

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

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Fishy Business

Catfish is overtaking cotton in the Mississippi Delta, but the plantation mentality remains.

ALSO

The Green Index

New Fiction by Clyde Edgerton

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

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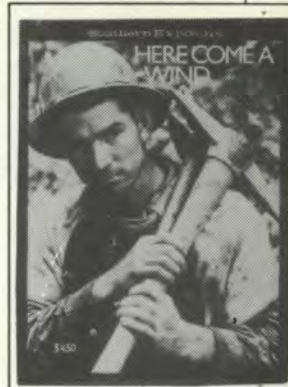
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This 414-page book unearths the hidden history of Southern labor, beyond mint juleps and oil barons to coal dust and auto workers. Choice magazine called it "a superb compilation . . . on a par with the work of Studs Terkel." (\$8)



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DATELINE: THE SOUTH

DECATUR, Ala. (May 15) — The Ku Klux Klan threatened to sue the county Chamber of Commerce for refusing to allow the group to join the local "Adopt-A-Mile" highway cleanup program. Chamber leaders unanimously rejected a bid by the Klan to pick up litter along a county road in return for having the KKK name placed on a roadside sign. "This is a clear case of violating our civil rights," said Klansman Bill McGlockin. "We just won't stand for it."

BATON ROUGE, La. (June 6) — Under a bill approved by the Louisiana State Senate, dealers caught selling drugs to children could be sentenced to death. The bill would apply to any persons age 25 and older convicted of selling cocaine to minors. Asked why he pushed for the death penalty for offenders, State Senator Ben Bagert Jr. replied, "I couldn't think of anything worse."

LUMBERTON, N.C. (June 20) — An Iraqi tank captured during the Persian Gulf War was held hostage for a second time today when state inspectors discovered that it exceeded weight limits on Interstate 95. Impounded overnight, the 50-ton tank was allowed to continue on its way to a victory celebration at Fort Bragg after authorities paid a \$1,810 fine.

DALLAS, Texas (June 6) — Female inmates in the county jail will each be issued three pairs of underwear after a story in the *Dallas Observer* revealed that guards were routinely confiscating bikini-panties and other undergarments that failed to meet prison standards. Dallas County Detentions Commander Bob Knowles dismissed the problem as "a budgetary matter."

CHESNEE, S.C. (June 7) — Michael Hames, a local firefighter convicted on six counts of arson in 1987, was unanimously elected fire chief of the Chesnee Volunteer Fire Department. "I've never had a fascination with fire," insisted Hames. "I was in with the wrong crowd and I paid my price. My past doesn't mean I can't do a good job now."

RICHMOND, Va. (June 9) — The bones of an unknown Civil War soldier discovered by a relic hunter were displayed at the state capitol to allow the curious to pay their respects to the fallen Confederate. Historians speculate the soldier was killed at the Battle of Ware Bottom Church in May 1864. A note found with the bones read: "Please bury this man with all proper dignity and respect in a Confederate ceremony."

KENNESAW, Ga. (June 13) — The Cobb County Health Department is suing two lay midwives, saying the women present an "imminent danger to public health." Doctors want to bar women from delivering babies unless they receive state certification, but midwives say the suit would eliminate an important alternative to hospitals. "Many women feel like obstetricians treat them like a piece of meat going through a factory," said Martha Ivey, one of the midwives being sued.

ATLANTA, Ga. (June 14) — The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced it will investigate charges that consumers are routinely purchasing contaminated chickens. The investigation was prompted in part by testimony from more than 80 poultry plant inspectors. "There's no question there's unhealthy, unwholesome chickens coming out of poultry plants today," said Delmar Jones, chairman of the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals. The USDA has formed two teams to inspect plants.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (June 15) — Over 100 people gathered to greet a group of bicyclists who are retracing the 1,500-mile route traveled by the civil rights Freedom Riders 30 years ago. "Have pride in the enormous progress you have made

in this city," said James Farmer, a key organizer of the original Freedom Rides that helped desegregate public accommodations in the South. "This city gave us the Civil Rights Act. It had been the symbol of all the worst in American culture."

ROANOKE, Va. (June 18) — A federal judge has ruled that the all-male Virginia Military Institute can continue its 152-year tradition of barring women from admission. "Even if the female could physically and psychologically undergo the rigors of the life of a male cadet," U.S. District Judge Jackson Kiser ruled, "her introduction into the process would change it. Thus the very experience she sought would no longer be available."

MIAMI, Fla. (June 19) — Eight-year old Margot Mankes is suing the male-only Boy Scouts of America for discrimination, saying she was kicked out of Cub Scout Pack 350 after leaders discovered she is a girl. Mankes said she didn't want to join the Girl Scouts because "they don't do as much." Her attorney, Mark Rubin, vowed to press the case "until the Boy Scouts yield to admit girl members."



BATON ROUGE, La. (July 1) — State lawmakers approved a study that will research the possibility of New Orleans seceding from the rest of the state. State Representative Arthur Morrell of New Orleans argued that the city contributes much more in taxes than it gets back in state aid. "This study should get the attention of the state on what New Orleans brings to it," said Morrell. If necessary, he suggested, New Orleans could secede from the entire country in order to qualify for foreign aid.

SIGHTING #133546638525364534



AT 3:29 A.M., IN A PARKING GARAGE IN CONETOE, N.C., ONE RUFUS PINCHER SPOTS ELVIS, JESUS, BIGFOOT, THE LOCH NESS MONSTER, AND MICHAEL LANDON CLIMBING INTO A MINI-VAN.

ATLANTA, Ga. (May 15) — Scores of motorists have reported seeing a shadowy image of Jesus hidden among intertwined strands of spaghetti on a Pizza Hut billboard. One inspired driver, fashion designer Joyce Simpson, said her vision convinced her to remain in her church choir instead of singing professionally. Pizza Hut officials disclaim any subliminal message. "I'm kind of stunned by it all," said company spokesman Roger Rydell.

ostrich chicks worth \$132,000. Texas now ranks as the largest supplier of the flightless birds, which are raised as a low-cholesterol, high-protein meat source. "This was our first big year," said Irene Weydell, president of the McQuary ostrich farm. "We had fertile eggs and good chicks — until disaster struck."

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (July 9) — Native American leaders say many of the nearly 13,000 Indians in Arkansas receive inadequate health care because the state has no reservations. The federal government spends \$2 billion a year on services to native Americans, but only for those who live on tribal lands. "Federal officials act as though their only responsibility is to real estate, not people," said Norm DeWeaver of the Arkansas Indian and Native American Employment and Training Coalition.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (July 16) — Public TV officials refused to air "Tongues Untied," an award-winning documentary on the lives of black gay men. Nearly 200 stations nationwide banned the film, which includes brief nudity. Unexpected opposition to the censorship came from conservative minister Donald Wildmon, who insisted the documentary be aired to give viewers "a better knowledge of what the debate concerning the misuse of tax dollars by the National Endowment for the Arts is all about."

SHREVEPORT, La. (July 22) — Kenneth Goodpaster got an unexpected shot in the arm today while browsing for weapons at the annual Southern Gun and Knife Show. After admiring a .22-caliber handgun, he handed it back to the exhibitor — who pulled the trigger, apparently thinking the gun was unloaded. Goodpaster suffered wounds to his right arm. The exhibitor was asked to leave the show.

Compiled by Heidi Fisher. Illustrations by Steven Cragg.

Readers are encouraged to submit articles to *Dateline: The South*. Please send original clippings or photocopies and give name and date of publication.

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (July 1) — Civil rights leaders officially dedicated the Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated as the National Civil Rights Museum, one of the most extensive exhibits of the civil rights movement in the nation. Coretta Scott King, the slain leader's widow, said the museum will "be a place where his dream is being redeemed on a daily basis."

NORTHPORT, Ala. (July 1) — More than 100 people who turned out to oppose a Ku Klux Klan demonstration today discovered that they had already won the battle: The Invisible Empire never appeared. For city police officers, at least, the day wasn't a total waste. With almost the entire force on duty at the same time, the police department took advantage of the opportunity by taking a group photo.

FRANKFORT, Ky. (July 4) — State Senator Mitch McConnell is once again backing a bill defeated by state lawmakers last year that would levy stiff fees on out-of-state garbage. Kentucky faces a "solid waste crisis" from tons of trash being trucked in from New Jersey and other Northern states, according to

McConnell. "The inability to stop other states from shipping their garbage here makes the situation almost unbearable."

CHARLESTON, W. Va. (July 7) — A statewide program to urge citizens to snitch on suspected drug dealers has fallen short of official expectations. Police have passed out 6,000 coupons with space for the names, addresses, and license plate numbers of alleged drug felons, but so far the forms have yielded no new leads. "We had no tips come in on anyone we did not have an investigation on already or did not know about," said Police Superintendent Jack Buckalew.



