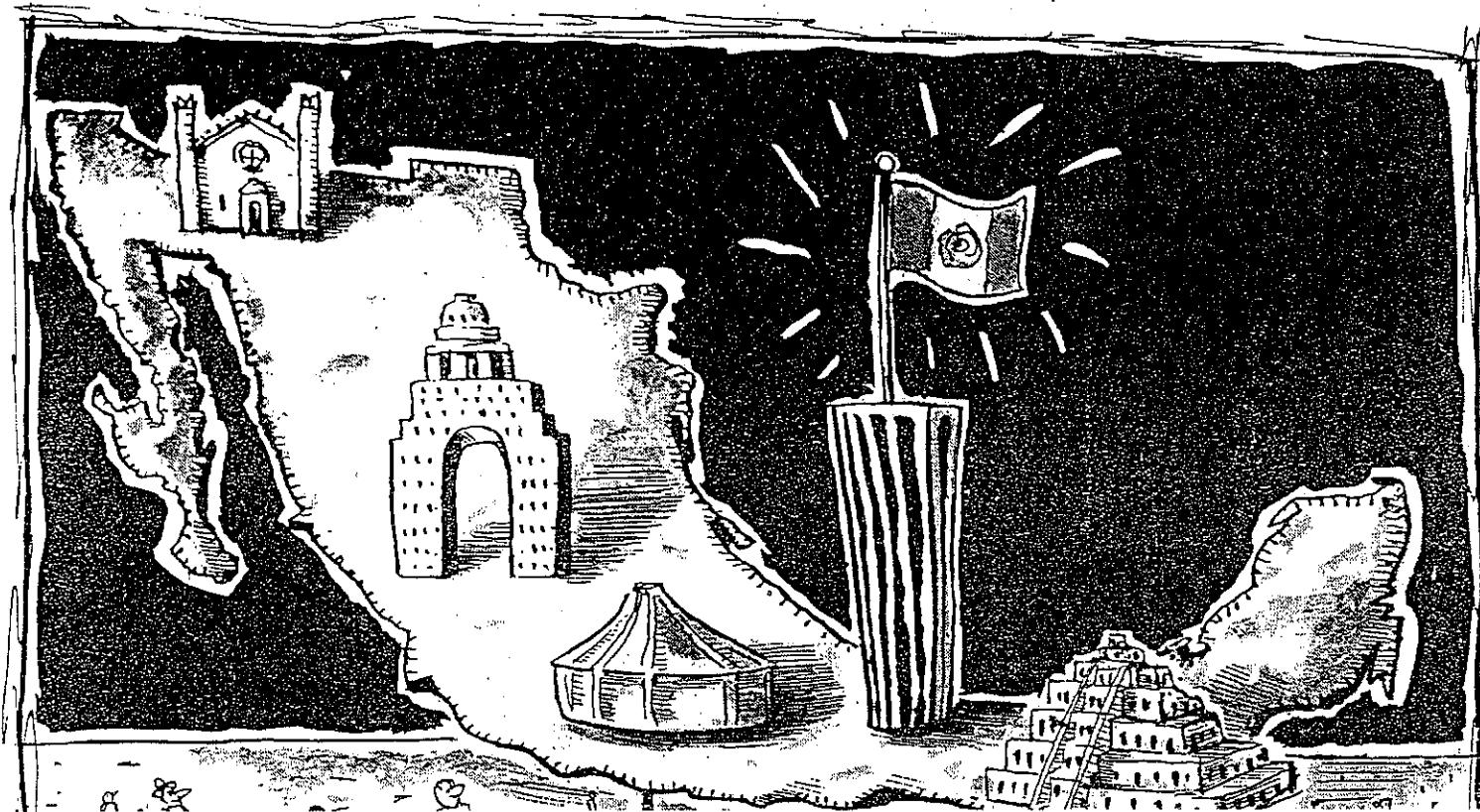


MAÑANA MADNESS

DESALINATION PLANTS! THEME PARKS! CHEAP LABOR! THE BIG BAJA BUBBLE!

