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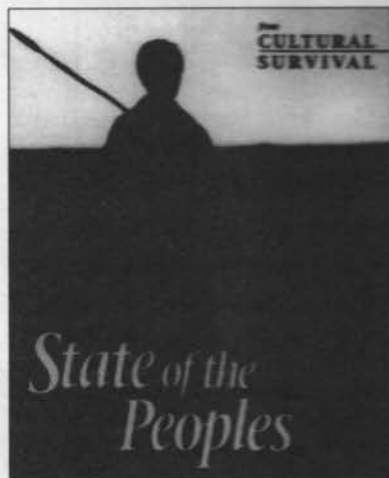
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Winter 1993

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# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

**EDITOR**  
Eric Bates

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS**  
Susan Ketchin, Nayo Watkins, Janet Irons,  
Ron Nixon, John O'Neal

**COVER EDITORS**  
Mary Lee Kerr and Charles Lee

**DESIGN**  
Jacob Roquet

**COVER PHOTO**  
Sam Kittner

**CIRCULATION**  
Sharon Ugochukwu

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*From the Editor*

**F**or the past seven years we have presented the annual Southern Journalism Awards to honor reporters whose stories broaden the range of issues, voices, and sources found in the region's daily newspapers. By asking tough, often imaginative questions and by probing untapped sources of information, these journalists demonstrate the potential of the media to analyze community problems and contribute to positive change.

This year, a panel of 36 judges selected winners for both investigative and environmental reporting from 106 entries in three divisions, based on the size of a newspaper's circulation. The panel included professors of journalism and English, magazine and newspaper editors, journalists and book authors, and community leaders and public officials.

Our thanks to each of the judges: Bill Adler, Maxine Alexander, Alease Alston, Harry Amana, Richard Boyd, Cynthia Brown, Millie Buchanan, Eddie Davis, Sybil Dorsey, Jan Johnson Elliott, Meredith Emmett, Robin Epstein, Katherine Fulton, Jerry Hardt, Roger Hart, Diana Hembree, Lois Herring, Neill Herring, Chip Hughes, Jereann King, Marc Miller, David Molpus, Dee Reid, Hazel Rich, Linda Rocawich, Derek Rodriguez, Al Sawyer, Carolyn Schwartz, Caroline Senter, Bob Sherrill, Vernie Singleton, Elizabeth Tornquist, Lori Ventura, Lester Waldman, Michael Yellin, and Gordon Young.

Special thanks go to Bob Hall for coordinating the contest, and to Marc Miller and Jane Fish for excerpting the first-place stories that begin on page 44.

Coincidentally, all the first-place winners relate to the subject of our cover section: race and the environment. Reporters uncovered toxic chemicals that threaten residents and farmers in Texas, Georgia, and Florida. They visited wealthy resorts that threaten the South Carolina coast. They examined Virginia police and judges who crack down harder on black citizens, and studied Louisiana school officials who shortchange children while paying political cronies.

The newspaper stories offer an investigative counterpoint to our cover section, which provides a much-needed forum for people of color struggling for environmental justice. As their stories vividly demonstrate, communities of color across the region are threatened by toxic racism — but they are leading a powerful grassroots movement that broadens traditional notions of the “environment” and fights to preserve the planet for all people.

With this issue, we also widen the diversity of voices heard regularly in *SE* by welcoming three new contributing editors to the magazine. Ron Nixon, a South Carolina activist and reporter, is overseeing our “Blueprint” column of concrete strategies from grassroots organizers. Janet Irons, an associate professor of history at Lock Haven University, is editing our department of book and film reviews. And Nayo Watkins — poet, playwright, arts consultant, and community organizer — is looking for oral histories and first-person essays for our “Voices” department.

The new editors join Susan Ketchin, our long-time fiction editor, as well as John O'Neal, who passes along the wisdom of the common people through his close friend Junebug Jabbo Jones. With the benefit of their combined energy and experience, we hope to continue bringing you the wide range of vision and voices that are shaping the modern South.

— Eric Bates

**WINTER ISSUE**

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## HOG WORKERS FIGHT BACK

**H**ogs are considered a god-send in rural Sampson County, North Carolina. The farmers who raise them and the workers who slaughter them are plenty grateful for the money they bring in.

But for some of the workers at the Lundy Packing plant in Clinton, those same hogs have become more of a curse than a blessing. At least 23 of the slaughterhouse employees have contracted swine brucellosis, a rare disease humans catch from freshly slaughtered pigs.

If diagnosed early, brucellosis can be relatively harmless, bringing on aches and fevers much like a bad flu. When left untreated, it can become chronic, resulting in years of joint pain and fatigue.

Lundy workers say the failure of the company and the state to recognize and deal with the problem has made it worse. Some employees suffer from lingering pain; others, like Larry Simmons, have been in and out of the hospital.

Simmons has worked at Lundy for 20 of his 42 years. After he was diagnosed with brucellosis in 1992, he was hospitalized twice for chills and weight loss, the second time for nine days. When he went back to work in June, he lasted one day. His temperature hit 102 and he was rushed back to the hospital. On the way, the muscles in his jaw and hands locked and he began spitting up blood.

"I've gone through a lot of pain and misery," says Simmons.

The response from

## GEORGIA WORKERS PROTEST HOGWASH

**M**any of the 16,000 state employees in Georgia who have been denied raises for two years apparently think the pay freeze has more to do with hoggish officials than an ongoing budget crunch. To show their outrage at greedy and wasteful spending in state government, workers marched through downtown Atlanta recently — led by a 75-pound potbellied pig.

When they reached the state Department of Transportation, the workers littered the sidewalk with counterfeit dollars. The pig promptly wallowed in the cash.

The protest by members of the Georgia

State Employees Union was sparked by a proposal to fatten Transportation Commissioner Wayne Shackelford's already plump salary by \$20,000, raising his yearly earnings to \$125,000. GSEU "honored" Shackelford with the Golden Pork Award, presenting him a trophy of a plastic pig.

Several weeks later, when the state transportation board was ready to vote on the raise, GSEU members showed up at the board meeting — with another hog in tow. The increase was denied.

Now the local union is suing the state to recover the back pay withheld from workers since 1991. "We're talking about millions of dollars that will average out to \$1,000 per employee," says Grant Williams, executive director of GSEU.



Annabelle Lundy Fetterman, the white-haired matriarch who runs the company, has been less than sympathetic. Embroiled in a bitter struggle to keep the United

Food and Commercial Workers Union out of her plant, she says the problem is not as bad as sick workers say.

"I think they're fine," she says. "I think they are exaggerating and I think the union is encouraging it."

She also refuses to buy her hogs only from herds that have been designated as "brucellosis-free." If she were to do that, Fetterman says, she would be unable to find the 8,000 pigs she needs each day to fill her orders. Those orders amount to \$290 million in sales each year.

The government response has not been much better. For over a year, responsibility for the issue was passed back and forth between state and federal health, agricultural, and labor regulators, but not one agency took decisive action to protect workers. The state Department of Health asked Fetterman twice to limit her buying to disease-free herds, but the

agency has no authority to force her to adopt the recommendations.

Last summer, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health visited the plant and drew blood from 156 workers on the Lundy "kill floor," where the pigs are slaughtered. NIOSH found that 129 have been exposed to brucellosis. For most, the exposure was mild and will not likely make them ill. But 47 workers showed signs of "significant exposure" and were urged to seek medical help.

Since then, the union has filed a worker safety complaint, and the state Department of Labor has launched an investigation. When labor officials were initially called in by Fetterman in 1991, however, they found no problems at the plant.

Nor do workers expect to get much help from their hometown United States Senator. Republican Lauch Faircloth owns more than \$1 million worth of Lundy stock and has served on the board of directors.

In November, 73 Lundy employ-



LARRY SIMMONS SUFFERS FROM BRUCELLOSIS, A RARE DISEASE.

ees wrote Faircloth requesting that he meet with them. "We want you to know what it's like to work at Lundy's," they wrote. "We want you to know the kind of company you are a part of." Faircloth has refused to meet with them.

Workers at Lundy had plenty to complain about before they ever heard of brucellosis. They have not had a pay raise in 13 years, though the company has enjoyed years of profits. Lundy also requires them to buy their own knives and safety equipment, and to pay the full cost of their health insurance if they don't have a virtually perfect attendance record.

Workers narrowly voted for union representation last summer, but the final election certification has been challenged by the company. In the meantime, the National Labor Relations Board is considering union complaints that the company fired four workers for union activity, and interrogated and threatened to physically harm workers who support the union.

In the meantime, Annabelle Fetterman has been voted one of the nation's top businesswomen for the third year in a row by *Working Woman* magazine. In September, she was toasted along with 50 others at a gala at the National Museum of Women.

—Tinker Ready

## UNDER THE BIG SOMBRERO

**W**ith the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in November, many Mexicans worry about the "Americanization" of their culture. But one top-ranking Mexican official says it is the United States that should be worried about "Mexicanization." To study the clash of neighboring cultures, freelance writer Russell Underwood visited South of the Border, the infamous tourist attraction off I-95 in Dillon County, South Carolina.

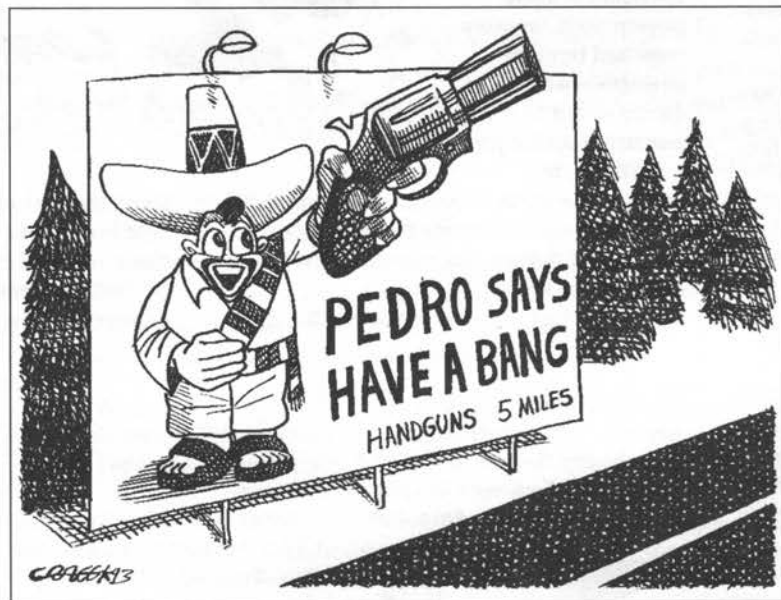
**S**outh of the Border is a sprawling complex of 14 shops, six restaurants, a golf course, hotel, campground, three game rooms, two swimming

pools, a nightclub, a convention center, and half a dozen kiddie rides. It resembles a small, glitzy city, complete with its own water tower, post office, drug store, bank — even its own rent-a-cop police force. Its mascot, Pedro, is a tubby, maraca-shaking, Mexican caricature, complete with sombrero and dopey grin. His likeness is ubiquitous here.

Some people love the place. Sure it's tacky, they say, but that's part of the fun. Others are less enthusiastic. For them, South of the Border is emblematic of the New South, a monument to greed and bad taste, a place Elvis might have loved in his later years.

Everyone is right.

The first stop on my South of



the Border tour is the El Toro Game Room, which is surprisingly low rent, with concrete floors and a bunch of outdated games. As I open the door I am greeted by the sight of a huge golden bull, glaring at me like some Old Testament idol.

In fact, bulls are big at South of the Border. A whole herd of plaster replicas stands watch over Pedro's Leather Outlet, each with brightly painted testicles. Inside the Leather Outlet, busts of Nefertiti and the Buddha crowd alongside Harley-Davidson t-shirts and South of the Border's own licensed products, from shirts to mugs and shot

## NORTHERN CRIME, SOUTHERN STYLE

**M**any of the muggings and murders in big Northern cities owe their origins to Southern hospitality. According to the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), more than half of all handguns recovered from crime scenes and arrests last year in New York and Washington — and more than a quarter of the weapons confiscated in Boston — came from five Southern states.

Virginia tops the gun list — supplying 39 percent of the weapons recovered in Washington and 26 percent in New York — followed by Florida, Georgia, and North and South Carolina.

Together the five states form what federal agents call "The Iron Pipeline," a conduit along Interstate 95 where gunrunners can legally purchase weapons and send them to Northern cities — where gun-control laws are tighter and gun prices are higher.

"Gun traffic has grown up around the way stations and travel routes from southern Florida north," Jack Killorin of the ATF told *The Atlanta Constitution*. "The early traffic was for the drug runners, but a group has grown up that does its business

in gun traffic. There are several advantages — you're dealing in a legal commodity, the markup is good, and the competition is not as lethal."

New Yorkers buying guns must wait until officials complete a background check and decide whether applicants have a legitimate need for a weapon. By contrast, most Southerners with a driver's license can buy a handgun in a few minutes — and resell them up North

for big bucks. "A .380-caliber that retails in Atlanta for \$80 will bring \$650 in New York," says Tom Stokes of the ATF.

Officials say gunrunners often stockpile hundreds of weapons and avoid reporting multiple purchases — by hiring people to buy one gun each. According to the ATF, one gunrunner in Virginia paid homeless men at day-labor pools \$10 to buy guns.

Since Virginia passed a tougher gun-control law last July, federal agents expect the gun traffic to shift to other Southern states. "I believe we're starting to see guns from West Virginia show up in the Northeast," says Killorin. "And I think we'll see Georgia increasing as a source state because of the Virginia law."

glasses to caps, sports cups, and fat pencils. Behind glass in the center of the store are all varieties of knives, a few samurai swords, and Japanese throwing stars of all

descriptions. The leather items include pistol holsters, bullwhips, and riding crops. As I leave, I hear Billy Ray Cyrus belting "Some Gave All" over the PA.



## GIANT HOSPITALS GET EVEN BIGGER

**A**s the Clinton administration pushes its plan to reform the health care industry, big hospitals are wasting no time consolidating their financial power. In October, the two largest for-profit hospital chains in the nation announced that they plan to merge, forming a \$10-billion company with 42,000 beds in 26 states.

If stockholders approve the deal, Columbia Healthcare of Louisville, Kentucky and HCA of Nashville, Tennessee will join forces, creating a chain of 190 hospitals worldwide. Most of the hospitals owned and operated by the new Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corporation will be located in the South, from Texas and Florida to Kentucky and Virginia.

Officials with both companies acknowledged that the merger is an attempt to cash in on "health networks" envisioned under the Clinton reform plan. "The direction of health care delivery in the future will focus on quality

results and cost-efficient operations, and we believe this transaction strengthens our efforts toward this goal," the chief executives of both firms said in a joint statement.

The companies said they expect to save \$130 million a year, mainly by using their combined purchasing power to command lower prices for medical supplies. Neither firm mentioned plans to pass along savings to patients or employers.

The deal follows a frenzy of consolidation in the medical industry, as companies realize that bigger equals better under the reform plan. In an earlier move, Columbia Healthcare swallowed the giant Humana hospital chain based in Louisville.

"Hospital consolidation eliminates competition and enhances economies of scale," says Deborah Ann Smith of U.S. Health Connections in Atlanta. "We're going to see more of this."

Across the road, the Mexico Shop contains beaded South of the Border belts, Frosty Mugs, big rubber snakes, and vaguely religious sand sculptures. But it contains something else as well. It contains the tackiest thing in what well may be the tackiest place in the world. Forget the camouflaged condoms; forget even the Horny Hillbillies and bags of fake vomit.

In the rear of the shop, nestled among the so-called quality imports, is a \$3,000 white statuette of the Buddha with robes covered in sparkling chips of colored glass. He looks like an oriental Elvis, circa 1974, gazing with otherworldly compassion.

John and Erin, married yester-

day, stopped by South of the Border on the way to their honeymoon in Florida. They are young, attractive, and amused.

"I think it's the cheesiest place in the world," Erin says. "I mean, it's overwhelming. It's a total waste, but you have to stop in. I mean, how could you not?"

How indeed? South of the Border began as a beer depot in 1949, when Alan Schafer moved his beer wholesaling business across the state line from Robeson County, North Carolina, which had recently gone dry. Originally located on U.S. Route 301 between Fayetteville and Florence, the place began attracting tourists and gradually started selling food and novelty items.

The place caught on. In a big way. Last year South of the Border welcomed 7.5 million visitors and brought in over \$38 million.

In 1986, South of the Border was topped with a 220-foot-tall Sombrero Tower to allow tourists a bird's-eye view of the neon oasis. The complex boasts the largest highway sign in the world, which takes two computers to drive and

consumes \$120,000 a year in electricity.

During a tour of the complex, Schafer grudgingly comments on his 1981 conviction for vote-buying. He pleaded guilty, but still maintains his innocence. After 16 years as chairman of the Dillon County Democratic Party, he contends he was doing business as usual. "I did absolutely nothing wrong," he says. "I just had a chickenshit bunch of lawyers." Schafer served 17 months in prison, and has retired from politics.

Depending on the season, South of the Border employs between 700 and 900 people. I speak with one of them at the Ice Cream Fiesta, which on this particular Sunday night is doing less than brisk business. She is off-duty, sitting next to a friend at a table near the corner. She is middle-aged and has lived in Dillon County all her

life. I ask her how she likes working here in Pedro-land and she forces up a crooked smile and grinds her cigarette out in an ash-tray. "Ask me another question," she says.

—Russell Underwood

*Excerpted from The Point, a monthly newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina. Brett Bursey contributed to this article.*

## BEAUTY AND THE BOMBER

**O**n a clear day in mid-September, World War II bombers and fighter planes filled the skies over the airport in Asheville, North Carolina. For five dollars, visitors to the air show could buy dummy hand grenades, 30mm shells, and fighter-plane pencil sharpeners. A blond-haired girl clutched an inflatable plastic combat plane as her father carried her into the belly of a bomber.

Jim Smith of the Air War Museum of Genesee, New York sold war souvenirs from a booth, giving collectors brief histories of the objects. "Some people might say we're warmongers," Smith allowed, but insisted that most

## GO TO MUSTARD AND TURN LEFT

All barbecue is not created equal, according to a study by Charles Kovacik of the University of South Carolina. The geology professor conducted "intensive field work," visiting 150 barbecue joints across the state in order to map local tastes in barbecue. His conclusion: It's the sauce that makes each meal distinctive. "The state is incredibly diverse for its size," says Kovacik. His map shows regional preferences for tomato, ketchup, mustard, and vinegar-and-pepper sauces.

### Barbecue Regions



## REACH OUT AND OFFEND SOMEONE

Telephone giant AT&T came under fire from black leaders last fall when it distributed 300,000 copies of an employee magazine depicting Africans as monkeys. The North Carolina NAACP announced it was switching to a long-distance competitor after the company published the "humiliating and offensive" illustration showing five characters on several continents conversing over the phone. All the characters except the monkey in Africa were human. The civil rights organization restored service after AT&T apologized and agreed to discuss hiring more minorities and providing minority scholarships.

people understand that air shows are "a tribute to the people who served. If we don't preserve this for the young people, they won't know where they came from."

But Robert Lyon, a conscientious objector from World War II, called the air show "an unintentional glamorization of war." Bloody conflagrations are not often presented to the public at such venues, said the 72-year-old Lyon. "I suspect nobody at the air show got any impression of the fire bombing at Cologne."

The selective memory of a conflict can distance us from unpleasant facts, Lyon said, just as the air machines tended to isolate the men inside from the killing their weapons inflicted on the

ground. "A pilot or a bombardier could go through a war killing hundreds of people without ever seeing a dead body."

As the air show demonstrates, the men who flew the bombers generally receive more attention than those like Lyon who worked for peace. Some 12,000 conscientious objectors spent the war years living in ramshackle camps in New Hampshire, Oregon, and Tennessee while working in mental hospitals without pay. "We called them American concentration camps," said Lyon.

Lyon has no

problem with honoring the past. "A nation needs to celebrate its history, whether you agree with a war or not," he said. But the lesson lies in the way the presentation is made.

"I can conceive of a grandfather showing a child the planes and admiring their design while explaining the horrible purpose for which they were used," said Lyon. "I can imagine a grandfather saying, 'Let's pray it

never happens again.'"

—Kevin Carter

Excerpted from *Green Line*, a weekly paper in Asheville, North Carolina.

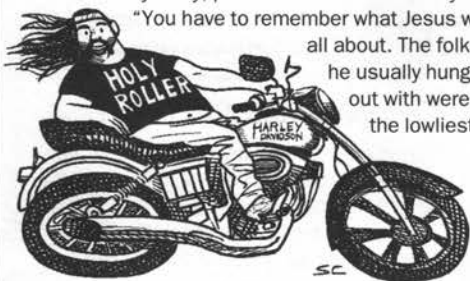
Illustrations by Steven Cragg. Readers are encouraged to submit news articles to Roundup. Please send original clippings or photocopies with name and date of publication, or articles of no more than 500 words.

## VROOM! AMEN!

When dozens of thundering Harley-Davidsons pulled up to the Cathedral of the Cross in Birmingham, Alabama last October, no one in the congregation was alarmed. The bikers were members of Cathedral Riders, a new group for Christian motorcycle riders, who had come to attend Sunday-morning services.

"We're just people, not weirdos," said the Reverend Wiley Perry, pastor of the biker ministry.

"You have to remember what Jesus was all about. The folks he usually hung out with were the lowliest."



## CONFEDERATE FLAG? NEIN, DANKE SCHÖN!

The Confederate battle flag — a favorite symbol of neo-Nazi skinheads — may represent a lost cause when it comes to doing business with Germany. According to Billy Joe Camp, the top industrial recruiter in Alabama, Mercedes-Benz decided to locate its new \$300 million plant in Tuscaloosa County only after it was assured that the flag no longer flies above the Capitol dome.

"One Mercedes official kept talking about all of the Ku Klux Klan activity in Alabama," says Camp. "I don't believe we would have ever gotten this plant if the Confederate flag was atop the Capitol."

Governor Jim Folsom banned the banner after years of protest by black lawmakers, citing the potential effect on industrial recruitment. South Carolina and Georgia, which both fought for the Mercedes plant, fly versions of the Confederate banner atop their capitols.

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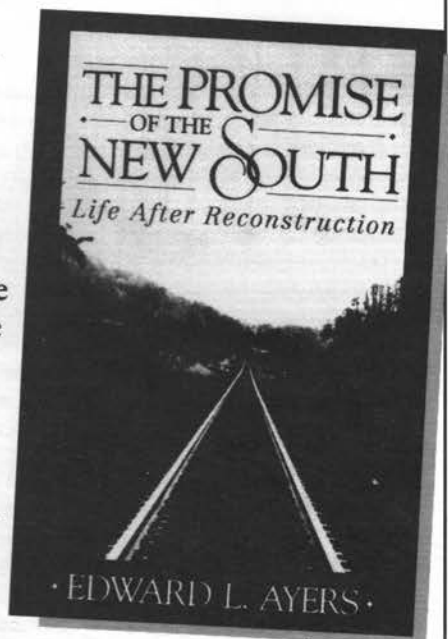
—*The Washington Post Book World*

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# CLEAN DREAM

In October 1991, more than 600 grassroots leaders gathered for an historic meeting in Washington, D.C. They represented Latino, Native American, African American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities from across the United States and its territories. They had come to attend the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.

The Summit was a defining moment in the emerging movement for environmental justice. After much discussion and debate, the delegates drafted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice that represent a radical departure from traditional views equating the environment with air, water, and land. The Principles redefined "environment" as "wherever we live, work, and play," expanding the concept of environmental hazards to include unsafe jobs, unemployment, inadequate housing, poor health care and education, unresponsive government, police brutality, and crime.

The Summit transformed the participants, bringing in its wake a powerful surge of grassroots activism led by communities of color. In rural towns and inner-city neighborhoods across the South, activists are striving to do more than simply distribute pollution equally among all social groups — they seek ways to free all life from the burden of toxic contamination.

The Summit also altered the direction and priorities of predominantly white national environmental organizations and government agencies. "Those of us who went to the Summit and saw the power, the courage, the knowledge, and the effectiveness of those 600 environmental leaders of color came away changed," said Michael Fischer, former head of the Sierra Club. "The experience changed our lives and the lives of our organizations."

Two years after the Summit, however, it is clear that the environmental justice movement has fallen far short of the powerful promise evident at its birth. The movement has become a storm center of wrangling around issues of leadership, funding, and vision. There are increasingly rocky relations between people of color and whites, between grassroots groups and national organizations. The great unifying hope of the Summit is in danger of being lost.

This special section of *Southern Exposure* on environmental justice emerges from our concern for the future well-being of the movement and the suffering communities it seeks to heal. We hoped it would serve the interests of all concerned if we took an in-depth look at environmental justice work where it matters most — on the frontlines of community-level struggles.

Working with Charles Lee of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, we put together an overview of environmental racism from Columbus to the present. We col-

lected stories of environmental justice struggles from all 13 Southern states. And we invited a wide spectrum of local activists to discuss the future of the movement, share their experiences, and speak for themselves on the issues they care about most.

What we learned is both encouraging and discouraging. We are heartened that grassroots activism is on the rise, and that youth and workers are increasingly involved in environmental justice struggles. We are also glad that state and federal officials are paying more attention to environmental justice and equity issues.

But despite such progress, poisoning industries and waste facilities are escalating their assault against communities of color. Victimized communities are fighting for their lives with grossly insufficient resources; environmental justice groups find themselves in keen competition for diminishing financial support. And the pervasive climate of organizational turfism and racial polarization remains a powerful impediment to serious cooperative action.

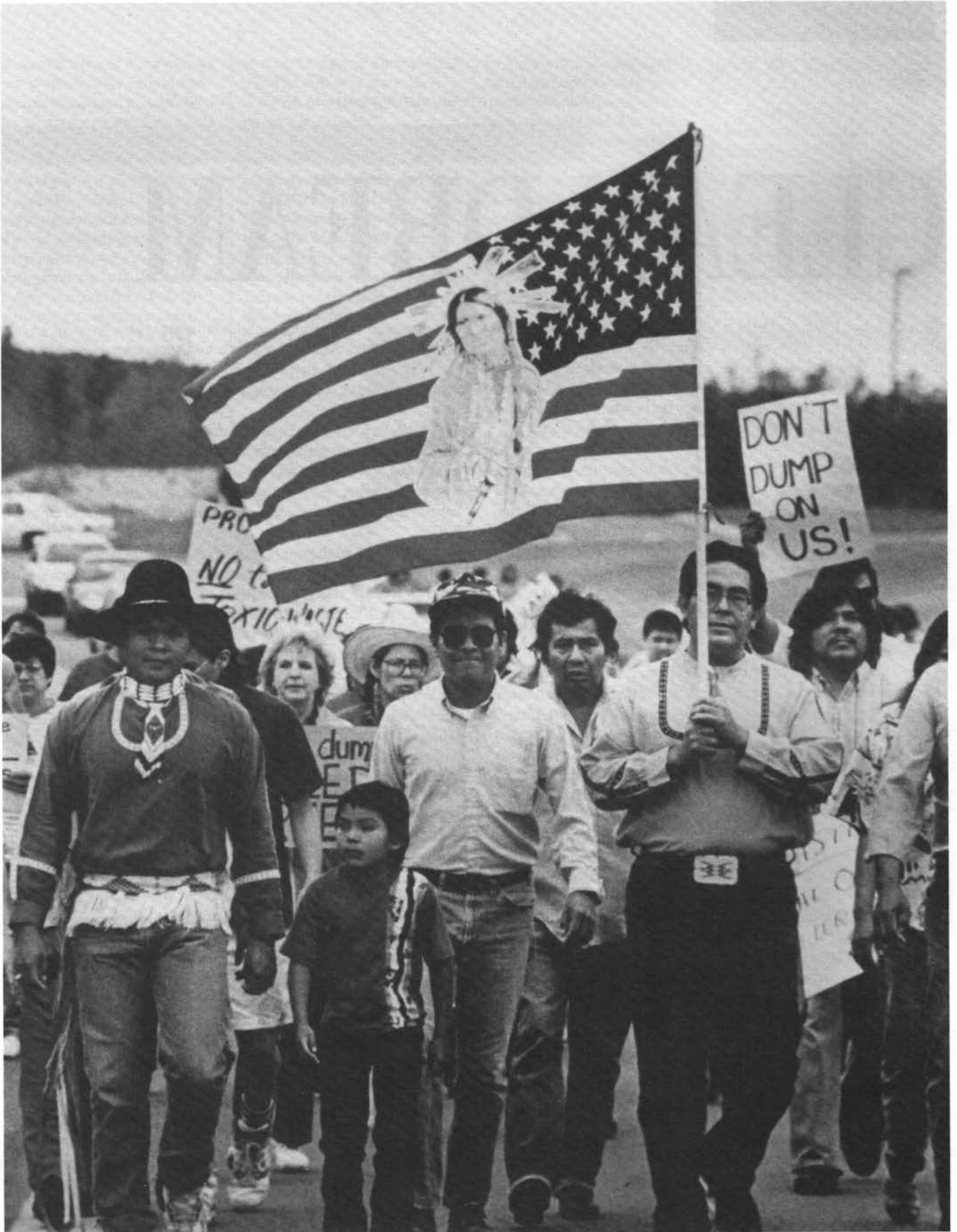
These obstacles to united action require a refocusing of our efforts. The environmental justice movement recognizes that widespread environmental degradation is an inevitable outcome of our current mode of economic production. Until we adopt different ways of meeting our material needs, we will make no appreciable headway in reducing toxic contamination. In short, we must face a fundamental question: "What can we do to create a future for people of color and our society as a whole that is both economically viable and environmentally sustainable?"

If the environmental justice movement is to survive, we must strengthen the capacity of communities of color to develop meaningful economic alternatives to polluting industries and waste facilities. We must give serious and sustained attention to help communities develop their own leadership, raise money, build coalitions, and shape public policy. Only by placing community-based economic development at the center of our work can we hope to keep the environmental justice movement on the high road of inspired cooperation and constructive activity.

The diversity of agendas within the movement is a source of great strength — but it is also a source of conflict. Effective action requires coordination and cooperation. We in the movement must work to strengthen our unity of purpose and vision if we are to fully realize our dream of environmental justice for all. □

— Isaiah Madison and Mary Lee Kerr

Isaiah Madison is executive director and Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate with the Institute for Southern Studies.



**CHOCTAWS MARCH AGAINST A PROPOSED TOXIC WASTE DUMP IN NOXUBEE COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI, THE LATEST IN A LONG LINE OF ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS TO THEIR LAND AND HEALTH SINCE COLUMBUS.**



**AFTER CENTURIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL**

**FROM**

**RACISM, PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE**

**CONQUISTADORS**

**FORGING A NEW MOVEMENT FOR**

**TO COALITIONS**

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.**

**By Mary Lee Kerr and Charles Lee**

**F**or five centuries, the Choctaw Indians lived and worked in the lower delta of the Mississippi River. Using simple bone and wood tools, they fished, hunted, and planted corn and beans in the fertile soil, sustaining their own families and trading excess crops with neighboring tribes.

All that began to change with the arrival of Hernando de Soto in 1540. Spanish soldiers killed more than 2,000 Choctaws in their search for gold and slaves. In the centuries that followed, other European settlers steadily overran tribal lands. By 1831, federal troops had forced 18,000 Choctaws to leave their homeland and relocate in Oklahoma.