AUSTIN, Texas (July 8) — Police are on the trail of a new breed of rustler following the theft of dozens of emu and

HALF OF "NUCLEAR LEMONS" IN SOUTH

In May, 320 pounds of uranium leaked into a waste storage tank at the General Electric nuclear fuel plant near Wilmington, North Carolina. The accident prompted a "low-level" alert at the plant, but company officials kept the mishap quiet for hours — even though they knew the leak could have jeopardized workers and released deadly radiation into the atmosphere.

Federal investigators with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission blamed GE for poor management, saying the company puts production over safety. They also criticized their own agency for failing to properly regulate the fuel plant and safeguard the public.

"I think that sort of mistake is indicative of the management problem that has plagued that plant," says Bob Slaughter, president of the Wilmington chapter of the Sierra Club. "There was no outcry, but there probably should have been."

The accident was one of hundreds that take place each year at nuclear reactors across the country. According to a report by the non-profit group Public Citizen, there were 1,921 safety-related incidents reported to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission last year alone.

The danger is especially high in the South. The Brunswick Nuclear Power Plant, located in Southport near the GE-owned factory, topped the Public Citizen list of "nuclear lemons" — the most dangerous reactors in the nation. Half of the 20 reactors posing the greatest threat are in the South; three in North Carolina; two each in Virginia, Florida, and Arkansas; and one in South Carolina.

The Public Citizen report also identified another danger: public apathy. In the five years since an explosion rocked the Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, the report says, Americans have "become complacent about the considerable risks involved in operating the

nation's 100-plus commercial nuclear reactors."

In the face of such complacency, the nuclear industry has launched a new public relations campaign touting nuclear energy as a "green" alternative to power produced by burning coal and oil, both of which contribute to acid rain and global warming.

Recent polls by CNN and *Time* suggest that the public remains divided on nuclear power. Thirty-two percent of those surveyed strongly opposed construction of more nuclear reactors, but 40 percent said the United States should rely more on nuclear power than on oil and coal for increased energy needs during the 1990s.

Those who live close to dangerous reactors, however, appear more skeptical. In Alabama, residents expressed doubts recently when the Tennessee Valley Authority restarted the accident-prone Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant after a six-year shutdown and \$1.4 billion in improvements. Those doubts were quickly confirmed in August, as the reactor breached safety procedures twice in a single week.

Across the border, Georgia Governor Zell Miller has joined the ranks of those who oppose federal plans to build another reactor at the Savannah River Nuclear Plant in Aiken, South Carolina. Cattle near the weapons factory yield radioactive milk; the river is contaminated, and federal officials estimate that it will cost at least \$30 billion to clean up the entire mess.

With communities facing such serious threats from nuclear reactors, groups like Public Citizen are calling for a shift away from nuclear power. "There should be a change in federal policy in the direction of phasing out nuclear power in the United States," the group concludes in its report. "The worst plants would offer a reasonable starting point for such an undertaking."

—Alison Davis

MARINES THROW WAR OBJECTORS IN BRIG

As cheering crowds welcomed troops home from the Persian Gulf war in parades across the South, a group of reluctant warriors who refused to fight were paying a heavy price for following their consciences.

Two dozen Marines who filed for status as conscientious objectors during the war have been sentenced to up to 30 months in the brig at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina for "desertion" or "missing a troop movement." Four more await court martial — two on charges of desertion during wartime, which carries a possible death sentence.

The stiff sentences are part of a military crackdown on conscientious objectors. Before Iraq invaded Kuwait last year, officials routinely granted CO status to 300 soldiers each year. Since the Gulf War began, however, the military has not approved a single CO discharge.

"The Marine attorneys have stated very clearly that they want to make examples of the men," says Gerry Sommers, director of the Quaker House, a military counseling center located near Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina. "They want to make sure that any Marine who considers this move in the future has an example to consider."

Lance Corporal Samuel Lwin is one such example: Sentenced in May to four months in the brig, the 21-year-old Marine knew he was in trouble when an officer first interviewed him about his CO application. "It was supposedly an interview about my religious beliefs," Lwin recalls. "But he just told me he hoped the sergeant beat the shit out of me."

Another Marine testified during his court martial that his sergeant and several other officers had severely beaten him when he refused to board a bus that would take him to a ship bound for Saudi Arabia.

Defense attorneys say regulations



PRIVATE ERIC HAYES LEAVES A MARINE COURTROOM IN HANDCUFFS, ONE OF 30 SOLDIERS COURT-MARTIALED FOR REFUSING TO FIGHT IN THE PERSIAN GULF.

prohibit the military from deploying soldiers who file for CO status, but prosecutors claim that Gulf War objectors were required to ship out to the war zone while they waited for officials to rule on their applications.

Conscientious objectors faced another trap: Applicants who specified that they were morally opposed to fighting in the Gulf War were disqualified as "selective objectors," on the grounds that they did not state that they were opposed to all wars.

"The military will find whatever they can in an application to deny a claim," says Mike Marsh of the War Resisters League. "We learned from this that you almost have to go into the CO process as though it were entirely theoretical."

Caught in a web of strict regulations, Marines like Corporal Lwin have little hope that the military will accommodate soldiers who experience a genuine change of heart. Orphaned as a child, Lwin says he joined the Marines searching for a place to belong and for financial help to get a college education. Once in the Corps, however, he rediscovered the Buddhist faith of his Burmese childhood — including its doctrine against killing.

"I was ignorant and naive," he says

now. "But life in the Marines is not like they say in the recruiting ads. The military taught me a skill: how to kill. And that, I now believe, is the whole purpose."

—Rob Urban

MINERS BATTLE FOR BLACK LUNG BENEFITS

They fought the black lung battle in 1969 and won — or so they thought. Now, more than two decades later, disabled miners once again find themselves fighting for recognition that the hazards of their occupation go beyond cave-ins and explosions.

For years, miners crippled by pneumoconiosis — the disease better known as black lung that is caused by inhaling coal dust — have been compensated for their disability. In the early years of the program, as many as 30 percent of all applicants received benefits.

But all that changed in 1981, when the newly-elected Reagan administration approved regulations making it easier for coal companies to drag out claims by crippled miners. Since then, miners

seeking compensation have found their claims tied up in endless appeals, and the approval rate for disability benefits has plummeted to four percent.

Determined to eliminate the legal delays, miners are backing new federal legislation that would provide total disability benefits to any miner who presents a single piece of qualifying medical evidence. Under a bill pending in Congress, claims could be challenged only if it could be shown that a miner is still able to work in the mines.

"These are not people who are looking for a handout," says U.S. Representative Nick Rahall of West Virginia, who introduced the bill. "These are people who were promised compensation by their government — and these are people who now see their government break that promise."

Unfortunately, the restrictions on benefits aren't the only broken promise. At the same time it approved the benefit program, the federal government developed safety standards that were supposed to limit exposure to coal dust. "It should be impossible to get black lung disease under current levels of exposure," says Tom Altmeyer, vice president of the National Coal Association.

But it now appears that coal companies may have simply been covering up the danger. In April, the Mine Safety and Health Administration, which until recently trumpeted the low approval rate for black lung benefits as evidence that mine safety had improved, charged more than 500 coal companies with tampering with the dust samples used to gauge exposure. U.S. Labor Secretary Lynn Martin said the agency had uncovered "widespread cheating" in more than half the nation's underground coal mines.

"That has given us a tremendous amount of momentum" in the push for fair compensation, says Vince Carroll, a lawyer for the Virginia Black Lung Association. "In everybody's minds, including Congress, this has put to rest the argument that the mines are clean."

The National Black Lung Association contends, however, that the current law stacks the deck against disabled miners. Although the danger persists, coal companies simply use their vast legal and financial resources to keep benefit claims tied up for years.



COAL MINER EARNEST HICKS SUFFERS FROM BLACK LUNG WHILE COAL COMPANIES DRAG OUT DISABILITY CLAIMS.

"Claimants are challenged at every step of the process, by coal companies and by their government," says Representative Rahall. "These claimants cannot afford to hire high-priced lawyers to make their case. Naturally, the claim approval rate is low. The effect of these challenges, which can span a period of 10 or more years, is to wear the claimant out until he dies."

—Martha Hodel

WOMEN FARMERS GET "HANDS-ON ADVICE"

When her husband died of a heart attack 10 years ago, Pat Dore suddenly found herself trying to run their farm in Sinks Grove, West Virginia on her own. But many of her fellow farmers, she soon discovered, didn't think raising cattle was any job for a woman.

"It was definitely harder because I was a woman," recalls Dore. "In two of the nearby counties I could deal with the men who ran the feed and hardware stores just fine. But in another county, I almost had to kick the door in to get credit. It was two or three years before they took me seriously."

