

Center for Auto Safety

1223 Dupont Circle Building Washington, D.C. 20036 (202) 659-1126

April 9, 1974

Mr. Andrew Detrick
Acting Director
Office of Defects Investigation
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
400 Seventh St. SW
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Mr. Detrick:

We are writing to request formally that you open defect investigations on the fuel tank integrity of the 1971-1973 Ford Pinto and the 1971-1973 Chevrolet Vega. Although the Center has been concerned for some time with poor fuel tank integrity in GM and Ford vehicles generally, we are particularly concerned with the Pinto and Vega. Recent inputs from attorneys have brought this problem dramatically to our attention.

Ford Pinto

On February 4th, the Center received a letter from Mr. David Christensen, an attorney in Detroit, concerning a 1973 Ford Pinto with the strap on gas tank which had been rear-ended by another vehicle. We quote a relevant section of Mr. Christensen's letter:

As a result of the collision the gas tank was ruptured and the unit itself was forced into the passenger compartment spewing gasoline into the interior of the car. The results were disastrous; one death and one severe burn case. [See Enclosure 1 for photographs of the car.]

Mr. Christensen is not the first attorney to have contacted us. Four additional attorneys who are handling Pinto gas tank suits have corresponded with the Center. (See Enclosure 2 for a listing of their names and addresses.) From these attorneys alone, we have learned of three deaths and four serious injuries partially attributable to the Pinto gas tank design.

Organizations besides the Center for Auto Safety have expressed concern over the lack of fuel tank integrity in the Ford Pinto. In the University of Miami Multi-Disciplinary Accident Analysis Team's final report to the NHTSA in November 1973, four vehicle defects were noted to have "stood out" during the four-year study. We quote from the section entitled "Gas Tank Integrity/Protection (Ford Pinto)":

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It has been noted that protruding strut bars (generally as found on front end of Ford products) demonstrated a tendency to pierce gas tanks (UMMAAT cases #697010 and #MI-319). The most notable lack of gas tank protection was recorded in three incidents involving the Ford Pinto. . . .It is the opinion of UMMAAT that three such conflagrations (all experienced by one rental agency in a six-month period) demonstrate a clear and present hazard to all Pinto owners. [Emphasis added.]

Another organization which has graphically demonstrated the Pinto's inadequate fuel tank integrity is the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. On November 16, 1971, IIHS released a Status Report which detailed the crash testing of several cars at medium speed, frontal impacts. Of the cars tested, the Ford Pinto was the only car to sustain a ruptured fuel tank. (This is rather startling considering that the Pinto's gas tank is located in the extreme rear of the vehicle.) On May 29, 1973, IIHS released another Status Report which detailed a series of crash tests designed to test fuel tank integrity in rear-end collisions. The 1973 Ford Pinto failed miserably. Dr. William Haddon explained why in testimony before a subcommittee of the House Commerce Committee: ". . . .because of the struck Pinto's design, a corner of its own fuel tank was torn by its own differential housing structure in this crash--torn so severely that it leaked gas at the rate of more than one quart a minute."

The Center has also run a search of the Multi-Disciplinary Accident Investigation File to identify accidents in which Ford Pinto gas tanks have failed. We discovered four cases involving Pintos in which there was some type of fuel leakage sustained after an accident. (The cases are designated as SRI 2-012, USC-73-7, MI-319, and 321-KY-20.) The only car with a higher failure total in the M.D.A.I. file, the Ford Mustang equipped with the poorly designed "drop-in" tank, is presently under investigation by your office.

Chevrolet Vega

In terms of fuel tank integrity the Chevrolet Vega, like the Pinto, is no "Bright Star." During the past two months the Center has received letters from two attorneys who are handling separate liability suits against GM for injuries and deaths sustained when 1971 Vegas were rear-ended and burst into flame. (See Enclosure 3 for copies of photographs and Enclosure 4 for the names and addresses of the attorneys.) A description of one of the accidents follows:

Mr. Folkerts was in his 1971 Chevrolet Vega stopped at a red light when his vehicle was rear-ended by a 1953 Ford pick-up truck. The Vega's gas tank ruptured and the entire car burst into flame. The driver reportedly crawled out the driver's door and his clothes were on fire. Although he was taken to the hospital for 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree burns on most of his body, he died within 24 hours. . . .The gas tank was torn completely loose from the mounting straps on the right rear of the vehicle. . . .