Today, the descendants of Choctaws remaining in Mississippi face a threat almost as deadly as Spanish conquistadors and U.S. troops. In 1991, tribal chief Phillip Martin invited National Disposal Systems, Inc. to build a hazardous waste landfill on tribal land.

"Just because we're a minority group, they thought our land could be used," says Linda Farve, president of Concerned Citizens of Choctaw, which resisted the landfill. "We've been taught by our ancestors that people's health was important, never that money was the important thing in life." Last year, 60

percent of the Choctaw people voted in a referendum to reject the landfill.

The connection with their tribal history was not lost on most Choctaws. The proposed landfill, say Scott Morrison and Leanne Howe, represented "the culmination of all the foreign diseases, concepts, and institutions introduced since Columbus landed that have paved the way for the waste crisis in 1992."

Since the arrival of European explorers in the South, the exploitation of Native Americans and other people of color — racism — has been tightly interwoven with the exploitation of the environment in which they live and work. Native Southerners, African slaves, and migrant workers provided the land and labor that formed the backbone of Southern industrialization. Today, polluting industries continue to take advantage of the poverty and powerlessness of people of color — employing them in toxic jobs and dumping hazardous waste in their communities.

Known as "environmental racism," this new pattern represents an old way of doing business in the South. According to a 1987 study by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, half of all Native and Asian Americans — and

three out of five African and Hispanic Americans — live in communities with waste dumps.

Dumping on communities of color has become a big business. WMX, the largest waste management corporation in the world, is expected to bring in \$10 million this year from its toxic waste sites, including those in predominantly black Southern towns like Port Arthur, Texas and Emelle, Alabama (see "The Emelle Megadump," page 17).

But in recent years a new movement has emerged, led by people of color at the grassroots level. Sparked by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, the community-based movement has helped strengthen local activism across the region, placing the struggle to defend the environment within the larger struggle for social and economic justice.

"The issue of environmental racism in our communities has become an issue of life and death," said Benjamin Chavis, then-director of the UCC Commission for Racial Justice and now executive director of the NAACP, in his opening remarks at the summit. "It is our intention to build an effective multi-racial, inclusive environmental movement with the capacity to transform the political landscape of this nation."

## DISEASE AND DUMPS

The first Southerners to experience environmental racism were Native Americans. Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Tuscaroras, Catawbias, Seminoles, Natchez, and other Southern Indians who inhabited the region long before Columbus lived in complex, self-sustaining communities. Many cultures took only what they needed from the environment, leaving the soil and forest to replenish after they planted and hunted.

"When we speak of land, we are not speaking of property, territory, or even a piece of ground upon which our houses sit and our crops are grown," explained Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee who fought a dam slated for his reservation in the 1950s. "We are speaking of something truly sacred."

The Europeans who invaded the South beginning in the 1500s treated the land and its people much differently. In European culture, man controlled nature, and land and natural resources could be bought and sold. While some Europeans defended Native American rights to their homelands, many saw them as nothing more than "wild and cruel Pagans," and used their "inferior" race and "primitive" culture as an excuse to plunder land and resources.

Warfare, alcohol, and European diseases like smallpox and typhoid decimated entire native populations. In 1763, one English general even proposed a kind of germ warfare: "Inoculate the

Indians, by means of [infected] blankets to Extirpate this Execrable Race."

Throughout the next two centuries, Europeans continued to use the race and culture of Native Americans as an excuse to take and develop their land. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the expansion of Southern agriculture, and the discovery of gold in Georgia, seizing Indian land became national policy. In 1829, President Andrew Jackson called for Southern Indians to be moved west. Despite appeals from tribal representatives to stop the removal, government agents forced tens of thousands of native Southerners to leave their land. The

Cherokees alone lost about 4,000 people on the 800-mile march to Oklahoma which earned its name, "the Trail of Tears."

A series of federal acts between 1871 and 1934 deprived the surviving Indians of much of their remaining land and sovereign power, replacing tribal governments with councils overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Nevertheless, relocated Indian nations have retained full sovereignty when it comes to the environment. Federal environmental protection acts passed in the 1960s and 1970s include no provisions for indigenous lands, and the BIA has neither the staff nor the resources to evaluate and monitor waste facilities. Some nations have estab-

lished their own environmental protection agencies, but many lack the resources to defend their air, land, and water.

The lack of environmental protection in Indian territories — combined with widespread poverty and high unemployment — has made native land an attractive target for the military and waste companies. According to federal reports, 650 solid waste disposal sites and two million tons of radioactive uranium now contaminate Indian territory across the U.S.

And the dollars-for-dumping deals continue. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Energy has gone from tribe to tribe, offering up to \$5 million in exchange for storing deadly uranium tailings in Monitored Retrieval Storage sites. "This is the space-age version of the diseased blankets deliberately given to Indian people by the U.S. Cavalry," says Navajo Valerie Taliman.

But without viable economic alternatives, many Native American communities find it hard to say no to lucrative waste offers. "The targeting of waste companies for siting on Indian lands reflects the lack of options we have given the tribes," says Representative Duncan Hunter of California.

"Some tribes are prone to making decisions on an economic basis, because they have no choice," agrees George Bearpaw, executive director of tribal operations with the Cherokee Na-

Photo by Stephen Humbert



LUMBIE AND TUSCARORA INDIANS DRUM THEIR PROTESTS TO A HAZARDOUS WASTE FACILITY SLATED FOR THEIR NORTH CAROLINA HOMELAND.



tion in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. "They've got to provide employment and basic needs."

### "A FLOCK OF BUZZARDS"

Despite the economic hardships, many Native Americans insist that they can survive better without waste dumps. Just as their ancestors resisted European invaders 500 years ago, Indians across the country are joining forces to defend their land against waste companies.

Lumbee Indians, who comprise 37 percent of the population of Robeson County in southeast North Carolina, have joined black and white residents to ward off two waste facilities since 1984. The first, an incinerator proposed by a company called U.S. Ecology, was defeated in two years. But after high-income, majority-white Mecklenberg County rejected a regional

waste treatment facility proposed by GSX, the company and state officials spent eight years trying to locate the facility in the Lumbee homeland.

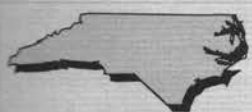
Under the proposal, GSX wanted to dump 500,000 gallons of waste into the Lumber River every day. "Some people are still subsistence living down at the river. It's a life source, rooted in Indian history," says Donna Chavis, a Lumbee resident. "We were looking at a major impact on our culture and way of living in terms of health risks."

To local residents, the waste plant was a clear example of environmental racism. "They don't see the racism that is buried in the efforts to site this facility," says Chavis. "They didn't have any idea that Robeson would be able to organize a campaign."

But organize they did. Recognizing that the county is 37

## YOUTH IN ACTION

By Rhiannon Chavis-Legerton



I am 13 years old and I live in Pembroke, a small town in the southeastern part of North Carolina. I am Lumbee and my people are the Native people of this land.

In my area, there are a lot of people and businesses who are trying to destroy our land and people. They have tried to force on us chemical treatment plants, radioactive waste incinerators, and now a large nuclear dump which would destroy the land, air, and water. But with the help of my family and others in the community, we have organized to stop it all from coming. We also work to protect our river from pollution. We have an organization called the Center for Community Action. Youth, adults, and people of all races are involved in our work.

I got involved in this work through my parents. They took me to rallies and meetings they held to stop the bad things that people were trying to bring to our town and surrounding area. We protested and picketed to stop the treatment plant and incinerator. It took many years, but we were successful. Now they want to place a nuclear dump 30 miles from my home.

I have been working for justice with my family since I was very young. My work to protect the environment is justice work, too. The term environmental justice reminds me of the Pledge of Allegiance, when it says, "and justice for all." To me this should mean the land also, but do people live by that? No. But they are also saying that they love their country. Are not trees part of this country? People forget that we live on their oxygen. Isn't water part of this country? People forget where we get our fish.

So to me, the term environmental justice means exactly what it says — justice for the environment. If people would live

by this, then there would be no need for me to be writing this. Areas like mine are being chosen by polluters because they are isolated, low-income, and have people of different races. Environmental justice means stopping areas like where I live from always being chosen for dumps and plants by industries which hurt the environment and people. We already have too many of them.

I think that the idea of radioactive dumps stinks. I think the only reason they are trying to put it here is because they think people don't care about the environment. If they are allowed to put it here, then they will think they can treat us any way they please because we did not stop them.

Photo by Henny Garfunkel



**"IF YOUTH WOULD GET INVOLVED, THEY COULD HELP CHANGE THE DECISIONS OF OUR LEADERS" SAYS RHIANNON CHAVIS-LEGERTON.**

If this dump is allowed to come to our area, I feel it will cause much harm. It is proven that every other dump of this kind has leaked. The odds are that this one will leak too, if we let it come. If this dump comes and leaks, then the radioactive materials could cause cancer in my area. It could kill trees, plants, fish, and our air and drinking water could be polluted.

I am working with my dad, mom, sister, and brother to help stop this dump. Whatever is needed to do, I will help. I have tried to talk to my friends about the problems in our community, but many of them don't know what is happening because they haven't been taught about it.

I think that if youth would get involved, then they could help change the decisions of our leaders. Many people listen to children more than adults because they think if the children feel strong enough to speak out, then it must be pretty bad. If kids would get organized, then they could organize adults.

I hope that you take what I have said seriously because you never know, it can happen to your town just as quick as anywhere else.

*Rhiannon Chavis-Legerton is a member of the Center for Community Action, which was founded by her parents, Donna Chavis and Mac Legerton. She was recently featured in Sassy and Zuzu magazines for her work for environmental and social justice.*

percent white and 26 percent African American, the Center for Community Action (CCA) in Lumberton emphasized cross-racial organizing. The groups had different agendas, but the united effort produced huge turnouts at public hearings.

Finding resources was tougher. "Companies are bankrolling 10 to 20 professionals to locate a site, and most environmental campaigns cannot even hire one full-time staff person," says Mac Legerton, executive director of the CCA. "It's no wonder so many battles are still being lost."

Robeson citizens also found themselves up against federal regulators. After being lobbied by GSX, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency challenged a North Carolina law that provided more protection for drinking water than federal regulations. In what became a national test case, an EPA administrative hearing upheld the right of the state to maintain higher standards.

The community had won — but it wasn't long before the tri-racial community was once again forced to defend its land and cultures. Chem-Nuclear Systems, Inc. recently proposed siting a regional low-level radioactive waste facility in Richmond County, 30 miles from Lumberton. CCA is meeting with other local groups to strategize ways to stop the facility.

To further counter proposed waste facilities and strengthen the work of local activists, Native American groups have formed the Indigenous Environmental Network, a national coalition that provides education and technical assistance to more than 50 grassroots groups.

"Our goal is to help develop community empowerment," says Jackie Warledo, who represents the IEN in the South. "When groups begin to face these issues, they will learn how to strengthen their own organizations."

Some Southern groups are doing their own networking. North Carolina Cherokees, who recently fought off a 62-acre landfill, have united with Mississippi Choctaws in the Coalition for Native Rights. Despite the daily struggle of what Cherokee organizer Virginia Sexton calls "an all-day, every-day thing just to survive," the two groups take time to share experiences and plan strategies. Together, their flyer says, they are finding ways to stop waste companies and government agencies from "circling over your sovereign nations like a flock of buzzards."

### DEATH IN THE TUNNEL

Unlike Native Americans, Africans brought to America in the early 17th century did not have their land taken from them;

they were taken from their land. But like indigenous Southerners, they faced the brutal consequences of racism in their new environment, as white planters enslaved hundreds of thousands to power huge cotton and tobacco plantations.

As slaves, and later as freedmen, African Americans were consistently given the most toxic tasks. During the 1700s they were given dangerous jobs making tar, pitch, and turpentine in the coastal South. After the Civil War, they sorted tobacco leaves in rooms "laden with fumes and dust" for half the wages of whites and were relegated to the dirtiest, dustiest jobs in the new cotton mills. In the early 1900s, the federal government used black men in Alabama as guinea pigs in an experiment designed to test the long-term effects of syphilis. The men were never told what they had and were denied a cure when it became available.

In 1930, a subsidiary of Union Carbide hired nearly 5,000 workers — 3,244 of them black — to dig a four-mile tunnel at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. Workers were told they were diverting water to supply a Union Carbide metal refinery with hydroelectric power. What they weren't told was that they were digging a tunnel through solid silica, which was known to scar the lungs and eventually suffocate those who inhaled its dust.

Some 2,000 black workers dug inside the tunnel, where the effects of the dust were the worst. Only 500 of the 1,687 whites worked

Photo courtesy Martin Cherniack, Yale University



**BLACK WORKERS DIG THROUGH DEADLY SILICA AT GAULEY BRIDGE, WEST VIRGINIA IN 1930.**

inside. One observer said black workers were "treated worse if they was mules." When explosives were used, they were forced "right back into the powder smoke in the tunnel, instead of letting them wait 30 minutes like the white men do."

James McGhee is the only black man still living who worked inside the tunnel. "We worked them rocks, they didn't have anything on our noses," he recalls. "They knew what was going to happen. We didn't."

Before long, at least 476 workers had died of pneumonia and were quickly buried in unmarked graves. "Many of them died in the tunnel," says McGhee. "Ain't no tombstone or nothing."

Company officials were surprised. "I knew I was going to kill these niggers," the contractor hired by Union Carbide later testified before Congress, "but I didn't know it was going to be this soon."

McGhee and more than 1,500 other workers were disabled by silicosis. Whites who survived received as much as \$1,000 in compensation; black workers received less than \$250.

"I'm 86 now and I got silicosis and I can't hardly breathe," says McGhee. "They didn't do anything for us."



## HIGHWAY RACISM

As McGhee was watching hundreds of his fellow workers die in the hills of West Virginia, millions of black Southerners hoping to escape rural racism and find better-paying jobs were migrating to cities. In 1920, one in six blacks in Georgia lived in cities. By 1950, the ratio was one in three.

As African Americans created new urban communities, however, they encountered new forms of racism. When governments built highways, railroads, and other public works, they often routed them through black neighborhoods, uprooting decades-old communities from Dallas to Durham, from New Orleans to Nashville.

"The interstate highway departments have simply destroyed black neighborhoods by sending big interstates through there," says John Hope Franklin, professor emeritus of history at Duke University. "I would call this an aspect of environmental racism."

Once one public project disrupts a community, others quickly follow. The all-black neighborhood of Newtown in Gainesville, Georgia, separated from the white community by a parkway, is surrounded by dozens of dirty and dangerous industries. Over the years, residents have been plagued by pollution from an oil refinery, soybean mill, feed mill, wood treatment plant, auto factory, railroad terminal, landfill, and large junkyard. Of the 16 companies that report releases of toxic

chemicals in the city, all but two are located in Newtown (see "No Answers for Newtown," page 52).

Residents say polluting companies endanger public health. "Out of 40 residents we surveyed, 18 people were sick or had died of cancer or lupus," says Faye Bush. "My sister had two kids who died with lupus. I had a brother who died with cancer. I had skin lupus. But the city and state didn't do a complete study. They blamed it on our lifestyles."

Determined to protect their families, Bush and her neighbors turned to the Newtown Florist Club, a civic group formed 40 years ago to collect money for flowers for ailing residents. Today the group is organizing to find out what chemicals are being released, educate the community, and push for cleanup.

Bush knows Newtown is not alone. "Everywhere you go," she says, "black people are crying the same story."

In fact, government studies show that black communities consistently suffer from the worst environmental conditions, including lead exposure, landfills, and toxic industries. A 1988 study by the Agency for Toxic Substances found that 44 percent of urban black children are at a risk of lead poisoning, four times the rate for white children.

## TOXIC GHOST TOWNS

While city life has been toxic to many African Americans, those who have tried to hold on to their farms have not been

# JESUS PEOPLE AGAINST POLLUTION

By Charlotte Keys



The town of Columbia was founded on December 8, 1811 — six years before Mississippi was admitted into statehood. The people of Columbia were here long before any industries came into the area.

The town and state have always been known to

have a racist attitude in treating the poor. All across Mississippi and the rest of the South, modern-time slavery still exists in our homes, workplaces, and schools. Here in Columbia, there are no blacks in any government or banking positions. There are no unions in local industries, either. Companies are slaving and slaying the people with toxic poisoning.

Our people have been abused and used by polluters who have broken the law. The polluters are billion-dollar industries, crooked politicians, and the EPA, right down to wealthy, evil-minded people who control the media and refuse to let the truth be known.

Between 1974 and 1975, Reichold Chemicals manufactured wood preservatives without a permit for 22 months. After they did receive a permit, an explosion rocked the plant in 1977. When the company abandoned the site in

1984, the EPA discovered that the whole city drinking water supply had been poisoned by benzene, toluene, lead, and many other deadly cancer-causing chemicals. Floods washed the chemicals into Jiggling Creek, which runs through an African-American and poor white neighborhood past a school. Fish and cattle died.

All of the evidence was kept from the poor. The EPA put the plant on the Superfund cleanup list, but they have consistently tried to cover up the major environmental crisis.

In 1989, Jesus People Against Pollution stepped on the scene to help the poor of Columbia to obtain the justice they deserve for being poisoned by Reichold Chemicals. They have broken God's laws that state, "Thou shall not steal," and "Thou shall not kill."

We have been the victims of toxic poisoning by the military and industries for years, but we have reached the stopping point. We are not going to take it any longer. Poor communities are crying out for help to end this chemical warfare. We have the right to protection, not

because we are a people of color, but because we are human beings and everyone deserves the right to clean land, air, and water in their everyday environment.

*Charlotte Keys is founder of Jesus People Against Pollution based in Columbia, Mississippi.*



**CHARLOTTE KEYS AND THE REVEREND BENJAMIN CHAVIS RALLY SUPPORT IN THE POLLUTED COMMUNITY OF COLUMBIA.**

immune to environmental racism. In 1947, Mathew Grant moved his family into a resettlement community in Tillery, North Carolina. Such communities were established by the government to relocate people to rural areas when the demand for factory labor decreased after the Great Depression.

Like 350 other African-American farmers in the area, the Grants raised livestock and grew peanuts, corn, cotton, and soybeans. When a few farmers sold off their plots during the 1950s and 1960s, others managed to buy the land and keep it within the community.

But federal programs run by the Farmers Home Administration favored white farmers. Black landowners had a hard time getting their loans refinanced and paid higher interest rates than their white counterparts. When the local FmHA tried to foreclose on 12 farmers in 1976, Grant and several others filed a complaint.

"There are clear practices of discrimination," says Grant's son Gary. "They did not offer black farmers the programs that were available, and the funding was always lower than was needed to survive. We're just talking about racism in all of its forms."

Corporate hog farms, timber companies, and other industries took advantage of the situation by buying up land, driving small farmers out of business, and polluting the drinking water. "Because we are a predominantly black community, the land value is already depressed," says Gary Grant. "The land is much cheaper for purchasing by larger corporations."

Grant and other farmers formed Concerned Citizens of Tillery to fight back. They formed the Land Loss Fund to educate black farmers about protecting their land, and they have allied with the white community to fight the hog farms and a hazardous waste incinerator. Last February, the NAACP and the Natural Resources Defense Council sued a corporate hog farm for placing a facility next to a minority community and dumping hog waste into a nearby stream.

Across the South, streams and rivers in predominantly black communities like Tillery have proven particularly attractive to polluting companies. Over 700 chemical and industrial facilities line the banks of the Mississippi River, producing billions of pounds of toxic waste — and widespread illness among residents. Louisiana, which churns out a quarter of the nation's chemicals, ranks among the 10 states with the highest cancer rates.

Mary McCastle lives in a black community outside Baton Rouge that is surrounded by 15 chemical plants. "There used to be fresh air," she says. "It was just acres of land. You could sit

in the yard, and now you can't. Some people have died from this. You could be woke up at night and strangled by the smoke."

McCastle, president of the Coalition for Community Action, says polluting companies take advantage of rural poor communities of color. "They come in as a good neighbor, but we found out they was a bad neighbor. They put it in predominantly black areas where people don't have the money to move."

In some areas, the health effects of decades of pollution have been so severe that companies and government agencies have found it cheaper to pay entire communities to move rather than clean up the mess. In Louisiana, companies have "bought out" Sunrise, Good Hope, Reveilletown, and other communi-

ties, creating toxic ghost towns.

Patsy Oliver lived in a predominantly black subdivision of Texarkana, Texas for 25 years before she was bought out earlier this year by the Army Corps of Engineers. The neighborhood, it turned out, had been built on a chemical dump containing creosote and arsenic, and residents were sick with cancer, rashes, and respiratory ailments. Oliver had a gallstone rupture and her husband had kidney problems and thyroid surgery.

Oliver blames federal regulators for failing to act sooner.

"More people could have been spared if they hadn't drug their feet. It was really environmental racism and genocide."

Faced with the destruction of entire communities, many African Americans are looking for grassroots alternatives to toxic industries and corporate development. On Sapelo Island in Georgia, where mass oyster harvesting and hotel and restaurant projects threaten black and Indian farmers and fishers, the McSap Development Corporation is trying to give local people jobs and sustain their land.

"The issues of black-owned land and reparations cannot be dealt with in isolation from issues of ecological and social justice," says Sulaiman Mahdi, who worked with McSap as Southeast regional director of the Center for Environment, Commerce and Energy in Atlanta. "How we treat the land is reflected in how we treat the people who live on it."

### CHEMICAL-LADEN CROPS

African slaves were the first people of color brought to the South to work the land, but they were not the last. After the Civil War, white farmers turned to migrants from other countries to work the fields for low wages in often hazardous conditions.



Photo by Jenny Labalme

**RESIDENTS IN WARREN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA BLOCKED TRUCKS CARRYING POISONOUS PCBs TO THEIR COMMUNITY IN 1982.**



Beginning in the 1860s, Chinese workers came from the West Indies, and later directly from China, to work on Louisiana and Mississippi plantations. But high unemployment among whites fueled resentment against foreign workers, and Congress ordered a halt to Chinese immigration in 1882.

Then, in 1910, the downfall of Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz prompted a mass immigration of Mexicans to the United States. Over the years, workers from the Caribbean, Central America, and Pacific Islands followed.

In the South, most of the migrant labor centered in Texas and Florida, where conditions for Latino and black farmworkers were brutal. Adults and children did backbreaking field work harvesting chemical-laden crops for long hours and low wages.

When Cora Tucker was growing up during the 1940s, her

family worked in the tobacco fields of Virginia. The arsenic powder farmers put on tobacco to keep worms off, she recalls, would "make strange things happen." Five-year-old girls menstruated. Boys got nose bleeds.

It was not until 1962 that three events finally brought the hazards of pesticides into the public spotlight. The book *Silent Spring* documented the harmful effects of DDT, prompting a public outcry. The Migrant Health Act, passed the same year, provided some money for clinics, although it did not reach most workers. And Cesar Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association, later known as the UFW, to improve conditions for farmworkers.

Public concern eventually waned when DDT was replaced with organophosphates, which pose less threat to consumers. But farmworkers cannot escape the acute toxic effects of the

## FIELD OF PAIN

By Karen Woodall

**DADE CITY, FLA.** — Maria Isabel Rosales watches her mother suffer from asthma after years of being exposed to pesticides in the vegetable fields of Florida. "The workers smell everything, and they swallow everything," says Maria. "They don't take lunch in order to pick more, so they eat the fruits and vegetables from

the fields. By the time they know about the danger, they're in the hospital. In a few years, they get really sick."

In Florida, where agriculture is a multi-billion-dollar industry, those who work the fields are poor people of color. There is close to an even split between Latinos and blacks.

They also suffer from the highest rate of toxic-related injuries in the nation. Every day farmworkers are subjected to chemicals that cause birth defects, spontaneous abortions, skin rashes, swollen joints, nausea, numbness, tingling hands and feet, and nose bleeds. Yet farmworkers are excluded from a state right-to-know law that allows other workers to obtain written information on chemicals they have been exposed to.

Even when chemical companies pay for the harm they cause, farmworkers receive no compensation. Du Pont Company paid \$400 million earlier this year to settle a lawsuit over its fungicide Benlate, but the money went to growers who claimed that Benlate damaged their crops (see "Death of a Nursery," page 47).

Worker advocates are struggling to convince state lawmakers to shift the focus to worker protection. Groups like Farmworkers Self-Help in Dade City and the Farmworker Association of Central Florida have been holding press conferences and meeting with state officials, demanding that immediate attention be given to the health effects on workers exposed to pesticides.

"Racism and poverty are killing my people," says Margarita Romo, director of Farmworkers Self-Help. "Anywhere there are farmworkers it's the same — bad housing, lousy pay, terrible working conditions, poor education and medical care."

Romo has lobbied on behalf of farmworker rights for close to 10 years, and she was in the halls of the legislature again this past session working to include farmworkers in the right-to-know law. Farmworkers went with her, holding signs saying, "They can still poison us, we just want to know what they are poisoning us with." The bill was never brought to a vote, but advocates vow to continue their fight.

Farmworkers Self-Help represents primarily immigrants and

Photo by Davida Johns



**AS MANY AS 313,000 FARMWORKERS SUFFER FROM PESTICIDE-RELATED ILLNESSES EACH YEAR.**

Mexican-Americans, but serves all low-income people in the community. The group places families in housing, conducts English classes, provides paralegal assistance, serves as a reference for members trying to obtain loans, and helps create small businesses such as taco stands, a plant nursery, a catering service, and a thrift shop.

Farmworker Association of Central Florida is also helping its 4,000 Latino, African-American, and Haitian members create their own economic development projects. The group has formed worker-owned co-operatives, a credit union, a grocery store, a Mexican restaurant, and a self-help housing development.

Organizers realize that environmental justice takes more than fighting pesticides — it requires developing the economic capacity of communities and empowering workers to speak out for their rights. "We've got to come out of our barrio and take what is ours," says Romo. "We have to decide as farmworkers — whether we're Hispanic or black or white — that we will not take inhuman treatment any more."

*Karen Woodall is a Tallahassee political consultant to Farmworkers Self-Help, Farmworker Association of Central Florida, and Florida Rural Legal Services.*

newer pesticides, which can inflame the skin and eyes, infect the lungs, and cause cancer, birth defects, chronic fatigue and headaches, and liver and kidney disorders. One study found that as many as 313,000 farmworkers suffer from pesticide-related illnesses each year. The life expectancy of migrant workers is 49 years — more than 20 years below the national average.

Most of those threatened by pesticides are people of color. Evonne Charboneau with the Farmworker Health and Safety Project of Texas Rural Legal Aid first started working with farmworkers in 1983. “Crop dusters sprayed human beings with poisons, not even stopping to warn people to get out of the fields,” she recalls. “Upper-middle-class white people wouldn’t be treated that way.”

Tirso Moreno picked oranges in Florida groves for 13 years before becoming an organizer with the Farmworkers Association of Central Florida. He says conditions have not improved much over the years. “Because we are people of color, we have never had enough control. Because we are farmworkers, we have been put at the bottom of everything.”

The only way to adequately protect farmworkers, advocates say, is to stop using pesticides. “Growers are losing more to pests now than they were before they were using the pesticides,” says Rebecca Flores Harrington, state coordinator for United Farmworkers in Austin, Texas. “In the process they’re poisoning everything else in the environment.”

To educate the public and end the use of pesticides, the UFW produced a documentary called *The Wrath of Grapes*, a visual account of the danger of agricultural chemicals. The union also launched a national boycott of grapes, which are sprayed with dozens of different pesticides that affect 55,000 workers.

Farmworkers and other Hispanic Americans in barrios from Texas westward also found a friend in the SouthWest Organizing Project. In the early 1980s, SWOP co-founder Richard Moore and five other activists surveyed communities across the region. They found that while community-based organizations were disappearing, national groups were stepping in and determining local agendas. SWOP helped empower local organizers to pursue local strategies.

Before long, organizers realized that pesticides, sewage and lead poisoning — long considered issues of poverty — were also environmental. Communities began to make the connection between the poor condition of their environments and the fact that they were poor people of color. “It was very intentional that neighborhoods were being targeted” for pollution, says Moore.

In 1990, SWOP organized a regional three-day meeting that brought together local activists, workers, church leaders, and Mexicans from south of the border to share their stories. The participants discovered that they could protect their communities better by exchanging information about polluting industries. “If we had mechanisms where we could share that information with each other, we could save some lives,” says Moore. The result was a new regional coalition, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, dedicated to sharing information and pushing for cleanup and better environmental regulations.

### FIGHTING BACK

Such grassroots organizing and coalition building among migrant workers, black residents, and Native Americans lies at the heart of the emerging movement for environmental justice.

Indeed, what brought the centuries-old pattern of environmental racism to national attention was a local struggle over how to manage deadly waste in a rural, black-majority community in North Carolina.

In 1978, the state was looking for a place to store 40,000 cubic yards of roadside soil that had been illegally sprayed with carcinogenic PCBs. Backed by the EPA, state officials decided to dump the deadly waste in Warren County. Although the county failed to meet federal geological standards, it had something more important: a population that was overwhelmingly poor and 64 percent African American.

“They put a dump in a county that had no way economically or politically to defend itself,” says Dollie Burwell, a Warren County resident. “While it was an environmental issue, it was more of a justice issue. That’s why for me it was the beginning of the environmental justice movement.”

The county waged a protest that caught the state — and the rest of the nation — by surprise. Local citizens protested the dump by attending hearings, staging letter-writing campaigns, and lying in front of the PCB-laden trucks when they began bringing in the dirt in 1982. More than 500 protesters were arrested, making headlines in *Newsweek* and airtime on the CBS Evening News.

Burwell and her neighbors enlisted the help of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta and Ben Chavis at the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. Her 10-year-old daughter Kim looked into the cameras and told the nation, “I’m not afraid of going to jail — I’m afraid of this poison that is coming to my county.”

Although continued protests and a series of legal challenges failed to keep the dump out of Warren County, they spurred black residents to become more involved in local politics, registering to vote and electing more black officials. Dollie Burwell became county registrar of deeds.

The fight also prompted the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ to investigate the connection between race and toxics. In a landmark statistical study published in 1987, researchers found that race, even more than class, determines where polluting industries and dumps are located. In his 1990 book *Dumping in Dixie*, Robert Bullard of the University of California also documented how waste companies target politically powerless black communities, particularly in the South — and noted the strong activism against such sitings by people of color.

Recent studies and investigations have confirmed that people of color bear a disproportionate share of the waste burden:

▼ The Institute for Southern Studies reported in its *Green Index* that four of the states with the largest share of African-American or Hispanic populations in the nation — Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi — also rank among those with the most pollution, poorest health, and worst environmental policies.

▼ An EPA study concluded that low-income people and racial minorities “appear to have greater than average observed and potential exposure to certain pollutants because of historical patterns affecting where they live and work.”

▼ In five of eight studies reviewed by University of Michigan researchers Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant, race was a more significant factor than income in determining which communities were the most polluted.

▼ An award-winning investigation in the *National Law Journal* documented racial discrimination in the enforcement of environmental laws. The study found that white communities “see faster action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities live.” The study



found that it takes the government 20 percent longer to place minority communities on the Superfund list for cleanup and imposes weaker penalties on polluters in minority communities.

## THE BIG TEN

Such reports underscore the importance of environmental

justice struggles by people of color — and the failure of major environmental organizations to support such efforts. In 1988, only six minorities sat on the boards of the 11 largest national environmental groups, including the National Wildlife Federation, Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and Environmental Defense Fund. In addition, fewer than two percent of the profes-

## THE EMELLE MEGADUMP



By Kaye Kiker and Cleo Askew

**EMELLE, ALA.** — The largest toxic waste dump in the nation sprawls across 2,700 acres of Sumter County, its trenches as much as a half-mile long and 600 feet wide. Trucks hauling hazardous waste from 48 states and foreign countries pass through its gates 24 hours a day.