STORIES BY LAWRENCE A. HERZOG

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER HANNAN



Other theatrics are planned: a mini-roller coaster, like the *montaña rusa* (literally, Russian Mountain) in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park, will operate; cruise ships will sail along the Mexican Riviera; authentic-



HISTORIC MEXICO IN MINIATURE

A mini-Disneyland on the border? Ancient Indian pyramids and temples, colonial palaces, churches and basilicas, great plazas, boulevards, and skyscrapers from all over Mexico brought to Tijuana in a single open-air tourist attraction. Sometime this

theme park just like Disneyland," says Julian Souza, director of operations for Mexitlan. "All theme parks offer permanent exhibitions. At Disneyland, you've got mechanical rides and animation. In Sea World, it's animals doing shows. Here in Mexitlan, there will be monuments from all over

ride the bobsleds. It's very beautiful, I like it. But it's a diversion. You don't think much.

"Mexitlan is not a small version of Disneyland. We're not trying to compete with it. This is a window to Mexico. We're trying to offer a sample of what Mexico really is. A lot of people in the U.S. think they know Mexico because they've been to Tijuana. Tijuana is not Mexico."

The Mexitlan concept — Mexico in miniature — is backed by an investment consortium — the *Grupo Mexitlan* — from Mexico City. There are similar scale-model exhibitions in the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, and Taiwan. The *Grupo Mexitlan* hired an architectural heavyweight, Pedro Ramirez Vazquez, designer of the Aztec Stadium, the National Museum of Anthropology, and other important Mexico City edifices. Ramirez assembled a team of architects, sculptors, artists, and craftsmen to recreate the nation's greatest architectural treasures in miniature, at 1:25 scale (most of the structures in the park are five to six feet high; the tallest structure, the Mexicana Airlines building, is about 20 feet high). Teams of workers then spent three years photographing and videotaping buildings and studying original drawings to build the replicas. At times, as many as 1000 artisans worked on the project.

What they've built are tantalizingly realistic dioramas of Mexico: the pyramids of Teotihuacan and Gran Tenochtitlan, the Mayan city of

Chichén Itza (as it would have looked in its time), colonial Tazco, Mexico City's Paseo de la Reforma, Chapultepec Park, University City, and the Zocalo (main plaza). The *maquetas* (scale models) are made of a mixture of stone (often taken from the original building sites) and acrylic resin. They must withstand exposure to the elements in a permanent outdoor space. The scenic representations include miniature, hand-painted human figures. Over 700,000 such figures will eventually be found in the park.

Like Disneyland, great care has gone into creating the feeling of a "show" around the 200 different scale models. Each is set on a raised platform surrounded by speakers. Music, delivered through a computer-operated sound system, will create moods in different settings throughout the park: tropical music for the coastal regions, baroque symphonies

creation of the 1968 Olympic ceremonies. There is talk of installing sound booths where visitors will be able to listen through headphones to lifelike audio-experiences, such as Mayan athletes playing on the Ball Court at Chichén Itza, as they did 1000 years ago.

"Mexitlan is a meeting of the first and third worlds," says Ramirez Vazquez. "The labor, the handicraft, is pure Mexican. But the fiber-optic illumination and Omni sound systems are of the 21st Century."

The clay-colored building itself is bland and unspectacular, a simple functional structure designed to house the entire show on the 150,000-square-foot second-floor steel deck. "It looks like a parking garage," says Ramirez Vazquez. The only identifying element will be the giant green *pirata* towering above the second floor. "The *pirata* will be an urban reference point," notes Ramirez Vazquez. "Tijuana needs more of them."

Will the American tourists come? The investors estimate that 16 million U.S. citizens cross the border into Tijuana each year, many by foot. But most don't come to visit indoor museums, like the Centro Cultural de Tijuana (the cultural center) in the River Zone. Despite its impressive big-screen Omnimax theater, the cultural center's visitors are mostly from Mexico. "The Americans come here for the sun," says Miramontes. "They come to walk, browse, eat their taco or hot dog."

The investors hope to attract

A MINI-ROLLER COASTER, LIKE THE *MONTAÑA RUSA* (RUSSIAN MOUNTAIN) IN MEXICO CITY'S CHAPULTEPEC PARK, WILL OPERATE; CRUISE SHIPS WILL SAIL ALONG THE MEXICAN RIVIERA.

summer, the first theme park at the United States-Mexico border — a sculptural extravaganza of pre-Colombian, colonial and 1990s urban Mexican street scenes in miniature, hand-crafted scale models — will open in Tijuana. It's called Mexitlan — Land of Mexico — and in addition to the artwork it will feature high-tech light and sound shows, continuous live entertainment, and seven restaurants. The \$24 million project, in the final stages of construction, covers an entire city block on the edge of downtown Tijuana.