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety rear-end crash tests released in the May 29, 1973 Status Report also demonstrated the lack of gas tank protection offered by the Chevrolet Vega in collision impacts. As Dr. Haddon commented before a subcommittee of the House Commerce Committee, "[d]uring postcrash inspection, we found that in this impact, the Vega's design had allowed its own shock absorber bracket to penetrate and rupture its gas tank."

This is not the first time you have been contacted in regard to Vega fuel tank integrity. On August 23, 1972, Mr. Thomas N. Vacar, Director of the Auto Safety Research Center in Cleveland, forwarded to your office a copy of a letter from Mr. Blair Colborne of Alberta, Canada, which described a crash in which a 1971 Vega was rear-ended by a Datsun 510 PL and burst into flame. (Consumer Complaint Letter #27347.) A 21-year-old girl was burnt to death in that crash. A relevant portion of that letter reads:

Several points are worth observing from this accident. First [the Vega] was hit by a small car, not a big American car or truck as the picture might indicate. Secondly, the fuel tank, located only 2½ inches from the rear bumper, crushed on impact spreading gasoline all over the car.

Mr. Colborne's letter also claimed that this was "the third such incident in Calgary." The M.D.A.I. file contains three other such accident reports which detail fuel leakage from the Vega (UNM 65, AA#333, SWRI 7174).

Central to the problem of inadequate fuel tank integrity is the location of the gas tank. The Vega gas tank is located not only in the extreme rear of the vehicle but also in the right rear portion of the vehicle, making it vulnerable to side angle impacts. Apparently GM also feels that the gas tank is vulnerable as they have moved the gas tank further forward in the 1974 Vega and relocated the filler pipe on the side of the car.

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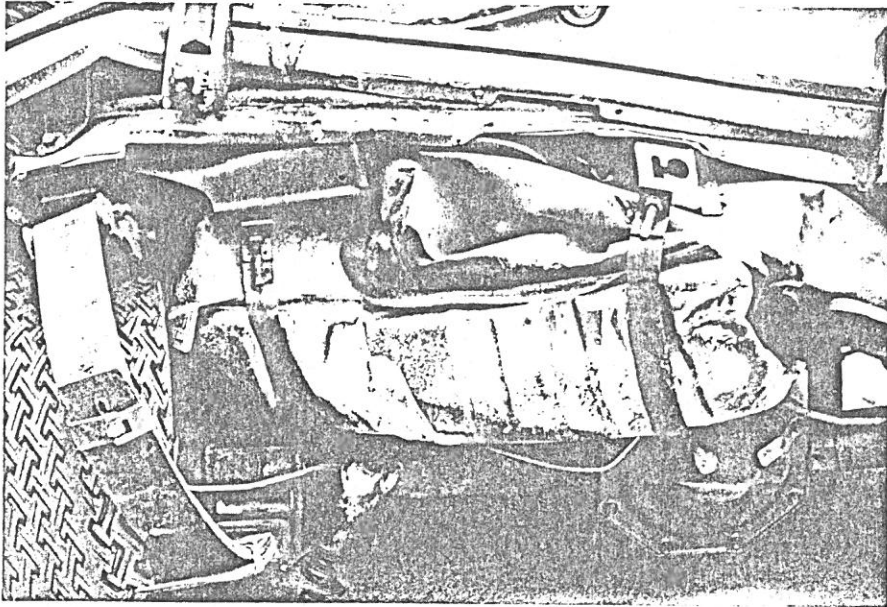
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Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter. We look forward to notification from your office that formal defect investigations have been opened.