According to the Census Bureau, approximately 16,000 people live in the rolling hills of west central Alabama that surround the waste dump. More than 11,000 residents are African American. Unemployment is 14 percent. Annual income averages barely \$10,000.

The proximity of waste and race is no coincidence. As cities have looked for low-cost alternatives to traditional landfills, privately owned "megadumps" like Emelle have become increasingly attractive. The trouble is, commercial dumps require a guaranteed tonnage from outside the county and state to turn a profit, and the trucked-in waste winds up covering hundreds or thousands of acres. To keep land cheap and avoid political opposition, waste companies have made poor, rural counties with high populations of people of color the dumping ground for the nation.

The Emelle dump got its start in 1977, when the son-in-law of then-Governor

George Wallace and three Tennessee partners opened a waste landfill on 340 acres of farmland in north Sumter. A year later they sold the site to the Illinois firm of Waste Management, Inc. The company — now known as WMX — bought up surrounding land and turned the dump over to its subsidiary, Chemical Waste Management.

"It's a classic case of environmental racism," says Wendell Paris, who lives five miles from the dump. "The community was taken completely by surprise."

There were no public hearings, and most citizens believed the giant facility would be a limestone quarry or brick foundry. In any case, the impoverished county needed jobs, and community leaders considered the potential environmental risk less important than regular paychecks and food on the table.

Before long, however, residents discovered that jobs at the dump were scarce and health risks were plentiful. The landfill contains millions of tons of deadly waste, including illegally dumped radioactive waste and half of the land-disposable PCBs produced in the eastern part of the country.

Spills, explosions, fires, and evacuations have plagued the dump. Truckers cited for drunk driving have spilled poisonous phenol and nitrobenzene that they were transporting to Emelle. In 1989, state troopers found 740 violations among 312 trucks shipping waste to Emelle and took 51 vehicles out of service.

Since the dump opened for business, many residents and industries have fled the county, driving down already low property values. The landfill has become the largest employer, increasing its tight grip on the local economy.

In 1991, public concern peaked when a water well was drilled near the dump to provide drinking water for over 1,000 residents. Alarmed by possible contamination, citizens and political leaders called for the well to be capped. But the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the local water authority ignored community opposition, and the well was approved for public use.

When one nearby community refused to be connected to the well, the Alabama National Guard had to be called in to provide residents with water for two weeks. The county water authority voted unanimously to honor the community's rights and press for an alternative water source, but state officials are demanding that the community be connected to the controversial well or face stiff penalties.

Organizing can be difficult in a poor, racially divided part of the Deep South, where people are dependent on the waste dump for employment, and where protesters have

lost jobs and faced death threats. Nevertheless, residents formed the West Alabama East Mississippi Community Action Network — "We Can" — to fight the dump and improve their quality of life. The group works to make local officials accountable to the people they serve, and hopes to develop the economy by finding alternative uses for the chalk that is such an abundant component of the local terrain.

"Based on our experience in Emelle, we have to alert other unsuspecting communities as to what will actually happen if they locate a hazardous waste site," says Wendell Paris. "The first thing we have to do is educate. Once folks have the correct information, most of the time they will make the correct decision."

*Kaye Kiker chairs the board of the Sumter County Water Authority and is a member of the West Alabama East Mississippi Community Action Network. Cleo Askew is a board member of the Water Authority and works on housing and environmental issues with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.*



**A WORKER WALKS THROUGH A WASTE-FILLED TRENCH AT THE 2,700-ACRE CHEM-WASTE DUMP IN EMELLE, ALABAMA.**

*Photo by Neil Brake, Tuscaloosa News*

sionals on staff were people of color.

The big environmental groups also control the big money. A review conducted by *Southern Exposure* of all foundation grants given to 3,332 environmental organizations in 1991 revealed that a handful of mainstream groups known as the "Big Ten" received \$20.4 million — six percent of all grant money.

Angered by the racial and funding inequities, both the Louisiana-based Gulf Coast Tenant Organization and the SouthWest Organizing Project sent letters to the "Big Ten" in 1990, demanding that they diversify their staffs and boards and focus more attention on the plight of polluted communities where people of color live and work. "We care about the outdoors and wildlife, but we care about ourselves and our families, too," explained SWOP co-founder Richard Moore. "These groups weren't taking positions against the poisoning of our communities."

Grassroots organizers were disappointed by the lack of response. "The big groups still had a fear of sharing power," says Moore. "They missed a major opportunity. If we had some dialogue and came to some agreements, it could make an incredible difference in saving the lives of many people."

Frustrated by the lack of representation among mainstream environmental groups, grassroots leaders looked for ways to forge a larger movement — one led by people of color and responsive to local struggles. The result was the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, convened by the UCC Commission for Racial Justice in October 1991.

Over 600 delegates and white observers gathered for three days of plenary meetings, workshops, panel discussions, and time to share stories in hallways and over meals. In a collaborative and sometimes difficult series of working sessions, a committee of delegates hammered out 17 principles of environmental justice that have become a defining document for the movement (see "The Principles," page 19).

The summit also allowed participants to share frustrations about the Environmental Protection Agency. "EPA is here to protect us, but they do everything *but* protect us," said Patsy Oliver of Texarkana.

Turning their frustration into action, the Southwest Network, researchers, and organizers wrote to the EPA, calling for accountability to communities of color. As a result of their demands, the agency set up a workgroup to study environmental equity.

In its final report, the EPA workgroup concluded that "there are clear differences between racial groups in terms of disease and death rates." It added, however, that "there are also limited data to explain the differences." The only clearcut evidence of a link between race and environmental risk, according to the group, is the high rate of lead poisoning among blacks.

"Is there systematic racism out there?" said Robert Wolcott, chair of the group. "I don't think so. It's more economic class."

Grassroots leaders were furious that the study group had ignored widespread evidence of environmental racism, and asked why the agency did not fund new studies if it felt there was a lack of data. "It's definitely racial discrimination," said Benjamin Chavis, director of the NAACP. "I'm not saying whites are not exposed. I'm saying the disproportionate exposure to minorities has been the result of systematic policy-making."

Frustrations with the EPA peaked last year when Congressman Henry Waxman released a confidential agency memo. The internal EPA document lays out a coordinated public rela-

tions plan to deflect grassroots political pressure and woo civil rights groups away from the environmental equity issue.

According to the memo, the agency should try to draw support away from civil rights groups before the "minority fairness issue" reaches a point where "activist groups finally succeed in persuading the more influential mainstream groups (civil rights organizations, unions, churches) to take ill-advised actions."

Waxman says the memo demonstrates that the EPA "views the environmental equity initiative as a public relations matter, not an opportunity to understand and respond to the very real health problems faced by people of color. The agency is concerned about appearances, not substance."

Among the strategies listed in the memo was holding meetings at historic black colleges to discuss the agency's equity plans. But when the first meeting was held at Clark Atlanta University in September 1992, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC) was ready. The 150 citizens who attended ordered industry representatives to leave, outlined 42 demands for more environmental enforcement and citizen participation, and listed "hot spots" across the South that needed immediate EPA attention.

"We kicked out the industries," says Connie Tucker, Atlanta coordinator for SOC. "It shows the frustration of our people — white and black — that they were ready to come together to do something."

EPA officials say the Clinton administration is committed to involving community leaders in decision-making and increasing the flow of money to polluted communities. Warren Banks, a special assistant to EPA head Carol Browner, says the agency is already cleaning up "hot spots" in places like Columbia, Mississippi where it has moved slowly in the past.

"I feel that we are moving very fast," says Banks. "But of course, we were way behind."

## BEYOND THE SUMMIT

Leaders of the environmental justice movement are used to such government promises — and they aren't waiting for federal regulators to take action. Last December, 2,500 activists converged on New Orleans for a regional meeting sponsored by SOC.

"They came to New Orleans because they're losing their lives and their families are dying," says Damu Smith, who helped organize the conference. "We helped stimulate more of a coordinated effort among groups that already existed."

To share information and strengthen the movement, some activists agreed to start state networks. A Mississippi network that got under way in August has already become a model for other states.

Among the New Orleans participants were several hundred young activists, mainly junior high and high school students, who had ridden freedom buses to the meeting. "We've never had a movement where youth were not the foot soldiers," says Angela Brown, Youth Task Force coordinator for SOC. "Youth are always forcing the tight-fisted establishments to change policies and procedures."

While young people have the freedom and energy to support a struggle, they lack resources to travel and communicate. "Foundations are not willing to fund young people. We barely have a fax or computer," says Brown. Despite such limitations, the task force has established several state offices and a speakers bureau, and recently held a planning meeting that included a panel of elders experienced in building justice movements.

More mainstream student groups are also starting to make



environmental justice a priority. The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) originally formed to organize college students around forestry issues and now has members in over 2,000 high school and college groups in all 50 states. Moving from white leaders and issues to a more diverse agenda and membership hasn't come easy, organizers say, but after much discussion the group devoted its 1991 annual conference to the issue of social and environmental justice.

Two years later, half the members of SEAC's national council are people of color, and students at the national headquarters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina have supported the black housekeeping staff in their demands for better pay and working conditions.

"I have had an easier time working with SEAC than other

groups," says Kirti Shastri of the group's People of Color Caucus. "Our national structure has incorporated an integrated understanding of global environmental justice issues."

Such efforts among young activists will help carry the environmental justice movement into the next century. "We're struggling with the question of how we move forward from here," says Angela Brown of SOC. "It's not a question of whether — it's a question of how. We're just a quiet storm that's starting to brew." □

*Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate with the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, North Carolina. Charles Lee is research director with the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in New York.*

## THE PRINCIPLES

*In 1991, delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drafted and adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, the principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.*

**WE THE PEOPLE OF COLOR**, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

**1. Environmental justice** affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

**2. Environmental justice** demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

**3. Environmental justice** mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living beings.

**4. Environmental justice** calls for universal protection from nuclear testing and the extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.

**5. Environmental justice** affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

**6. Environmental justice** demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.

**7. Environmental justice** demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation.

**8. Environmental justice** affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

**9. Environmental justice** protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

**10. Environmental justice** considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

**11. Environmental justice** must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of the Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.

**12. Environmental justice** affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

**13. Environmental justice** calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.

**14. Environmental justice** opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.

**15. Environmental justice** opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.

**16. Environmental justice** calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasize social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

**17. Environmental justice** requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.



**CORPORATIONS ARE EXPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL**

# CROSSING

**RACISM TO MEXICO, DUMPING DANGEROUS JOBS**

# THE LINE

**AND TOXIC WASTE ON COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.****By Rick Held**

**MURFREESBORO, TENN.** — Pat Floyd worked the swing shift at General Electric for 12 years, earning \$9.95 an hour to clean the bonding oven where freshly lacquered motor windings were baked dry. She used solvent and thinners to scrub the oven walls, and the company provided a vapor mask, gloves, and an exhaust fan for her protection.

Last spring, GE closed up shop in Murfreesboro and moved to Juarez, Mexico. The workers who replaced Floyd receive only \$1.11 an hour, and the company provides no safety equipment — only the solvent and thinners. After less than a year on the job, Mexican workers complain of nausea, dizziness, and loss of appetite.

Since 1982, more than 5,000 Tennesseans have lost their jobs to Mexico. U.S. companies now run more than 2,000 assembly plants known as *maquiladoras* along the border from Brownsville, Texas to Tijuana, Mexico, taking advantage of the same kind of low wages, unorganized labor, and weak environmental regulations that have long made the American South a profitable place to pollute.

“Corporations are going south, whether it’s from Tennessee to Texas or Texas to Mexico,” says Ruben Solis of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice in San Antonio. “They go to places where they can take advantage of people. They look for communities that do not have a position of power, so there’s no enforcement of regulations.”

Between 1986 and 1991, Mexican jobs created by multinational corporations rose by 25 percent. Most of the work involves auto production and electronics, but low-skill, labor-intensive Southern industries such as textiles and food processing are also starting to cross the border. *Maquiladoras* operate in duty-free zones on the border, where they import raw and

unfinished goods into Mexico and ship finished products back to U.S. markets with few or no tariffs.

The much-discussed North American Free Trade Agreement — better known as NAFTA — is designed to greatly expand these zones. The agreement will create an international tribunal of “trade experts” with the legal power to eliminate state or local environmental, health, safety, and labor laws it deemed “trade barriers.” Side agreements call for separate panels to monitor environmental and labor standards, but left the powers of the tribunal intact.

Despite the environmental risks, major environmental groups like the National Audubon Society and National Wildlife Federation rallied support for the agreement. Corporate executives from WMX, the largest waste management company in the world, sit on the boards of both groups. Ignoring opposition from many of their local and state chapters, the two organizations joined with USA\*NAFTA, a coalition of more than 400 multinational corporations including WMX, GE, Du Pont, Eastman Kodak, Citicorp, and American Express that committed to raise \$2 million for a pro-NAFTA lobbying and public relations campaign.

Under NAFTA, corporate giants will increase their push south, paying people of color to perform dangerous jobs and dumping hazardous waste in their communities. More than six million people now live along the 800-mile industrial corridor between Texas and Mexico, many inhabiting the unincorporated communities known as *colonias* that have sprung up around the *maquiladoras*. Most *colonias* have no potable water or sewage systems; many lack electricity.

To make matters worse, 25 years of unrestricted dumping by the *maquilas* has resulted in a health crisis. A survey of



water and soil by the National Toxics Campaign documented "an alphabet soup of toxic chemicals" along the border. An alarming number of babies have been born with partial or missing brains or spinal cords, and adults suffer from tuberculosis, typhoid, hepatitis, and cholera as a result of poor sanitation. Cervical cancer among women is three times the rate of U.S. women, and bladder, liver, and bowel cancer are common.

Many U.S. communities abandoned in the rush to Mexico also suffer from a legacy of pollution. Alco Pacifico operates a lead smelter in Tijuana, Mexico after closing a smelter that poisoned a black and Latino community in Dallas, Texas. Schlage Lock left behind a toxic Superfund site and hundreds of unemployed workers, many suffering from respiratory problems and eye irritations, when it closed its doors in Rocky Mount, North Carolina and moved to Tecate, Mexico in 1988.

As companies cross the border, workers are also forging international connections. Joan Sharpe, a former Schlage worker and an organizer with Black Workers for Justice, visited Tecate to see conditions for herself. In the *colonia* surrounding the plant, she met teenaged women who worked 10 hours a day for \$4.

But when Sharpe asked to talk to workers inside the plant, managers refused to let her in. "I could point out areas that were real hazardous," she says. "They didn't want me to have that kind of connection to workers." Sharpe waited until workers came out on breaks and gave them flyers explaining why she was there. She also told them that the severe rashes on their hands came from the graphite they were working with on the job.

Conditions are bad, says Sharpe, and NAFTA would only make things worse. "It's an open gate for plants to just pick up and leave without having to deal with anything."

Across the region, grassroots organizers like Sharpe are working to improve conditions along the border. The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras in San Antonio urges companies to abide by voluntary Standards of Conduct to control wages and benefits, environmental contamination, and health and safety. Such standards apparently threaten Mexican officials: The group is being investigated by the town of Matamoros, host of some of the worst *maquiladoras*.

"It's important for people to realize that the ones who are being investigated and having the pressure put on them are not the corporations," says Sister Susan Mika, who chairs the Coalition's board. "It's the people who are trying to document and expose what's going on."

The Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice took the lead in opposing NAFTA. Last July the network held a gathering in Tuscon, Arizona, bringing together grassroots activists on both sides of the border to develop a common agenda. One concrete result was a series of protests held along the border in October in collaboration with the Red

Mexicana Frente al Tratado de Libre Comercio (Network to Stop NAFTA in Mexico).

Opposition to the accord also forged important links between environmental and labor organizers. For years, companies have pitted workers against environmentalists, claiming that stiff "green regulations" threaten jobs. But some of the largest labor unions initiated active anti-NAFTA campaigns — citing the threat to the environment as a primary concern.

"Health and safety and toxics are issues that more people have had to personally deal with than conservation," explains Bill Troy, director of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network in Knoxville. Since TIRN was organized in 1990 as a resource for workers threatened with plant closings, the group

has developed a heightened awareness of environmental issues. TIRN created an educational program on the impact of free trade, and nine members traveled to Mexico to see conditions in the *maquiladoras* first-hand and share their experiences with workers back home.

"I saw children playing in green slime from chemical plants," says Shirley Reinhardt, who used to work in a GE plant that relocated to Mexico. "I thought I had seen everything, but I have never seen anything like this."

NAFTA opponents also united across racial lines. "Black workers are more likely to be employed in industries which will experience large job losses to Mexico," says William Lucy, Secretary-Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. "If American business was making investments in our inner cities and poor rural communities, as it is doing in Mexico, black unemployment would plummet."

Native American organizers also fought the agreement. "It would have a tremendous impact on us, but no one is pointing out what the impact will be," says Jackie Warledo of the Indigenous Peoples Network.

Ruben Solis of the Southwest Network says that any trade agreement must include basic principles that will force industry to improve worker safety and wages, clean up existing pollution, and eventually eliminate toxics at the source of production. The Network also calls for including a declaration of human rights.

The key to dealing with the problems of free trade, says Solis, is to involve people who live and work in effected communities. "We have to begin with extensive hearings to let people speak about what has been happening for 25 years of industrial programs on the border. The people who have been contaminated have to have a voice in the process." □

*Rick Held is a writer in Knoxville, Tennessee. Ruben Solis, coordinator of the Border Campaign for the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, contributed to this article.*

Photo by Ernesto Mora



**MEXICANS LIVE WITHOUT PLUMBING AND SUFFER FROM DISEASE IN COLONIAS SURROUNDING FACTORIES OWNED BY U.S. COMPANIES.**

COMMUNITIES OF COLOR ACROSS

# TOXIC

THE SOUTH ARE FIGHTING FOR

# STRUGGLES

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

*The environmental justice movement in the South, like every grassroots movement, is made up of individual struggles in small towns and cities involving years of hard, painstaking work. We've collected stories of communities of color fighting for a clean, healthy environment in each state of the region. A few begin in "From Coalitions to Conquistadors" on page eight; the rest are featured here.*

*Many of these stories are told by the citizens most involved in the struggle. Some tell of tackling incinerators or oil tank farms; others of staging demonstrations, building coalitions, or pushing for tougher laws. But all share the vision voiced by Pat Bryant of the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization: "We seek a world in which the interests of corporations are subordinate to the needs of people. We envision and will struggle for a 'beloved society.'"*

## "MUTUAL TRUST" LOUISVILLE, KY.

**W**hen Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson announced plans to build a new solid waste incinerator back in 1990, the proposed location came as no surprise to local residents. Rubbertown, a neighborhood on the west end, has long been dominated by large factories such as B.F. Goodrich, du Pont, Rohm and Haas, and American Synthetic. What's more, the surrounding communities are populated primarily by low-income and African-American residents.

Residents were outraged. "They don't need to put anything else down there; they've already got enough things contaminating Rubbertown," said Rosebud Taylor. "The projects that nobody else wants are stuck in the black or poor neighborhoods," added Frank Jones.

Jones, Taylor, and other members of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), a statewide citizens group, decided to fight the incinerator. With a local environmental organization, they devel-

oped an alternative recycling and source reduction plan that would cut pollution and save the city millions of dollars. But Louisville Energy and Environment, the incinerator company, hired a professional public relations firm to promote its "state-of-the-art waste-to-steam" facility with videos and glossy brochures.

To counter company propaganda, KFTC turned to cross-racial organizing. The group had worked with POWER, an African American-led group with members in the west end, on a campaign to end utility shutoffs to low-income residents. The two organizations agreed to team up again, combining work on utility reform with efforts to defeat the incinerator.

The multi-issue approach proved mutually reinforcing. When POWER convinced the Board of Aldermen to hold a public hearing on utility shut-offs just a mile from the proposed incinerator site, for example, KFTC scheduled a press conference at the site immediately following the utility hearing. That way, people concerned about both issues could conveniently attend both events. Both stories made the top of the news that evening.



"We developed a relationship of mutual trust and together worked for the victory," says KFTC member Tyler Fairleigh.

POWER and KFTC held their meetings in the west end, allowing neighborhood leaders to chair gatherings and speak to the media. Local residents recruited their neighbors, educated their churches, and collected signatures on petitions. To keep up the public pressure they held news conferences, organized rallies, attended public hearings, staged public skits, and negotiated with city officials.

Within a few months, all four African-American aldermen joined in opposing the incinerator. Other city leaders followed suit, citing economic and civil rights concerns. Rather than risk the embarrassment of a defeat, the mayor abandoned the incinerator proposal. The aldermen eventually voted to implement part of the alternative recycling plan developed by KFTC.

Newly organized residents say they will continue to fight for environmental justice. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize this is environmental racism," says Mary Woolridge, a KFTC member. "I see absolutely no reason to build an incinerator anywhere in Louisville or in Jefferson County."

—Terry Keleher

*Terry Keleher is a community organizer and KFTC staff member in Louisville, Kentucky.*

## LEGISLATING JUSTICE

### CHARLESTON, S.C.

Nearly everyone in the four black communities that make up the Neck area of Charleston, South Carolina can name someone who has cancer or has died of



cancer. In the heavily industrialized stretch along the Ashley River north of the city, infant mortality



MARY WOOLRIDGE SPEAKS AGAINST AN INCINERATOR PROPOSED FOR HER MAJORITY-BLACK COMMUNITY IN LOUISVILLE.

rates are high and nearly everyone suffers from respiratory problems and nose and eye irritations.

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control blames the health problems on lifestyles, but residents insist that the polluting industries near their homes have contributed to their ailments. The area hosts the Albright & Wilson Americas chemical plant, where a 1991 explosion killed nine people; a trash incinerator from the nearby Charleston Naval Shipyard; the Macalloy Corporation steel plant, fined several times for pollution violations; two trucking depots; several oil storage facilities; and Interstate 26, a major transportation corridor that crosses the communities.

"We're at a disadvantage because we're a black community," says Jennifer Jackson, a 35-year-old resident. "For over 100 years these companies have gotten away with murder because they provide a major tax base for the city. These people do anything they want to us and no one seems to care."

Throughout South Carolina, the environmental struggles of poor and predominantly black areas like the Neck are the rule rather than the exception. Recent data compiled by the Citizen's Local Environmental Action Network, a statewide environmental group, show that most waste disposal facilities are located in or near black communities — including all but two of the 23 sites that made the EPA Superfund list of deadliest waste sites.

"Environmental racism is no fairy tale," says State Representative Ralph Canty. "There's no doubt that those who breathe dirty air and drink dirty water are the poor, the disadvantaged, and the black."

To alleviate discriminatory practices in

siting toxic and hazardous facilities, Canty introduced the Environmental Justice Bill in the state legislature this year. Patterned after federal legislation introduced by Representative John Lewis of Georgia and then-Senator Al Gore of Tennessee, the bill would curb the siting of polluting industries in areas already devastated by poverty, crime, and other social ills.

Other Southern states are also moving forward with similar measures to ensure environmental justice:

▼ **Arkansas** passed an "environmental equity" law last

April mandating that waste facilities be located at least 12 miles apart. But the law exempts some facilities and allows projects to proceed if they present economic benefits to the host communities.

▼ **Georgia** lawmakers are considering an Environmental Justice Act that seeks to ensure "that significant adverse health impacts associated with environmental pollution in Georgia are not distributed inequitably." The bill requires officials to publish an annual toxics release inventory, assess health risks, and compile a list of 20 areas facing the greatest environmental threat.

▼ **Louisiana** passed a law in June 1993 requiring the state Department of Environmental Quality to hold public hearings on environmental justice and make policy recommendations to the legislature. The law also mandates that particular attention be given to populations without "the economic resources to participate in environmental decision-making affecting their community."

▼ **North Carolina** is considering a bill that would establish an Environmental Justice Commission to examine state environmental policies and siting patterns based on socioeconomic and demographic data. The commission would also study policies to assure fairness and public participation in environmental decisions affecting low-income and people-of-color communities.

▼ **Virginia** has ordered the legislative audit and review commission "to study . . . siting, monitoring, and cleanup of solid and hazardous waste facilities, with an emphasis on how they have been operated and how they have impacted minority communities." The findings will be presented to the governor and general assembly in 1995.

In South Carolina, however, the Environmental Justice Bill has stalled in a House subcommittee. "The knock on this bill is that it's a 'black bill.' Nothing could be further from the truth," says Canty. "Whether it's a black community in Rock Hill fighting an incinerator 97 feet away from their church or a white community battling groundwater contamination at Langley Pond in Aiken, the issue is justice. No one deserves to be dumped on because they are poor or minority."

Canty says he plans to reintroduce the measure next year. "It may not pass this year or the next year or the next year, or even the next year after that, but I'll keep introducing it until the problem of environmental racism gets the attention it deserves."

—Ron Nixon

*Ron Nixon is a contributing editor for Southern Exposure in Columbia, South Carolina. Information on state legislation was provided by Richard Regan and John Choe at the Center for Policy Alternatives in Washington, D.C.*

## IN THE VALLEY INSTITUTE, W.VA.

In December 1984, West Virginia residents of the Kanawha Valley watched their televisions in disbelief as video images on the evening news conveyed the aftermath of the chemical disaster at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India.

More than 3,500 people died and 50,000 were injured when the factory leaked methyl isocyanate (MIC) — the same chemical being manufactured and stored by Union Carbide in the predominantly African-American college town of Institute, just outside of Charleston.

Officials at the Institute plant immediately tried to assure residents that a "Bhopal-like incident could never occur here." But most plant managers did not live in the Institute area, and they had inadequate emergency plans for evacuating residents in the event of a catastrophe.

In early 1985, residents created People Concerned About MIC. PCMIC demanded more information about chemicals affecting the community, called for the reduction of toxic waste



**A RHONE-POULENC WORKER RESTS AFTER A CHEMICAL LEAK FORCED EVACUATION OF WEST VIRGINIA PLANT.**

emissions, and pressured officials to build an emergency evacuation route.

The disaster was not long in coming. In August 1985 — just nine months after the Bhopal tragedy — an accident at the plant released 500 gallons of highly toxic chemicals into the atmosphere, sending 135 Institute residents to area hospitals. Plant officials waited 20 minutes before warning the community.

"The first thing that crossed my mind was India," said one worker. "You're so helpless. There's nothing you can do. I mean, how far can you run?"

The accident divided the community. Plant workers who feared for their jobs supported the company, while members of PCMIC protested the policies and practices of Union Carbide.

In recent years, however, more and more chemical workers in the area have begun to support community organizers. In August 1992, an explosion at nearby Rhone-Poulenc released 45,000 pounds of chemicals into the air, killing one worker and seriously injuring two others. Chlorine leaks from the same plant injured 19 workers in May and five workers in September 1993.

"As a labor union we are interested in working with groups like People Concerned About MIC," says Steve White, director of Affiliated Construction and Trades. "We found that companies that cut corners with their workers are damaging the environment and deceiving communities they operate in."

PCMIC has also worked on building multi-racial alliances. The predominantly African-American group has allied with white and Jewish groups threatened by pollution from 12 factories along the Valley. Together, they have pushed for a health survey and emergency preparedness measures, educated residents, and lobbied for a state law to reduce toxic emissions.

"Other groups have become aware of our mutual interests, which are to sustain jobs and protect the health and safety of workers and plant neighbors," says Paul Nuchims, a professor at West Virginia State College and a member of PCMIC. "By working together, we are better able to help companies envision and achieve long-range environmental goals."

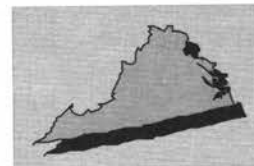
—Pam Nixon

*Pam Nixon is president of People Concerned About MIC and a health care worker in Charleston, West Virginia.*

## TOXIC TRUCKING MARTINSVILLE, VA.

Last year residents of Martinsville, Virginia, a small town nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, discovered that trucks hauling toxic waste

for an Oklahoma-based company were using a local abandoned trucking facility as a stopover. Unknown to city officials and local resi-



dents, Environmental Transportation Service (ETS) had set up business a year earlier in the heart of the only black neighborhood in town.

Michelle Smith, a local environmentalist, and Bob Sharpe, an investigative reporter for a cable television station, exposed the company on a nightly talk show. Outraged, citizens quickly formed SCAT — Sensible Citizens Against Toxics — to fight the toxic way station.

When SCAT held a town meeting at Fayette Street Christian Church, the group proved to have overwhelming support from a large cross-section of the city — black and white, rich and poor alike. Local ministers lent their support, as did regional and national environmental organizations.

But city officials supported the company, claiming that ETS was protected



by zoning laws. A company official called citizens who opposed the toxic truck stop "troublemakers and vigilantes," adding that "they are just making a mountain out of a molehill."

Yet SCAT's persistence paid off. As a result of the citizen organizing, the city now requires companies to get a special-use permit to park vehicles containing toxic waste. State legislators passed a zoning amendment that would oust such facilities, but the city council has not conformed to the new law.

"We're back to the drawing board," says SCAT's Michelle Smith. The group plans to approach the legislature again to ask for a stronger law that the city would have to pay attention to. "We'll do everything we can," says Smith, "to get a law that protects the neighborhood."

—Gloria Hodge-Hylton

*Gloria Hodge-Hylton is a former educator and founding member of SCAT who lives in Martinsville, Virginia.*

## SOS AT SRS SAVANNAH, GA.

Mildred McClain has a Ph.D. from Harvard, but she hasn't forgotten the lessons she learned growing up in a public housing complex in Savannah, Georgia. "People of color in Georgia are treated no differently than people of color anywhere else in the world," she says. "Our neighborhoods are the dumping grounds for all kinds of hazardous wastes."

One of the biggest dumping grounds is the Savannah River Site (SRS), a 300-acre nuclear weapons factory opened near Aiken, South Carolina in 1952. Local residents have long been threatened by leaks and mishaps at the facility, which sits atop one of the largest aquifers in the region. Tritium from the plant has been found in well water and the milk of cows as far as 120 miles away in the predominantly black community of Keysville, Georgia.

About five gallons of tritium-contaminated water leaked into the river in 1991, forcing oyster beds to close. SRS and federal health officials denied that the tritium posed a health risk, but many residents are skeptical.

"We still don't believe that the people are being told the truth about the damage

that's been done to their health by the leaks, spills, and emissions from the SRS," says McClain, head of Citizens for Environmental Justice (CFEJ).

Operating on a shoestring budget since its beginning in 1991, CFEJ members have educated the public about the possible health risks of contamination from the SRS through workshops on radiation exposure, a weekly radio show called "Black Earth Watch," and statewide conferences. They helped put environmental racism on the agenda at the first joint meeting of the Georgia Association of Black Elected Officials, the Georgia Conference of Black Mayors, and the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus.

In January 1993, CFEJ members nearly caused a traffic jam in downtown Savannah when they held a loud, colorful protest in front of City Hall, carrying signs lambasting SRS and wearing white Halloween masks symbolic of death. In July, the group led a caravan of environmental activists to SRS for a tour and briefing to dispute the safety of the facility.

CFEJ has also served on advisory committees overseeing SRS and studying its emissions. Members met with Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary and demanded that the site halt all production of tritium. And they are currently fighting a proposal to turn the facility into a national processing center for tritium and to resume production of plutonium.

