

GM's rebuttal to NBC reveals rigors of safety design



DAN MCCOSH

It wouldn't be tough to cast Harry J. Pearce of Bloomfield Hills in a sequel to "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly," if only because he has the kind of level stare that makes you think he might run Clint Eastwood's day.

Pearce actually once was a judge in Bismarck, N.D., although his official biography at General Motors, where he is now executive vice president and general counsel, does not mention

whether he was of the hanging variety.

The folks at NBC's Dateline have no doubt of that, however, after being subjected to Pearce's excruciating public disembowelment of the television magazine show's portrayal of GM's older pickup trucks as rolling safety hazards.

The courtroom-style performance Pearce conducted on the ground floor of GM's corporate headquarters a few weeks ago left no doubt about the nearly unbelievable sloppiness and lack of ethics on the part of the Dateline crew, who had allowed a consultant working for the plaintiff's side

The methodical detail revealed about the design of the fuel system in GM pickups had to impress anyone watching that considerable care, testing and research has been done over the years.

In a product-liability case against GM to wire up the truck with remote-controlled rocket motors to ensure the gas tank would go off on cue.

In fact, Dateline's position was so indefensible, it was no big achievement to discredit the show.

What was more remarkable was Pearce's controlled, but visibly

angry, presentation — a methodical examination of every detail of how and why the gas tank burst into flames on camera.

Pearce's tour de force of technical investigation was likely the first time any auto company executive had managed an impassioned, credible, statement that went beyond defending its products, and began to counter the

most damning impression left in the wake of most product liability suits — that the company involved is callous, sloppy, and uncaring about public safety.

Along with uncovering the subterfuge undertaken by the news show, the methodical detail revealed about the design of the fuel system in GM pickups had to impress anyone watching that considerable care, testing and research has been done over the years, contrasting mightily with the junk science favored by the self-proclaimed safety experts.

Exactly why this hasn't happened before is still good for a long evening of debate.

Most engineers called in for an

on-camera rebuttal seem to clam up in front of the camera, or wander off into irrelevant detail, when asked to explain why they designed a car the way they did.

The specifics of a personal injury are countered with dry, impersonal statistics. Numerous executives wave off a rebuttal with the statement "No comment, it's in court," or even "It was the driver's fault."

There have been precious few times when the public gets a peek at how thorough a major auto company normally is when it is designing cars.

Pearce managed more than a peek — he gave a lot of people a long, hard look.

DATEBOOK

MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTANTS
The Detroit chapter of the Institute of Management Accountants will hear a presentation of Testing, Global Measures at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 18, at the Livonia Marriott at 1-275 and Six Mile. Call Maria Dunn, 596-7889, for more information.

UNDERSTANDING FRANCE
The 1993 International Cultural Festival Global Business breakfast series will present Pierre Dubucquard, vice president of Concord International, who will speak on "Helping U.S. Companies Understand the French Market-Place" on Thursday, Feb. 18 at 7:30 p.m. at the Ritz-Carlton in Dearborn. Call 647-7833.

EMPLOYEE LEASING
Roy Employee Leasing is presenting a seminar entitled "How to Hire Your Employees and Still Have Them Work at Your Business" in a special breakfast seminar on Thursday, Feb. 18 at 7:30 p.m. at the Michigan State University Management Education Center in Troy. Call 356-1188.

CAM DESIGN
The SuperFlow regional Detroit Office in Livonia is presenting a

technical workshop on Saturday, Feb. 20 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on "CAM Design, Inlet and Exhaust Tuning. Speaker: Chuck Maguire of General Motors Powertrain Division. Call 464-4333.

LIFE AFTER GM
Lifetime Planning is hosting the first "Life After GM" seminar for those who are preparing to or have already retired at the Somerset Inn in Troy on Saturday, Feb. 20 at 9 p.m. Call 932-1744.

BEHAVIORAL STYLES
The American Society of Employers is presenting a seminar on "Understanding Behavioral Styles," Monday, Feb. 22 at 9 a.m. at 23851 Northwestern highway. Speaker: Julie Kowalski, Creative Partnerships. Call 353-4500 for more information.

WAGE/SALARY ADMINISTRATION
The American Society of Employers is presenting a seminar on "Wage And Salary Administration: An Overview," Tuesday, Feb. 23 at 9 a.m. at 23851 Northwestern highway. Speaker: Mark Pittel, Sullivan, Cotter and Associates, Inc. Call 353-4500 for more information.

TAX-FREE IN '93
Fidelity Investments will present an educational seminar "Tax-Free in 1993: Defending Yourself Against Increasing Taxes." The seminar will explain who can benefit from tax-free investing and how to choose and appropriate tax-free investment. Seminars will be in two locations: Livonia Marriott, 17100 North Laurel Park Drive on Tuesday, Feb. 23 at 7:30 p.m.; and at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham at 100 Townsend Street on Wednesday, Feb. 24 at 7:30 p.m.

ESTATE PLANNING
Attorney Linda Baxter will speak about estate planning to STRIVE, a networking and support group for women and a local chapter of the National Association For Female Executives on Thursday, Feb. 25 at 6 p.m. at the Troy Public Library. Call 693-3232.

BUSINESS START UP
"How to Start Up and Manage Your Business" will be presented by Lewis & Renn Associates at the Holiday Inn Livonia West, Friday, Feb. 26 and Saturday, Feb. 27. Call 1-800-444-4444.

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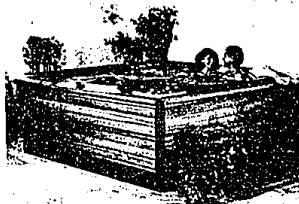
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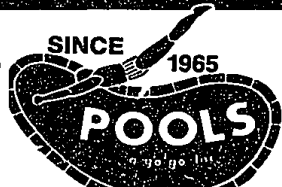
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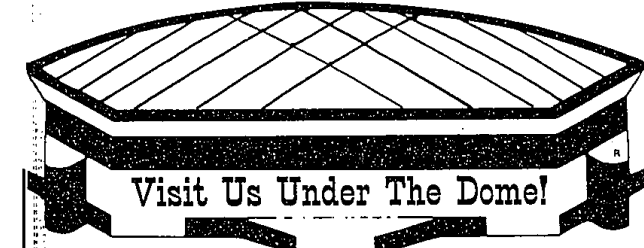
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