Sincerely,

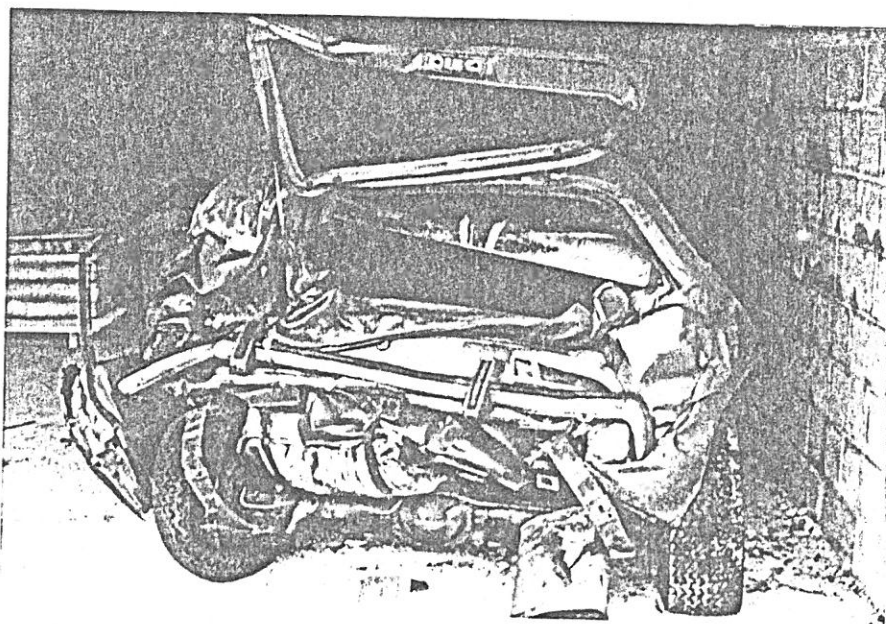
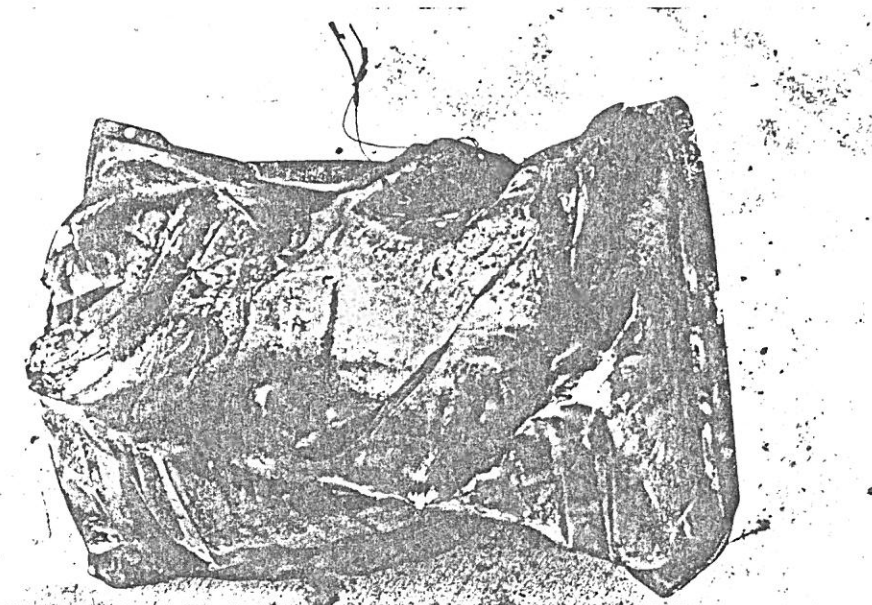
A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Whitman". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

David Whitman
Staff Researcher



Note the
"T" bar on
the rear
axle. The
"T" bar was
partially
responsible
for the
tank rupture.

Enclosure 1 (cont.)



Enclosure 2

Ford "Strap-on" Gas Tank Attorneys (Pinto)

Mr. Leonard Goodkin
Kanengiser, Goodkin and Kremsdorf
50 N. Beverwick Road
Lake Hiawatha, N.J. 07034
(201) 334-3341
1972 Ford Pinto rear-ended, two women killed

Mr. Howard S. Zwelling
Zwelling Building
421 Main Street
Zanesville, Ohio 43701
(614) 452-8426
recent model Pinto caught fire after being rear-ended, one woman seriously
burnt ('71 or '72 Pinto)