"We are sick and tired of being a dumping ground for other people's hazardous waste," says McClain. To stop the pollution, she adds, CFEJ is working with a

diverse network of community organizations and international coalitions.

"Fighting for environmental justice goes beyond traditional environmental issues," she says. "It includes all the issues we face in our community. It's going to take the collective work of all sectors of our community to win this one."

—Theresa White

*Theresa White, a Savannah native and former journalist, currently manages the Savannah District Office for Representative Cynthia McKinney.*

## DEATH HOLES LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

One Sunday afternoon last May, 16-year-old Emanuel Ray Holloway drowned in an old mining pit between Higgins and Sweet Home, two black



neighborhoods on the southeast side of Little Rock, Arkansas. News accounts said the youngster went to the pit to learn how to swim.

The death was tragic — and all too familiar. Children have been dying in the "blue holes" in this low-income community for at least 30 years. A 1964 news story called two bauxite pits abandoned by aluminum companies "large enough to set the state Capitol in several times over."

*Photo by Bob Morris*



**RESIDENTS IN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA DONNED DEATH MASKS TO PROTEST THE SAVANNAH RIVER NUCLEAR WEAPONS FACTORY.**

# NETWORKING IN TEXAS

## DALLAS, TEXAS

Abandoned mines aren't the only environmental danger. Since 1971, the city has dumped its garbage in a bauxite pit donated by Reynolds Metals Company, which has created a rat and vermin problem. To make matters worse, state officials also planned to allow a commercial medical waste incinerator to be built there.

"They wanted to put it near two schools, two churches, a day care center, and a convalescent home," says Don Buchanan, who has lived in Higgins for 17 years. "They are not concerned at all about poor people. There are over 4,000 people in the community, but the people who profit from this dumping are not concerned about the area."

Buchanan, who is African American, says the community is the target of dump sites and incinerators because "it is 99 percent black." Melissa Price, a white resident, agrees. "If this were happening off Shackelford, off Markham, or in the Highway 10 area, it would have been stopped before it ever got started," she said, alluding to Little Rock's affluent west side.

Community organizing and activism have helped stem the tide of pollution over the last decade. Residents successfully blocked two landfills proposed by a state senator from being located in the area. The state Department of Pollution Control and Ecology deemed the proposed site unsuited for a landfill — but a year later granted a permit for a medical waste incinerator in the same area without any public notice.

Residents blame politics for the turnaround. The incinerator is represented by the powerful Rose Law Firm, which once employed Hillary Rodham Clinton and supplied President Clinton with his associate U.S. attorney general and several White House counsels.

Randall Mathis, state director of pollution control, insists that big names did not enter into the decision. "We don't make political decisions," he says.

But last October, things turned around again. Responding to citizen pressure, Mathis revoked the incinerator permit.

Citizens are reserving celebrations and continuing the fight until they are sure the incinerator is gone for good. "We won't rest easy while there's still the possibility they can appeal to a higher power," says Melissa Price.

— Bobbi Ridlehoover

*Bobbi Ridlehoover has been a reporter in Little Rock for 12 years.*

Brenda Moore looked into the camera and explained the botched efforts to clean up lead contamination in her westside neighborhood of Dallas, Texas. "This is environmental racism pure and simple," she said. "If this had been a white neighborhood, everyone would have been packed up and moved out of here. They come here and 'clean up' our neighborhoods with their suits on, but they let people just sit there as they stir up the dirt."

Moore's story is being used to stir up the dirt beyond her own neighborhood. Rene Renteria, a member of People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER), videotaped Moore and her father, the Reverend R.T. Conley, to document the second EPA-mandated cleanup of lead contamination in West Dallas. The video serves as an education and organizing tool, informing people of color in other parts of the state about the struggle.

Moore, Conley, and Renteria are all members of a statewide coalition called the Texas Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. The network got its start in 1991, when African-American and Latino activists met to examine the impact of toxins on their communities. They represented groups from all over the state, working on issues ranging from lead contamination to relocation of polluted communities to the dangers of landfill expansion.

The next year the network held its first statewide gathering in Austin, bringing together more than 70 activists from across Texas and northern Mexico. The gathering gave organizers a chance to share information in workshops on environmental racism, state environmental and public health agencies, the North American Free Trade Agreement, economic development, and workplace toxins.

Since its formation, the network has been instrumental in disseminating information and providing support to groups across the state. "When PODER initiated its campaign against Exxon to remove its

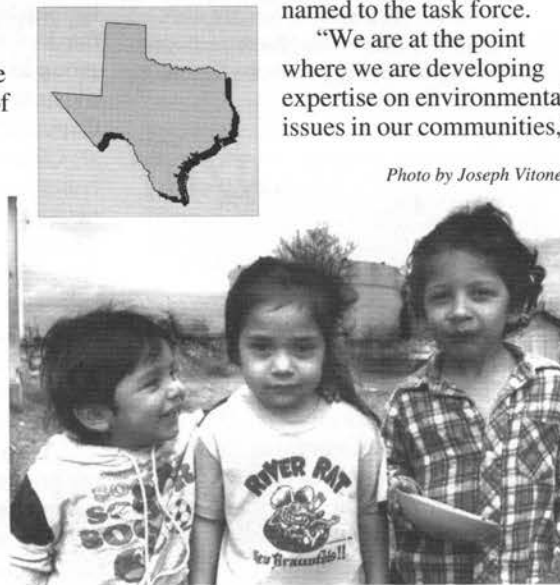
tank farm from our East Austin community, the people from the Texas Network helped in sending letters to the president of the company urging him to remove the tanks," explained Sylvia Herrera, a PODER member. "When we started the Exxon boycott, the network helped us get the word out."

The campaign worked. Last February, Exxon was the last of six oil companies to agree to move its facility away from homes and schools in the Latino and African-American neighborhood, and to clean up the mess it made.

The network also spurred the development of the Texas Task Force on Environmental Equity and Justice, a state panel that recommended policies to address the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities of color. Alice Flores, a community leader from Rosenberg and a member of the network, was named to the task force.

"We are at the point where we are developing expertise on environmental issues in our communities,"

*Photo by Joseph Vitone*



**CHILDREN IN EAST AUSTIN, TEXAS LIVE NEXT TO TANK FARMS THAT CONTAMINATE THE LAND AND WATER.**

says Arthur Shaw, a Houston member of the network and a long-time civil rights activist. "The Texas Network is becoming a resource for communities of color in the state affected by environmental hazards. As we build our collective know-how, we need to make sure we share those skills with other communities that are working for environmental justice."

— Antonio Diaz

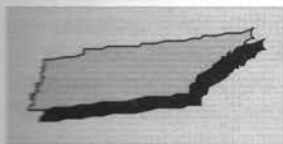
*Antonio Diaz is the coordinator of the Texas Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, co-chair of PODER, and a staff member of the Texas Center for Policy Studies in Austin, Texas.*



# SUPERFUND CITY

## CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

In recent years, local officials in Chattanooga, Tennessee have launched a national public relations campaign. The goal: to attract environmental conferences



and conventions to town and shape a new civic image as

“The Environmental City.”

But residents in the predominantly black neighborhoods of Alton Park and Piney Woods have a different perspective. The area around their homes contains 42 toxic waste sites, including a toxic dump 100 times larger than Love Canal, a playground, and a baseball field sometimes submerged from a contaminated spring. Nearby is a defunct coking plant where numerous chemicals — including leukemia-causing benzene — have been found in the soil and groundwater.

Chattanooga Creek, which flows past miles of polluting industries before reaching Alton Park, is considered by many researchers to be the most polluted stream in the Southeast. Lined from bank to bank with tarry goo, the entire creek bed has been declared a state Superfund site and is currently being evaluated for ranking on the National Superfund Priority List.

“Had this happened anywhere else, the cleanup would already have begun and they would be talking about relocating people,” says Jean Stone, a member of the Stop Toxic Pollution group. Residents formed STOP in 1988 to push the city to clean up the air and water pollution in the community.

The city proved reluctant to act. “I think Chattanooga officials are afraid if they admit the problem, they’ll somehow be taking the blame,” says David Brown, a STOP organizer. “Why can’t they just say publicly that it’s an injustice and a shame to Chattanooga, and stand at the front of the cleanup effort?”

When local officials didn’t respond to initial protests, the group got help. In 1990, STOP teamed up with Greenpeace and the Environmental Research Foundation and released a report highlighting the severe contamination and environmental racism in southside neighborhoods.

The resulting publicity spurred elected officials to urge EPA to take action. In 1991, the agency announced a “geo-

graphic initiative” to begin a cleanup. The city agreed to rebuild its sewer lines to stop raw sewage from flowing into the creek during heavy rains. And the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry began the first-ever look at health risks in the community. Last summer the agency mounted a public campaign to keep youngsters away from Chattanooga Creek — an ominous forewarning of what the final assessment is likely to conclude.

Local industry is also starting to listen to community concerns. According to STOP, a company called Velsicol is inviting community leaders to regular meetings and talking with them about efforts to update plant equipment and cut pollution.

Despite such progress, however, many officials remain reluctant to address the reality of environmental racism. After members of the state Environment and Conservation Committee told State Representative Tommie Brown that they were unaware of the community’s decades-old problems, Brown invited Alton Park residents to testify. All but three members of the committee left the meeting before the residents could tell their stories.

In the long run, residents say, they are placing their faith in community organizing and tougher laws. “We’re encouraged not by the companies and the local officials, but by the avenues out there for Superfund cleanup, and by the environmental justice bills before Congress,” says Jean Stone. “Environmental racism was very much alive here in the past, and it’s still here today. We have to recognize it and keep the eyes of the people focused.”

— Pam Sohn

*Pam Sohn is a writer based in Chattanooga, Tennessee.*

# TENANTS AND TOXICS

## NEW ORLEANS, LA.

This is my story about how as a tenant organizer I became involved in the fastest growing movement in the United States. Mine is a story of how the greatest crisis facing civilization today — environmental destruction — demands leadership, vision, and solution from

people of color. It is a story of how African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans across the nation have become pivotal to saving the Earth. It is a story of how the struggle against racism and greed is the key to stopping the destruction of people everywhere.

My views evolve from my childhood in North Carolina in the 1950s, when I tagged along with my father, a Baptist preacher of the social gospel. Nowadays we call it liberation theology. I had grown up in a housing project and soon got absorbed in tenant rights.

The tenant rights movement was an important part of the civil rights movement in the late ’60s and early ’70s, surviving crushing blows from the FBI and CIA. In the early ’80s, the Reagan-Bush plan to demolish public housing or sell it to private landlords brought an upsurge in organizing. I moved to the Deep South to assist this work, with support from the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC) and the Institute for Southern Studies.

The Gulf Coast Tenant Organization developed in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana and won victories for tenant rights in many communities. We also joined struggles against racist and sexist landlords and housing authorities, with national battles to cut military spending so there would be money for housing.

Then in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana we learned an important lesson that mitigates further against single-issue organizing. Here African-American leaders battled the housing authority and won major renovations to public housing, refund of overcharged rent, overturn of illegal arrests of demonstrators, and firing of the insensitive housing administrators.

After this victory, however, Vanessa Preston, Ruth Bovie, and other St. Charles leaders pointed out that they were being poisoned each day by giant factories owned by multi-national corporations located virtually on their doorsteps. They said their victories would be meaningless unless the same power used to beat plantation housing managers was turned against petro-chemical companies.

We realized that similar conditions existed all along the industrial corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, which we later helped christen “Cancer Alley.” Some 138 factories were huddled around mostly African-American and some poor white communities. They were producing fertilizers, pesticides, plastics, herbicides, electricity generated by

nuclear power, gasoline, and hundreds of petroleum-based products — products at the center of almost everything produced in the U.S. and abroad.

Children in our youth groups had year-round eye infections that doctors called pink eye, which we later associated with acrolein, a Union Carbide chemical. We witnessed leaders we trained like Ruth Bovie, their relatives, and friends become ill and die of cancer. The poverty was strikingly similar to conditions in Central America, Africa, and Asia. Communities lacked running water and sewage disposal; people were poorly educated; public housing was deplorable. The poisoning companies refused to hire people from the host communities. More black men were in prison than in college. This was our reality.

When the Superfund law with its community right-to-know provisions was reauthorized in 1986, we began to find out what chemicals, and how much, were being dumped on us. Before that, EPA and the companies kept saying they could not divulge “trade secrets.”

Through what became a sister organization, the SouthWest Organizing Project, we learned that similar conditions existed for Latinos in the Southwest, and for Native Americans struggling to save their sacred earth and win sovereignty. All communities of color were facing the same crisis.

## BLIND SPOTS

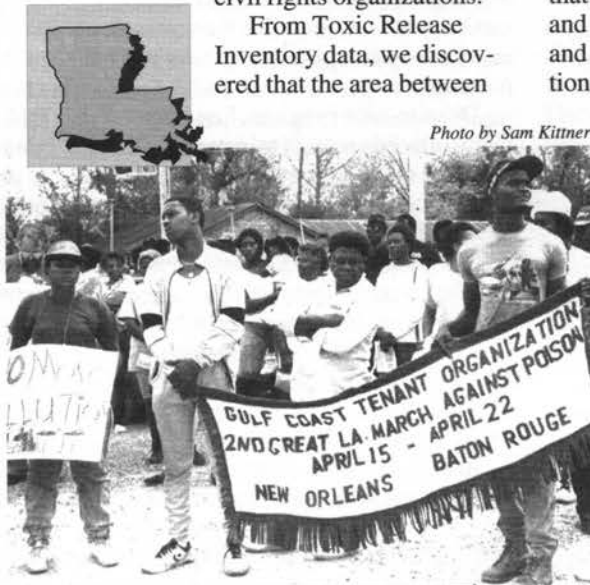
The movement against environmental racism had actually started in 1982 when people in Warren County, North Carolina stood in front of trucks to keep PCBs out of their community. In 1987, the landmark study of the United Church of Christ, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, confirmed the grim fact that race was the most significant factor determining where commercial hazardous waste facilities are located. The higher the concentration of people of color, the more poisoning facilities. Traditional environmentalists were unable to digest the significance of this. I knew their racial blind spots were going to be tough to penetrate.

Yet we realized that white working-class people should be our natural allies. We understood that tradition, racial prejudices, white privilege, and racist propaganda affect all whites, including the working class. But we were determined to seek historic opportunities to highlight the

self-interest of all ethnic groups.

That was especially true during 1988. First we organized a busload of mostly African-American tenants, along with some environmentalists, to attend the Southern Environmental Assembly in Atlanta. Environmental racism didn't make it onto the agenda, but we shattered the myth that African Americans were not concerned about the environment. A collaboration developed between Gulf Coast Tenant Organization, Greenpeace, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, and several community and civil rights organizations.

From Toxic Release Inventory data, we discovered that the area between



**THE LOUISIANA TOXICS MARCH IN 1990 HIGHLIGHTED THE TOXIC DEVASTATION IN COMMUNITIES ALONG “CANCER ALLEY.”**

Baton Rouge and New Orleans — Cancer Alley — was one of the most poisoned places in the U.S. We organized an 11-day march that included significant media events.

Blacks and whites were working together; it was a significant breakthrough. But before that march was over, racial tensions strained and tore at its inner fibers. White groups proved unable to focus on the disproportionate poisoning of African-American communities and the resulting need for them to follow black leadership.

We knew that the road ahead would be lonely. Whites can play a significant role in the new movement we are building, because they too are being poisoned and must deal with the additional poison of racism in their communities. But we in communities of color must lead this movement because our history, our

struggle, and the reality of our lives have compelled us to develop a total approach to society's problems that is the only way to stop the poisoning of the earth.

As long as communities of color provide “safe places” to produce deadly products and store their waste, our economy will keep on making more poisons. It is already making more than this earth or our communities can sustain; thus poisons will continue to spill over into poor white communities. As people of color deny those “safe places,” we will force basic changes in production processes and priorities. But we won't get to that point as long as people of color here and abroad are seen as less than human and not as deserving as whites of education, health care, jobs, housing, and fair police protection.

So we have redefined the “environment” to include everything which impacts upon where we live, work, and play. It thus becomes the mission of people of color to lead this movement and make our nation aware of its self-interest in our struggle. When we win, we win for everyone.

Our new definition of the environment is akin to the perspective of indigenous societies in Africa, Asia, South and Central America where we see respect for all life and the sacredness of all things in the natural order.

## A NEW AGENDA

Beginning in 1988, we took our definition of environment to SOC for regional support. Dr. Bob Bullard, in his book *Dumping in Dixie*, revealed that 65 percent of the nation's commercial hazardous wastes were dumped in the states of the Old Confederacy, mostly in African-American communities. SOC had helped initiate the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization in the early '80s, and many times its regional network made the difference in local struggles that otherwise would have been isolated and snuffed out. SOC also had a long history of dealing with racism and taking on the tough questions of how to reorder society's priorities. Its network of activists expanded their work from economic, racial, and social justice to include environmental justice.

In January 1990, the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization authored a letter challenging the “Big Ten” national environmental groups to deal with issues facing



communities of color. The letter was co-sponsored by the Southwest Organizing Project and endorsed by civil rights groups. We didn't intend it to be publicized, but Phil Schabecroft, then at *The New York Times*, ran a prominent column in which the "Big Ten" admitted that they had a major problem because they had mostly white staffs and lacked the perspectives of people of color.

One outgrowth of this letter was the October 1991 National People of Color Environmental Summit. Along with the Southwest Organizing Project, which organized the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ), and other grassroots activists, we insisted that this Summit be directed by grassroots movements. More than 500 delegates — Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans — came together, sharing histories, cultures, and perspectives in the context of environmental degradation. They confirmed the existence of an international, multi-cultural, multi-issue movement; adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice; and changed the environmental movement in the U.S. forever.

Delegates decided against establishing a national organization at that time. Instead they mandated regional initiatives to respond to our community crises. In the South, SOC provided the cohesion. In 1992, Damu Smith, on loan to SOC from Greenpeace for the entire year, along with Connie Tucker and several volunteers, traveled in 14 states from Texas to North Carolina, visiting communities previously isolated by race and geography. We learned that there was hardly a community in the South that wasn't struggling against a landfill, incinerator, toxic dump, or polluting industry.

Culminating this year-long work, SOC sponsored a regional conference in New Orleans, hosted by Gulf Coast Tenant Organization and Xavier University, which was working with the tenants on environmental problems. The event attracted 2,500 people, mostly activists from African-American, Latino, and Native American communities, along with a significant number of working class whites and more than 500 youth. The diversity resulted from collaboration between SOC and two other major networks — SNEEJ and the Indigenous Environmental Network. Government and industry were shocked at the tremendous turnout, which more than doubled

our predictions. It was the largest environmental gathering on record in the United States.

At that conference and a follow-up gathering in 1993, we noted a shocking fact: The areas with the most poisoning are the very same areas where we have elected the most African-American and Latino officials. We developed a Code of Environmental Ethics to demand that officials of color, as well as whites, be accountable to our environmental health.

Also at the 1992 conference, we introduced for discussion across the South a Southern Manifesto, presenting a radical agenda that can save our communities, our people, and the planet. It calls for a total moratorium on new poisoning facilities in the South; massive clean-up of damage already done, tied to training, jobs, and economic development; drastic cuts in military spending; massive housing construction; an overhaul of our educational system; health care for all; and foreign policy that precludes dumping on and exploitation of developing countries.

This is an agenda that comes out of struggles of people of color and working-class people at the base of the society. It places the mantle of leadership squarely on our shoulders. But it is a program that can rebuild America and save all our people. Many of us are willing to die, if necessary, to eradicate racism. If whites can see that our program offers them salvation too, we may see a mass repentance in our racist society that, in the words of the '60s song, can "make that day come round."

Delegates to the SOC conference recognized a great disparity between existing capacity of local organizations and what is needed to accomplish our own agenda. They recommended information exchange and action networks; technical assistance, including funding and computer support; leadership development; and support to groups developing sustainable community-based economic enterprises. The time has come to engage communities of color and poor white communities across the South in a massive campaign to develop our rich human and material resources from the bottom up. There is broad-based grassroots commitment to creating viable economic alternatives to the region's persistent poverty, which makes us vulnerable to exploitive and poisoning industries.

Now we must all use our time-tested workshop models and organizing assistance in communities throughout the South. As we help them push for societal

policies and changes, as we encourage them to develop a vision of a new society, we will also help develop the skills of local leaders and organizations so that they become economically self-reliant.

We are dealing with a moral issue. Many white churches are woven into the maze of corporations that poison us. Many religious institutions hold profitable stock in poisoning companies. CEOs of poisoning companies are often outstanding church members. Whatever happened to the Commandment "Thou Shall Not Kill"? What about New Testament teachings, "You are your brother's (and sister's) keeper," and "Love your neighbor as yourself"?

These are the same churches that have retreated from any commitment made in the '60s to deal with racism. We must preach the gospel of environmental justice to help religious communities develop the spirituality that has been ours for centuries to offer America. Our youth organizations, educational institutions, and labor organizations must also join the front lines of this battle.

The "Principles of Environmental Justice" and the Southern Manifesto call for the industrialized and non-industrialized communities and nations, the rich and poor, to share equitably in resources — jobs, income, leisure, education, housing, health care, and a clean environment. We seek a world in which the interests of corporations are subordinate to the needs of people. We envision and will struggle for a "beloved society" free of war.

In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "When the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say there lived a great people, a black people . . . who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization."

Today Dr. King's prophecy can be paraphrased to say: "There lived people of color on this continent who projected a vision that turned our whole society in a more humane direction." This is our vision in the environmental justice movement.

—Pat Bryant

*Pat Bryant is a writer, community organizer, and director of Gulf Coast Tenant Organization, which operates in poor African-American communities in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. He is a board member of SOC and the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, NC.*

HOW CAN WE BUILD A BROAD MOVEMENT FOR

# “TO FORGE A

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE? SEVENTEEN GRASSROOTS

# MOVEMENT”

ORGANIZERS SHARE THEIR IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES.

## Interview by Isaiah Madison

*On a cool evening last March, nearly 300 environmental justice activists from across the South gathered in a hotel in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC) was convening a gathering the next day in nearby Columbia to support local residents fighting to clean up hazardous wastes at an abandoned factory. The meeting would also give organizers a chance to network and strategize.*

*Before the meeting began, the Institute for Southern Studies and Southern Exposure invited organizers from nine states to join our executive director, Isaiah Madison, for a frank discussion of issues facing the environmental justice movement. We wanted to know about their local struggles, and about ways to link them to regional organizing. We wanted to understand the obstacles they face, and their hopes for the future. Most of all, we wanted to know how activists at the grassroots — black, white, and Native American — envision building a broad and powerful movement for environmental justice.*

### STARTING LOCAL

**Isaiah Madison:** Let's talk about the local struggles first, and then move on to talk about how we network and build a real movement.

**John McCown:** Cynthia Smith and I had our beginning in Hancock County, Georgia, the first county in the nation to be controlled by African Americans since Reconstruction. In 1987, the county was targeted with a proposed \$50 million hazardous waste incinerator.

Realizing the dangers with that kind of facility, we began to organize. In five months, we diverted the state's attention from Hancock. Then we visited 10 other communities to show them how we stopped the facility.

That was the genesis of grassroots environmental activism in Georgia. As a result, the governor eventually realized that there was not a need for a hazardous waste incinerator in the state. Following that, we were targeted with a 900-acre landfill. That fight took longer to win, but we were victorious.

**Isaiah Madison:** How did you do that?

**John McCown:** There are two kinds of power. You've got to have money or you've got to have people. We didn't have the money, so we knew there was a need for us to go door-to-door. We knocked on practically every door in the community. We came up with fact sheets and invited people to a meeting. Two hundred people turned out the first night, and we educated them.

Another key vehicle we used was the black church, which is extremely powerful in the African-American community. We mobilized the ministers, and as a result they set up a coalition that gave us access to every church in the community.

**Isaiah Madison:** Did you organize across racial lines?

**Cynthia Smith:** On the landfill fight we had white participation, but on the incinerator fight it was us.

**John McCown:** Our focus was the children; we have to leave them a clean environment. The white interest was property values. We didn't question their motives — we just wanted their participation and their money.

**Guy Jackson:** Property value was



their incentive, but it took everyone to save the community. Segregation, only working within your own community, is as bad as industry only wanting to profit for itself. You've got to reach out and go beyond your own small sphere.

Most groups we work with are multi-racial. But there is a cancer growing within, because some of the black people have been dependent on whites for so long that sometimes they don't speak out.

**Cynthia Smith:** It's a slave mentality. Blacks are working together with whites, but they don't really have any power in the group. So that's what we're working on — trying to build power.

**Isaiah Madison:** How are you all dealing with it?

**Cynthia Smith:** We've been building bridges. In Burke County, where people are fighting a lead smelter, we did a workshop for community leaders. The whites organized it. Only four blacks showed up, compared to about 30 whites. At the end of the meeting they agreed to form multi-racial task forces to go door-to-door to educate the community, but they never went. The white people were telling the black organizers, "Make your people listen," but they can't even get blacks to come to the meeting.

**John McCown:** The black population is saying, "Okay, look, white folks: All these years you haven't given a damn about us. Now all of a sudden you come in here trying to save our lives. What in the world is this all about? It's got to be a trick."

### REDEFINING ENVIRONMENT

**Doris Beale:** Ours is a different fight in Louisville, Kentucky. We're fighting violence among the blacks — blacks killing blacks — and we're working against police abuse and harassment.

**Mattie Mathis:** We're working on developing a civilian police review board. The things that police do are so atrocious to the community, especially to the black community. We even have cases of poor whites who have suffered. We have documents of things going back 15 years, and on up to last month when the police killed a man.

**Isaiah Madison:** Why are people in the environmental justice movement addressing issues of police violence and black-on-black crime?

**Mattie Mathis:** You have to start with self-preservation. I work in a women's shelter on my job. I see women with children who don't have a place to live. When you have to worry about those kinds of things, that messes with your environment. That takes away the safety. You want to live in a world where the environment is not only safe from lead poisoning but also from police

## AROUND THE TABLE

**John Michael McCown** with the Sierra Club in Birmingham, Alabama, and **Nick Aumen** in Lake Worth, Florida.

**Cynthia Smith** and **Guy Jackson** with Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Doris Beale** and **Mattie Mathis** with the Kentucky Alliance Against Racial and Political Oppression in Louisville.

**Scott Douglas** with Greater Birmingham Ministries in Alabama.

**Rose Mary Smith**, **Betty Ewing** and **Pat Bryant** with the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization in New Orleans, Louisiana.

**Delois Gore** with African American Environmental Justice and Protect Our Environment in Noxubee County, Mississippi.

**Virginia Sexton** and **Mike Sexton** with Wake Up in Cherokee, North Carolina.

**Anne Braden** with SOC in Louisville, Kentucky, and **Connie Tucker** in Atlanta.

**Benishi Albert** with SOC and the Indian Land Toxics Campaign in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

**Scott Morrison** with Jobs and the Environment Campaign in Ada, Oklahoma.

abuse and not having enough to eat and not having a place to stay.

**Scott Douglas:** I agree. The environment is holistic. Our movement has always talked about how you can't limit the environment to trees, rabbits, squirrels, and owls. It has to include people and their cultures.

**Benishi Albert:** Environment is the land, the water, the air. It's the people. It's our communities. It's everything around us.

**Betty Ewing:** Those of us with Gulf Coast Tenant Organization have been facing many different crises in our environment. A few days ago there was a public hearing in Jackson, Mississippi about the hangings in jails throughout the state of Mississippi. Since 1986 there have been 86 hangings.

**Isaiah Madison:** How is hanging an environmental issue?

**Betty Ewing:** The environment is about life, about having choices. Deliberately taking a human being's life is not having a choice.

**Rose Mary Smith:** We've had many struggles, mainly pertaining to organizing tenants. They were cheating us with rents, lights; they kept letting our buildings go down and they just didn't care. But we cared enough to fight. We knew our community needed to be upgraded even though we are in public housing and are lower-income, because we are human beings. We won, but we keep on struggling.

Then they come right in our communities with all these toxic companies killing us. We need clean air, clean land, better food, better quality of life. The rich white folks put out their toxic fumes night and day, pour it into the rivers, and you can't get a decent glass of water. It's just one part of the racism we face in our everyday life.

### ORGANIZING YOUTH

**Virginia Sexton:** Saving the environment is a health issue — saving the health of people. In Cherokee, North Carolina we have a group called Wake Up, because the Indian people need to wake up and work against the government and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

We're small and we have our own government, so we realized it is easier to stop things before they get started. When they tried to put an incinerator in the county in 1990, we showed the community a Greenpeace tape about what happened to the Navajos. The traditional people in the community got riled up, and they stopped it.

Then we got ahold of the minutes of a meeting that said the tribal council was going to purchase private deeded land and put a landfill on it. Non-Indians helped us and it was stopped because it would leak into the river.

We also stopped a nuclear depository called MRS — Multiple Retrieval Storage. The military is disarming nuclear warheads, and they have to store them somewhere. We had all kinds of documentation to show they are targeting Indian reservations.

Now we're working on stopping

building for tourism along the river. We've got an EPA person opposed to it, but the council just does what it wants. So there's waste going in the river.

**Mike Sexton:** In the 15 years I've lived in Cherokee, the government has kept saying that we're a sovereign nation. Then they try to put an incinerator on our land, saying they can do it because they're the trustee. The only time I've seen that tribe really sovereign was last week when the snow fell. Snow plows came to the edge of the reservation and stopped.

**Scott Morrison:** Fighting a hazardous waste incinerator on the Mississippi Choctaw Reservation, I realized that we are targeted because reservation land is exempt from state regulations. Only about 30 of the 300 tribes have a tribal EPA office.

One of the things I'm doing is working on a code of ethics that recognizes that any damage to the environment is damage to our culture, because our culture is so basic to our subsistence and our spirituality. What I hope to do is not only write codes, but also help train grassroots people.

**Benishi Albert:** As indigenous people we have to organize differently. We fight the same struggles, but in fighting things like MRS facilities on our lands or landfills or incinerators, we can't get legislation passed like other communities to stop them because we are sovereign nations.

As a young person I think that it is also important that I help other young people recognize that they are contributors, and to recognize the difference between real change and pacification. The youth movement among people of color is growing. We start from our own communities, and then work out and educate.

**Isaiah Madison:** What are some of the things you're doing in terms of organizing young people?

**Benishi Albert:** There is a youth task force within SOC which has 18 people

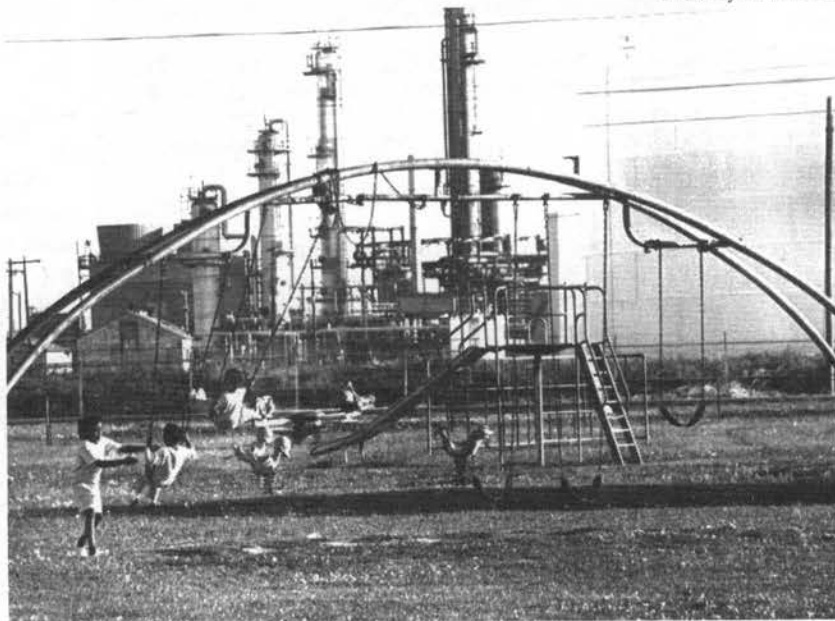
from different organizations in the South. It's important we have our voices included in decision-making. We have limitations because we are in school and have few resources, but we can organize and be involved in strategies with everyone else.