Has the theme park craze finally struck south of the border? Is this the first of a barrage of Sea Worlds, Knott's Berry Farms, and Disneyland soon to fan out across Baja California?

"In a generic sense, Mexitlan is a

Mexico, combined with movement, light, music."

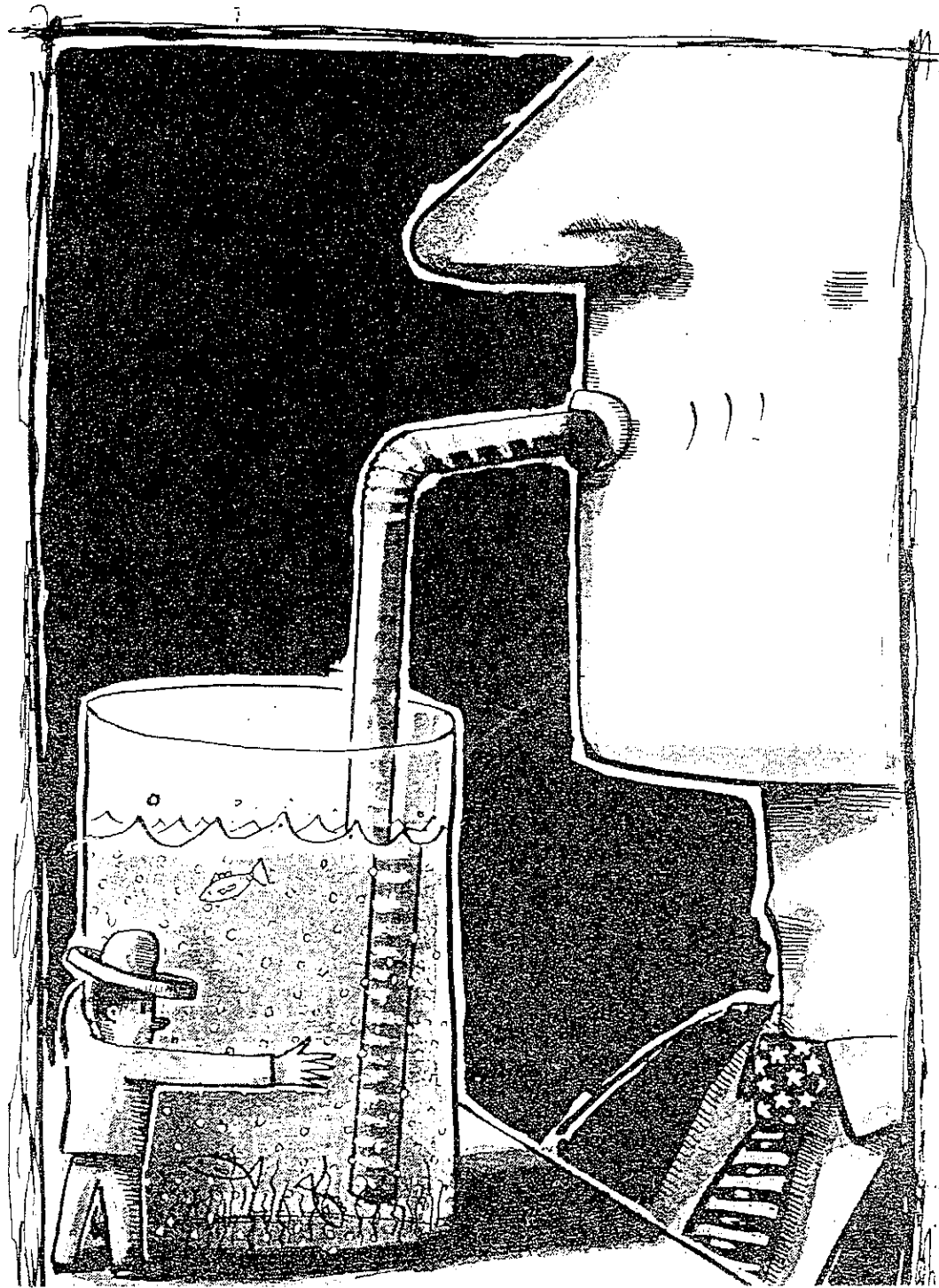
American theme parks whisk us into a world of fantasy and escape. Disneyland, the quintessential choreographed space, is what architect Charles Moore once described as a place where "people have a sense of being somewhere and being special." Mexitlan offers a different experience to American tourists. "We're trying to show who we are," says Juan Miramontes, one of the four project architects. "Mexitlan shows our roots through our architecture. It isn't just scale models of buildings, it's a way of seeing art, color. We're showing a culture and a way of being."