Mr. Francis H. Hare, jr.
Hare, Wynn, Newell and Newton
Seventh Floor, City Federal Building
Birmingham, Alabama 35203
(205) 328-5330
1971 Ford Pinto rear-ended, one serious burn

Mr. David W. Christensen
Charfoos & Charfoos
939 First National Building
Detroit, Michigan 48226
(313) 963-8080
1973 Pinto rear-ended, one death and one severe burn

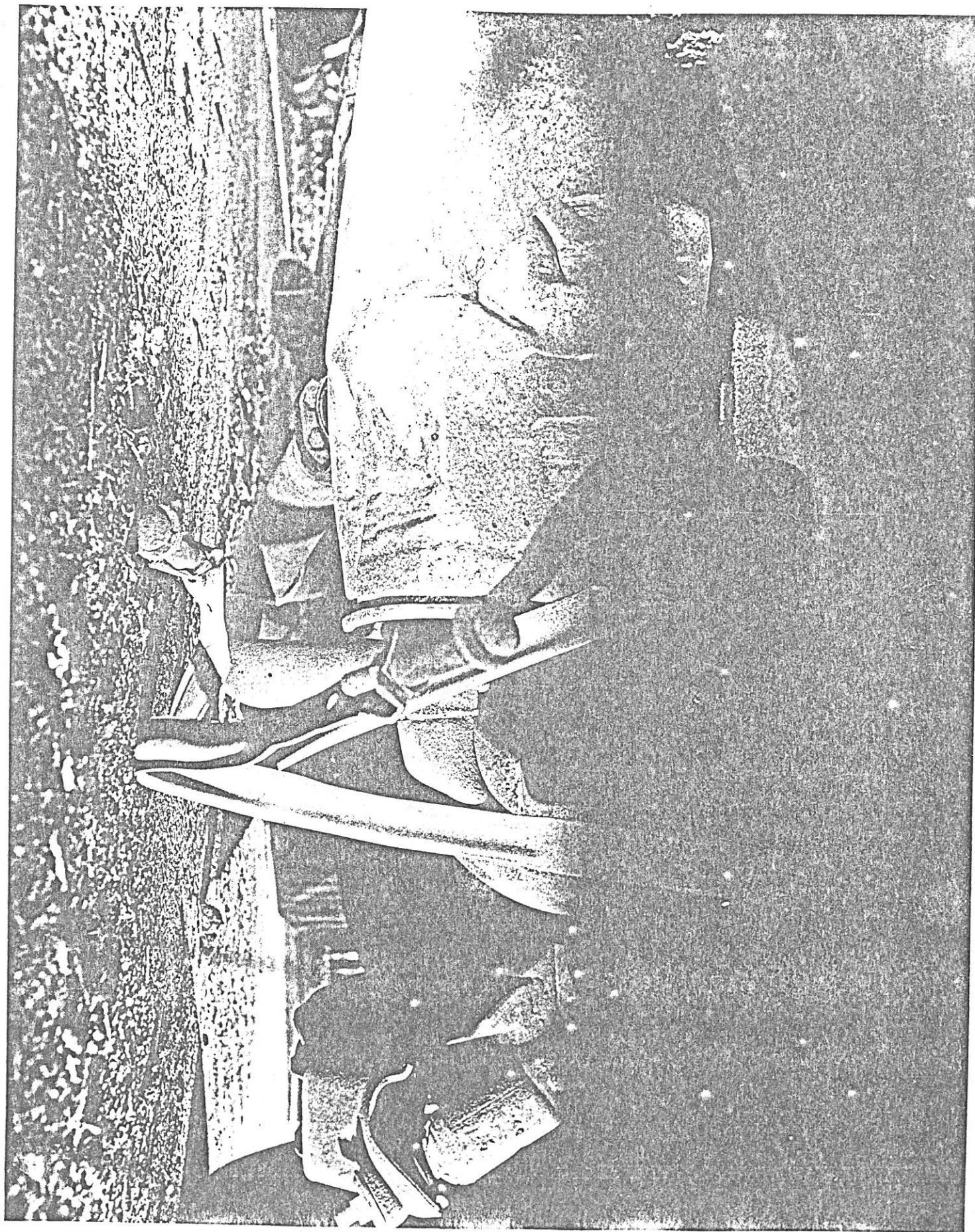
Mr. Stephen F. Rossman
Colson & Hicks
66 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33130
(305) 373-9016
Havlick v. Ford, 1971 Ford Pinto rear-ended, one woman severely burned

Enclosure 3 (Sherrod Accident)

NOTE THE VEGA IS
NOT SEVERELY DEFORMED.