We don't want to be separate, because it would be like fighting the same struggle separately. But we also want to be recognized and have our voices heard and let people know there are young people out there who are organizing.

## BUILDING A MOVEMENT

**Isaiah Madison:** Moving to another level, how do we organize in terms of building a movement across the South?

**John McCown:** Sometimes when you're actually involved in the struggle you get the feeling that you might be out there by yourself. What happens when



**"OUR FOCUS IS THE CHILDREN," SAYS JOHN MCCOWN. "WE HAVE TO LEAVE THEM A CLEAN ENVIRONMENT."**

we come together is we realize that we're not alone. When I saw Charlotte Keys stand up and talk about the poisons in her community and how people are dying, it gave me energy to go back home and say no, we can't have this in our community.

**Mattie Mathis:** We know that to disempower our enemies and to take control, we all need to participate and get together. We all have the same problem in that we're poor. Whether we're black or white or Indian, we don't have money

— so we have to have people power.

**Connie Tucker:** We need to bring the forces of all these local struggles together into a regional effort that will evolve into a national effort for social change. We have to build local leadership, no question about it. But we also have to link the struggles so they are born into a movement that can seek out resources and fight to impact public policy.

**Cynthia Smith:** But we've got to make change at the local level first so we can empower people and elect some new politicians.

**Connie Tucker:** That's right. I think the first approach we ought to take is to do mass education — not only of our own people, but of our elected officials. We hope to provide a code of ethics for people to use in their communities, so they'll have a tool that speaks directly to the issue of environmental justice.

*Photos by Sam Kittner*

**Anne Braden:** I think we have to learn from history. The great struggles of the '60s impacted the whole country when people in the network focused on particular places. A lot of people went to Birmingham, Jacksonville, Selma from other places to support grassroots struggles there.

We need to develop the machinery where if something's happening in Noxubee, Mississippi, other people will show up in Noxubee, and the country's going to hear about Noxubee. When they hear about that, they're going to know about Hancock

County, too. We've got to build a regional struggle around specific local struggles.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

**Isaiah Madison:** What are the obstacles that prevent us from building the kind of national movement you're talking about?

**Connie Tucker:** One of the obstacles is the commitment to not be disunited.



What we are doing here is beginning to make a commitment to each other that we are going to work together.

Another obstacle is to be able to look beyond our local struggles. A lot of folks are dealing with environmental issues under white-led, single-issue organizations. They're concerned about getting that incinerator out, even if it means putting it in another community. They're being overwhelmed by the pressure of the local struggle and not seeing the value of linking beyond the local community so that we can make a national impact.

**Isaiah Madison:** Any other obstacles, barriers, problems?

**John McCown:** Egos. Industry is going to exploit whatever barriers it can use to keep us apart. If we don't come together and quit focusing on the fact that we look different, all of our lives are in danger.

**Pat Bryant:** The number-one problem is race. As long as there are communities of color where it is safe to poison people, send police to beat them up, and relegate them to substandard housing environmental poisons will continue. Race is at the heart of it.

**Nick Aumen:** I work with the Sierra Club, a predominantly white, middle-class, West Coast organization. One of my agendas is to focus more attention on the South. My personal goal is to look to the day when a corporation that's seeking an incinerator or a landfill will put it in the richest, whitest community.

**John McCown:** Hancock County in Georgia is 80 percent African American. It suffers from one of the major obstacles communities of color are facing in the South — economic red lining. In 1986, the *Atlanta Constitution* found that industries owned by white America avoid any community with an African-American make-up of over 30 percent.

That's why hazardous waste incinerators, prisons, and landfills seem so appealing. We haven't been given our share of the pie for years. Then all of a sudden companies come in and say, "You ought to be good and desperate now. How about this incinerator? How about this prison? How about this landfill?"

selves. Companies promise jobs and grease palms. That's their payoff — to talk all of us into what's already been decided.

**Delois Gore:** Black leaders have been bought off. This is a phenomenon we are observing all across the region.

We are fighting two toxic waste facilities they are trying to put in Noxubee County, Mississippi, a 72 percent black county.

**Cynthia Smith:** An editorial in the paper said communities ought to quit squawking and take these facilities because all we have is uneducated, unskilled labor. For the writer to say that environmental racism isn't real was really an insult.

**Pat Bryant:** The same people we put into public office are representing big corporations who want to do us in. For the last eight years we have fought an uphill battle to get environmental organizations and our government — both controlled largely by white men — to recognize that environmental racism exists. Yet many environmentalists say we shouldn't try to organize the civil rights movement in the middle of the environmental movement.

**Isaiah Madison:** It's past midnight, so I want to bring the discussion to a close. What we've really heard this evening is a living statement that captures the history of a movement in the making. But all of this is prologue. Our challenge is to be

true to ourselves, to speak to the questions that crush us as people, to refuse to be silent lest we be enslaved. By raising our voices, we can build a movement that has the power to raise up black and white, yellow and brown, tan, Jew and Gentile, Hispanic. One people, pulling together to forge a movement. □

**Cynthia Smith:** The frustrating thing in Hancock County was that black elected officials refused to hear the facts about environmental racism. We educated them about the incinerator in 1987, and they went right back in 1988 for a 900-acre landfill because they wanted the jobs.

**Virginia Sexton:** Governments need revenues and the communities are poor, so they see it as a means to better them-



**"WE WANT TO BE RECOGNIZED AND HAVE OUR VOICES HEARD," SAYS BENISHI ALBERT, A NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH ACTIVIST.**

# RESOURCES

## REGIONAL ORGANIZING

### **GULF COAST TENANT ORGANIZATION**

P.O. Box 56101  
New Orleans, LA 70156  
(504) 949-4919

### **INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK**

Southeast Office  
P.O. Box 701796  
Tulsa, OK 74170  
(918) 743-6530

### **SOUTHERN ORGANIZING COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

P.O. Box 10518  
Atlanta, GA 30310  
(404) 243-5229

### **SOUTHWEST NETWORK FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

1114 7th Street NW  
Albuquerque, NM 87102  
(505) 247-8832

### **SOUTHWEST ORGANIZING PROJECT**

211 10th Street SW  
Albuquerque, NM 87102  
(505) 247-8832

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

### **WEST ALABAMA EAST MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK**

49 Country Club Road  
York, AL 36925  
(205) 392-7443

### **CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ACTION**

P.O. Box 723  
Lumberton, NC 28359  
(919) 739-7851

### **CITIZENS CONCERNED ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS**

2226 Delano Street  
N. Charleston, SC 29405  
(803) 744-4421

### **CITIZENS FOR PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT**

P.O. Box 416  
Sweet Home, AR 72164

### **JESUS PEOPLE AGAINST POLLUTION**

P.O. Box 464  
Columbia, MS 39429

### **SENSIBLE CITIZENS AGAINST TOXICS**

P.O. Box 162  
Martinsville, VA 24112

### **PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT MIC**

P.O. Box 423  
Institute, WV 25112

### **KENTUCKIANS FOR THE COMMONWEALTH**

P.O. Box 864  
Prestonsburg, KY 41653  
(606) 886-0043

### **FARMWORKERS SELF-HELP, INC.**

709 Lock Street  
Dade City, FL 33525  
(904) 567-1432

### **FARMWORKERS ASSOCIATION OF CENTRAL FLORIDA**

815 South Park Avenue  
Apopka, FL 32703  
(407) 886-5151

### **CITIZENS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

The Harambee House  
1115 Habersham Street  
Savannah, GA 31401  
(912) 233-0907

### **STOP TOXIC POLLUTION**

3806 Highland Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37410

### **TEXAS NETWORK FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

P.O. Box 684825  
Austin, TX 78768  
(512) 472-9921

## RESOURCE CENTERS

### **INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHERN STUDIES**

P.O. Box 531  
Durham, NC 27702  
(919) 491-8311

Researches environmental, workplace, and economic development issues. Publishes *Southern Exposure*, the *1991-92 Green Index*, and *Environmental Politics: Lessons from the Grassroots*.

### **HIGHLANDER CENTER**

Route 3, Box 370  
New Market, TN 37820  
(615) 933-3443

Hosts weekend gatherings to enable grassroot environmental activists to share experiences and analyze their work.

### **TEXAS CENTER FOR POLICY STUDIES**

P.O. Box 684825  
Austin, TX 78768  
(512) 474-0811

Researches environmental issues and publishes *Toxics in Texas and Their Impact on Communities of Color*, available for \$10.

### **CENTER FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 710  
Washington, DC 20009  
(202) 387-6030

Prepares updates on environmental justice legislation, an annotated bibliography on environmental justice sources, and a directory of state legislators of color.

### **UCC COMMISSION FOR RACIAL JUSTICE**

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1948  
New York, NY 10115  
(212) 870-2077

Published *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (1987) and "Proceedings of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit" (1992).



# Big Bear John

As Told to Barbara Wickersham

**S**everal years ago my friend Ron Vance and I embarked on an oral history project on Roan Mountain, Tennessee. There we discovered a whole world lost — except in the memory of some very sharp-minded and keen-witted older mountain people.

As they shared their “lost” worlds with us, the name of Big Bear John was inevitably raised. Some spoke of him with laughter and seeming pride. Others spoke more thoughtfully, knowing that the same independent spirit still lives today up on the ridges and back in the “hollers” of Roan Mountain. They considered John’s constant survival to be somewhat of a miracle.

The following is a composite of only a few of the memories of Big Bear John as they are still swapped around winter fireplaces and fox-hunting campfires.

**N**ow I ’low as how Bear John probably never killed any bears and he wasn’t exactly what you’d call a folk hero, but he was a mighty fine timber cutter and moonshiner and he certainly gets my vote for being about the toughest man who ever lived.

Called him Big Bear John, they did ... wasn’t called big for nuthin’ either. He stood six-foot-six in his bare feet and weighed a sight over 300 pounds stark “naked”! Why he was so big he could carry two quarts ’shine under the bib of his “overhauls,” each hand hitched under a gallus, and even the sheriff couldn’t tell it.

Lived up near Shell Creek, way up on Teaberry Knob whur he could see a mighty fer piece. Sheriff never did find that still; guess he never tried much. Made the best ’shine in Carter County they tell me.

’Bout everybody was a-skeered of Bear and for good reason! He was a fun feller to drink with, they said, ’lessen you got him

riled up, and then he shore lived up to his name.

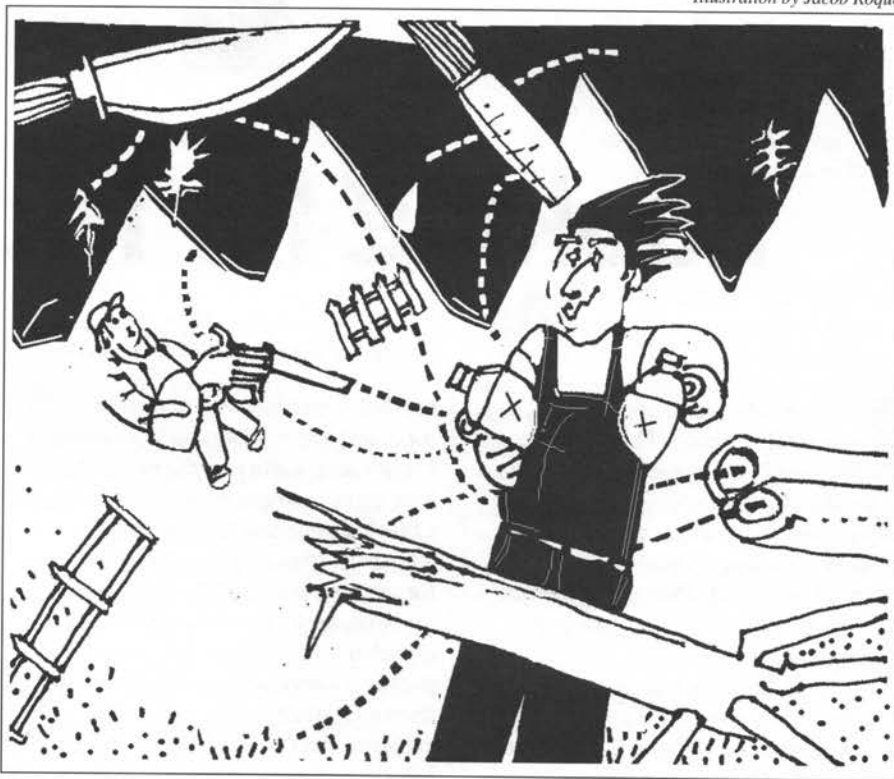
One day Bear got into an argument with a man named Russ, and he sent word to Russ that he was going to come on a certain day and kill him. Russ didn’t think too highly of that idea and he sat on his porch on that certain day cradling his .38 pistol on his lap. He saw Bear John a’comin’ up that dusty dirt road a-ways off and he stood up to get a better look.

welcome, to say the least. About that time Russ’s wife came running out and handed him a 12-gauge shotgun. Russ was reported to have said, “I drew down right where his galluses crossed and gave him both barrels.” John walked the two miles back to his home.

Everybody thought he’d die ... but he didn’t.

Some time after that he was a-playin’ cards down under the railroad trestle over

Illustration by Jacob Roquet



When John got to the gate, Russ told him if he opened the gate and came in the yard, he was going to shoot. He did and Russ did — shot Bear John five times in the chest. John turned, still standing, and started through the gate, not feeling very

the North Carolina line and got in an argument with his opponent. The man whipped out a razor, one of those kinds you have to sharpen on a “strop,” and slashed Bear John across the abdomen. John just garnered up his intestines in his

hands and walked four miles over to Elk Park to a doctor.

Everybody thought he'd die ... but he didn't.

He was over in Elk Park another time and had apparently been imbibing some of his own moonshine when he saw this good-looking woman and took a likin' to her. The only problem was that she was with another man. No matter, John just walked up, took her by the arm, and was a-headin' off with her. Now her original companion didn't cotton up to that much, ran around in front of John and stabbed him in the throat with a long-bladed knife. John's aunt just happened to be nearby and she filled the wound with snuff.

Everybody thought he'd die ... but he didn't.

John eventually left his wife and "took up" with a woman who had grown children. They "just couldn't hardly love" John and one day they invited him out to help cut firewood. When they got him out in the woods, however, they hit him in the head with a peavey and dragged him over to the foot of a big tree which they felled across his body. Then they ran back home decrying the fact that poor John had been killed in a timbering accident and everyone must come see. When they got back and pulled the tree away, John was still alive, had been lying in a soft place on the ground. Some say blood actually gushed from his eyes.

Everybody thought he'd die ... but he didn't.

**W**ould you like to know how John finally met his demise? Well, hear this: When he was in his 80s, he went over to Jonesboro one night, got totally drunk, wandered out behind a schoolhouse, fell down across a stump, passed out, and froze to death.

Everybody wondered how he'd die!  
And that's the truth! □

*Barbara Wickersham lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. She and Ron Vance have interviewed more than 62 people as part of their oral history of Roan Mountain.*

## J U N E B U G

# Looking for Mudbone

By Junebug Jabbo Jones

I'd never been to Peoria, Illinois, so I was really excited. This is where Richard Pryor comes from! I wanted to see the place just outside of the Caterpillar Plant where Pryor described old Mudbone's tractor running out of gas after he'd made that wrong turn on the way from Tupelo, Mississippi to Chicago.

I was in Peoria to tell stories at the big University in town. They put me up in this big fancy old German Castle near the school. I won't lie to you, the building is impressive. It's made just like the real castles they got in Germany. When I drove up to the place it was wide-open daylight, but the minute I stepped inside it was so dark that it might as well have been midnight outside.

As I walked to my room I got to thinking about the way the Neo-Nazi skin-

heads are running wild in Germany, Europe, and lots of places in this country. I'd just seen a story on the news about how some German skinheads had chased a black athlete and gave a good whupping to one of his white teammates for walking into the wrong place.

Now, me I am not exactly the scary type, but I will confess that before I unpacked, I checked the room for one-way mirrors, hidden panels, and secret switches that opened doors to dungeons. Like I said I'm not scary but if I had seen a bunch of goose-stepping SS troops marching down the halls looking for every threat to the purity of the Aryan race in the place, it wouldn't have surprised me!

It struck me that I'd been on the road too long. This was a classic case of the homesick blues. I had to get to where I could smell the hamhocks simmering in

the greens or I was going to be a menace to society. I didn't even brush my teeth before I set out on my search for Mudbone.

Two things struck me as strange about Peoria: the small number of black people on the streets, and the large number of police. The small number of black people surprised me because I figured that Richard Pryor could not have become the storyteller he is without being in a place that helped him learn his stories and how to tell them. The large number of cops surprised me because I don't usually see that many cops unless there's a bunch of black folks for them to worry about.

Then I spotted this brother sitting in a Mister Donut shop, so I decided to stop. I figured he might be able to help me get my bearings.



The guy looked just like this lawyer I used to know in Jackson, Mississippi named Jess Brown. If he'd stood up straight Jess might have been five-foot-eight, but he always hunched over so much that he never came to more than five-foot-five. He had light brown *cafe ole* skin, a nose like an eagle's beak and — when you could see them — piercing brown eyes.

I sat down beside the guy and said, "You ever been to Jackson, Mississippi?"

He said, "Naw. Why?"

"You could be Jess Brown's twin brother, except for the fact that Jess was older than you are now when he died 20 years ago."

Well that got a conversation going. He told me his name was Weasel.

I mentioned that I was surprised to see so few black people and so many cops in Richard Pryor's hometown.

Weasel slurped his coffee and looked out over the edge of his cup. "Hell, Richard ain't been home for years. I think he'd been a lot better off if he had come home every now and then. But as for the cops, it's always been rough here.

"I remember one time I was sitting in this very donut shop matter of fact I was sitting in this very same seat slurping coffee and dunking doughnuts — when this white guy who looked like he might have been a bank clerk in a cowboy movie walked in. I paid little or no attention to him because I'd just been laid off at Caterpillar and had plenty of problems of my own.

"Then the waiter dropped this load of dirty dishes on the floor. I heard him say, 'Oh my God!' The noise made me and the other four people in the place look up.

"The little mousy white guy had pulled this big gun and was telling the donut shop clerk behind the counter to empty the cash register. 'Keep your hands down. Just give me the money, and no one will be hurt.' The clerk had his hands up over his head and looked like his legs belonged to someone else's body.

"The guy waved his gun at the rest of us. 'Everyone just sit still and no one will be hurt.' The donut shop man with very shaky hands emptied the cash register.

"This ain't but \$47!" the robber said.

"I just came on. That's all I've got! You can look for yourself."

"The robber thought about it for a while and said, 'Okay, then we'll just wait for more money to come in. The rest of you just sit here looking normal. The coffee's on me.'

"I couldn't believe what was happening. He sat down there at the other end of the counter, put his gun down in just such a way that it aimed dead at my heart, and we sat here all night acting 'normal.' Other people came and went with no idea that the store was being robbed and that the rest of us were being held hostage by this mousy little guy at the end of the counter with a big German Luger under his newspaper.

"About 12:30 these two cops came in to take their break. They sat there writing reports and talking for about 30 minutes and nothing happened. When they left everyone started breathing again."

Weasel stirred his fresh cup of coffee as he turned his head to look at me out the top of his eyes. "You may not believe this but after a while it began to feel 'normal.' You'd be surprised how people can adjust to crazy situations."

So what happened?" I asked.

"How'd you get out of it?"

"The situation didn't change until about 3:30 a.m.," Weasel said. "This black guy named Paul Blocker, he was the star running back in high school we all called 'P-cock,' came in the store. He was a plain clothes cop at the time. He picked up on the bad vibe in the place right away. He sat right there where you're sitting now.

"While P-cock talked about his grid-iron heroics, I used a toothpick and coffee to write the word 'robber' on a napkin and drew an arrow pointing to the mousy guy at the other end of the counter. Finally P-cock got the point. He paid his bill and went out to his car and called for backup. He came back into the donut shop a few minutes later claiming



that he'd been cheated out of his change. He managed to get close enough to the robber to knock his gun away, toss the guy over the counter, and cuff him.

"P-cock was standing behind the counter at the cash register with the German Luger in his hand when the two cars of white, uniformed officers came screeching up to the donut shop with their

lights flashing. The first two in the door with their guns drawn were the same two guys who'd been here drinking coffee around midnight.

"POLICE! DROP THE GUN!"

"I'm an officer too. Here's my badge. I've got a perpetrator here. I can't drop the gun."

"Drop the gun nigger!"

"Don't you call me —"

"The youngest of the two white officers fired one shot that hit P-cock in the neck.

"It was awful."

Was he hurt bad?" I asked.

"I tried to help him but he bled to death on the floor right there beside the cash register. I still come here every month as my own kind of private memorial."

"That's what you call a double dose of bad luck," I sort of mumbled to myself.

"Yeah," Weasel murmured. "The worst thing about it was that the little mousy guy that was trying to rob the place was tried for armed robbery and murder, and the cop who did the shooting got off scot free."

Weasel and I sat there without talking for a long time. I thanked him for the story and went back to the hotel thinking that maybe I had found Mudbone after all. □

*Junebug Jabbo Jones travels the country collecting the wisdom of everyday people. He sends along stories from his home in New Orleans through his good friend John O'Neal.*

# Diseases of Mystics

*By Sharon Claybough*

**I**t begins with a man and a poor one-eared horse are standing on my porch. They look big as planets behind the caved-in mesh of the screen, their heads not a yard from my eyes.

"Mister," I say, "there's a loaded pistol aimed smack at your face and it's goin' off at the count of two." I'm holding a .357 magnum straight out.

He turns the animal around but takes the four steps down slowly. Deliberately. He is a handsome man, but crazy-looking too. They take their time getting out of the yard and into the trees.

It's almost dark. I latch the screen and turn on the porch light. The bolt on the inside door has been broken for a year. I whistle the hounds in from the back. They didn't hear the stranger. I know they were nosing around in the trash I threw out last night, digging at salt pork scraps and bloody meat

wrappers. I could beat them.

Had to be crazy to come up on a house like that, I think. A horse on the porch. I go back to peeling potatoes. I throw skins to Rover John, who will eat them, and toss half of a peeled one to Jackson. "Spoiled, spoiled," I say to him. I dice up the potatoes and put them in a pot and fill it with cold water.

I wish some friend would come by, but it is mid-summer, and most of my neighbors have company from far off. Relatives. Daughters and sons and grandchildren who have married and moved away and only come back to hollers for three or four days in summer. They can't wait to get back to their cities and stores, their telephones and brought-on food. They think they have made some great escape, that all the things they hate about this place (for starters, the poverty that embarrasses them and the shadow of God in every corner),



are far from them. Like God don't just sneak up on you.

When the potatoes are done I pour milk into the pot. I mash them with a fork and put in a little fresh dill and onion and butter and make a soup. Far off a little thunder mutters to itself, like it is searching for something. I am hoping the stranger and his horse are far off by now.

My great-great-grandma Early married a stranger. Found him at night raiding the vegetable patch while the moonlight and rain poured down on his yellow hair. He was sick to the bone. She saw by his clothes that he was a Rebel and thought he was a deserter. His name was Jeremiah. Early was 15 then. She hid the boy in a rock cave behind the house. Was supposed to be only for one night, but she liked him so well she just kept him, and the family thought that was all right because he was so puny and almost crazy from war. After a while he liked her too.

I am thinking the man was right good-looking, but if he comes back in the middle of the night I will have to blow his head off. I push the sofa in front of the door. The back door has a bolt. The windows are tight and locked and the panes are small. He is too big to fit through any of the windows. The front door is surely the least defended. I try to make Rover John and Jackson lie down in front of it, but they won't. I carry the soup upstairs to my room.

Early was half Cherokee. She knew so many things and

Illustrations by Jacob Roquet



wild birds would eat out of her hands. Her mother looked sort of like an elf, though she was full-blood Cherokee. Early's father was a Welshman but looked like some kind of little troll. Neither one of them looked like a human being at all, but Early, by the grace of God, or just plain luck, was all right.

I eat my soup and try to think of pleasant things. Tomorrow will be full moon and I will set out more onions and carrots, if something bad don't happen. I'll wait until the shrinking moon to plant the second batch of corn. I think about the

things I own. This house. Two horses. My Rover John and Jackson. My chickens and the Bantam, and the two turkeys.

I have got a hundred acres crowded with oak, ash, hazel, red maple, pine, black walnut, redbud, dogwood, laurel, magnolia, apple, cherry, and catalpa. The largest catalpa goes past the roof, its elephant ears covering half my bedroom window by July. Sometimes I sit in the fork of it drinking coffee or maybe taking a few sips of bourbon, or have a little bourbon in the coffee, or a little coffee in the bourbon. I do not ever fall out of the tree.

My land is deep, deep, deep into the hills, and the stream that runs through it is pure, free of the poisons leached from mining wastes. I can drink from the stream and cook with its water.

There is little to fear here, except for strangers sometimes, and of course the spring rains, gully washers that can turn into

a deluge, making the creek beds and the roads one thing. It rarely happens in summer. Anyway, my house is built on high ground. Of course, things can happen in storms — boughs of trees can come crashing through your roof and knock you in the head and kill you, or send glass shooting every which way to blind you. Maybe I am a worrier. Neighbors are far.

A shiver wriggles through me. There's a little bourbon left in the cupboard in the bedside table and I reach for it.

**E**arly was 15 when she stole Jeremiah from the Army of Northern Virginia. I am 36 now. I've had boyfriends, long-term, before. One for three years, another for two. One for five. The love life with the first two was purely adequate, but the recollection of the last will keep me awake sometimes, or wake me in the early morning, or will come to me while I am feeding the hens. His name was William.

The first boyfriend plain and simply could not be bothered with self-improvement. He would not read a book nor tax himself with a new idea. I don't know why I kept him for so long. The second liked church too much, going twice on Sundays and getting to where he was sure enough too good for me.

William would have been the one then, only when he finally got up enough nerve to propose, I went and acted like some wild beast that could not be caught. Cold feet was all, but he left right after I said let me think about it. Just left me and it was a shock to my system.

The first thing I did after William was get rid of the four-poster. I learned then that I could make it through a winter without a man beside me, something like hibernation, only not quite so serious. I get a lot of reading done.

Come April, though, when the first shoots are pushing through the earth, I always know it, because that is when some force is making me re-arrange furniture that is fine the way it is, making me scold the hounds for nothing at all.

It has something to do with the smells. Smells from everything, alive and not. One breath of the spring air, of the laurel and redbuds, of the rhododendron and dogwood, even of the soft pin feathers of birds that line the nest and get mixed in with what the winds take up — and something sets up inside of me, inside *anybody*, I believe, quicker than aspirin, quicker than a drug. Say the one you love is beside you

though, say rain or shine, then it is like a false spring always.

I am lucky in the earthly goods department. I have food and a little money and a roof overhead. I borrowed money once because I had a few debts backed up. I was young and had been a little of the spendthrift, which I am not now. It took me 10 years working various no-account jobs to pay that money back. I am still ashamed it took so long. Now I sell wild herbs to the state agriculture bureau which sells them to pharmaceutical companies. There is a good farmer's market over in Cumberland that buys my lettuces, squashes, beans, and black walnuts, and another over in the next holler. That's all the cash I need. The house was given to me a year ago by Gran when she went to live in the city and there is no debt on it. I grow all my own food. So.

The horse had one ear. I am thinking maybe the man shot it off. He could have been a lunatic. I feel a chill and decide not to take the empty soup bowl down to the kitchen. I set it on a table and turn out the light, pull off my shorts and T-shirt, get under the covers, and try to sleep.

Maybe he is one of those Vietnam vets gone mad. One did over in Harlan and shot a mother cat and all her kittens. I know the stranger saw my .357. I bought it at a pawn shop in Cumberland. I am a crack shot and he will rue the day if he dares to come back. Probably was a vet's pistol.

I think about Early again, how her blood runs in mine. I listen to the cicadas and wish a storm would come. The cicadas stop and I hear the thunder again. It's moving a little closer, like when I have had four or five cups of coffee.

It strikes me that maybe he is from the government. Maybe a plainclothes postal carrier. No. Horny Gaitskill is our equestrian carrier. They wouldn't send a fill-in who would ride up on our porch at night on a one-eared horse. Maybe the man was sick. Maybe now he is dead because of me. I can't sleep.

**I**t is early the next morning. Birds are just up. Something tells me not to get the gun. I don't want to stand at the door watching him, like a fool, waiting, so I go out onto the porch and stare straight into his eyes. Even 30 yards away I can see their steel blue.

I read somewhere that if a great ape charges at you, you should stand your ground, don't budge an inch. He will come right up to your nose, but you just stare him down. The man

*I am lucky in the earthly goods department. I have food and a little money and a roof overhead.*



keeps coming but he holds his hands up. "Don't shoot," he says, he keeps walking towards me and looking to where my arms are behind my back, where I might have a gun. He is very tall. He has long hair, and the sun is behind him, turning the pale strands to prisms.

Suddenly I am put in mind of the Bible scenes about angels, how they were all aglow, and how you may entertain one unawares. I feel like a fool for the thoughts I'm having.

"I bought the Caxton place, two miles yonder," he says, motioning with his elbow, "I'm your neighbor." I stare at him while he lowers his arms slowly. "Samuel Long," he says, and makes like to shake hands with me, but I won't until I put enough questions to him that I am satisfied he is neither an angel nor a murderer. Then I shake hands with him.

The way he asks for our first date is like this: "I don't reckon you would care to go snaking?" And that is exactly what we do. We hunt rattlers from dawn to noon. Sam catches six and I get 14 and he's not upset. He's glad for me. We sit in a stand of young pines and have our picnic lunch and talk. Little things hop around on the basket and the food and over our sun-burnt skin, but we don't mind. He says he bought the Caxton place with Army money. He doesn't talk about the war though and I don't ask him anything about it. He does look tired and too lean and I want to feed him, same as all the women in my family have wanted to feed men to comfort them, back as far as I can remember, no matter how tough a woman it was. That night I make him a dinner of ham and biscuits, corn bread, green beans, fried potatoes, poke salad, and coffee. He doesn't talk when he is eating. Not for the whole meal. I like that. I'm used to eating by myself in a peace and quiet, so it's nice to be with someone

else who likes the taste of his food and isn't all the time talking.

In the storm cellar, I keep Gran's scrapbook. I keep it there so it's safe from the tornados and floods and robbers and so on. There is an old, old letter in it that's from Jeremiah to Early. After dinner I show it to Sam. It was written when Jeremiah went to be a lumber jack for awhile. He had to do that so as to be able to support their child that was on the way.

He had to be gone from home for three months.