Like other dairy farmers hard hit by the low price of milk, Dore is trying to grow specialty crops like shitake mushrooms to bring in more income. "You can't make a living on a farm any more unless you're going to diversify," says Dore. "That's

what we're trying to do."

But unlike her male competitors, Dore and many other women farmers in West Virginia lack the information and resources they need to diversify. Of the 1,290 women farmers in the state, 900 earn less than \$10,000 a year. Many, like Dore, are widowed or divorced, forcing them to juggle the demands of working the land and raising their children.

Now, female farmers like Dore are receiving help from Women and Employment, a non-profit group that has been organizing women around economic issues since 1980. According to executive director Pam Curry, Appalachian women have traditionally kept a small "house garden" to support their families. "They tend to discount this as real work and think of it as a hobby," says Curry. "They have to have a second job to make ends meet. We want to help them make it a full-time job."

But growing specialty crops is just the beginning. Women and Employment also hopes to help women farmers develop a trucking cooperative so they can transport their crops to market. "The idea of a co-op is very conducive to the Appalachian culture and geography, and to the limited resources available for transportation for marketing outside the state," says Curry.

Such a plan would work well for women like Elizabeth Burford, who raises sheep and cattle on her 500-acre farm in Pocahontas County. Currently, Burford must send the wool up to New England to be processed into yarn. "We're a bunch of farmers," she says. "We don't need a bunch of theoretical speeches—we need somebody who can give us hands-on advice."

Women and Employment has been working to do just that. The group is surveying more women, developing co-ops and marketing strategies, and planning a rural computer network that would link women farmers with information and resources statewide.

"We've been disappointed so many times, we're afraid to hope," says the 61-year-old Burford. "But we still do have some hope, if we can work with Women and Employment."

—Susan Leffler and Laurie Udesky

HEALTH WORKERS CUT INFANT DEATH RATE

A few years ago, babies born in Lee County, Virginia faced a bleak future. With more than half of all adults out of

work, Lee was the poorest county in the state. And with the only health care available to many pregnant women provided by two small clinics, many infants never lived to see their first birthday.

In the past few years, though, more and more babies in Lee County are living. According to federal figures, the county cut its infant mortality rate in half during the 1980s.

"We had the highest infant mortality rate in the state," recalls La Verne Brown, a Lee County native and an organizer of the Western Lee County Clinic in Ewing. "Now we have a rate lower than the rest of the state."

One of the chief reasons for the dramatic turnaround: an innovative health project started eight years ago to train local leaders in impoverished Appalachian communities. Known as MIHOWs — Maternal Infant Health Outreach Workers — the health care advocates have formed a vital support network serving more than 500 women in Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The local leaders work directly with pregnant women to help them get the care they need. "They are the glue that keeps everything together, helping women at risk maneuver through the system and have healthy babies," says Franki Patton, a MIHOW supervisor at Tug River Clinic in McDowell County, West Virginia. Since MIHOW started, she notes, the county infant mortality rate has dropped from 23.1 deaths to 13.2 deaths for every 1,000 births.

The project has been a success, Patton says, because it provides more than basic health care. At Tug River, for example, outreach workers provide prenatal care, classes in parenting and nutrition, and financial help to pay for prescriptions. They also transport pregnant women to doctor appointments and make monthly home visits.

A report by the Center for Health Services at Vanderbilt University, which developed the project, bears out the success of the program. The report found that MIHOW has helped many women break out of their rural isolation, address family relationships, and set goals. It also found that MIHOW helped mothers better understand child behavior, ultimately improving their child's development.

Jeri Wray is one McDowell County resident who knows first-hand how MIHOW has helped. Alone with her three young children "day in and day out," Wray felt isolated and frustrated. Project workers assisted her with everything from a ride to the doctor and information on



A GRASSROOTS NETWORK OF LOCAL OUTREACH WORKERS SERVES MORE THAN 500 PREGNANT WOMEN IN APPALACHIA.

proper nutrition, to purchasing a baby bed and encouraging her to finish her high-school education.

"There's nothing that feels better than having a great day with your kids," Wray says. "Had it not been for that program, I would have gone crazy up here."

—Phyllis Johnson

ALABAMA PRISONERS FIGHT "LEPER COLONY"

Lucas Boikin is serving a life sentence in an Alabama prison for murder. For seven years he was a model prisoner, and officials allowed him to hold down a job outside the prison gates to help support his family.

Then, two years ago, the job and all his other privileges came to a sudden halt. Prison officials told Boikin that he had tested positive for HIV, the virus that can lead to AIDS, and confined him to a segregated unit with 170 other men.

"The doctors was telling everybody with HIV they was going to die," recalls Boikin, who asked that his real name not be used. "I stayed up for three nights, couldn't get no sleep, because I was afraid to die."

Like all Alabama prisoners who test positive for HIV, Boikin has been barred from taking part in most prison activities. But this fall, his fate will be decided by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, which is set to rule on a class-action suit charging the Alabama Department of Correc-

tions with violating the constitutional rights of HIV-positive prisoners.

The suit accuses the department of mandating HIV testing for all prisoners, placing those who test positive in segregated "leper colonies," and denying them access to activities available to other prisoners. For years, prisoners with HIV were forced to wear masks and plastic suits when they left the segregated unit, and a woman in Tutwiler Women's Prison said she was ordered to "wipe the telephone with an alcohol pad" after she used it.

Prisoners in the HIV units were also denied medical care, or were treated by inexperienced doctors. By the time the case came to trial, seven prisoners with AIDS had died.

"In each case, our experts said the deaths were unnecessary, preventable deaths," says Alexa Freeman, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, who is representing prisoners. "Prisoners suffered unnecessarily and horribly."

The lawsuit has already forced the state to improve medical conditions and lift some restrictions on sick prisoners. But Freeman says the Department of Corrections has a long way to go to grant prisoners with HIV their full rights.

"I want to see the mandatory testing stopped," Freeman says. "I want to see the medical treatment brought up to community standards for treating HIV infection, and I want to see the prisoners integrated into the general population."

—Laurie Udesky

MOSES BRINGS NEW MATH TO STUDENTS

Thirty years ago, Robert Moses was on the forefront of the civil rights movement. As field director of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he traveled throughout rural Mississippi helping black residents register to vote.

Moses is still traveling, but these days he's fighting on a different front. With a staff of fellow black activists, Moses is implementing an innovative math program he designed to help students learn algebra by relating numbers directly to their everyday lives.

Moses developed the program in 1982, when he discovered that his eldest daughter's school offered no course in algebra. The public school system, Moses realized, had been left financially strapped as white parents fled the inner city: "Because of a race issue there is a flight from

the public schools," he says.

As a result, Moses says, working-class children have become mathematically illiterate. A report by the National Assessment for Educational Programs shows that only five percent of all high school seniors can solve an algebra problem — and the situation is even worse in disadvantaged inner-city schools.

Unwilling to enroll his daughter in private school, Moses developed the Algebra Project to help students in public schools understand numbers in terms of familiar events and everyday language. Students are taken on field trips such as subway rides to relate abstract concepts like positive and negative numbers to the concrete reality of "uptown" and "downtown" trains.

The project was an instant success. In Cambridge, 80 percent of junior high school students who graduated from the program qualified for honors math classes in high school.

In the past year, Moses has introduced the project to public schools across the South. In Atlanta schools, students took a trip on the subway to study number lines. "By drawing a subway line from east to west, they could actually see and experience the direction," explains Dr. W.F. Patterson, coordinator of mathematics education. Eventually the subway line became a number line, and the station stops became integers.

Linda Danns taught the new project in her math class at Crawford W. Long Middle School in Atlanta last spring, and she already sees promising results. "One of my students, Julius Dixon, was so enthusiastic about the project that whenever he saw me, he asked when we were going to have algebra class again," recalls Danns.

Moses says that it takes little effort to draw enthusiasm from students about the program. The more difficult challenge, he says, is convincing lawmakers not to leave inner-city children behind.

"It will take a conscious will on the part of the people living in the cities to make the school system work for the children who are in it," he says. "Everything will turn on whether the country will find the political will to mobilize the resources that carry out the education that these students need."

—Wei-Ling Gong

Compiled by Laurie Udesky.

Readers are encouraged to submit articles to Southern News Roundup. Please send original clippings or photocopies and give name and date of publication, or articles of no more than 300 words.

THROUGH THE MILL

The looming insurance crisis threatens the pensions of North Carolina textile workers and four million other retirees.

By Joe Drape

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. — C.W. McKinney's mouth is open, broken teeth exaggerating a look of wonder, as the retired textile worker listens to an explanation of junk bonds. How the high-risk, high-yield investments became fashionable during the 1980s, financing everything from casinos to takeovers of multibillion-dollar corporations.