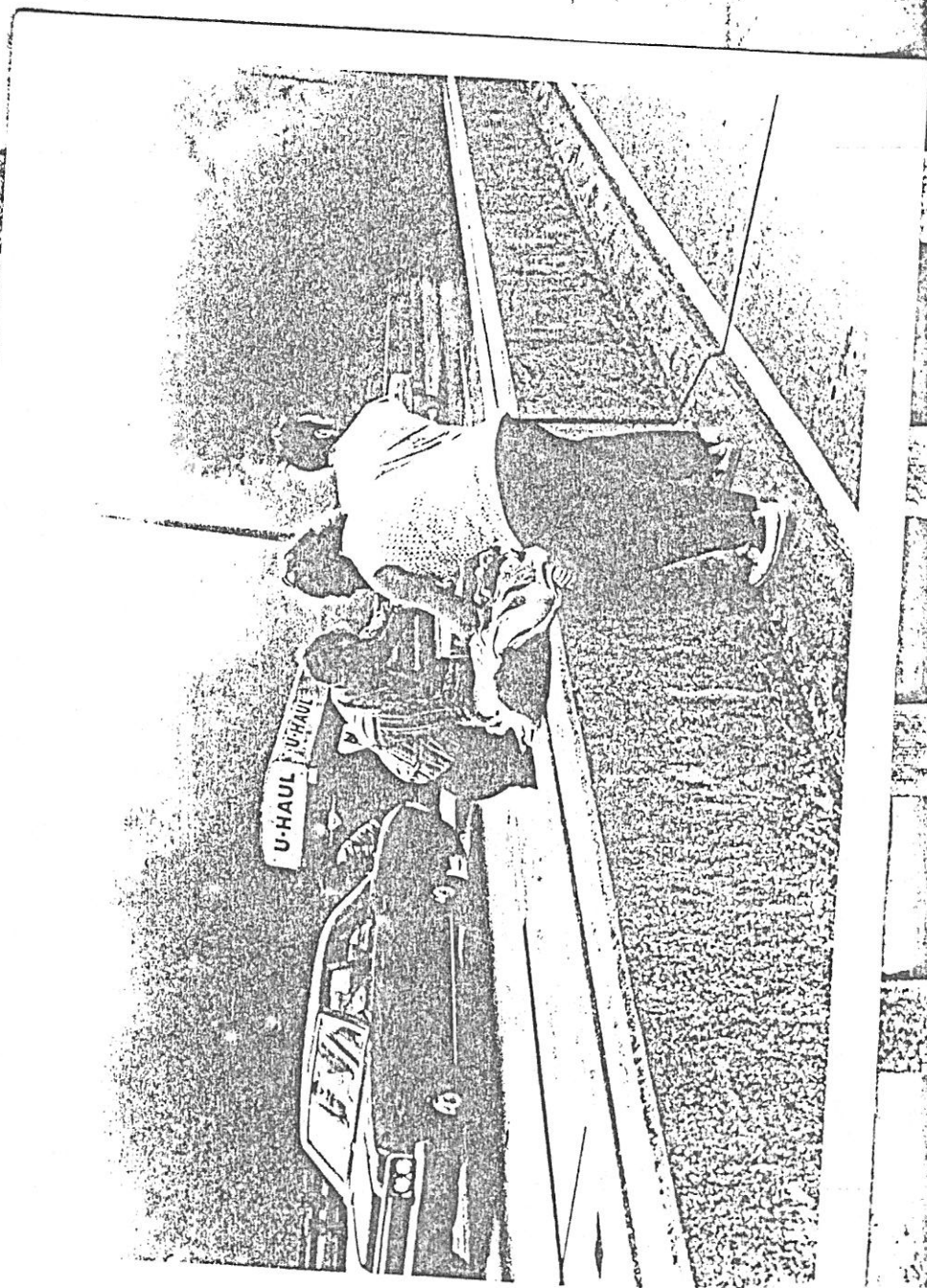
Enclosure 3 (Sherrod Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