The letter says how when he was in the war he had no idea that he would ever love Early. Then God showed him the way to her garden and now they had this precious new life coming and he would love her and it forever. He signed the letter "Your husband and its daddy, Jeremiah Stone." Except for his name, the correctness of the spelling is not even close.

We play a game, Sam and me. I don't guess his game is the same as mine, but I know he is playing something. My imaginings change from time to time, and I expect his do too, but my main one, my favorite one, is that he is Jeremiah and I am Early.

Sometimes he comes riding slow through the dogwood, up and down, up and down, on Thompson, like in a dream. Thompson's torn ear makes my heart ache. I imagine the two of them scouting ahead, coming through the green trees, their hearts beating fast. They hear something. Sam pulls his saber as they come to the dogwoods. Sam holds his saber high and digs his heels into Thompson. The blade pierces through the dogwood and catches the sun, while white blossoms fly up and flutter down, covering Sam's head and shoulders, scattering over Thompson's flank. The two of them look like some knight and his steed — maybe King Arthur and a horse



he loved well. I don't know. Then there is a terrible noise, the blast of a cannon, I think, and Sam is thrown off. Thompson falls and that's how he gets his ear torn off. But then it all clears and I see Sam and Thompson, whole and healthy, except for Thompson's ear, riding towards me, both of them are wearing silly grins.

Thompson is human to me, or more than that. He's human to Sam too, that's why both of them come up on my porch like that. Thompson wanted to, was the only explanation Sam ever gave me. He said he was coming over to make my acquaintance and Thompson just wanted to climb the steps. "He was in a hurry to meet you," Sam said.

**I**n the fall, we go to the drag races. The season is so exciting, like it's on fire. The air is changing, the leaves are the deepest blazing reds and sunny golds, and they fall on everyone like things for us to play with. There is the smell of pork smoking everywhere, and of the last ears of corn roasting on grills. People all over the holler are cooking weiners and apples and corn cakes out of doors, and there is this feeling of deep, deep sunlight all around us, sinking into us, going into our bones, maybe to protect us from the coming chilly days.

Then there is the drag race. It isn't with cars, which I truly like better. They call it a drag race in jest. Darby Yates, he owns the little store, the only store in the holler, up the road from me, well he is the only one to "drag" the sack of corn fat to lay the scent. The corn is in a cage three miles away, up in the middle branches of a hickory, Sam has got Jackson held back tight and I've got Rover John, but I'm not wagering on either one. I put my money on Darby's young hound. Sam put money on Jackson. It gets dark and the miner's carbide lights go on one by one and the hounds get more excited. Rover John and Jackson are whining like puppies, though they are seven and five. I'm embarrassed and wish Sam had wasted his money some other way.

With all the blackness and the lights flashing like stars in it and the noise and the men's voices getting louder, out-doing the women's, the whole thing begins to seem silly to me. I say that to Sam, that it's silly, and he just looks at me with no smile at all and says, "Don't you want to win?" He goes off with Jackson pulling him for a ways and then I can't see them. I let Rover John jerk me around and I think of swatting him one and making him go back home with me because suddenly I can't stand this stupid men's game, but then he goes crazy, he's really onto the scent, and I go with him as far as I can, then I let loose of him and watch him stray far left of

me, sniffing the ground and turning in a circle like when he has to go, but then he shoots straight ahead and I chase him with my light. He's gone in a few seconds, but I can hear his bark, and I keep running. I run for maybe 20 minutes, and then I have to walk. My mind is somewhere up ahead with him though, pushing him on. *Go on, you want to win, don't you?* I follow the thick of the noise. Half hour later, there's the tree. There's Darby and most of the holler, and at least a dozen crazy hounds, lathered up and barking their heads off so hard I'm afraid their throats will bleed. Sam's got Rover John by his collar, patting his head, saying something.

Most of the lights are focused on the poor little coon eight or 10 feet up the tree. His eyes are like burning coals. They all start to tell me Rover was the first to the tree. Sam and I could be soaring 20 feet above the trees.

Some of us go by Darby's store for sodas. We sit outside on tree stumps and on the weeds. We can see the flickering lights of cities spread out in the valley below. Lightning pulsates high above them. The lightning is in the clouds that are on a line even with us. Sam says by the time we get home it will come a full blown electrical storm. Some of the folks ask me what I feed Rover John and Sam tells them coons. Everybody laughs and Sam rubs his nose with his fists and grins. I think of making love in the storm.

**W**e have a dance just for our holler. Horny Gaitskill and Darby Yates and some others prod around trying to get Sam to tell about the war, but he will not. All night one or another of the ~~men~~ comes up and pats Sam on his shoulders and mumbles something like, "There's a good man," or such.

Except when they sneak into his dreams, he handles the memories all right. Sometimes he dreams of bodies falling through jungle trees, first they're little white balloons, soft and thin walled, not a lot of air in them, and they float down quietly, then, when they're almost to his face, they turn into people, roaring and screaming like wild animals.

When he first got off the bus at Richmond, he tells me, right after he was discharged, he walked out of the station into the sunlight and smack into a bunch of people holding blown-up pictures of the My Lai massacre. He wasn't at My Lai, but he felt like he was. Sam kept his eyes on the blue sky and his mind on McDonald's, a kind of self-defense. There was nothing to say to anyone, nothing that would help, he says, and probably never will be. He only wanted some peace and quiet and some plainness: water and grass and sky and a good

horse. Then he looks at me and adds, like an afterthought, how he needed a good old plain woman too, and I am obliged to wrestle him off the porch, where he is telling me this, and into the clover, cool and deep and green.

Sometimes at night, after he thinks I am asleep, Sam slips into the storm cellar and brings up my scrapbook. He turns the pages slowly and looks at the pictures of Civil War tombstones. There is a photo too of Early's and Jeremiah's tombs, side by side. There's a confederate flag and a photo of Jeremiah's uniform. Then Sam turns to the letter and reads it slowly. Sometimes he smiles. Sometimes he just quietly closes the album. I've seen him do all that maybe three or four different nights. I don't ever bother his thoughts. I slip back into bed after a while and wonder what it is we're doing. We don't have any plans. We will talk to Thompson and ask him questions which the other one will answer for Thompson, and the days and nights go by and we're just happy as frogs.

Some people can't stand it. They try to tell me I could be sitting on a powder keg. "You hear how more of them from the war are going crazy now?" they ask. Or, "You recollect that mama cat and all her babies?" But I don't listen.

**S**unday we go to Cumberland to visit Gran. Her mind is slick as glass and twice as sharp. She lives in a rooming house with six other "oldies," she calls them, mostly women. She's 82. "Don't you marry her less'n you love her," she says to Sam the first time they meet. "Don't you never marry no one 'cept for pure ole love," and she crosses her hands over her chest and looks up to the ceiling, hugging herself tight, then she laughs.

"I won't," Sam promises. "Why I don't even like her," he says and I hit him. "I believe you children already are in love," Gran says. "Oh, I know it," I say, and Sam casts his eyes up into their sockets and makes a terrible writhing face.

"I want to show you off, you pretty thing," she says to him, and leads him off to meet her friends. I stay in her room and browse through her books. She has books galore. There's one, *Diseases of Mystics*, that strikes me, and I take it down from the shelf.

There is some mildew on the pages. It's a very small book, I guess because the diseases of mystics are not all that many. Most of them are nervous afflictions, brought on, the author says, by a fretful nature — "Too much moon, not enough

sun," he calls it. A zealot is blind to the kingdom of heaven, he says. As a way to quit worrying and avoid so much sickness, he recommends that people stop believing in time.

I'm thumbing through the book and wondering how a person could possibly not believe in time, when Gran and Sam come back. "Don't ask to borrow that," Gran says to me, "you won't be needing it."

She likes to tell us the old family stories from the Civil War, and we like to hear them. One Sunday she tells us the story about how Jeremiah walked away from his unit right before the Battle of Chickamauga. He was drinking water from a little bend in a stream, about 30 yards from his company. He looked up and standing in front of him was a man all made of blue light, shimmery like the birth sac of a new foal. Jeremiah stared, water still dripping off his chin, and the man just stood

there. He was across the stream, maybe two yards away. Jeremiah watched the man back up slowly. Then he stood without wiping his face, while the man sort of beckoned to him. Jeremiah waded to the other side, stepped up onto the low bank, and followed him for miles. The man finally disappeared into thin air about 30 yards from Early's garden.

"I can't believe that Gran," I say in the middle of the story. "Well, don't then," she says.

I listen politely for a while and then ask, "Did Jeremiah have a one-eared horse by any chance? And did he carry a saber?" I half glance at Sam, expecting him to snigger at me, or at least to be grinning, but he's looking to Gran instead, quietly waiting for her answer.

Then Gran says, "No. He was infantry come up with Longstreet. They was gonna help Bragg's Confederates in Tennessee. He warn't with the cavalry, dear heart, now shut up and let me tell it."

It is nearly winter now. We've got maybe two weeks before it's too cold to sleep in the treehouse we built last spring. We sleep in two zipped-together bags and are warm as moles. At night Thompson stays in the barn, his long chestnut back covered with three wool blankets.

We go to sleep in a cradle of branches under a quiet moon, buried in dreams or in nightmares, and wake up to the shout of the red sun rising, turning itself inside out for us, burning itself up for every living thing, every single day, like it's some kind of crazy fool. Like there is no tomorrow. □

*Sharon Claybough lives and writes in Lizella, Georgia.*

**It's a very small book, I guess because the diseases of mystics are not all that many.**



# Race and Risk

How private dealing over public housing condemned a West Dallas neighborhood to segregation and lead poisoning.

**By Craig Flournoy and Randy Lee Loftis**

*Dallas Morning News*



*During the last days of the Bush administration, city officials in Dallas were putting the finishing touches on the nation's*

*largest plan to redevelop public housing. They promised it would create "a community that people would be proud to live in."*

*But a nine-month investigation by reporters Craig Flournoy and Randy Lee Loftis revealed that the plan would create a giant toxic slum, trapping thousands of impoverished African Americans in a West Dallas neighborhood with a 50-year legacy of lead contamination.*

*The investigation triggered immediate results. Public pressure to scrap the plan mounted, and city support quickly evaporated. Within two months, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros announced that given the risks of lead poisoning and racial segregation, the West Dallas plan was dead.*

**DALLAS, TEXAS** — Under the banner of housing the poor, local and federal officials plan a \$67 million project that would force thousands of people to live in the city's poorest, most polluted neighborhood.

Supporters say the plan — which would double the number of families in one of the nation's largest housing projects — would provide safe, decent housing and revitalize a neighborhood blighted by crime, poverty, and pollution. Officials in Washington and at City Hall have accepted the plan with little public review and despite overwhelming evidence that it won't work.

Also disregarded has been West Dallas' 50-year history of lead contamination, the result of unchecked pollution from a now-abandoned smelter. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will soon declare parts of West Dallas, including the entire housing project, a federal Superfund cleanup site. About 3,000 people live in the affected area.

Cleaning up the project could

add as much as \$25 million to the housing plan's cost. Yet the government's only environmental review of the housing plan downplayed the risk, quoted a widely disputed study, and omitted evidence of public health concerns.

The plan's most prominent supporter, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp, said it would let the poor live where they choose. In a written response to questions, Kemp said the plan represents a "commitment to social and economic justice and expanded job opportunity for residents of West Dallas."

Housing experts and former HUD and city officials condemned the plan as an outmoded, discredited approach. They said it would trap thousands of minorities in a giant new slum.

"It is totally predictable that it will



## BEST OF THE PRESS

The Southern Journalism Awards honor reporters whose stories broaden the range of issues, voices, and sources found in the region's daily newspapers. This year, a panel of 36 judges selected winners for investigative and environmental reporting from 106 entries in three divisions, based on the size of the newspaper's circulation. The first-place winners are excerpted here.

### **OTHER WINNERS** For environmental reporting in Division One (circulation over 100,000):

**Second Prize** to Charles Seabrook of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for his concise and unusual reporting on the mining of kaolin, "The White Gold," and its destructive impact on Georgia's land, people, and tax equity.

**Third Prize** to Bailey Thomson, Ronni Patriquin, Michael Hardy, Carol McPhail, and Renee Busby of the *Mobile Register* for an exceptionally thorough look at pollution in Alabama's Mobile Bay including its economic and political causes and consequences.

produce social isolation, inferior education, and serve as a breeding ground for gangs," said Gary Orfield, a Harvard University professor of social policy. For 25 years, Orfield has advised governments, housing advocates, and others on the effects of segregation.

"The idea that it will redevelop the neighborhood is truly crackpot," he said. "This is just madness."

## THE GHETTO

U.S. District Judge Jerry Buchmeyer once called the 38-year-old West Dallas project "a gigantic monument to segregation and neglect." Officially, it has 3,462 units, but only 928 are occupied. Many of the rest have been stripped by thieves, vandals, or drug users.

For decades, West Dallas' poverty and pollution have formed a wall that trapped people in and kept development out. The city, the Dallas Housing Authority, and HUD concluded in 1987 that the answer was to give people the means to leave by offering certificates that could be used for private housing.

More than 800 families left the project within two years.

The new plan, which is before Judge Buchmeyer, is to demolish some units, renovate others, and build still more. The project would then be a permanent home for 2,000 families — more than double the current number.

To assess the plan, *The News* examined thousands of pages of government documents about the housing project and West Dallas' environmental problems. The documents, many confidential, were obtained through the federal Freedom of Information Act and other sources.

*The News* interviewed dozens of current and former officials and others involved with the plan, as well as West Dallas residents. The paper also asked some of the country's most influential experts on housing and on lead pollution to review the plan.

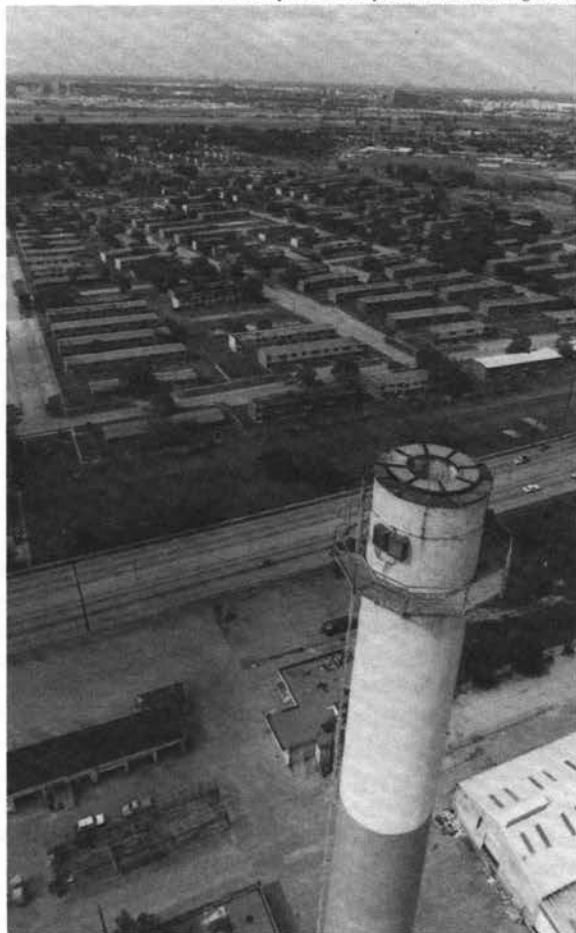
The investigation found that:

▼ The plan follows the example of the 1950s by packing thousands of poor, minority residents into an impoverished, minority area. Several experts and former officials predict a repeat of the history of big public housing projects: a

run-down, segregated ghetto occupied by people terrorized by crime.

The plan shows "local officials colluding with HUD to use federal government powers to maintain the ghetto," said Douglas Massey, an urban segregation expert at the University of Chicago. "It freezes the ghetto in concrete."

Photo by William Snyder/Dallas Morning News



**FOR YEARS, THE SMOKESTACK AT THE FORMER RSR SMELTER BELCHED FUMES THAT CONTAMINATED THE WEST DALLAS HOUSING PROJECT WITH LEAD.**

Opponents — and some supporters — said the plan would increase racial and economic segregation.

▼ Some plan supporters have downplayed the risk of lead contamination in West Dallas or denied it outright to clear the way for the project. The risk is real, government reports show — especially for West Dallas' children.

Public housing may be the worst possible land use for an area with a history of toxic contamination, several experts said. "It sounds like it's the worst situation to have," said Doug Ammon of Clean Sites, a nonprofit Superfund study group. "That almost seems like that should put the renovation on hold."

▼ The supporters' main selling point — that the plan will spur the revitalization of all of West Dallas — has virtually no chance of coming true, experts and former officials said.

The plan devotes 90 percent of its money to rebuilding the project instead of the surrounding neighborhoods, documents show. The plan would not increase local or federal aid to the neighborhoods.

Among those who say it won't work is the city's former top housing official. "I'm not going to sit here and say that I will ever believe that 1,200 additional public housing units is going to create what people think it's going to create — a viable community. It's not," said Harry Jones, who left City Hall in 1991 to take a similar job in North Carolina.

## THE MEETING

When then-Secretary of HUD Jack Kemp announced the plan in April 1991 before a packed news conference in Dallas, he said it symbolized a "new day in public housing."

What Kemp did not say was that the commitment he announced as new was actually a year old — made during private meetings with a small group from Dallas that lobbied for the money.

Nor did he mention the trade-off. Poor families, most of them black, would get 1,200 new or renovated apartments. But they would have to give up 1,200 rent-subsidy certificates that they could have used to rent apartments of their choice. Instead, they would be forced to live in the city's poorest, most polluted neighborhood.

Nor did he mention that key officials with the city and his own agency thought the plan would fail. Or that opponents were excluded from the private meetings. Or that he might benefit politically.

Something else wasn't apparent the day of the announcement: Some of those who lobbied for the money also might benefit from the \$67 million project.

"It comes down to politics," said the Reverend M.L. Curry, who was spokesman for the group that secured Kemp's private commitment. "I don't mind saying that we played a better game."

Most units in the housing project were slated for demolition following a 1987 lawsuit, but Kemp met privately with sup-

porters of the renovation plan in April 1990. According to Curry and three other people who were there, Kemp told them, "All right, all right, I'm going to work with you to save 2,000 of those units."

That was all it took. Kemp had endorsed the largest public housing renovation in the country with no applications, no paperwork, no staff reviews.

Curry has a new role: president of a for-profit construction company that filed its incorporation papers two days before Kemp publicly endorsed the West Dallas project. Curry said he expected the company to get \$10 million in West Dallas contracts.

Kemp, widely considered a leading contender for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination, has insisted that he was not playing games or politics. "You have to look at what a community wants," he said. "That is what HUD did under my leadership in West Dallas."

## THE RESIDENTS

Mary Wigenton said Kemp was not speaking for her. "It's not right to force people to live here. They ought to let us go," said Wigenton, a mother of two in the project. "I pray every day and night that I can leave this place."

Mary Wigenton is a 20-year-old single mother. Frank Skinner is a 70-year-old retiree. Both are residents of the West Dallas public housing project. Both said they live in fear and want out.

"This is a big old ghetto, and it gets worse every day," said Wigenton. "This is a deathtrap."

Wigenton and Skinner are not unique. More than a dozen families interviewed at the project all said they want out. Their primary reason: fear of violent crime.

"It's a slum," said Skinner, "a place you can get killed anytime."

Some federal and local housing officials paint a sharply different picture of life in the project. "Ninety-eight percent of the people who live there want to stay," said Alphonso Jackson, chief executive officer of the Dallas Housing Authority.

Jackson said residents get excellent housing in a safe neighborhood. "It's safe," he said. "It's no less safe than anywhere else in Dallas, and in many cases, based on police data, it's safer."

Dallas Police Department statistics tell a different story. Figures for 1992 show that compared with the rest of the city, a resident of the project was almost twice as likely to be murdered, three

times more likely to be raped, and four times more likely to be the victim of a violent assault.

The government spent millions of dollars in recent years renovating more than 800 apartments. Frank Skinner, like virtually all the project residents interviewed, lives in a renovated apartment. Yet he said conditions were worse today than ever.

"It used to be a good place to live when I first moved in," said Skinner, who has lived at the project since 1954. "But it's gotten bad. Drugs. Shootings. Bootlegger houses. It's gone downhill."

Skinner, a retired landscaper, and his wife, Thea, are raising an 11-year-old son. They said one of his earliest lessons was learning to hit the floor at the first crack of a gunshot.

"It takes a mighty extraordinary kid to make it out here," said Mrs. Skinner. "The average kid, he'll either wind up dead and buried or in the penitentiary."

The overwhelming majority of families on the public housing waiting list have an equally negative view. A survey conducted by Richard Scotch, a sociology professor at the University of Texas, found that 80 percent do not want to move into the project even if it is renovated.

"You see men and women out peddling drugs all the time," said Lettie Davidson, a 45-year-old woman raising six children at the project. "It's poison."

## THE POLLUTION

Sandra Clark worries about another form of poison — lead contamination from the nearby RSR lead smelter that closed in 1984. She said tests found that her oldest daughter had elevated blood lead levels. "She's always sick," said Clark.

Clark would like to move. "This place is not fit for a dog to live in," she said. "It's a ghetto."

Mattie Nash, a former City Council member and supporter of the renovation plan, lobbied against federal cleanup of the housing project. She called the lead problem "minor, very minor."

But government studies confirm the threats from lead. To call the risk minor is "not a fair statement," said Allyn Davis, the EPA hazardous waste chief in Dallas. "We are concerned."

In 1992, a federal report said children in the area showed signs of lead exposure. Lead has been shown to lower children's intelligence even in extremely small amounts. In larger exposures it can cause a variety of other health problems.

"I wonder how many doctors, lawyers, and presidents we have lost" to lead's effects during 50 years of West Dallas pollution, said Luis Sepulveda, president of the West Dallas Coalition for Environmental Justice, a community group.

A confidential EPA Superfund ranking study for West Dallas says that some areas, including the housing project, have three to 10 times more lead in the soil than the city overall.

To be considered for Superfund — the key to getting major federal cleanup money — a site must score at least 28.5 in a complicated ranking system. West Dallas scored 50.

Dr. Herbert Needleman of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, who is considered the nation's most prominent researcher on lead's effects on children, called blood-lead levels in West Dallas "above the national average." He said the West Dallas evidence shows "absolutely" that more public housing there would be a bad idea.

Other experts agreed. "You're likely to have the worst situation there — children playing in the area, the highest density of people," said Dr. Tom Clevenger, a lead cleanup expert at the University of Missouri. "If you have a higher surface soil exposure, they're going to be exposed to that dust."

But HUD has already decided that the site will be safe for children in the future. An environmental assessment the agency finished in November but has not released calls for digging up the contaminated dirt and hauling it off.

"If we remove the lead, we've solved the problem," said I.J. Ramsbottom, a HUD official in Fort Worth.

To assess lead exposures in West Dallas, HUD relied on 10-year-old information that many experts have discredited. The agency quoted a 1983 federal report that found no lead poisoning in West Dallas. HUD didn't mention that thousands of blood tests taken since then do show problems.

"I don't think we had access to the latest information," Ramsbottom said. Asked whether HUD had requested it, he replied, "I don't know that we did."

Dr. Ian von Lindern, a nationally known lead pollution consultant, said the 1983 federal report on West Dallas was poor science then and still is. "They were using the wrong criteria to define lead poisoning," he said. "There was lead poisoning all over the place. It was clear as day." □



# Death of a Nursery

Thousands of Florida farmers watched their crops wither and die. Was a Du Pont fungicide to blame?

By William R. Levesque

The Ledger



Once-fertile fields throughout Florida lay devastated, apparently ruined by a flawed Du Pont fungicide called Benlate DF. Re-

porter William Levesque spent five months examining state and federal documents, uncovering secret company memos, and meeting with farmers from Hawaii to Costa Rica. The result was "Phantom on the Farm," a five-part series in the Lakeland, Florida Ledger detailing the worst agriculture disaster of its kind in U.S. history.

**DOVER, FLA.** — Billie McLemore sat at her kitchen table and picked through a thin pile of papers until she found a reminder of the spring of 1988. "Here it is," the 62-year-old grower said. "Here's what put me out of business."

From a pile of papers she pulled out a wrinkled receipt from a local feed store dated December 16, 1987. It contains one telltale word that has come to make Florida farmers shudder: Benlate.

Benlate DF, made by the Du Pont Company of Wilmington, Delaware, was one of the most widely used fungicides on the market after its 1987 introduction. The fungicide is now thought responsible by Florida agriculture officials for the costliest man-made agriculture disaster of its kind in Florida and U.S. history. Du Pont officials deny Benlate is harmful to plants.

In 1988 nobody suspected the product may have been capable of damaging plants. Months after McLemore bought that five-pound box of Benlate DF, her nursery of Boston compact ferns was forced to close. Up to 10,000 plants lay ruined.

"Let me tell you, it don't take long to

wipe a person out," McLemore said as she looked outside to a field behind her house. "Not long at all."

Out in that field of wind-swept weeds and tall grass once stood the greenhouses of McLemore's thriving two-acre wholesale nursery, called, simply enough, Billie's Nursery. The land is now empty.

The end of the decade-old nursery came swiftly as the symptoms of disease, racing like the flames of an invisible fire, swept through each of her nursery's eight greenhouses.

## DARK BLOTCHES

In the beginning, no one suspected Benlate. It never entered Fred Leffler's thoughts.

Leffler is a family friend of the McLemores who operates his own ornamental plant nursery near Plant City. He visited Billie's Nursery in early 1988 at the behest of her two sons, Robert and Richard.

The plants Leffler saw were obviously ill. But the cause was unclear. "She grew a pretty fern until that year," he said. "The boys were mad as hell that they couldn't

### OTHER WINNERS

For environmental reporting in Division Two (circulations between 30,000 and 100,000):  
**Second Prize** to Maria Carrillo, Daryl Lease, and Paul Sullivan of the *Free Lance-Star* in Fredericksburg, Virginia, for making sense of a large, often abstract topic — growth and pollution — through lively reporting that focused on one creek and its meaning for the surrounding community.  
**Third Prize** to Lucy Beebe and Elaine Hamaker of the *Star Banner* in Ocala, Florida for their absorbing and detailed coverage of the development of a *greenway* across the Sunshine State.

get their plants to grow. It was amazing. They would only grow into tiny things.”

Thin, narrow leaves that should have developed into a dark shade of green instead remained a lighter tint. Most of her plants developed ugly, dark blotches McLemore had never before seen on her ferns. Other plants simply stopped growing altogether.

“The plants’ growth was so stunted, it didn’t take no time before there was nothing left at all,” said Richard McLemore. “I thought we had put too much of this or too little of that. Nothing we tried worked.”

At first, Leffler said he suspected fertilizer damage. But in the end, he said he didn’t understand what problem was at work. “Whatever it was, I couldn’t figure it,” he said. Other growers were called in to look at the damage and left equally puzzled.

At one point, the McLemore brothers guessed that an especially tenacious fungal disease was at fault. So they applied more Benlate. At that point, the symptoms of disease intensified.

“I didn’t know who to blame but myself,” Billie McLemore said. “I didn’t know how, but I killed my nursery. What else could explain the damage? What else could explain the death? I must have done something wrong.”

Worse still, she was forced to live with the knowledge that a nursery founded by her late husband, Enoch, was laid to waste while operated under her direction. Enoch, who built the nursery from nothing after its founding in 1978, died of lung cancer in 1982. The nursery, say family, was his pride.

“That whole thing hurt my mother a lot,” said Robert McLemore. “Not knowing what caused the damage was painful to her.”

The family had used Benlate WP safely for years. Benlate WP was a powder version of Benlate DF and had been on the market since about 1970. Benlate DF was introduced in 1987, a granular Benlate replacing the powder.

“We didn’t even discuss Benlate,” Billie McLemore said. “Fungicides were supposed to be safe. I thought: I guess I just can’t grow ferns.”

By the end of the year, she filed for personal bankruptcy and worried about

losing her land. Bit by bit, she sold the pieces of her nursery to other operations around the area. And she sold the eight greenhouses that provided the heart of the family business. “So I managed to save

word from other growers who wondered whether her nursery’s death was more than just God’s will.

Jeff Jensen, 17, who knew McLemore through the church, was one of those

who heard about her problems and immediately thought of Benlate DF. Jensen, a Plant City horticulture enthusiast studying at Hillsborough Community College, had seen suspected Benlate damage before — at the nursery of his girlfriend’s father.

The damage described by McLemore was identical. “I told her six months ago that it could be Benlate,” he said in September 1992. “I mean, it’s an awful coincidence, if it isn’t Benlate. Right after they spray the ferns with Benlate, she loses everything.”

Now McLemore thinks she may have found an explanation for years of frustration. “The whole thing whipped me, spiritwise,” she said. “Now I know in my heart what happened. I feel relief. I feel a lot better knowing it’s not my fault.”



Photo by Pierre DuCharme/The Ledger

**WIND-SWEPT WEEDS AND TALL GRASS COVER THE TWO-ACRE FIELD WHERE BILLIE MCLEMORE ONCE RAN HER WHOLESALE NURSERY.**

my land,” she said.

For a proud woman used to providing for herself and her family, the thought of having to accept government payments — widow benefits to which she was entitled — was unsettling.

Devoutly religious, McLemore, who attends the East Side Baptist Church in Dover, accepted the loss of her business. “I thought maybe God didn’t want me to grow ferns,” she said.

## AN EXPLANATION

McLemore would hear much of Benlate DF after 1988. In the summer of 1989, Du Pont recalled batches of the fungicide after discovering traces of the plant-killing herbicide, atrazine. Up to \$60 million in damages were paid to farmers nationally for that contamination.

By this time, McLemore was well out of the nursery pipeline, and news of the industry did not often find its way to her door.

Then in March 1991, all the Benlate DF then on the market was again recalled by Du Pont. In time, more than 1,200 Florida growers would report damages suffered in 1991 and after. But damage from this episode was not caused by atrazine. Instead, many in the industry suspect Benlate is somehow flawed.

By this time, McLemore began to get

## EARLY REPORT

McLemore’s story may provide a unique glimpse at a farming disaster. Tim Schubert, chief plant pathologist with the Florida Department of Agriculture, said he does not know of any cases of Benlate-related damage as early as that claimed by McLemore.

Du Pont refused to say. “We do not discuss individual claims,” said Du Pont spokeswoman Pat Getter. She declined even to say if the company has received any claims for damage prior to 1989.

Schubert said it is possible that a pathogen, or organism, and not Benlate, caused the damage to McLemore’s nursery. But the damage she describes, he said, is not consistent with that theory. “After 10 years growing plants successfully, it isn’t very likely that someone would, all at once, develop a problem they had never experienced before,” Schubert said.

But he warned: It may be impossible to know with certainty so long after the fact.

McLemore never approached Du Pont to file a damage claim. And now it’s

too late. Du Pont announced recently it would no longer pay any claims because its studies show Benlate does not harm crops, a fact the state disputes.

If McLemore decides she is owed money, she will have to file a lawsuit.

But a solution to the nagging mystery means more to her than any payment of damages from Du Pont.

McLemore sat in a swing and pointed proudly to a shot of her husband standing in one of the greenhouses, rows of lush

plants stretching in concentric lines behind him.

"We were proud of what we owned," she said. "Now all we have left are these pictures." □

Environmental Reporting, Division Three

# The Changing Lowcountry

Private resorts erode the South Carolina coast while public dollars pay the insurance.