"Mexitlan has a different message than Disneyland. In Disneyland, you climb, they move you around physically, they shake you up and jolt you. You see pirates from a boat; you

"WHEN YOU MEET A MEXICAN AMERICAN, THERE IS A CULTURE CLASH. THEY'LL SAY, 'WE'VE ALREADY BEEN TO THE MOON, AND YOU'RE JUST A TONAC (INDIAN).'"

for the colonial towns, ancient pipe instrument melodies for pre-Colombian cities. At night, the mini-towns and cities will be lit up like real ones, thanks to a sophisticated fiber-optics system.

between 1½ and 2 million visitors a year at a \$12 per person entry fee. To do that they knew they had to build more than just a museum. "If Mexitlan were only a museum displaying miniature sculptures and



architectural reproductions, it would be cold," says Souza. "But here on the upper esplanade there will be live shows — folkloric dancing, clowns,

The Mexican group is growing and its largest tourism market may well lie with the growing population of Americans of Mexican ancestry. "In the United States, there are many people of Mexican descent, but they don't know the land of their parents," says Miramontes. "There is such an absence of information about Mexico in their lives, it's a shame. Many of them haven't even been to Mexico City.

"What's sad is that sometimes when you meet a Mexican American, there is a culture clash. They'll say, 'We've already been to the moon, and you're just a *Toionac* [Indian]. But life is more than just landing on the moon."

In this land of miniatures, Mexiland's architects hope to create a space where imagination can flow freely, where for one moment you are transported to a different place, another time, not by bobsleds, roller coasters, or monorails, but by your own mind.

"We hope that people who visit Mexiland will remember previous trips they've made, pieces of Mexico's history, stories told to them by their grandparents," says Souza. "We want this to be a place where memories awake in people." □

THE WATER BOYS SCOUT OUT BAJA

"Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink."

— ancient British sailors' adage

In 1991, San Diego rediscovered that it lies on the edge of a vast desert. Water is precious. While we wander through nurseries in search of drought-free plants, "the water guys" — as one politician calls them — the San Diego County Water Authority, the Metropolitan Water District, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and others, think they've found a source of billions of gallons of future water — Baja California, Mexico.

Baja California is as dry as San Diego County, but it has a few things Southern California lacks that might prove helpful in finding water: cheap labor, large tracts of vacant land along the coast, and less cumbersome permit systems for new construction. It also has, of course, the great azure Pacific Ocean lapping at its shores, from which the water companies hope to squeeze millions of gallons of drinking water by the end of the decade. They propose building the largest desalination plant in North America (and one of the largest in the world) on the coast near Rosarito, just south of Tijuana. It would cost about \$2 billion dollars and desalt some 100 million gallons of seawater a day, nearly enough for a quarter million people, but that might only mark the beginning of a new era of water supply technology in San Diego. The Bechtel Power Corp., based in San Francisco, which will build the plant, expects to complete a \$600,000 feasibility study in August.

Desalination — taking the salt out of seawater and turning it into potable water — has been around for

centuries. Sixteenth-century British sailors converted saltwater to drinking water through boiling and distillation on crude stoves atop wooden barrels. But large-scale desalting is expensive, and for more than three decades, water experts viewed it as an exotic technology best left in remote research laboratories. To take the salt out of the sea, you either heat the water and distill it ("multistage flash distillation," technically speaking) or bring it under extreme pressure and filter it through a membrane ("reverse osmosis"). Both techniques are pricey: they require large amounts of energy, and the desalination plants, with their intricate valves and pumps and corrosive saltwater, are costly to maintain. For 30 years, scientists and

plants worldwide generate 3.4 billion gallons of potable water a day.