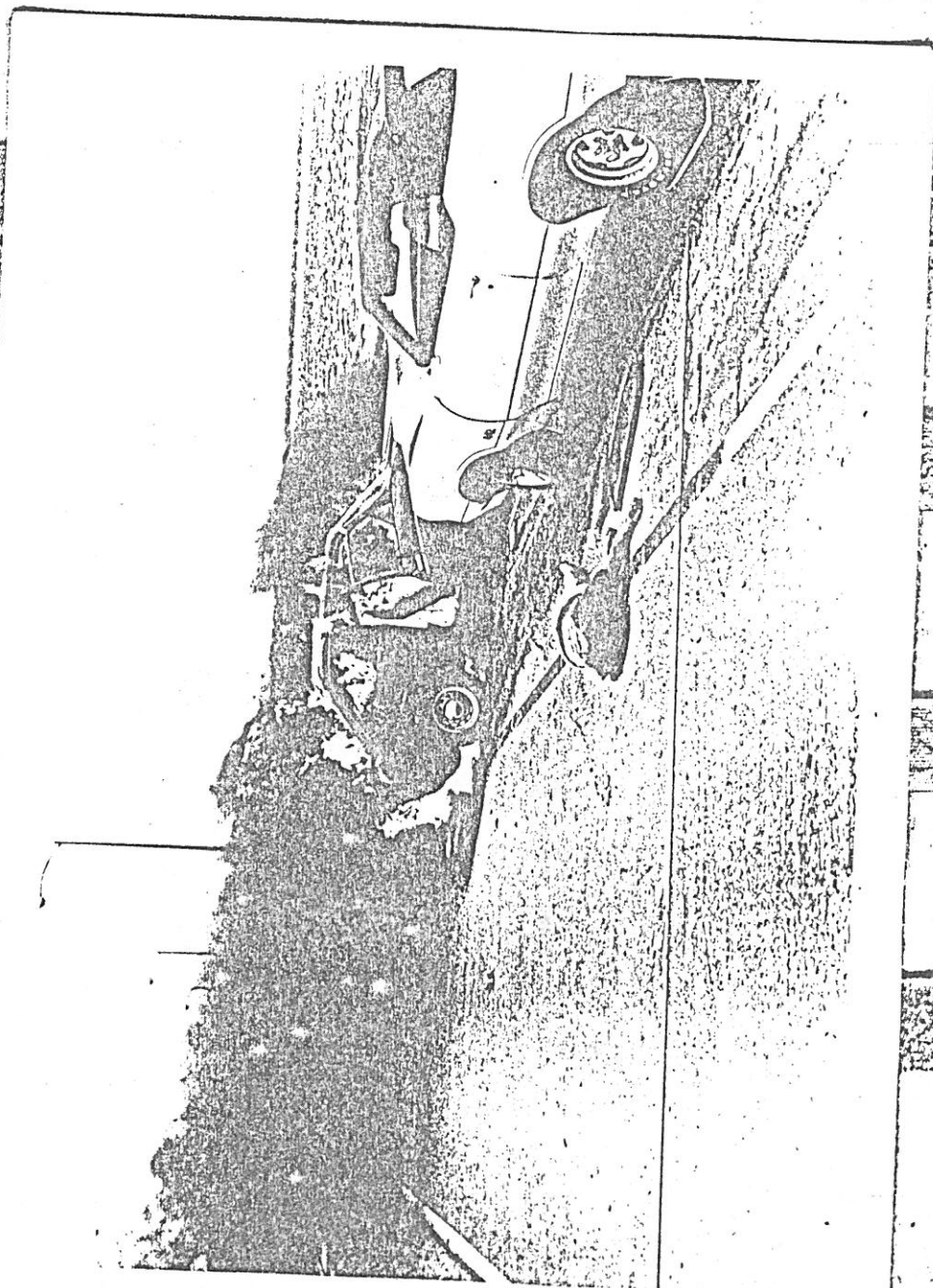
Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