**By Frank Heflin**

*The Beaufort Gazette*



*Billions of dollars of private development along the South Carolina coast have limited public access to beaches and, in*

*many cases, threatened the beaches themselves. Frank Heflin, who covers coastal issues for The Beaufort Gazette, provided readers with an in-depth look at the environmental dangers of resort developments — and the tax dollars that support them.*

**FRIPP ISLAND, S.C.** — For the past 15 years island residents have been engaged in a high-stakes gamble with ever-increasing odds. They are betting at least \$14 million worth of beachfront homes — and possibly their island and their lives — that a bar of sand will move in time to protect them from the merciless ocean.

A vocal minority on the island — including developer Ken Willis and August Gorse, president of the Fripp Island Property Owner's Association — believe that time is running out. They want to protect the island through a beach renourishment project.

Some coastal experts believe that if action isn't taken in the next three years, a sudden winter storm could sweep through Fripp Island, claiming lives and millions in property.

Still, a 3-to-1 majority of residents in this exclusive private residential and resort community voted last summer to let nature take its course and not to commit further funds to study ways to restore the beach.

"Sure there are risks. There are risks no matter where you live. If we have a real storm, the entire island will be covered," said George Roberts, who has lived on the inland side of Fripp Island for the past eight years.

If all this sounds like a long shot made by high rollers, consider also that every taxpayer has money on the table in the form of federally subsidized flood insurance, without which most of the homes on this private island could not have been built.

Consider, as well, that front-row property owners have built a 3.5-mile seawall to protect their homes and lots from an ocean that is swallowing chunks out of the middle of the island.

That seawall has resulted in the loss of most of a beach that belongs to the public. And with it has gone the habitat that once hosted hundreds of loggerhead sea turtle nests and thousands of migratory birds.

How Fripp's beachfront problems are resolved — as they are debated among



residents, in a pending state Supreme Court suit, and in the General Assembly — may provide a crystal ball for hundreds of similar communities built on high-hazard coastal land along the East and Gulf coasts.

## RESORT FORTRESS

Fripp Island is among 13 of the state's 36 barrier islands that have been, or are about to be, developed. Two-thirds of this 4,500-acre barrier island is marsh.

About 1,700 property owners, 700 of whom live on the island year-round, have purchased land on the sandy sections of the island since development began 30 years ago.

Scientists call these narrow strips of marsh and sand "barrier islands" because they act as breakwaters, protecting the coast behind them from the constant pounding of the Atlantic Ocean's waves and wind.

For the past 20 years Fripp Island has been collapsing in the middle. As the sea has moved ever closer, front-row property owners have reacted by building rock revetments at a cost of \$20,000 to \$50,000 per lot.

Viewed from the air or sea today, Fripp's beachfront, comprising 114 homes and two condominium complexes, looks more like a fortress than the exclusive resort it was intended to be.

At high tide its gray, rocky, 19-foot rampart rises out of the ocean, casting spumes of spray toward the homes it was built to protect. About two-thirds of its beach is completely under water twice every day.

Now the seawall itself is being attacked by the sea. Winter storms have seriously damaged north and south sections of the wall in the last two years.

"My concern is that if the sea continues deepening the beach face, they are going to have undermined revetments and they are going to have some serious problems," said George Madlinger, in charge of permitting in Beaufort County for the S.C. Coastal Council.

"If a portion of the wall is breached, especially where you have water coming up four feet on it at high tide, it will affect the adjacent property as well as the one in back of it. It's frightening to think of what a major storm could do to this place, especially the south end."

Restrictions on the replacement of seawalls damaged by storms, enacted by the General Assembly in the 1990 Beachfront Management Act, could dramatically

compound the long-term effects of such a breach. In 1995, seawalls more than two-thirds destroyed by storms cannot be replaced. In 2000, the restriction changes to 50 percent.

## PUBLIC PROPERTY

Fripp Islanders and the S.C. Coastal Council are locked in a legal battle in the state Supreme Court over whether property owners can bridge a 10-lot gap in the wall on the south end of the island.

The suit, which pits private versus public property rights, tests a provision of the 1990 act which outlaws the construction of new seawalls on the state's coast. The provision was designed to prevent the kind of

*Photo by Frank Heflin/The Beaufort Gazette*



**WINTER STORMS BATTER THE REVETMENT ON FRIPP ISLAND.**

beach loss experienced on Fripp, where revetments were constructed before the act was passed.

Earlier this year the court granted property owners a temporary injunction allowing the last section of revetments to be built, but required Fripp residents to post a \$100,000 bond to pay for its removal if they ultimately lose their case.

"If we didn't have that wall, those lots would be gone already," said August Gorse, president of the Property Owner's Association. "People are just trying to protect what belongs to them. What the Coastal Council really wants is to do away with us. They are determined to do away with every private island up and down the

coast. This suit and their proposal to place a tax on use of sand by private communities are proof of that."

Not so, said Coastal Council spokesperson Donna Gress. The Coastal Council is merely upholding the Beachfront Management Act. "The main purpose of that act is to protect the goose that lays the golden egg — namely the beaches which draw people," Gress said. "The healthier the beach, the better the economy. We are doing what is best for development and protecting public property as well."

Many residents argue that since the island is private and provides its own roads, fire service, police, and other infrastructure, its residents should be left alone. "I feel no obligation whatsoever to provide a beach for residents of South Carolina who do not pay for its upkeep," said David Kobick, who has lived on the island since 1984.

While it is true that almost everything within the closed-gate communities was built with private dollars, it is not true that public money is not involved. Most of the homes and amenities behind the gates could never have been constructed without federal flood insurance — which is subsidized by taxpayers.

The second-largest domestic federal program — trailing only Social Security — the federal Flood Insurance Act provides premiums in critical flood-prone areas along the coast far below the cost of private insurance. Without this insurance, most banks would not lend the mortgage or development money necessary to build expensive homes, hotels, restaurants, and clubhouses.

Ironically, the FIA was passed in 1967 to reduce taxpayer liability for disaster relief by forcing communities to steer new development away from flood-prone areas. But the restrictive measures of the Act were not enforced, and coastal development in flood zones boomed.

In a 1983 study, the General Accounting Office found that the program "provided a safety net" for developers building in risky coastal areas. The GAO recommended that Congress restructure the program to charge higher rates or discontinue policies in the "v-zone flood areas" — those on barrier islands most prone to flooding.

Instead, Congress pumped \$1.1 billion of taxpayer money into the Federal Flood Insurance Fund between 1978 and 1987 to keep it solvent. There is now only \$285 million in the fund to cover \$250 billion in flood policies in force across the whole United States.

"It is neither moral nor legal for private citizens to take action which results in the

destruction of public property. That has long been established in state law," said Dana Beach, executive director of the

Coast Conserversation League. "The residents of Fripp Island, as in all other beachfront communities, have

an obligation to act responsibly in their own actions so as not to infringe on what belongs to everyone else." □

Investigative Reporting, Division Three

# No Answers for Newtown

Environmental racism is killing black residents and dividing a Georgia community.

**By Rick Lavender**

*The Times*



*In recent years, Hall County, Georgia has become a racial melting pot of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and whites. Racial*

*tensions have become strained, but government leaders have been slow in responding to the needs of the changing community.*

*In a 12-month series entitled "United or Divided," four reporters at the Gainesville Times explored changing race relations in the county. Mickey Higginbotham and Lolita Browning reported on health care, minority businesses, and literacy. A.J. Banks examined the criminal justice system. And Rick Lavender investigated environmental racism in the black community of Newtown.*

**GAINESVILLE, GA.** — Jerry Castleberry is a 45-year-old father with forearms thick as thighs and a voice as calm as a breeze. He looks healthy, but when the DeSota Street resident sits, he shifts often, as if his chair were stuffed with gravel.

The problem is lupus, a chronic disease that attacks the body's immune system. Lupus killed Castleberry's mother. Now it sears his joints with almost constant pain. He shifts about for relief.

"When I don't hurt and I feel good, I get scared," Castleberry says quietly. He fears the calm before the storm — death.

Castleberry doesn't know what caused his disease. Yet some say there is too much death and disease in Newtown, a small, predominantly black neighborhood that fans out from DeSota in southeast Gainesville. Residents list 19 cases of cancer and a rash of illnesses, most afflicting those living on DeSota. Some point to in-

dustrial borders bordering their backyards and claim toxic contamination. Some believe their community was built on a dump.

Most agree on one thing: They're victims of environmental racism. "We're black and they don't care," said Catherine Earls, thinned to 90 pounds by colon cancer.

State and city officials deny the charges, citing a 1990 health survey that reported no cause for alarm. The study concluded that drinking and smoking were the culprits.

Critics say otherwise. Their claim of racism stands as another stumbling block to unity in Hall County. The decades-old dispute is the county's biggest clash of race and environment.

## SPOTLIGHT ON NEWTOWN

"We have had more people who want to

### OTHER WINNERS

For investigative reporting in Division Three (Circulation under 30,000):

**Second Prize** to Don Stringer, David C.L. Bauer, Evans Donnell, and Robyn L. Minor of the *Daily News* for their painstaking research of the wheeling-and-dealing and lack of accountability at The Medical Center of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

**Third Prize** to Lenora Bohen of the *Island Packet* for examining the economics behind a hospital's survival and the delivery of health care on Hilton Head, South Carolina.



**ROLAND WALLER LOOKS OUT OF HIS DESOTA STREET HOME TOWARD THE LEECE-NEVILLE PLANT WHERE HE WORKED FOR 23 YEARS. HE BLAMES CHEMICAL FUMES AT THE PLANT FOR HIS CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE.**

become involved in helping solve the Newtown cancer crisis than we've ever had," said Rose Johnson, an instrumental member of the Newtown Florist Club. The 40-year-old group that opens meetings with the Lord's Prayer and doggedly pushes community issues has lined up:

- ▼ a Newtown-led survey to canvass the community for cancer and other diseases;

- ▼ a toxic riding tour of the area in conjunction with a National Council of Churches Racial Justice meeting in Atlanta;

- ▼ "The Newtown Cancer Story," a pictorial by freelance photojournalist Michael Schwarz.

"The story's out about Newtown," said Faye Bush, a club veteran who has skin lupus.

That story mirrors a nationwide environmental justice movement spurred by research showing that racial minorities and the poor are more likely to be exposed to pollution.

Federal data put the Southside, Newtown included, in that category:

- ▼ The Southside — from Jesse Jewell Parkway south into unincorporated areas of the county — is home to half the toxic polluters in Hall County, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data.

- ▼ Those companies legally spewed a third of the 5.5 million pounds of invisible poisons released into the county's air, water, and land between 1987 and 1991.

- ▼ Parts of the Southside are almost all black, and median household income for Newtown is \$13,600 below the county average of \$29,775.

But Bert Langley, director of the state Environmental Protection Division's Emergency Response Program, contends that "environmental racism . . . implies an intent I don't think is there." The former industry consultant lists land cost, zoning, and availability of transportation and work force as factors in siting plants.

The result: Industry centers in lower socioeconomic areas. In the South, those areas are home to minority residents, Langley said. "They're getting exposed

more because of where they live," he said.

## THE UGLY SIDE

Call it life on the other side of the tracks.

This new town was built for blacks after the Tornado of '36 killed 203 people and smashed 800 houses in Gainesville. On a wind-scoured March afternoon, adults gather for sidewalk gab beside neat houses as children shoot ball at DeSota Street Park.

"Just a dark little ol' place," remembers Ruth Cantrell, 77, a long-time resident battling throat cancer.

The dark survives on Gainesville zoning maps. They show gray-colored industrial zones along DeSota and McDonald streets, Newtown's ugly side. DeSota's slim backyards butt against Gainesville Scrap Iron and Metal and overlook railroad tracks that helped form both business and community.

Rising like a reminder above Newtown rooflines is the Purina Mills feed mill — tall, tan, and humming with energy. The red-checkered logos became bulls-eyes in



the 1970s as resident complaints about waste water and grain dust spurred a state inquiry and company cleanup.

Concerns cropped up again in 1990 when the Florist Club, formed to raise money to buy flowers for community funerals, counted 12 dead from disease in some 10 years along DeSota, Emily, and Harvey streets.

A Georgia Department of Human Resources survey followed in May 1990. Results linked a high rate of oral cancers to smoking and drinking, but Newtown residents scoff at the study. And they're not alone. The Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste and the Legal Environmental Assistance Foundation, two national environmental groups, rate the research superficial.

Dust complaints are common to feed mills, said Paul Luther, Purina environmental and safety services manager. "Everything in the feed is approved for food-chain consumption. We have never had any reports of cancer or serious illness from residents and employees."

Other companies often mentioned

include Southern Tank, which makes steel tanks, and Cargill, a massive soybean refinery. Yet Cargill, like Purina, is low on a list of 33 Hall companies that reported releasing poisons into the environment from 1987 through 1991, federal Toxic Release Inventory data shows. Southern Tank is not required to file the annual reports.

### OLD DUMP IN QUESTION

The Florist Club is making a checklist of contamination sources. Tracking polluters that file release reports is high on the list. Also to be investigated:

▼ **Workplace exposure.** Roland Waller, 54, believes his congestive heart failure stems from years of working in chemical fumes at the Leece-Neville Division of Prestolite, Inc. The same fumes blew from the factory, closed in 1992, toward DeSota, he said.

Newtown's Charlie Sims and Lee Whelchel also worked at the plant. Whelchel died of lung cancer and Sims of a heart attack that an autopsy report

said was influenced by chemicals, son Tyrone Sims said.

▼ **Underground garbage.** Benjamin Rucker, 70, recalls hunting snakes at a dump stretching the breadth of Newtown, from Bethel AME Church to Emily Street. City officials say that the April 6, 1936, tornado wiped out any records of such a dump, but an old dump might pose a threat.

Though the chemical craze dates back only to mid-century, industrial waste from the early 1900s could spell trouble, said Bill Rathje, a University of Arizona archaeologist who digs up old dumps. "My guess is you're dealing with an open dump where the material has been largely incinerated and degraded. Unless you dig it up, nobody knows."

City officials are awaiting the Florist Club's plan for tackling the issue, City Manager Al Crace said. "We're not on a scavenger hunt."

Club members and others in Newtown charge that city officials are giving them the brush-off. "That junkyard would never happen if there were white opposition," Jerry Castleberry said, referring to Gainesville Scrap Iron and Metal, a common source of complaints. Gainesville Scrap Iron co-owner Harrison Haynes declined comment.

Crace argues, in part, that the city's hands are tied because the mix of homes and businesses predates zoning in Gainesville. And talk of a moratorium on new industry in the neighborhood, or of a buyout of Newtown or area businesses, has led nowhere.

Other than water testing, the environmental questions "are beyond our capability," Crace said. Produce evidence "of some kind of substantial problem, and we'll be glad if we have any experience in that area to use it," he said.

Developments that may shed new light on environmental concerns in Newtown and the Southside include a pending analysis of soil samples to help locate the dump site, upcoming meetings for a proposed state Environmental Justice Act that would require the state to gauge health risks before issuing permits to polluters, and potential good neighbor tours at area companies.

Whatever action is taken, residents want the issue answered. Faye Bush has endured a cyst in her vocal chords, a triple bypass, and lupus. She is confident of the source.

"I really believe it's linked to the environment," Bush said. "I guess I'll go to my grave saying that." □

## A GREEN MOVEMENT OF COLOR?

Vicente Bautista is translating Hall County recycling pamphlets into Spanish. He's also helping Operation Clean Sweep, involving minority neighborhoods.

"We try to encourage the Hispanics to participate more actively from recycling to keeping everything clean," the owner of Chipicuario Restaurant said. Bautista's work is a leading example of how green groups in Hall are showing shades of something other than white.

The change in a county 87 percent white yet growing more diversified reflects a nationwide call for environmental justice. The movement is rooted in the revelation that minorities and the poor are subject to more pollution at home than other social groups.

Green giants such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Sierra Club have responded by revising white-oriented hiring and program records. But locally, despite signs of change, minorities are missing from many environmental groups and government boards. The five-member Hall County Environmental Quality

Board, which led the stormy search for a new landfill site, is 100 percent white.

Other all-white panels include the Grand Jury Watchdog Committee that guards Lake Lanier, the Gainesville and Hall County planning commissions, and three advisory groups that helped develop Hall's solid-waste plan.

Diversity pluses include blacks on zoning appeals boards and on volunteer groups tackling minority issues.

Reasons given for the lack of minorities in grassroots environmentalism include language barriers, economics that leave little time for causes, and developing environmental awareness. "The more we learn, the more we'll become involved," said Faye Bush of the all-black Newtown Florist Club, champion of Southside environmental issues.

Ironically, the office that takes the most heat on environmental issues rates big on minority hiring. The salaried workforce of the state Environmental Protection Division lists 27 percent minorities, or 132 of its 487 employees.

— R.L.

# Separate Justice

The war on drugs has rolled back the clock in Virginia courts, reversing decades of progress toward racial equality.

**By Bob Gibson**

*The Daily Progress*



*Is the federal war on drugs racially biased? To answer that question, reporter Bob Gibson surveyed more than 1,300 criminal*

*cases in Charlottesville and Albemarle County, Virginia. He considered 28 variables for each case, from the race, age, and sex of defendants to who the lawyers and judges were. He compared the charges to demographic data, and interviewed scores of police officers, lawyers, judges, cocaine users, and policy experts.*

*The two-year survey documented that most racial disparity in sentencing stems from drug-law enforcement. When The Daily Progress made the drug war's effects on courts and communities a major focus of a six-part series, two area police chiefs reacted by declaring the drug war a failure.*

**CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.** — Area courts are a casualty of the war on drugs — condemned to dole out two kinds of justice.

In the majority of cases, courts in Charlottesville and Albemarle County ignore race, but the same courts give blacks and the poor harsher punishments if they are caught with crack cocaine. A survey of more than 1,300 court cases from 1989 through 1991 suggests that the criminal-justice system in Charlottesville and Albemarle, instead of being an effective weapon in the community's battle to stem the increasingly violent drug trade, may be serving to exacerbate the problem.

Among the survey's key findings:

▼ Blacks accounted for three out of every four people convicted of a felony and given a sentence longer than one year. Take away crack-cocaine cases, and the racial disparity in sentencing virtually disappears.

▼ Nearly one in six black men between the ages of 18 and 29 in Charlottesville was charged with a felony each year in the survey period.

▼ Half the black felons in Charlottesville and Albemarle sentenced to over a

year were jailed for cocaine offenses.

▼ People convicted of selling or possessing cocaine to sell were sentenced to longer average prison terms than those convicted of armed robbery or burglary. A conviction for cocaine distribution netted an average sentence of more than four years; convicted burglars received an average of 14 months.

▼ Police have arrested drug suspects at a record clip since 1989, and nine out of every 10 cocaine suspects convicted of felonies have been black. However, national surveys, including a 1989 Public Health Service report, show that more whites than blacks use cocaine.

▼ It is largely the area's poor who go to prison, at least in part because of the cut-rate legal representation they get. More than 88 percent of the blacks and 78 percent of the whites given sentences over one year had court-appointed lawyers. Only three other states pay court-appointed lawyers less than Virginia.

▼ University of Virginia students arrested for using their illegal drug of choice — alcohol for those under age 21 — received no time in jail. The average

**OTHER WINNERS** For investigative reporting in Division Two (circulation of 30,000 to 100,000):

**Second Prize** to Rocky Rosen and Paul Bonner of the *Herald-Sun* in Durham, North Carolina, for a provocative series revealing the incompetence, underfunding, and bureaucratic dynamics behind the deaths of children neglected by county social services.

black crack user — someone convicted of possessing a small amount and not convicted of dealing — received an average 161-day sentence and a felony conviction to boot.

## EQUAL ENFORCEMENT

The disparities fostered by the drug war are more than unfair. They are, many believe, counterproductive, undermining the family structure, eroding property rights, and warping the economy in low-income neighborhoods.

The prospects of winning the drug war are so bleak that the police chiefs of Charlottesville and Albemarle say the debate over national drug strategy should include the possibility of decriminalization. Police chiefs John Bowen of Charlottesville and John Miller of Albemarle said trying to stem the supply of crack cocaine by jailing dealers is not working. New policies that address the demand for cocaine and the lack of good jobs should be part of the national debate over a social problem that police can't solve, they said.

The court survey supports observations from many in the community that, aside from drug cases, Charlottesville-area courts became more fair in the treatment of black suspects during the past 20 years. Most of the racial disparity that remains in sentencing does not appear to be a result of conscious discrimination by a judge or jury. Instead, the longer average sentences given black defendants result from the fact that 250 more blacks than whites were arrested for cocaine crimes since 1989 and from the harshness of the sentences that judges and especially juries give for crack offenses.

The vast majority of local cocaine arrests involved crack cocaine, a crystallized form of the drug that is smoked rather than sniffed or injected. Police arrested relatively few users of powder cocaine, which police say is used mostly by whites and not sold in violence-filled markets.

"As Victor Hugo said, the laws in Paris against sleeping under bridges are enforced equally against rich and poor," observed Charlottesville lawyer George Gilliam.

With the arrival of crack cocaine from the Washington area in 1988, residents of Charlottesville's black neighborhoods asked police for help. A special narcotics unit made up of Charlottesville, Albemarle, and University of Virginia officers was formed in 1990. It went after the people they were asked to get: street-level dealers and users who transformed neighborhoods into open-air drug markets. The officers employed new strategies, such as direct indictments, which allow police to bypass lower courts and make guilty pleas easier to obtain.

But the number of crack arrests con-

only 28 cocaine suspects in 1987, with four of the arrests in Albemarle. In 1991, the 171 cocaine arrests by local police included 35 in the county. "We are spending millions and millions of dollars to incarcerate crack dealers and seeing limited results," said Stanley Powell, a veteran local probation and parole officer.

Meanwhile, violence is increasing and more people are dying in drug-related murders. The five Charlottesville homicides so far this year include three cocaine-related slayings, Bowen said. The city had only three homicides all last year.

In Albemarle so far this year, there have been two homicides, and both are believed to be related to crack dealing. Last year, there was one slaying in the county.

Police also say they are alarmed by a significant increase in the presence of firearms, especially large-caliber weapons, among cocaine dealers.

City and county police arrested only 28 cocaine suspects in 1987, with four of the arrests in Albemarle. In 1991, the 171 cocaine arrests by local police included 35 in the county.

## THE COLOR OF JUSTICE

A two-year survey of court records in Charlottesville and Albemarle, Virginia revealed that blacks receive longer average jail sentences than whites — especially for cocaine convictions.

Offense	# of Convictions	Average prison term in days
Cocaine	Black: 59	Black: 1,465
	White: 6	White: 391
Violent crimes	Black: 23	Black: 1,228
	White: 16	White: 1,005
Burglary	Black: 31	Black: 281
	White: 19	White: 686
Grand larceny	Black: 32	Black: 265
	White: 25	White: 300
Other property	Black: 35	Black: 243
	White: 30	White: 165
Forgery	Black: 27	Black: 143
	White: 10	White: 28

tinues to grow, and the problem just keeps shifting among neighborhoods and expanding into Albemarle County, police said. City and county police arrested

High recidivism rates and low cure rates for crack addicts make many cocaine felons ill-suited for current alternative sentencing programs in the area, he said.

## HARSH SENTENCES

Despite its mixed results in the streets, the drug war is creating racial imbalances in courts, jails, and prisons and promoting a costly and repetitious warehousing of damaged human freight. A one-year prison term costs state taxpayers more than \$7,000 per inmate.

After getting out of prison, cocaine felons are more likely to return to criminal activity than to find and hold a job. The survey showed higher repeat conviction rates among cocaine felons than almost any other category of crime that did not involve alcohol.

"The courts are running out of options," Bowen said.



Police add that treatment for crack addicts often fails if they lack adequate support systems and return to the same jobless environment.

Bowen said his officers are frustrated. "The evidence is the same number of users are still out there, probably more than there were several years ago. We've kind of cleaned the corners off in one neighborhood, but the corners are kind of getting clogged in another neighborhood."

Some city officials wonder whether tougher sentencing for drug crimes is creating a class of poor blacks who are being sent the message that they are both undesirable and expendable. Drug users and dealers with no jobs to protect fall into the lifestyles of the hopeless who don't care about police or laws, much less the rights of other people, said William Harris, a University of Virginia professor and city-planning commissioner.

Said Bowen: "The attitude of these people is, 'We are not going to live much past 25 so we ought to do our thing now.'"

Meanwhile, the cost of keeping felons behind bars is increasing, and Vir-

ginia is keeping them for shorter stays by doubling the rate of early parole during the past 12 years. In July 1980, the state budgeted \$11,052 per inmate in the prison system to incarcerate its 8,295 inmates. By July 1991, that cost had increased to \$17,501 a year for each of 15,326 prison inmates, said Richard Hickman, a Senate Appropriations Committee aide who studies prison issues. The state now has about 18,000 felons behind bars in local jails and state prisons.

Former Charlottesville Circuit Judge Herbert Pickford believes Virginians are not willing to pay for the thousands of additional prison beds that will be needed if the courts continue sentencing people to prison for drug offenses. State legislative staffers estimate that, even with seven new prisons due to provide 5,200 new beds by 1996, the state will be 2,100 beds short of its projected prison population.

Although many Virginians aren't willing to pay for more prisons, juries in Charlottesville and Albemarle County gave cocaine defendants average sentences five times longer than those handed down by judges. Judges and ju-

rors said black jurors tend to be at least as harsh in dealing with black cocaine dealers as white jurors.

Police and prosecutors, who say they are frustrated by their inability to curb cocaine-related crime or get sentences longer than five years in most cases, are trying two new approaches.

One innovation is a police operation that began last summer to target buyers of crack cocaine. Of the first 34 people who tried to buy crack from undercover officers during Operation Paranoia, the majority were white, Bowen said.

In addition to targeting users, police are seeking longer prison terms for dealers by transferring cases into federal court. The joint narcotics squad has sought the transfer of more than 50 cases involving crack cocaine into federal court since 1989. Under stringent federal guidelines, repeat crack dealers get longer sentences than the state court system gives and have no chance of parole.

The federal sentencing formulas treat crack cocaine more harshly than powder cocaine, a point city drug detectives made in a 1991 report. "If there is an issue that might be perceived as unfair, it would be the difference in sentencing guidelines for crack versus powder cocaine," wrote Sergeant J.E. Chip Harding. "A defendant must be convicted of 100 times the weight in powder cocaine than crack to reach the same mandatory sentencing levels."

The only difference between powder and crack is "a few minutes in water and baking soda," Harding said. But another major difference is that crack is marketed on city streets almost exclusively by young black men, police said.

Who are these dealers? They are people who, lacking good jobs, will hustle almost anything in the streets to make a few hundred dollars. M. Scott Goodman, who has defended more crack suspects than any other Central Virginia lawyer over the past three years, said many of them are the same young men seen scalping tickets before University of Virginia football and basketball games.

"If they could sell University of Virginia football or basketball tickets every day, they'd be selling tickets instead of drugs," said Goodman. "You can make a couple hundred dollars that way. I know the people. I say hello to every single one of them." □

## DISCOUNT LAWYER, MORE TIME

A person who goes to trial with a court-appointed lawyer in the Charlottesville area is no more likely to be found guilty than someone who pays for a lawyer.

But if found guilty, the person with the court-appointed lawyer is likely to receive a sentence three times longer.

In Charlottesville and Albemarle County from 1989 to 1991, defendants who hired their own lawyer and were convicted of any crime received an average sentence of 148 days. The average sentence for defendants with a court-appointed lawyer was 544 days.

Those convicted of cocaine felonies who retained their own lawyer received an average of 770 days in prison. Those with a court-appointed lawyer got 1,536 days.

The longer sentences do not necessarily reflect the quality of court-appointed lawyers as much as they reflect the problems of the poor,

including their tendency to have a higher rate of prior convictions, various Charlottesville lawyers and other court professionals said. But a number of lawyers who handle court-appointed cases said that lawyers representing poor clients often don't prepare as well for the sentencing phase of a trial as they might when defending paying clients.

The state pay for defending poor clients in Virginia is, by legal standards, dirt cheap — and among the lowest in the nation. Court-appointed lawyers are paid a maximum of \$100 per case in general district court. State reimbursement rates in circuit court felony cases allow up to \$265 if a suspect faces up to 20 years in prison. In cases where someone faces 20 years to life in prison, the state pays up to \$575. Forty-six states pay court-appointed lawyers more.

— B.G.

# The Burden of Waste

Students in New Orleans public schools suffer as board members put politics above learning.

**By Chris Adams**

*The Times-Picayune*



*In most New Orleans public schools, children have to put up with oppressive heat, ancient textbooks, and playgrounds*

*void of swing sets. School board members are the first to acknowledge the poor environment for learning, yet they do nothing.*

*To understand why, Chris Adams of the New Orleans Times-Picayune spent six months touring 40 local schools. He conducted 200 interviews, filed 30 Freedom of Information requests, and reviewed 20,000 pages of federal, state, and local records. His three-day series brought a quick response: Voters ousted several board members, and the school administration launched immediate reforms.*

**NEW ORLEANS, LA.** — Desi DeLarge scanned her pre-kindergarten classroom at Alfred Lawless Elementary one April day and saw what was wrong with the Orleans Parish school system.

Above her, wires dangled from a hole in the ceiling where a fan — stolen years ago — was never replaced. Outside, the grass grew knee-high. The school's lawnmower was broken.

DeLarge's supply cabinet was filled with crayons and paper that had just arrived — eight months after she had ordered it. The nearest bathroom was closed because of backed-up sewage that one day spilled urine ankle-deep on the floor.

And her exhausted four-year-olds napped on the floor, half their tiny bodies sprawled on thin foam mats, half on dingy tile last wet-mopped eight months before. DeLarge was told the school couldn't afford enough cleaning supplies.

What's happening at Lawless is no anomaly in a city that can't — or doesn't — provide for its students. In ways big and small, the essentials of an adequate, safe, and clean education do not exist for most of the 82,500 children who spend their days in New Orleans public schools.

The Orleans Parish School Board and

Superintendent Everett Williams say they're powerless to do anything. External forces, such as a low tax base, are the reasons for smelly bathrooms, crumbling buildings, and missing supplies, they say.

But a review of system finances and leadership during the last decade reveals a plethora of internal problems that equally conspire to rob New Orleans children of a decent place to go to school, and, ultimately, a decent education.

▼ Williams and the board are correct. Compared with other big cities, Orleans Parish starts with a low tax base.

▼ Some of the money the system receives is squandered by school board members who award lucrative contracts to political friends, and by a cumbersome administration that allows hundreds of thousands in federal grant dollars to go unspent.

▼ The school board has built up long-term debt to trim short-term deficits. That could hurt its chances for borrowing in later years.

This year, the board stemmed a \$20 million deficit by cutting teachers and programs. It wasn't the first time the board had to rein in spending. It won't be

## **OTHER WINNERS** For investigative reporting in Division One (circulation over 100,000):

**Second Prize** to Karen Garloch and Paige Williams of the *Charlotte Observer* for their series on nursing homes, "Pain and Profit," which combined in-depth research with sensitive profiles for a fresh look at an old topic.

**Third Prize** to Jim Morris of the *Houston Chronicle* for examining the personal horror and institutional irresponsibility associated with the deadly occupational disease, silicosis.

the last. Next year, the deficit may be the highest ever — \$30 million.