How Bel Air financier David Murdock, a friend of Ronald Reagan's worth an estimated \$1.35 billion, bought McKinney's employer, Cannon Mills, and raided the \$102 million pension pool. How he used at least \$37 million of it to take over another company, then invested the rest in a California insurance company called Executive Life. How Executive Life bought too many junk bonds, forcing regulators to seize the company in April in the largest insurance failure in U.S. history.

And how this chain of events means that

McKinney's monthly pension check of \$36.81 will be cut by 30 percent.

He blinks hard, rocks back in his porch chair, and bounces the rubber-tipped end of his crutch on his right leg, which is permanently contorted in a ballerina's pirouette. It was shattered across the street in the mammoth brick mill where he worked for 43 years in the bleaching room.

Junk bonds. McKinney, 80, doesn't get it. "I don't got an education, but it sounds like there ought to be a law again't them."

The educated and the elected are rapidly coming to a similar conclusion. Since Executive Life collapsed under the weight of its high-risk deals, Congress and state lawmakers are realizing that the insurance industry is on the brink of a major disaster. First Capital, an insurance company with subsidiaries in Virginia

and California, went under in May, and two months later the state of New Jersey took control of Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Co.

In addition, industry analysts are now acknowledging that policyholders and taxpayers aren't the only ones who will pay for the collapse of major insurance companies. The looming crisis also threatens the pensions of millions of retirees like C.W. McKinney, as well as hundreds of cities and states that relied on insurance firms to guarantee bonds they issued to build housing.

According to the General Accounting Office, the trouble can be traced to the hostile takeovers of the 1980s. When corporate raiders like David Murdock took over companies, they frequently terminated employee pension plans to help pay their debts. In nearly 200 leveraged buyouts



studied by the GAO, the new owners pocketed \$581 million in pension money. Overall, federal figures show, employers milked pension plans of \$22 billion from 1984 to 1990.

As a result, an estimated four million retirees and their families currently depend on private insurance firms for their pension payments. Executive Life alone swallowed more than \$1 billion in pension funds covering more than 80,000 employees, from fast-food workers at Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises to nurses and orderlies at the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. Tens of thousands of retired workers throughout the South have already seen their pensions slashed.

Blaine Briggs got hurt twice. A retired district manager with Ryder/PIE Nationwide trucking of Jacksonville, Florida, Briggs lost his pension when Executive Life collapsed. He had also followed his employer's example by investing his life savings with the failed insurance firm.

"We're going to lose our home," Briggs told *The Charlotte Observer*. "You feel like you want to hit someone, but there's no one to hit."

Pensioners at Cannon Mills in Kannapolis are just as angry at David Murdock for raiding their pension fund. "It was my money," says Henderson Gantt, who retired from the mill after 48 years. "I worked for it. He ripped the people off."

WHO PAYS?

No one needs to tell nearly 13,000 retired men and women in Kannapolis, a classic Southern mill town near Charlotte, how tough things will become if more insurance companies go under. They are perhaps the most concentrated group of Executive Life casualties, and the most tragic illustration of how Wall Street yanked the net from underneath a financial tightwire that no one in Kannapolis wanted to walk.

LATRELLE SMITH IS ONE OF THOUSANDS OF RETIREES WHOSE PENSION CHECK WAS SLASHED.

C.W. McKinney and other Cannon Mills retirees on a fixed income have dipped into their Social Security checks to pay utility bills or bring home a sack of groceries. Their pensions may not have been much — most were less than \$100 a month — but the retirees need the money and consider it a just reward for a lifetime among the looms.

Instead, like Michael Milken, the jailed financier who hooked First Executive on junk bonds, the textile retirees have paid the price for the financial excesses of the '80s. But unlike Milken, the pensioners never shared in the spoils of the late gilded age.

Even in the midst of the insurance crisis, the retired mill workers' needs have not been addressed as much as their endorsement sought. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) made them a centerpiece in a union drive. North Carolina Senator Terry Sanford conducted hearings as a forum to inject a good-guy image into his troubled re-election campaign.

Even David Murdock, the man who plundered their pension, posed before television cameras with Senator Sanford in August to announce that he had written personal checks totaling \$800,000 to retirees. The gesture, intended to make up for the 30 percent cuts suffered from April to September, was accompanied by an anguished statement.

"I've been particularly concerned, myself, with what is morally right, ethically right, and legally right," Murdock said. "I certainly hope that this payment will mitigate the suffering that people are having."

Days after Murdock's pledge, however, the North Carolina Insurance Guaranty Association made it clear that it expects to reimburse Cannon's former owner the \$800,000. The association, run by the industry and funded by dues from insurance companies, was created by state law to protect retirees and policyholders when their companies go broke. (See sidebar.)

"I think Murdock is to be applauded for stepping forward," said William Patterson, attorney for the association, "but I don't think he expects the money to be permanently out of pocket."

North Carolina officials have insisted all along that the insurance association will guarantee Cannon pensions no matter what the fate of Executive Life. Terry

Wade, chief financial analyst with the state Insurance Department, says he hopes retirees will be reimbursed in "a matter of months, not years." In any case, he says, Murdock is not liable for the shortfall, nor is the mill's current owner, Fieldcrest Cannon Inc.

The bailout is certain to be costly. A French investment group bidding to buy Executive Life would give policyholders 81 cents of every dollar they invested. If the guaranty association makes up the difference, it would have to charge insurers in the state enough to cover \$1 billion in policies — the largest assessment ever collected in state history.

So who, ultimately, will pay?

"Whatever costs are incurred by the insurance industry are passed along to the public," Wade says. "That's the stark reality."

A TALE OF TWO MEN

The Cannon pension trouble is about more than junk bonds and a nation's decade-after fiscal hangover. It also shows how the textile business, the first major industry in the South and still the largest manufacturing employer in the region, has changed. It comes down to the story of two types of men.

Charlie Cannon, son of mill founder James W. Cannon, was the model of the benevolent, paternalistic textile magnate. As head of the operation from 1921 until his death in 1971, he didn't exactly offer the American dream. But he did offer thousands of relatively uneducated Southerners a roof over their heads, a steady, if minimal, paycheck, and a little compassion. He asked for hard work and anti-union work in return.

Murdock came to Kannapolis in 1982, paying more than \$400 million for the mill, the downtown business district, all of the company-built housing, and the 1,073 acres of prime real estate near Interstate 85. He was the

WHAT'S THE GUARANTY?

By Marty Leary

Pensioners aren't the only victims of the insurance industry blowout. Taxpayers and consumers are also paying the price. That's because current state laws allow the industry to pass the costs of insurer insolvencies along to the public in the form of higher taxes and insurance premiums. (See "Heading for a Crash," SE Vol. XVIII No. 1).

Almost all of the states have guaranty funds that are supposed to stand behind consumers when an insurance company fails. The funds were established by state laws, but their boards are controlled by the largest insurance companies in each state.

In spite of their names, the funds offer no guaranty to many policyholders. Some of the funds, for instance, do not protect pensioners. Others prohibit payouts to municipal agencies that invested in insurance products.

Not only is there no guaranty with a guaranty fund, there are no funds, either. Money to pay off policyholders is collected *after* a failed insurance company is liquidated. Only then do guaranty funds in each state collect assessments from insurance companies selling similar policies.



RETIRED MILLWORKER C.W. MCKINNEY CAN'T UNDERSTAND HOW JUNK BONDS THREATENED HIS PENSION: "I DON'T GOT AN EDUCATION, BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE THERE OUGHT TO BE A LAW AGAIN'T THEM."

model of the '80s takeover artist, slashing the work force by 700, cutting wages up to 30 percent, updating production methods, and forcing mandatory retirements. On one day — "Black Friday" employees

What's more, each fund has a legal limit to how much it can collect in a year. According to a study by the non-profit Southern Finance Project, failures as large as Executive Life could exhaust the funds, saddling policyholders with costly delays.

Municipal and state governments will also feel the affects of large insurance failures. In 37 states, insurers are allowed to deduct every dollar they pay into a guaranty fund from their state taxes. As the costs of insurance failures mount, many states will see millions of dollars drained from their budgets.

Many cities and states also relied on insurance companies to guarantee bonds issued to pay for housing and other developments. The Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Co. was backing more than \$800 million in bonds when it was seized by New Jersey regulators in July — including \$555 million tied up in development projects in Florida, Texas, Tennessee, and Georgia. If big insurance failures hurt municipal bond ratings, they may make it harder for local governments to raise money for housing and other public works.

SOLD OUT

What can be done to protect the public from paying the price for big insurance failures? With five large insurance companies currently under state control, there is a growing recogni-

tion in Washington that the current state-by-state system of insurance regulation may be part of the problem.