Officials at Bechtel say they can desalt water at a reasonable price down in Mexico and ship it north across the border. San Diego would be the first customer in line.

"San Diego gets about 95 percent of its water from outside the region. The advantage of a desalination plant is that the water would be local and drought-proof," says Gordon Hess, an official at the San Diego County Water Authority.

It's not as if San Diego has that many options left in meeting its water needs. Either the state of California taps into new water sources in Northern California, such as the recently built Los Banos Grande

IN CALIFORNIA, THE PERMITTING PROCESS HAS BECOME AN ENDLESS MAZE OF BUREAUCRATIC ACRONYMS: AFCs WITH CEQA AND THE CEC, NPDES FOR THE WQCB, PERMITS FROM THE APCD AND THE CCC.

engineers have tried to find cheaper ways to purify seawater. Freezing, solar distillation, and even ultrasonics have all come and gone.

Desalination is still expensive, but advances in technology have started bringing the costs down, so that in some regions of the world, desalting is now the leading source of potable water. Saudi Arabia produces about 2 billion gallons of water a day through desalination. New plants are being built on the Arabian peninsula, in the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Today more than 4000 desalination

Reservoir, or we conserve what we have, reclaim it, recycle it, or desalinate it. It's inevitable that the price of conventional water will rise, and the more it does, the better desalination looks as a source. According to Hess, while current water costs about \$1 per 1000 gallons, that price is based on water developments — the Colorado River Aqueduct and the State Water Project, for example — already in place. Once these sources get used up, the price of water will increase, as new pipelines, reservoirs, and other facilities get built.

"The next increment of supply from new water sources will be far more expensive than the current \$1 rate," says Hess. "We're looking at maybe \$2.50 per 1000 gallons. We estimate that desalinated water will come in at about \$4 per 1000 gallons. So the numbers are getting closer."

Mexico is delighted with the idea of locating one of the world's largest desalination facilities in Baja. "The Ruffo government [Ernesto Ruffo is Governor of Baja California] has greeted this proposal with open arms," says Alejandro Joulia, a planning consultant in Tijuana. Yet, if California's future water needs are to be met by desalting ocean water, why don't the utilities simply build plants near the Southern California coast? Why build the hemisphere's largest plant in a foreign country — in Mexico? "It's really a matter of money and time," says Hess. "In Baja, you can get the plant built much faster than in California, maybe two to three years quicker."

To build the proposed desalination facility and companion 500-megawatt power-generating plant in California would involve a massive paper chase. Large energy plants require filling out six or seven telephone book-sized volumes of engineering reports and permit applications. In California, the permitting process has become an endless maze of bureaucratic acronyms: AFCs (Application for Certification) with CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) and the CEC (California Energy Commission), NPDES (National Pollution Discharge Elimination Systems) for the WQCB (Water Quality Control Board of San Diego), permits from the APCD (Air Pollution Control District) and the

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CCC (California Coastal Commission), not to mention rights of way, construction permits, approval for seawater intake and outtake by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

What this means is that, as Fred Wend of Bechtel's Los Angeles regional office says, "When you're talking shoreline, it's difficult to do in California." But California Assemblyman Steve Peace, whose 80th district includes the South Bay/border area, thinks there's more to it than that. Peace is convinced that Bechtel really wants to sell desalinated water in Mexico but is hedging its bets with the water utilities in San Diego and Los Angeles. "Bechtel knows there's a market in Mexico, but their fear is that it's not a paying market. They're worried that if they go down there, build the

facility, contract with Mexico, and then can't generate pesos, they're in trouble. So what they're looking for on the U.S. side is a kind of insurance policy, to insure that there's a paying market for the water," he says.

State water authorities announced their support of the Bechtel Baja project this past February, in the midst of the California drought. "The Metropolitan Water District was under a lot of pressure to do something about desalination," says Peace. "Historically, the water guys have resisted desalination in California. They had a captive community, and they wanted to keep it that way. Desalination meant opening the supply of water and decreasing the power of the water authorities. We speculate that the water people kicked in \$100,000 on the Bechtel

feasibility study as a way for them to tell legislators in Sacramento that 'Hey, we're studying desalination.'" More than two years ago, the San Diego County Water Authority completed a study showing that the most cost-effective and stable source

United States. The pipeline would be physically attacked down there if they try that. No Mexican politician would last 30 seconds if they allowed that to happen."