“Unfortunately, there is no way possible this school district can educate youngsters at the level I think they ought to be educated,” said Williams, who is leaving the superintendent’s job. “I’ve been in this role for seven years, and there’s only one year I didn’t have to make any cuts. So we end up with problems we can’t attend to. Our schools are unkempt. We can’t afford to fix things that need to be fixed.”

## HOMEWORK WITHOUT BOOKS

What does this mean for the children? Ask Lois Adams.

Her son Chris, who attended Live Oak Middle and Warren Easton Senior High schools, often left school without his textbooks. The schools couldn’t afford to replace lost textbooks, so they forbid children to take them home. “If you know you weren’t allowed to bring a book home, you certainly wouldn’t think about homework once you left school,” Lois Adams said.

Lost textbooks are just part of the problem. The New Orleans public school system is a place where one in two classrooms isn’t air-conditioned, one in three drinking fountains doesn’t work, one in seven elementary schools has no playground equipment, one in nine high schools has no gymnasium, and one in 11 children attends school in decrepit temporary and portable classrooms — many of them in the same place since the 1950s.

It’s a system that outrages a father when his third-grader’s textbook is so old it lists Babe Ruth — not Hank Aaron — as major league baseball’s home-run king.

It’s a system that forces an eight-year-old named Marshall to hold his bladder all day.

Marshall will not step into his Lawless Elementary bathroom: “It smells stinky in there,” he explained. “I wait to go at home. I’ll hold it, I’ll hold it all day. Sometimes it hurts, but if you go in the bathroom you might slip. And it stinks.”

## PAYING THE PRICE

Anyone looking for someone to blame for the sorry state of New Orleans schools should first look in the mirror. Louisianians — New Orleanians in particular —

have been unwilling to finance schools at the level of other communities, so city schools have for years made do on 80 to 90 cents for every dollar other big cities get.

Although at \$350 million, the New Orleans public school system is well-financed by state averages, it is poorly financed compared with large systems nationwide. Some, such as Pittsburgh, get twice as much as New Orleans to spend for every pupil. Just to reach the national average, Orleans public schools would need \$70 million more a year, an increase of 20 percent.

The low tax base is aggravated by priorities that put fewer dollars into the classroom than other big cities. Of its to-

during the past 20 years, it has lost 25,000 students but gained 700 employees.

Aggravating the problem is a heavy reliance on parents and business partners to pay for supplies the school system should provide. So some schools are enriched while others languish. Supplies that seem routine in other systems and in some Orleans public schools are nowhere to be found at other Orleans schools.

At Marie C. Couvent Elementary, Principal Mildred Weber pointed to a spot on the asphalt. “This is where they cut down the playground equipment,” she said. Because of safety concerns, equipment resting on concrete was removed. At some schools, it was reinstalled above a soft, rubber surface, but Couvent, like 12 of 80 elementary schools, has no equipment left.

“It’s very cheap to take the equipment out,” said Ken Ducote, school board facilities director. “What costs money is putting it back in. If it’s a choice between playground equipment and textbooks, we’ll go with textbooks.”

## STORY OF A SINK

Overseeing 120 schools and 9,000 employees is an administration criticized for lax management and a school board critics say is more interested in politics than education.

Take the administration. In 1990, an audit found 49 deficiencies in the system’s books. The next year, 22 mistakes were repeated. In 1986, the state Department of Health and Hospitals cited S.J. Peters Middle School because it had no sink in the cook’s bathroom. The administration promised to install one, but the school was cited again in 1988, twice in 1989, and again in 1990.

This isn’t just about one bathroom sink in one school. In 1986, Williams presented a five-year plan to turn around the city’s schools. Five years later, few of the goals had been met. The annual progress reports Williams promised stopped after three years.

The heart of the plan was to increase student performance, but after five years, test scores had dropped slightly, dropouts and suspensions had increased, and secondary-student attendance dropped more than five percent.

Last November, Deputy Superintendent John Smith announced another plan

Photo by G. Andrew Boyd/Times-Picayune



SEEN THROUGH A BROKEN WINDOW, SIXTH-GRADER TRACY JEFFERSON WAITS FOR THE LUNCH BELL AT EDWARD ELEMENTARY IN NEW ORLEANS.

tal school budget, New Orleans spends 54 percent on instruction, the rest for services such as transportation, book-keeping, and the salaries of top administrators. Some cities spend 65 percent on instruction.

Compared with the nation’s 100 biggest school systems, New Orleans ranks 74th in instructional spending. Since Williams and the current school board took office, the system has spent an even smaller percentage on instruction.

Compared with Louisiana systems, Orleans spends more money per pupil than almost any other parish. But it also packs more students into every classroom than almost any parish — up to 27 per class in middle school, for example. And



—“New Orleans Public Schools 2000: A Vision for the Future.” It was to be a bold, new, and comprehensive initiative. Smith paid a consultant \$1,750 to set up the plan. A committee was announced to spearhead the project. It included Walker Tucei, head of a highly regarded accounting firm in New Orleans. The committee met twice, the last time more than six months ago. Said Tucei: “I don’t know anything about the plan. Nobody ever told me I was appointed to anything.”

Overseeing the administration is a board that has been criticized for a lack of planning and for letting politics and patronage influence its decisions.

One of its harshest critics now is Williams — who for seven years uttered nary a critical word of the seven-member body that twice approved his contract. But last month, Williams said the board doesn’t understand its role, thwarts his attempts to save money, and pays little attention to the budget. “I’ve been here for 35 years, and this is the worst board I’ve seen,” Williams said. “I’ve got another whole year on my contract that I have no interest in simply because I can’t tolerate this board any longer.”

For years the school board has balanced its budget by closing schools and cutting academic programs — while paying millions of dollars to politically connected lawyers, bankers, and architects.

Once again this year, the board nickel-and-dimed its way out of a \$20 million deficit. It cut 40 teachers and a half dozen school programs, some as small as a \$5,000 program to increase school safety, some as big as the year-round schooling at Lockett and Moton elementaries that had put New Orleans at the forefront of educational reform.

The school board said it couldn’t find the money to save these programs, but the money is there. To find it, the board need look no further than its own accounting books.

It could look at legal fees. New Orleans public schools spend far more for lawyers than other big school systems in the state.

It could look at administration. The system’s bureaucracy forfeits much-needed grant money for innovative programs, such as new computer labs and magnet schools, simply because it doesn’t spend the cash in time.

It could look at how it awards professional-services contracts. Without seeking competing prices, the board often awards lucrative contracts to political allies. Of 32 people who have given more than \$1,000 to school-board campaigns since the 1988

elections, 26 do business with the board.

Consider this case:

The same night board members admonished a worker for not using both sides of scrap paper, the board hired an architect for a job worth \$65,000 in fees.

Bonie Associates, Inc., which has given to current board members Avra O’Dwyer, Paul Sens, and Carl Robinson and is the ninth biggest contributor overall, submitted a proposal. The facilities planning department reviewed it and eight others. Eight were judged acceptable; Bonie Associates was not, according to a confidential memo sent to board members.

School board member Betty Jefferson looked at the list of acceptable firms. “My recommendation is not on the list. You may add to this list Bonie Associates,” she said.

Down the line, board members named their choice. Bonie Associates got five votes — and the contract.

Sens said he voted for Walker Bonie, whom he described as “a friend of mine and a contributor,” because Bonie deserved an acceptable rating. Robinson said he voted for Bonie because “I just voted with the majority.”

When reminded that he cast his vote for Bonie before a majority was established, Robinson said, “I guess I voted that way because Dr. Jefferson asked me to.”

Many of the contractors who make

campaign contributions say it’s part of doing business in New Orleans. “It’s the way of life,” said Ernest Colbert of C&S Consultants, a construction-management firm. “They send out tickets for fundraisers and we buy them.”

## STUDENTS BEAR BRUNT

When things at the top don’t work properly, students feel the effects.

They’re children like Harold, a student at Valena C. Jones Elementary. When the state inspected his special-ed program, they found Harold didn’t pay attention in class. “Harold’s hearing aid has not functioned at all this year,” an official wrote. No one at the school had checked.

They’re children like those at Charles E. Gayarre Elementary, where Principal Roslyn Smith constantly battles the school system to make sure textbooks arrive at the start of the year. “I can’t have a first-grader who’s just learning math concepts wait until November to get his book. But I often do,” Smith said. “There’s never a time when I have 100 students and 100 textbooks.”

One year, Gayarre waited for its shipment of new social studies books, but there wasn’t enough money to buy all the books. “So somebody made the decision to buy half the books then, the other half later,” Smith said. “We happened to be a school that never got the other half.” □

## EXTRA CREDIT

In 1980, the Orleans Parish School Board pulled the plug on Robert R. Moton Elementary, a decrepit school where chunks of ceiling would occasionally crash onto children’s desks.

In 1991, Joseph Kohn Middle School was mothballed, its foundation listed in critical condition.

In two years, children at Alfred Lawless Elementary — a place where termites chew through the floor and brick walls fall apart — will leave their school. Then Lawless will be put to rest, too.

But though the children will be gone, the taxpayers of New Orleans will be reminded of the schools for years to come. Moton, Kohn, and Lawless were built with cheap materials and poor designs in the 1950s, when the city’s student population was exploding. The bonds sold to build them were to be

paid off in 1993, but because of four bond refinancings, payments were extended until 2015. When today’s Lawless sixth-graders are 35 — old enough to have sixth-graders of their own — they’ll still be paying for a school closed a quarter century before.

That fact illustrates two glaring — and closely related — realities about this city’s public schools: its growing level of debt and its crumbling schools.

Normally, school systems borrow money to build and repair schools by selling bonds, but in New Orleans, the school board — through desperation or political expediency — has used the sale of bonds to reduce what have become annual deficits. The board has built up a level of debt so high that unless extra tax money or state aid arrives, the system won’t be able to borrow for years to come.

— C.A.

# Winning the War Against AIDS

By *DiAna DiAna*

**A**cquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome was first diagnosed in the United States in the late 1970s. Since that time, AIDS has killed more than 204,000 Americans — half in the past two years alone. Another 185,000 of the one million people infected with the HIV virus are expected to die by the end of 1994.

Nearly half of those diagnosed with the virus are blacks and Latinos. Women and youth in rural Southern communities now constitute the fastest growing segment of people with AIDS.

Yet despite such alarming statistics, the federal and state governments have been slow in implementing programs to stop the spread of AIDS. In place of government inactivity, a number of grassroots organizations have emerged.

Our organization, the South Carolina AIDS Education Network, was formed eight years ago to combat the growing number of AIDS cases in our state. Like many grassroots organizations we suffer from a lack of funding, which forces us to make creative use of the resources we have. To reach more people in the community, I operate some of our AIDS educational programs out of my beauty salon, DiAna's Hair Salon.

I hand out AIDS information to all my clients when they come in the shop and show videos on AIDS prevention while they wait for their hair to dry. I also have condoms available for anyone who wants them, and keep books and other publications around so customers can read them while waiting for their appointments.

It's amazing how many people we

set up similar programs in their shops. These same people can also be valuable resources in spreading information to their schools, community groups, and churches.

Our organization has developed several techniques that we think may be of use to other grassroots groups doing similar work. While we realize that there is no one way of winning the war against

AIDS, we would like to share a few lessons we have learned in our local battles:

▼ **Speak to your community in a way they can hear.** Many of the communities where we work have a low literacy rate, making it impossible to simply pass out AIDS literature and instruct people to read it. To solve this problem, we asked people in the community who can draw well to create low-literacy AIDS education publications.

These books use simple, hand-drawn pictures of "sad faces" and "happy faces" to illustrate ways people can prevent AIDS.

They are also careful to show people who look

like the ones we are trying to educate, since people can relate more when they see familiar faces and language they can understand. As a result, we have found that the books actually have more effect in the communities where we work than

have educated on the job. After all, if people trust hair stylists to make them look good, why not trust us to keep them healthy as well?

In the past year, we have begun helping hair stylists throughout the Southeast



**DIANA DIANA (RIGHT) AND DR. BAMBI SUMPTER STAND BY A STREET SIGN NAMED FOR A FILM THAT FEATURED THEIR WORK WITH THE SOUTH CAROLINA AIDS EDUCATION NETWORK.**

government publications which cost thousands of dollars more to produce.

▼ **Train teenagers to educate their peers.** Because AIDS is spreading fastest among teenagers in the rural South, we have established an "AIDS Busters" program which teaches youth from eight to 26 to go out into the community and teach "AIDS 101" to their peers. They can break it down and explain the risk of AIDS infection to friends their own age much better than an adult can. They also play a vital role in helping parents understand the types of peer pressure their children experience.

▼ **Talk about sex.** We often talk about at-risk AIDS groups such as IV drug users, but let's face it — there are a lot more people having sex than sharing needles. No one wants to talk about sex in public, but everyone's doing it in private. Young boys brag about the number of children their girlfriends have, as if it is a mark of distinction to have as many kids as possible before finishing high school. This has to change.

To help reduce the chance of infection in our youth and to provide an educational forum for adults, we have started "Safer Sex Parties." This new method of AIDS education teaches people how to have "outercourse" instead of "intercourse" — how to have fun without sharing body fluids. It also teaches them how to use condoms, dental dams, finger cots, and latex gloves.

There is no nudity or physical contact at the parties. They are usually held in the form of a game show, a skills-building exercise designed to get people to communicate with each other and share "safer sex" ideas. If we can get parents and kids to open up to each other and talk about sex at these parties, then perhaps they will feel more comfortable talking about the subject at home.

▼ **Redefine "at risk" to include women from different backgrounds and marital status.** I remember one

women who told me that her doctor said she was not at risk for AIDS because she was married and didn't use drugs. This kind of misinformation plagues the medical establishment. According to the Centers for Disease Control, women will soon make up 80 percent of those diagnosed with the AIDS virus.

Yet married women and women in monogamous relationships are told that they are not at risk — a cultural stereotype that can make women afraid to demand safe sex from their partners. Many think that if they refuse to "give it up," their partner will go elsewhere.

In our training, we emphasize that *everyone* is at risk. We also emphasize that everyone has a right to protect themselves — regardless of marital status.

▼ **Utilize the churches.** For years,

AIDS is a medical issue, not a moral issue, and religious leaders should be given mandatory classes on AIDS infection and how the disease is transmitted. No one can pretend to be a leader if they cannot address issues that are relevant and real to the people who attend their services.

We teach religious leaders that it's better to pray with a person beside us than from beside a graveside. Churches must continue to serve as the backbone of our community in the face of this deadly epidemic — but they must do so through AIDS education. This is not something that we can just pray away.

**T**hese lessons we have learned from fighting AIDS are by no means the only solutions to the crisis. But until there is a cure for AIDS, education represents the only safe measure to guard against the virus.

Let's be realistic. Abstinence is a worthy goal, but we have to face reality. People are having sex, and it doesn't appear that they are going to stop. In order for us to help stop the spread of AIDS, we have to face this fact and be more open.

Like no other plague before, the AIDS epidemic threatens to wipe out an entire generation and leave another orphaned. We must not let cultural, racial, or social barriers distract us from the job that must be done. Nor can we let political ineptitude stop us from our task. This is an undeclared war that everyone must enlist in for us to win. We simply cannot let people continue to die because we don't feel comfortable talking about AIDS. Everyone must become an educator and learn to live. □

*DiAna DiAna is director of the South Carolina AIDS Education Network. Her work has been featured in the film DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Information Up Front, and she contributed to the book Women, AIDS, and Activism.*

## TOOLBOX



For more information about AIDS, or to locate the groups in your area working on education, contact:

**S.C. AIDS Education Network**

2768 Decker Boulevard, Suite 98  
Columbia, SC 29206  
(803) 731-1171

**National Aids Information Clearinghouse**

P.O. Box 6003  
Rockville, MD 20849  
(800) 458-5231

**Centers for Disease Control**

Center for Infectious Disease AIDS Program  
Atlanta, GA 30333  
(404) 329-3651

**National AIDS Hotline**

P.O. Box 13827  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709  
(800) 342-AIDS (English)  
(800) 344-SIDA (Spanish)

many religious leaders have preached that sex without marriage is sinful, and that AIDS is a punishment from God. In the face of the growing epidemic, however, churches are starting to take a proactive role in educating their congregations about AIDS.



# Organizing Memphis

By Elizabeth Sharpe

## AT THE RIVER I STAND: Memphis, the 1968 Strike and Martin Luther King

By Joan Turner Beifuss  
Carlson Publishing. 370 pp. \$75.00

## AT THE RIVER I STAND

Produced by David Appleby, Allison  
Graham, and Steven John Ross  
California Newsreel. 58 min. \$49.00

## SOUTHERN LABOR AND BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS: Organizing Memphis Workers

By Michael Honey  
Illinois University Press. 364 pp. \$17.95

**O**n February 13, 1968, 1,300 black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee walked off their jobs. The strike became the occasion for the final march and subsequent assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came to Memphis to support the workers because their strike visibly combined the fight for civil rights with labor struggles for economic justice. But the potential of grounding the civil rights revolution in a campaign for worker rights proved to be explosive. On April 4, the father of non-violence in the United States was struck down by an assassin's bullet.

Now, two books and a documentary film put the tumultuous strike in a new context. In her superb book, *At the River I Stand*, Joan Turner Beifuss brings to the forefront the role sanitation workers themselves played in shaping an historical moment whose significance has always revolved around King's death. As historian David Garrow notes in the book's preface, the workers did far more than local civic activists, black elected officials, or even King "in belatedly bring-

ing the real impact of the civil rights movement to one of the South's largest, but theretofore largely untouched cities, Memphis."

Beifuss makes it clear that workers walked off the job, not because of King, but because they were fed up with low pay and dangerous and dirty working conditions. Garbage bins dripped constantly over their heads. Rain ignited a short in one of the older garbage trucks, causing it to scoop up two workers and crush them to death in the compactor. During the strike, the phrase "I Am a Man" appeared on picket-line placards, issuing a silent cry for dignity.

As Beifuss notes, nothing in Memphis history had prepared city officials for the sanitation conflict. Even though Memphis had a long history of labor activity, including strikes in the private sector, public employees had never struck before, and no one had seriously entertained the thought that workers in such crucial areas as garbage collection would do so. The sanitation workers' union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), did not even know about the strike beforehand and had to scramble to catch up and keep abreast of worker activity. The workers had clearly taken a leadership role.

In addition to acknowledging the sanitation workers' place in labor and civil rights history, *At the River I Stand* also uncovers triumph amidst tragedy. In the early days of the strike, city officials remained unmoved by the labor protest. After the murder of King, however, Memphis sat in stunned silence for the first time in weeks while city after city across the nation burst into flame. When the initial shock subsided and the world turned its attention elsewhere, the strikers continued to press their case. Sixty-five days after the strike began, the city

finally relented. The sanitation workers won union recognition, a dues checkoff, and a pay raise.

The circumstances which led to the telling of *At the River I Stand* are at least as compelling as the story of the strike itself. Beifuss, a Memphis native, was one of over 80 volunteers who formed the Memphis Search for Meaning Committee to make sense out of the horror of King's death. Over the weeks and months that followed the assassination, material poured into the committee's office: newsreel footage, newspaper accounts, bloody signs from the picket lines. These, together with 364 taped interviews conducted by volunteers, made the committee's office the largest archive of material on the sanitation workers' strike anywhere.

Yet it was not the committee but Beifuss who took it upon herself to commit the story to paper. An amateur, she was rebuffed by publishers and resorted to printing the book herself. Reprinted for libraries by Carlson in 1989, it was immediately recognized by scholars as perhaps the finest history of the strike yet written. But *At the River I Stand* did not receive wider public attention until last spring when, in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of King's death, the Department of Communication and Theater Arts at Memphis State released a documentary film by the same name.

The film captures both the drama and the substance of the conflict in an almost seamless narrative. Newsreel footage documents city police provoking sanitation workers by slowly driving police cars into lines of marching employees. Tension mounts as the specter of violence threatens to derail both the workers' and King's movements. No image is more moving, however, than the final cry of joy by T.O. Jones, the leader of the strike, when workers approved the contract. De-

spite King's death, courage triumphed over fear, hope over the degradation and humiliation that blacks in Memphis experienced during that time.

In his commanding study, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, Michael Honey of the University of Washington at Tacoma documents the role of organized labor in the lives of black workers in Memphis during the 1930s and '40s. In doing so, Honey reminds us that King and the sanitation workers were only the latest in a long list of freedom fighters in Memphis who risked their lives struggling for economic and racial justice.

Honey describes some of the earlier crusaders whose struggle paved the way for the 1968 strike. The list includes Thomas Watkins, a labor leader run out of town in 1939 for organizing; R.S. McCann, one-time president of the Tennessee Federation of Labor beaten unconscious by city authorities in 1937; and workers and organizers like Ben McCullough, Norman Smith, and Charles Phillips, each of whom were beaten in separate incidents. Even though city officials were clearly involved in the violence, no arrests were ever made. In 1940, organizer George Bass and worker Claude Parker were beaten by thugs, but police refused to press charges.

Such official resistance to labor organizing took place in the context of white supremacy. Memphis was governed by laws and customs which were designed specifically to protect white skin privilege, and which also served as justification for attacking workers and their representatives. Even white plumbing inspectors enjoyed statutory arrest powers during times of black unrest in Memphis. Although working people of all races shared profound material interests, the rhetoric of white supremacy helped divide them along racial lines.

As Honey makes clear, race was one of the keys to union success or failure in Memphis, and early union efforts foun-dered on the shoals of white supremacy. Even though some black and white

workers managed to forge strong alliances and move to improve their lives in unity, white unions often displayed white supremacist beliefs and employed the physical limitations imposed by segregation.

In the late 1930s, Honey observes, many white workers continued to expect blacks to exhibit deference and formality. "Whites typically addressed blacks by their first names, while blacks had to be careful to call a white 'brother,' or better still, 'mister,' and on strike duty it remained unacceptable for a black to stop a white scab from crossing the picket line. Such temerity by a black 'who behaves above himself,' as whites expressed it, could lead quickly to violence."

In later years, right-wing unions in



Photo courtesy Memphis State

**MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS ISSUED A SILENT PLEA FOR DIGNITY WHEN THEY TOOK THEIR CAUSE TO THE STREET IN 1968.**

Memphis drew the color line and concentrated exclusively on improving their own wages and working conditions. In contrast, left-wing unions built interracial organizations and promoted a broader agenda that included both civil rights and social transformation. Yet until sanitation workers struck in 1968, Honey notes, "the struggle to unite labor and civil rights efforts still had not prevailed."

Such union organizing had the great potential to undermine white supremacy. Unions were strong only to the extent that they could overcome racism and draw upon commonalities to unite black and white workers in a struggle

against oppression. Merging labor and civil rights battles enabled workers to move beyond issues of better pay and working conditions to concerns about the freedom that comes with the security of rights and the demise of poverty. Union organizing like that of the sanitation workers grounded civil rights activists in the pragmatic concerns of day-to-day life for all people. It inspired belief in a social transformation.

In style and approach, the works of Honey and Beifuss could not be more different. *At the River I Stand* is a moving account of a single dramatic event that depicts the central characters in almost novelistic fashion; in contrast, Honey provides structural analysis and historical perspective. Yet both authors energize the reader by portraying ordinary people

shouldering issues larger than themselves. Together, both works establish Memphis as a place which deserves greater attention for the lessons it can teach us about labor and civil rights struggles.

Both Honey and Beifuss also recognize that labor history is more than union history, and both make important contributions to our understanding of the history of working people and the struggle for civil rights.

"Movements for civil rights and labor rights had common origins in a long history of struggles for change," Honey concludes. "Both movements required neighborhood,

church, and workplace organizing. Both used picket lines and mass meetings to make demands on employers and those in power, and both sought federal intervention for beleaguered organizers in the South. To one degree or another, both movements sought to change the way people thought about themselves and their fellow humans. And both movements had to be checked in order to maintain the Southern system. What Memphis authorities feared ... was the organization of people into movements of democracy." □

*Elizabeth Sharpe is a lecturer in history at Jackson State University in Mississippi.*

# The Stroke Belt

By Mary Lee Kerr

**O**ne disabled Virginia-born Woodrow Wilson at the peak of his presidency, another killed Hillary Rodham Clinton's father, and they continue to ravage the South at higher rates than any other region. They are strokes, a condition caused when blood clots or fat deposits deprive brain cells of oxygen, causing paralysis or death.

Although stroke rates nationwide have declined dramatically in the 20th century, strokes are still the third largest killer in the nation. Ten of the 12 states with the highest death rates from strokes are in the South, with South Carolina ranking first.

"The places of high stroke mortality have been in the old Black Belt, farmer, plantation-economy areas," says Steve Wing, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The coastal plain long experienced the highest stroke rates, but with coastal development, higher rates have shifted westward to farmland in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys.

The factors that cause strokes are closely intertwined with elements of Southern culture, from tobacco and fatback to race and poverty. Smoking, for example, is highest among Southern men. "Smoking definitely increases the risk for buildup of plaque in your arteries, and that's the leading cause of stroke," explains Norman Oliver, a writer and editor at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

Black Southerners suffer higher stroke rates than whites, and studies show that stresses related to poverty and racism — "suppressed hostility, thwarted aspirations, and raised blood pressure" — may increase the risk for African Americans. "If you're of a low socioeconomic group, you're less likely to go to the doctor and be told you have high blood pressure," says Oliver. "If you do go and you're prescribed medication, you're less likely to be able to afford it."

Greasy Southern cuisine can also create the fatty plaques that contribute to stroke. "People in the South have diets that traditionally depended on the foods that were discarded by the rich, like pork fat and intestines," says Steve Wing.

Prominent black nutritionists have tried to educate African Americans about the dangers of soul food. Comedian Dick Gregory, who has written diet books and started a diet program, describes fatty food as black genocide. "The quickest way to wipe out a group of people," he says, "is to put them on a soul food diet."

In her vegetarian cookbook *Soul to Soul*, Mary Keyes Burgess says that she stopped cooking with pork after she realized "that eating animal fat may have partially contributed to the fact that many of my family were suffering high blood pressure."

There are medical ways to fight strokes. Aspirin cuts the risk by 80 percent in some patients, non-surgical angioplasty opens blood vessels and prevents clots, and surgery can remove fatty deposits from neck arteries. But with stroke, health officials say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

"We're trying to alert people to the prevention aspect," says Jan Frye-Pierson, a nurse clinician at the Stroke Clinical Research Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "If they have one of the warning signs, it's just as important to go to the doctor as if they have chest pains." Frye-

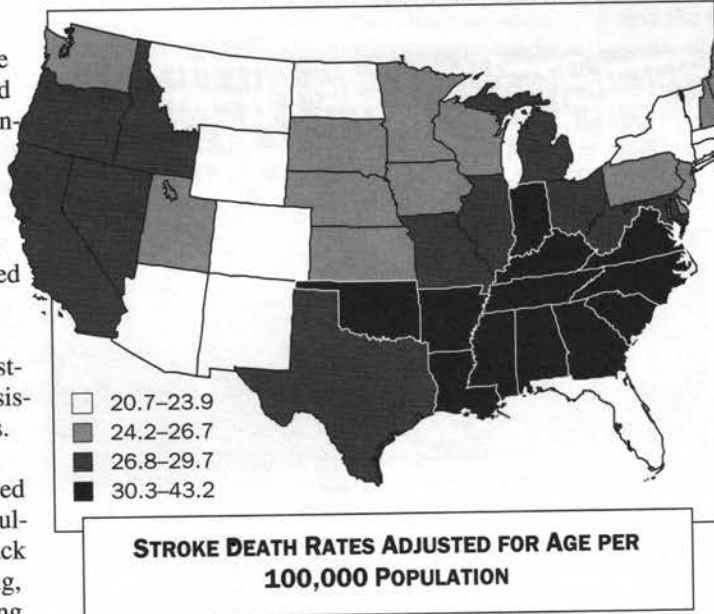
Pierson spends much of her time on the road talking to community groups, and the center has set up an information hotline to answer questions.

Disability, job loss, and depression can follow a stroke, and patients and their families often need both physical and psychological therapy to get back on their feet. Bruce Harrison of Winston-Salem lost some functioning on his left side when he suffered a stroke four years ago. "It was terrifying," says his wife Jackie. But with the help of a support group at the Stroke Center, she says, "we're doing much better."

Her husband Bruce recommends his own, particularly Southern brand of therapy for stroke victims. "It helps to be ornery," he says. □

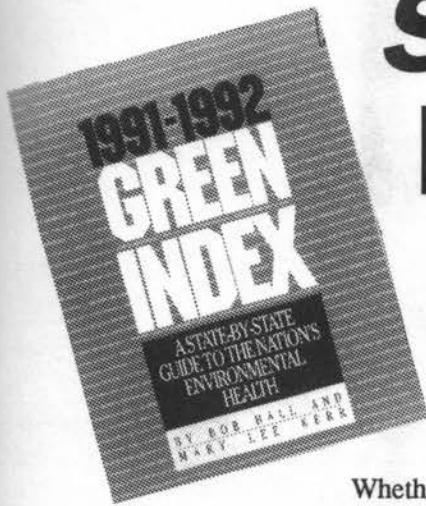
Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate with the Institute for Southern Studies. Melissa Long and Margaret Conrad contributed to this article.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics





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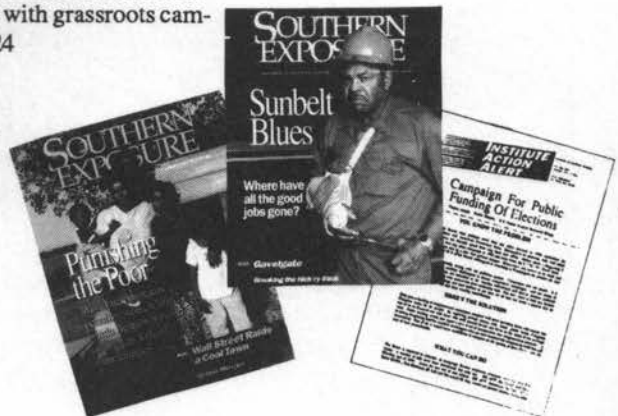
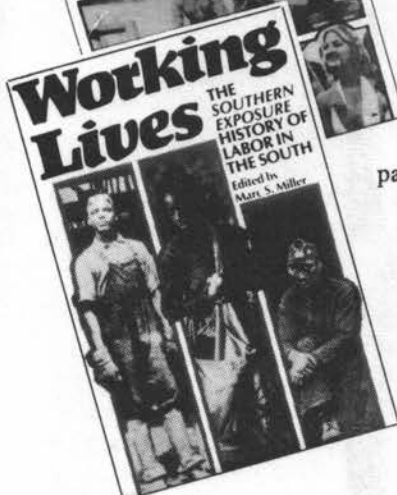
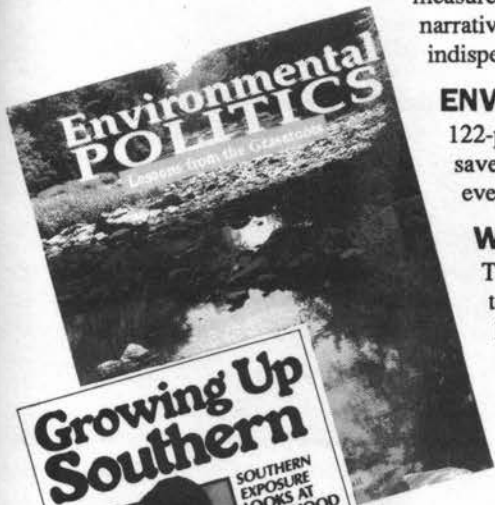
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