One reason the state guaranty funds might not be up to the task of safeguarding policyholders is that they were designed to ward off federal regulation, not to protect the public. The industry itself created the funds in the late 1960s after an unsuccessful attempt in Congress to create a national guaranty fund similar to the one that protects depositors in the nation's banks and savings and loans.

Senator Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio has resurrected the idea of a national guaranty fund to protect insurance consumers. The fund would collect money on a regular basis — not just when a company fails — and would be paid for by the industry rather than taxpayers or policyholders.

Metzenbaum blames states for failing to regulate insurance companies, but he also holds President Bush accountable for the current crisis. "Not only did the administration permit employers to steal workers' retirement benefits, it failed to monitor the benefits that remained," the Senator says. "As a consequence, the workers and retirees' benefits were sold out from under them."

Marty Leary is research director of the Southern Finance Project, sponsored by the Institute for Southern Studies.

called it — some mill hands were given an hour to leave the premises.

In 1986 Murdock sold Cannon's bath and bedding operations to Fieldcrest Mills of Massachusetts for \$250 million. But first he dissolved Cannon's pension fund, saying it had more than enough money to meet its obligations. He pocketed \$37 million and reinvested the rest in annuities with Executive Life.

Lynne Scott Safrit, president of the Murdock development company in Kannapolis, defended the move. Executive Life, she said, was a highly rated insurance company at the time, and "was chosen after careful consideration."

But Cannon's old archenemy, ACTWU, challenged the pension switch, charging that Murdock used the money to help fund his 1985 takeover of Castle & Cooke, the San Francisco parent company of Dole Food. "He used the pension fund as if it was another source of money," says S. Bruce Raynor, the

union's Southern director. "He benefited by investing the money. We consider that ill-gotten gains."

The union sued in federal court in California and lost. On appeal, the case was sent back to federal court for rehearing. In 1989, Murdock settled with the union out of court for a reported \$1 million. Raynor says the money will go towards building a new retirement home in Kannapolis.

In the meantime, Executive Life collapsed under its heavy reliance on the junk-bond market. California regulators say the firm invested more than 60 percent of its assets in junk bonds, compared with six percent for most insurance companies. The result: threatened losses for tens of thousands of retirees whose pensions were invested with Executive Life.

"It really is an 'insult to injury' story in the textile community" says Jacquelyn Hall, a University of North Carolina historian who has studied the

textile industry. "The little bit of improvement textile workers won over the years gets whittled away."

THE TOWN PATERNALISM BUILT

There is little in Kannapolis to suggest that it would be a lucrative trophy for a West Coast financier like David Murdock. The city of 45,000 is dominated by the red brick Cannon Mill, which engulfs 90 acres with smokestacks, water towers, and steel superstructures like an oversized Erector Set.

Next door are four blocks of red brick outlet stores, a tiny reflection of the mill. Neat cottages, sided in aluminum of marigold, royal blue, ivory, and apricot, spread out in all directions.

These are the houses, more than 1,600 of them, that James Cannon started building in 1906 in pine and farm land 25 miles north of Charlotte.

"Mr. Charlie," as his son was known, took over when he was 21 and made Cannon Mills a giant, employing over 25,000 in the making of towels and bedding.

C.W. McKinney remembers Mr. Charlie with a bowler cocked on his head, making sure that paint was going on all the houses that rented for \$25 to \$40 a month, right up until Murdock bought the mill. No charge for water. Electricity was a nominal fee. Cannon schools and Cannon hospitals built on Cannon land with Cannon money.

Even Mr. Charlie's old two-story house, which his wife named For Pity's Sake, was occasionally thrown open to the help. "We'd be invited up there in groups to ride the horses and just socialize," says LaTrelle Smith, 70, who for 45 years raced to put labels on towels.

Murdock, on the other hand, built a luxury lodge to entertain Cannon customers, sandblasted buildings downtown to restore the original red-brick facades, and turned Main Street's traditional retail shops into factory outlet stores. He also built a loop road — after much heated political maneuvering — to bypass the central business district which he called "Cannon Village."

The link between company and town was completely severed in 1984 when Kannapolis, long thought to be the nation's largest unincorporated town, voted to incorporate.

"We had a notion things would never be the same," says Foy Icard, 80, a retired

foreman, or "bossman" as his neighbor McKinney calls him. "Murdock wasn't a textile man, and he up and bought the whole darn town."

Icard is quick to admit that he only has a seventh-grade education and that his knowledge of high finance comes from reading the newspaper. But after 42 years of living in the same company house, making the same short walk across the street to work, he didn't need a degree to see how Murdock was changing Cannon.

The silver-haired Californian hired high-priced consultants and replaced Cannon old timers with managers from the company's competitors. Instead of trusted "bossmen," engineers with stop-watches judged who worked the slasher machines and looms the best. The old no longer retired when they wanted, the injured or sick no longer worked when they felt up to it. There would be no more C.W. McKinneys hobbling around the bleaching room.

Icard takes his wide brimmed hat off and points at his neighbor's house where C.W. sits in the tiny living room watching TV. Icard says he worries about "that old boy" and his reduced pension. "He's

got pains in his legs and has trouble getting around."

"I can live without the money," says Icard, whose pension has gone from \$104.80 a month to \$71. "But I'm lucky. I think it's a dirty deal that a man works his whole life, counting on a little something when he's through, and somebody who don't need it takes it from you."

"ALL WE EVER KNEW"

The tale of the two men who molded Kannapolis is perhaps most vividly illustrated at the town's YMCA. Everyone here knows that the Cannon Foundation spent millions of dollars on schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities.

But David Murdock? Here between the Charles A. Cannon Memorial YMCA and the Charles A. Cannon Memorial Library, sits the David H. Murdock Senior Center. He donated the land, paid for the bulk of the \$5.25 million complex, and continues to support it. He donated \$25,000 about the time Executive Life was going under.

The senior center is where LaTrelle Smith spends her ample free time paint-

ing, basket weaving, and dancing. As couples of her generation spin to "Sixty-Minute Man," she tries to put into perspective her 70 years in a company town.

Her mother and father worked at the mill, and she was eager to join them when she graduated high school. "Cannon Mills is all we ever knew," she says. "We were grateful and loyal. But I never knew I could do something else until my older years. And then it was too late."

Now she finds her monthly pension of \$57.36 cut to \$39. "I miss it and I resent it," she says. "It wouldn't have happened if Mr. Cannon was still here."

But while some retired millworkers dream fondly of a return to the paternalistic past, those days appear to be gone forever. Cannon Mills has pushed most of its older, loyal employees like LaTrelle Smith into mandatory retirement — and many younger workers say they don't give a damn what Mr. Charlie would do.

After the pension fund fiasco, millworkers launched a fast and furious drive to join the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Cannon employees had voted down the union twice, the second time in 1985. But this time, many

workers were fed up with having their paychecks and pensions at the mercy of Wall Street raiders like David Murdock.

Initial figures from the August election show the union came up 199 votes short. But 538 of the ballots have been challenged, which could result in a union victory or another election.

Whatever the outcome, union supporters say the narrow margin was a message. "We did in less than two months what it took us 15 months to do in 1985," says Pete McIntyre, a millworker who was on the forefront of the union drive. "The reason? We have been treated like animals before, but now times have changed enough to give us a way out." □

Joe Drape is a reporter with the Atlanta Constitution.



FOY ICARD, A RETIRED FOREMAN WHO HAS LIVED IN THE SAME COMPANY HOUSE FOR 42 YEARS, CALLS THE PENSION CUTS "A DIRTY DEAL."



FISHY BUSINESS

Few creatures are so completely identified with the South as the catfish. Southerners have been eating the mud-dwelling fish for more than 4,000 years, ever since the Native American culture called Poverty Point flourished along the Mississippi River. Long a favorite food of the poor, the mudcat still endures a reputation as the dirtiest of fish, a bottom feeder that will eat whatever comes along.

Over the past two decades, however, the lowly catfish has become big business. As markets for cotton and other traditional crops have withered, farmers from Louisiana to South Carolina have flooded their fields to make way for catfish ponds.

The switch from agriculture to aquaculture has paid off. Backed by a strong marketing campaign to improve its swampy image, farm-raised catfish is now a booming industry that raised \$2 billion last year. Catfish ranks as the fifth most-consumed seafood in the nation after tuna, shrimp, cod, and pollack.

Almost all of the growth has taken place in Mississippi. The state produces three-fourths of all catfish consumed nationwide, mostly in the Delta counties of Sunflower and Humphreys, where catfish has actually surpassed cotton as the leading crop. Last year Mississippi farmers raised 624 million catfish in nearly 95,000 acres of ponds, netting more than \$360 million.

From the start, farmers in the Delta have tightly controlled the new venture from top to bottom. Through a business structure known as vertical integration, a small group of 400 farmers has run the entire industry, from the mills that feed the fish to the factories that prepare them for market.