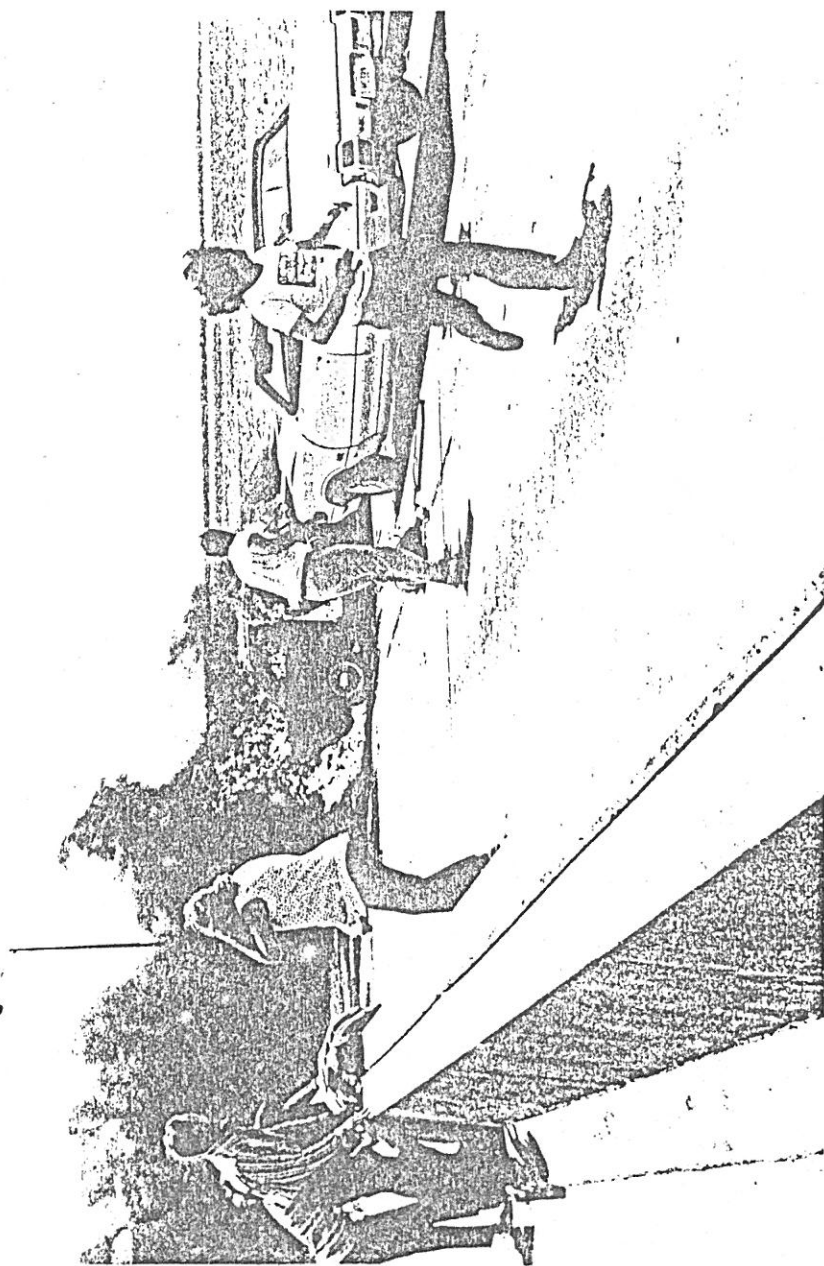
Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 3 (Graff Accident)



Enclosure 4

Chevrolet Vega gas tank attorneys

Mr. J. Thomas Sherrod
Rhodes & Sherrod
39239 Liberty
Fremont, California 94538
(415) 797-7979, Adams v. General Motors
1971 Vega rear-ended, one man severely burnt, died several days later

Mr. Jack S. Graff
Levin, Warfield, Graff, Mabie & Rosenbloum, P.A.
Seville Tower, 226 South Palafox Street
Pensacola, Florida 32501
(904) 432-1461, Fleming and Blanton v. G.M.
1971 Vega rear-ended, three serious injuries and one death