While Mexico has greeted the proposal favorably, Peace thinks U.S.

"WE POLITICIANS MISREAD TWO THINGS ABOUT MEXICO. FIRST, FRIENDLINESS AND WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT. NO ONE EVER SAYS NO IN MEXICO."

of future water in San Diego would be desalinated water. Peace supports that assertion, but not through a facility located in Mexico, which he thinks would raise all sorts of problems.

"The single greatest need in Baja is water," he states. "It's absolutely ludicrous for the U.S. to think that it can get away with developing a potable source of water in Mexico, piping it right past a bunch of people who have a dramatic shortage of water, and moving it up into the

officials should be cautious. "We politicians misread two things about Mexico. First, friendliness and words of encouragement. No one ever says no in Mexico. It's like dealing with movie distributors. They never say they don't like your script, they only say, 'It's just not what we're doing at this time.' The second thing is time. Everything in Mexico takes a long time. You may not see the institutional hurdles, so it looks like you can do it faster. That's just not the case," he says.

So far, the environmental impacts of the project in Baja haven't been widely discussed. Unlike California, Baja doesn't have a coastal commission. Mexicans are only just discovering the field of environmental legal enforcement. There are few environmental activist groups down there. "Anytime you build a new power plant, there are going to be problems of emissions and thermal discharges into the ocean," says Hess of the San Diego Water Authority. "In the U.S., even if you found a site for this kind of project, you might never build on it because of the 'not-in-my-back-yard' ecology people," he adds.

With the near euphoria building over the U.S.-Mexico free-trade agreement, it's a good moment to be promoting joint U.S.-Mexico ventures like the desalination facility in Baja. They have a nice ring to them. But will they work? "A guy could become a rich man by placing bets against people who claim that there's going to be a binational airport or a desalination plant in Baja bringing water to the U.S.," says Assemblyman Peace. □

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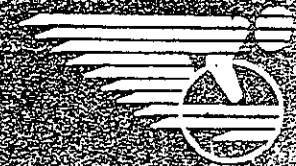
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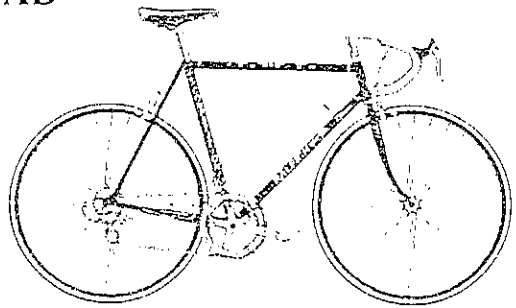
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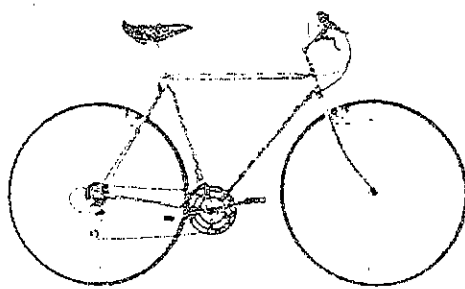
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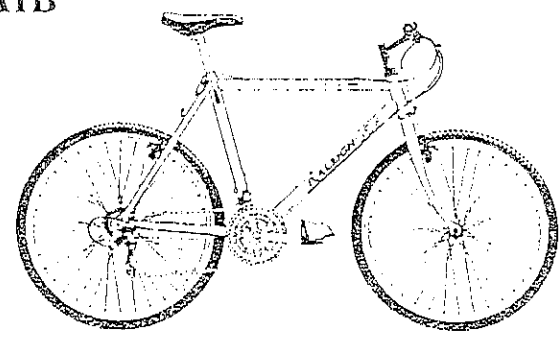
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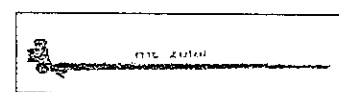
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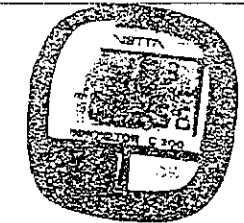
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