As the articles in this special section of *Southern Exposure* suggest, catfish farmers are the new bottom feeders. They live off the poverty of the Mississippi Delta, yet they share few of their profits with those who do the dirty work. Ninety percent of the 6,000 workers who process and package catfish are poor black women, many of them single mothers. Most receive barely \$4 an hour for their labor.

Like their counterparts in the poultry industry, catfish workers are driven at a dangerous, breakneck pace. According to a 1988 internal memo from Delta Pride, the largest producer of catfish in

the nation, headsaw operators are expected to cut off 60 catfish heads a minute — as many as 43,000 fish a day. Those who fall behind, the memo warns, “will be considered to be in violation of Work Rule #12, which requires them to work productively and efficiently.”

As a result of this ruthless emphasis on production, many catfish workers suffer from repetitive motion disorders, painful injuries to the hands and arms that, left untreated, can leave them permanently disabled. Workers at Delta Pride report that when their injuries prevent them from complying with Work Rule #12, the company simply fires them.

Nor has government come to the aid of injured workers. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has set no safety standards for repetitive motion disorders in the industry, even though a recent federal investigation revealed that scores of workers currently receive no medical care for their injuries.

Fortunately, in the midst of the racism and poverty of the Delta, there are the stirrings of a genuine and broad-based movement for change. Last December, nearly 1,000 women and men at Delta Pride won a three-month strike for better wages and working conditions. Now, inspired by their courage, a coalition of community leaders from across the Delta are working to reforge the links between the labor and civil rights movements. The plan, organizers say, is to reform the catfish industry while empowering poor citizens to develop their own, community-based economic alternatives.

It is a plan that will become increasingly urgent in the coming years. Like poultry, catfish and aquaculture will continue to grow, driven by the demands of health-conscious consumers. McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken are reportedly considering plans to offer catfish on their menus, and Brown-Forman, the company that makes Jack Daniels and Southern Comfort, is pouring \$6 million into a bass fish farm in the Delta.

But as with poultry, it seems, consumers must be prepared to consider some tough questions about the food we buy. Where does “healthy” fare like catfish come from? And whose health, in the end, is being served?

—Eric Bates



TOMMY TAYLOR HAS WATCHED CATFISH GROW FROM A BACKYARD BUSINESS TO A LUCRATIVE INDUSTRY WORTH \$360 MILLION.



DOWN ON THE FARM

ISOLA, Miss. — Larry Cochran was in trouble. For 20 years he had farmed his piece of land in Humphreys County, ground his father and grandfather had worked before him. He grew 1,000 acres of cotton and soybeans, but he was deep in debt and getting deeper.

Rising interest rates and international competition were creating insurmountable obstacles for Southern cotton and soybean farmers like Cochran; it was harder to borrow money for equipment and supplies, and it was harder to sell the product for a profit. In 1979 row-crop revenues in Mississippi were \$737 million. By 1983 they were down to \$181 million.

White farmers in Mississippi have replaced cotton with **catfish**, but their roots remain firmly planted in **slavery**.

By Richard Schweid

Cochran knew he needed a new crop, and needed it fast. So like a few of his fellow farmers in the Mississippi Delta, he flooded several of his fields and stocked them with catfish.

"I started messing around with fish back in 1978," recalls Cochran, a big, squared-off man with a rugged jaw and an easy laugh. "Me and my brother put in

four ponds. Then, the row crops like to broke me. I was still paying off my debts years later."

By 1985, Cochran had given up on row crops altogether and was growing over two million pounds of catfish in 33 ponds. "Fish are the only thing that saved me from going belly-up," he says.

Cochran was not the only farmer saved from foreclosure by switching from cotton to catfish. Across the Delta, farmers were abandoning their traditional row crops, heralding a dramatic economic shift from agriculture to aquaculture. Within a decade, a handful of white planters created an entire industry that they control from top to bottom, from the mills where they buy their feed to the factories that buy, process, and market their fish.

Known as vertical integration, this top-down control of each stage of the process has enabled farmers to keep their costs down and their prices high. The result has been hefty profits: Last year catfish generated \$350 million in the Delta, much of which went into the pockets of some 400 farmers.

Despite the financial success of catfish, however, the Delta remains the poorest region in the nation. The development of the catfish industry simply enabled a small group of white planters to continue their domination of political and economic life in Mississippi — much as their ancestors ruled the land when it was first cleared and cultivated by black labor.

“The catfish industry is very typical of the plantation mentality,” says Malcolm Walls, a leader of Mississippi Action for Community Education. “In many ways, the catfish industry has simply replaced cotton with catfish. The rest remains the same.”

BIGGER IS BETTER

It was not easy to subjugate the Delta to a plough a century ago. The land was exceptionally inhospitable, thick with swamp, canebrake, and malaria. The job of clearing it fell chiefly to black men using crosscut, two-man saws to cut down hardwood trees, mules to drag them out, and fire to burn them.

For white settlers, the reward for clearing the land was the extraordinary fertility of the Delta soil. Each spring brought a flooding of the Mississippi River, which spread out across its banks from Memphis to Vicksburg, depositing its burden of rich topsoil and leaving layer on layer of the finest farmland in the country, delivered free of charge. In some places the alluvial topsoil is over 25 feet deep.

For the first half of the 20th century, that soil grew the best cotton in the country. With large holdings of land, and sharecroppers to work it for almost nothing, Delta farmers made money. Slowly but surely, agriculture became agribusiness. As farming began to require more expensive equipment and chemicals, banks encouraged planters to borrow more money and increase the size of their operations. Farms got larger and larger, and fewer and fewer.

“They were giving away money back then,” one farmer recalls. “They’d come



FISH ARE CORRALED AND HERDED INTO A “GRADING SOCK” WITH A MESH THAT ALLOWS SMALL FRY TO ESCAPE BACK INTO THE WATER.

right out to the fields, you didn’t even need to go into town. They’d draw up the papers and write you a check right there in the truck. They made it hard to turn down.”

But the bigger-is-better strategy ran aground in the late 1970s, as interest rates soared and export markets dried up. The demand for Mississippi cotton fell, and banks started calling in their loans and putting a freeze on new money for farmers.

Up until then, there was nothing unique about the plight of Delta farmers. It was the same one faced by farmers all across the nation who had bought the get-bigger-or-get-out theory of farming. But unlike the millions of farmers elsewhere who went under during those lean years, many Delta farmers were saved from ruin by the land itself. Much of their property consists of soil known as buckshot — heavy clay that drains poorly, making it no good for growing cotton, but great for farming fish.

It is not cheap to start a catfish farm. A 1988 state report estimated that it costs at least \$400,000 to dig eight ponds covering 15 acres apiece, fill them with water, stock them with two-inch fingerlings, and feed the fish for a year until they are ready for harvest. If the fish don’t die of disease or a sudden drop in the pond’s oxygen content before they can be sold, the farmer can anticipate an annual profit of almost \$1,000 per acre — about \$120,000 a year for a typical eight-pond operation.

The high start-up costs might have

been an impediment to catfish farming in other parts of the country, but Delta banks are used to doing business in six figures. When it looked like there might be some money to be made growing catfish, Delta farmers did not blink an eye. They headed for the bank and began digging ponds.

TOP-DOWN CONTROL

Turner Arant was one of the first Delta farmers to see the commercial potential of catfish. He stocked his first pond in 1962 to give his family somewhere to fish. In 1965, he made his first commercial harvest.

“I decided to market those fish because there were a bunch of them in there and they were getting big,” recalls Arant, a broad-faced man dressed in a sport shirt and slacks. “I called this little processing plant over in McGee, Arkansas and they sent a harvesting crew and a live-haul truck over here, seined the ponds, loaded the fish, and hauled them 90 miles back to McGee. A couple of weeks later they sent me a check for a little over \$3,000. That was like \$30,000 today. So I got interested in the business commercially and immediately built a few more ponds.”

As cotton got worse and worse, catfish looked better and better to Arant. “It was getting impossible to make money



off of cotton, and every year I'd look at my cash flow on cotton and see that the rest of the farm was carrying it. I said, 'Heck, I need to just quit growing cotton.' So I did, and that freed up a lot of equipment and time. I started building more ponds."

But Arant didn't stop there. He and other farmers quickly realized that they could make more money if they could control their costs. Once ponds are dug and stocked, the single greatest expense to catfish farmers is feed, which generally eats up half of all operating costs. At the height of the summer, when fish consume the largest quantities of feed, farmers can spend \$30,000 every two weeks to keep their ponds fed.

In the early days, catfish farmers were at the mercy of national feed corporations like Ralston/Purina that controlled prices and supplies. Determined to break free, a group of farmers formed a cooperative feed mill called Producer's Feed in 1976. Shareholders get their feed for just about cost, and at the end of the year they even get a rebate. Plant management is hired by a board of directors, made up of farmer/shareholders. It was the first step on the road to complete vertical integration.

"Vertical integration is the thing that has stabilized the catfish industry and made it profitable," says former Humphreys County extension agent Tommy Taylor. "Producer's Feed al-

lowed the farmer to get the quality and quantity of feed he wanted. That was critical, because feed companies in other places were really putting it to us. By the end of the first week Producers Feed was open, the price of feed had dropped from \$300 a ton to \$250."

Once the feed mills were in the hands of farmers, they could effectively set their own price for feed. It did not take them long to realize that they could also increase their profits if they could set the price their fish brought at the doors of the processing plant. By 1979, two multinational corporations, Con-Agra and Hormel, both heavy players in the agricultural sector, had already opened processing plants in the Delta.

Turner Arant and 40 other farmers got together and decided the time had come for a processing plant of their own. In 1981, they took out a cooperative loan and started up a farmer-owned processing plant called Delta Pride. Today it is the largest processor of catfish in the world.

Arant now has 1,600 acres of ponds, owns shares in both Delta Pride and the Delta Western feed mill, and manages 400 acres of ponds for a limited partnership composed of investors from all over the country. Arant sold the limited partnership the land for its ponds, as well as 75 shares of Delta Pride stock, which he priced at \$1,000 a share. He is also paid an annual salary as the manager for the partnership. "Catfish have been good to me," Arant says.

For white farmers, the profits can indeed be tremendous. When farmers opened the Delta Western feed mill in 1979, for example, its shares fetched about \$20,000 apiece. By 1990 shares went for \$450,000, according to one shareholder. Last year Delta Western sold approximately 200,000 tons of catfish feed worth \$50 million.

Such large-scale operations are a long way from the early days of the catfish business, when county extension agent Tommy Taylor answered many a call at three in the morning from panicked farmers whose fish were dying. Farmers knew Taylor would always be right over, even if "right over" was 25 miles away, down five miles of dirt road in the humid dead of a mosquito-filled night.

"I held a lot of hands back in the early days, because farmers had no one to ask about their problems," says Taylor, a short man with a sizable paunch. "No one knew anything about catfish, and I be-

came an expert because there was no one else to do it then." Working on his own, Taylor put together the first catfish lab in Humphreys County — a sink, six pails, and a microscope in an empty room behind his office on the top floor of the shabby old courthouse in Belzoni.

Since then, Taylor has watched catfish grow from a back-room business to a lucrative industry. "I'm telling you that the one thing that has made the difference is vertical integration," he says. "Right now, the farmer controls the feed, the fish, the processing, and the marketing, and that's what keeps us strong."

TAXES AND RESEARCH

Humphreys County runs from Isola, just below its northern border with Sunflower County, to Louise, just above the border with Yazoo County to the south. More catfish are grown here than anywhere else in the world. Billboards featuring a drawing of a huge channel catfish mark the county lines, its gun-metal blue, gray, and silver colors looking clean and appetizing. "Welcome to Humphreys County," the billboards proclaim, "Catfish Capital of the World."

The movers and shakers in the world of catfish farming can be found at the Pig Stand, a little barbecue joint at the side of Highway 49 on the outskirts of Belzoni. This was where policy for the catfish industry got shaped. Deliberations go on every day but Sunday, and the pickup trucks come and go throughout the day.

Many white Delta farmers don't do much of the actual hands-on labor of catfish farming; mostly what they do is manage. Like their fathers and grandfathers before them, they take the financial risks, give the orders, and make the profits. A goodly portion of each day is spent in town making deals with other farmers, picking up the mail, talking, telling stories, and staying on top of the paperwork.

Most Mississippi cotton farmers have been living off of federal tax dollars for years. Each family that forms a cotton corporation may receive a federal subsidy of up to \$50,000, and families often form multiple corporations using different combinations of relatives. Without the subsidies, there would be hardly a boll of cotton grown in Mississippi, yet many farmers bitterly denounce poor Delta women for having children out of wedlock to increase the size of their welfare checks.

WHITE FISH, BLACK FISH

Although government support and bank loans have helped many white farmers in the Delta get started in catfish, black farmers who have managed to hold on to their land have received little support.

The region has one of the highest concentrations of African-American farmers in the nation, but most have found themselves shut out of the money being made in catfish. Delta banks have consistently refused to lend them construction money for ponds with the same willingness shown to white farmers. Of the 400 catfish farmers in Mississippi today, only two are black.

"Out of 335,000 acres being farmed under water, about 200 of them are owned by blacks," says Ed Scott Jr., who started growing fish in 1981 outside the town of Drew. "They can't get the money to get started. No one wants to lend that much to a black man."

Scott dug eight catfish ponds in 1981, but the district supervisor from the Farmer's Home Administration refused to give him a loan. When the same supervisor loaned a white farmer \$5.5 million for catfish, Scott went over his head to the state office and got enough money to stock his ponds with 600,000 fingerlings.

When the time came to market the fish, however, Scott discovered that no cooperative of white farmers would let him join because of his skin color. Without a guaranteed market, Scott knew he would have ponds full of catfish and nowhere to sell them,

fish that would keep on eating and costing money.

When he heard that the Grain Fed plant was being built with government money in 1983, he decided to see if he could become a shareholder. "I went to the lawyer handling the paperwork and said I'd like to buy some stock," Scott recalls. "He said he'd get me some. The lawyer came back and told me straight up that because of the color of my skin he couldn't get me any stock.

"I said to myself, if the government will put money in that plant then they're no better than the white folks in Mississippi. I decided to build my own plant."

Scott built a one-line processing plant next to his farmhouse, and soon became an expert in competing for federal and state contracts to sell his product. He now processes about two million pounds of fish a year, enough to employ 35 people and earn Scott the award for Mississippi Minority Businessman of 1989.

Scott traces his stubborn independence back to his father, Ed Scott Sr., who was also a successful farmer in Drew. In the early days of the civil rights movement, Scott carried food to the first groups of Freedom Riders trying to desegregate public accommodations in Mississippi. "To see, like I have, the extremes to which white people will go, and how much money they will spend to keep you down, it makes you think," he says. "It really does."

— R.S.

They lambast black residents for being more interested in collecting welfare benefits than in working an honest day. "I was behind a colored girl in the checkout line the other day and she paid for a box of salt with a \$1 food stamp, then got outside and threw the box away 'cause she just wanted the change," grumbles one indignant planter.

While taxpayers have not been called on to support Delta catfish to the same degree as Delta cotton, some tax dollars have gone into building the processing plants owned by white farmers. Grain Fed, a \$6 million processing plant, was built in the little town of Sunflower with the help of \$1.6 million in federal Urban

Development Action Grant funds. And in 1989, the Farmers Home Administration approved a guaranteed \$2 million loan to help finance the \$7.5 million Fishco processing plant outside Belzoni.

Julian Allen, owner of the SouthFresh processing plant at Baird complains bitterly about the use of federal money in the plants, even though his own company was built with the help of \$220,000 in bonds issued by Sunflower County. "We used real capital dollars to build our company, and Delta Pride did the same thing when they started," Allen says. "But most of these other plants used UDAG grants, and it's the government that has put them in business,

under-capitalized and under-funded."

Catfish farmers have also received millions of dollars in direct support from Mississippi State University, which employs scientists to research every aspect of the industry from diet to disease. The Delta Branch Experimental Station, located at Stoneyville, employs five full-time researchers and maintains over 60 ponds, all funded by state taxpayers.

Those resources are at the beck and call of the industry. "Because of the unique situation here, where the extension service works directly with both the researchers and the farmers, we have a good flow of information both ways," says Randy MacMillan, a fisheries specialist at the station. "Research is directly delivered to the catfish farmer, and his problems are prioritized and given to the researchers to work on. What we do here is try to translate our work into practical benefits for the farmer."

MacMillan is on his way to Isola, an hour's drive through the Delta, responding to a call from a worried farmer who thought the fish in one of his ponds were suffocating from a mysterious ailment known as hamburger gill. As he drives up to the levee, the pond lies placidly under the sunshine, turtles on the banks jumping into the water with a wet plop. The water's edge is dotted with fish floating in the shadows, white bellies up.

"When you start to see this many dead fish in a pond, you know you've got a real problem," MacMillan whispers. "This guy's got trouble."

MacMillan nets a fish, revealing its mushy, ailing gill. Suddenly, a surge of life passes through the fish, which arches its back and spikes MacMillan with its dorsal fin. "Gosh darn it," he exclaims, blood oozing from a puncture in his palm. "That's one of the hazards of this job. Getting finned doesn't just hurt, it can give you fishmonger's disease, which attacks muscle bundles and can actually be life-threatening."

BLACK LABOR, WHITE PROFITS

For all his work out at the ponds, MacMillan is still an academic. Every farm worker knows how to handle catfish spikes: Rub the slime from the belly of a catfish on the wound and both pain and swelling ease immediately. The worst spiking, workers say, is when the fin breaks off in the wound.

"If that catfish spike breaks off in your hand, your whole arm goes numb," says Victor Taylor, a black farm worker. "If you get stuck like that by yourself, don't try to drive to the doctor. No sir. 'Cause you won't make it. Just lay down and wait for it to pass to where you can drive."

Taylor has worked for Jack Reed, a white planter, for all 64 years of his life. He was dressed in a khaki cotton work shirt and old jeans. He had only a pair of yellowed, snaggle-teeth left in his mouth, one up and one down. He sat behind the wheel in his battered pick-up, on the levee of one of Mister Jack's ponds.

Most of the physical labor of catfish farming is performed by black workers like Taylor. They maintain the ponds, cut the grass around the levees to keep the snake population down, feed the fish, and maintain equipment like generators, aerators, tractors, and nets.

The toughest work comes at night, between May and November, when the oxygen levels in each pond must be monitored three or four times each evening. Once the sun is down, algae in the pond stop photosynthesizing — they consume oxygen but do not release it. If the oxygen level in the pond falls below two parts per million, all the fish will suffocate within hours unless the pond is aerated promptly.

The work is monotonous and lonely. Oxygen checkers sleep during the day, and check the ponds every two hours at night — not a farmer's idea of fun. Billy Ed Tinnan used to check on his own fish. It wasn't easy waking up in the early morning every two hours, stumbling out into the humid night. It was hard farming.

"It gets pretty bad out there," Tinnan says. "The mosquitos are so thick on top of the levees that you can rub your hand down your arm and just leave a trail of blood. They aren't the worst, though. The bugs I hate are the midges. They don't bite, but they get in your nose and throat. Man, when you swallow one of those, you've got to have something to drink to get that thing unstuck."

Tinnan eventually tired of checking his ponds every night, so he hired Fish Management Inc. to do it for him. The company manages over 100 catfish ponds for Tinnan and six other farmers. Oxygen checkers make more than minimum wage, but not a lot more.

Charles Kirksey says he puts 10,000 miles a month on a company pick-up

checking ponds for Fish Management. Every night from 9:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. he checks as many as 72 ponds, three times each, taking oxygen readings and writing them down on a clipboard. He works 70 hours a week, and makes a little more than \$4.25 an hour.

Clouds of midges swirl over the ponds in the beams of his headlights. "They're awful when you get one in your eye," Kirksey says. "They get up against your eyeball and they're hard as hell to get out. Your eye drives you crazy all night."

When catfish are ready to harvest, farmers employ crews of black workers to "seine" the ponds. Tractors on either side drag 1,200 feet of net across the water while workers wade behind it, pushing it along. Larry Cochran employs a seining crew full-time, working his pond and those of seven other farmers who pay him for the service. It is enough to keep the crew busy year-round.

An hour wading through four feet of

pretty hard," says Redbug Sykes, a short, balding man who manages the seine crew for Larry Cochran. "I've got more or less the same crew we had last year, and the year before that."

LAND = POWER

Sykes shows more respect for his workers than most farmers, who are prone to describe the labor force in terms reminiscent of the plantation. "There are a lot of colored who just don't want to work," complains Bob Bearden, who farms an immense spread of 102 ponds with his two brothers. "Now they're not all that way. We got a boy raised here on the farm and he's just a nice boy. He's colored. We probably pay him \$20,000 a year."

Bearden then launches into a long description of "welfare cheats" who have never worked a day in their lives. "They've got brand-new houses paid for



TRACTORS "SEINE" A POND, DRAGGING A NET THROUGH THE WATER.

water under a broiling Mississippi summer sun is not a pleasant way to make a living. Pond banks are crawling with water moccasins, and fin spiking is common. But there's not much else in the way of jobs in the Delta, and those on the seine crews tend to come back for more.

"These are good boys and they work

by the government," he says, the top three buttons of his shirt unbuttoned, three gold chains nestled in the hair on his chest.

The Beardens run one of the largest catfish farms in the world, with more than 3,500 acres underwater and 55 full-time employees. They work a seining crew 200 days a year, and the hatchery that

stocks their ponds produces over 100 million fry.

The family is headed up by Dillard Bearden, one of the most powerful men in Humphreys County. Dillard's father came to Isola in 1925 and bought 200 acres. The family now owns 5,000 acres. "The Beardens have such a big operation, if they cough twice they're behind," says Tommy Taylor, the former county extension agent.

For catfish farmers like the Beardens, money and land easily translate into political power. Dillard has served for years as a county supervisor, and many of his neighbors speak bitterly of his influence over local business and social services. He and other farmers have long used their sway to help maintain separate private schools for white children in the Delta, condemning black children to learn what they can at underfunded public schools.

In neighboring Sunflower County, Lester Myers serves on the board of the all-white Indianola Academy and sits on the Delta Council, an influential organization of business powerbrokers. He also

runs Delta Western, the largest producer of catfish feed in the world, and farms 500 acres of catfish ponds.

"The quality of the public education system has really, really eroded away," Myers says. "The whole public education system eroded away."

But wasn't that because white leaders like Myers pulled out the entire white school-age population all at once and sent their children to a private academy? "That too," Myers says equably.

MUDDY WATERS

Each April, the catfish industry sponsors the World Catfish Festival in Belzoni. The event attracts 40,000 people to a town of slightly more than 3,000, and features a flea market in the two downtown streets of the county seat.

The annual festival is just a small, local component of a broad strategy to market catfish to the seafood-consuming sector of the American public, a job that required some doing. If there was ever a fish with a poor reputation among people with

money in big cities, it was the catfish. Lots of people in the North and West are born, live, and die without ever tasting one bite of catfish, or wanting to.

That was never the case in the Delta, of course, where wild catfish have been a staple since native Americans inhabited the region around 2000 B.C. Catfish caught in the wild have a strong, muddy, fishy taste. In their natural state, catfish are omnivores, the goat of the fish world — they will eat anything they can swallow. Much of their lives are spent rooting around in the mud at the bottom of rivers and ponds for bugs, plants, smaller fish, and whatever else they can find. Many Southerners, having eaten wild catfish all their lives, prefer the natural muddy taste, but people in other parts of America like their fish to be blander. A whole lot blander.

Farm-raised fish, on the other hand, are taught from the beginning of their lives to come to the surface to eat. Feed for adult fish comes in small, round, floating pellets about the size and color of dry dog food. The pellets are distributed by a

blower mounted beneath a hopper on the back of a pickup truck. Once a day, a farmhand drives the truck slowly along the pond's levee and the grain-based feed is blown out over the water. A catfish raised on this mechanized diet has a firm, white meat that is neutral in taste, bland enough that it will pick up the flavor of any herbs and spices with which it is cooked.

But catfish offers attractions more substantial than its neutral flavor. Catfish are low in cholesterol, and feed for healthy catfish contains none of the antibiotics that are given to pigs, cows and chickens on most farms. The water in catfish ponds comes from artesian wells and has repeatedly tested free of agricultural pollutants.

It also makes good economic sense to grow catfish as opposed to other kinds of livestock: A cow needs almost eight pounds



WORKERS IN A FLAT-BOTTOMED SKIFF HAUL IN 50,000 CATFISH.

of feed to produce a pound of meat, a pig needs four pounds, and a chicken needs three, whereas two pounds of feed will produce one pound of catfish.

But in order to learn the benefits of farm-raised catfish, the American public had to be convinced to try it. The industry recognized it would not be easy, but it persisted — and, thanks to the tools of modern advertising, it succeeded.

In 1987 farmers in the Delta organized the Catfish Institute to serve as the marketing arm of their new industry. Funded by a “check-off” of six cents per ton at two farmer-owned feed mills, the Institute hired a Manhattan ad agency to present catfish to upscale consumers in big cities as a desirable choice for dinner.

Under the guiding hand of Belzoni resident and Ole Miss graduate Bill Allen, the Institute did an extraordinary job of accomplishing its goal. The industry poured \$1.3 million into the ad campaign, and by all accounts it was money well spent. A 1989 consumer survey showed that of all the people who had heard of farm-raised catfish, almost half knew it was “different” than other catfish.

The Institute also got a lot of free advertising in the form of magazine articles and television reports. In 1987, an industry survey counted more than 2,100 stories about farm-raised catfish worth an estimated \$1.5 million in comparable advertising.

Catfish sales began climbing, and the price per pound rose steadily as catfish gained increasing acceptance across the nation. National consumption of grain-fed, farm-raised catfish grew from virtually zero in 1965 to nearly 400 million pounds in 1990.

BAD TASTE

With more and more people willing to try catfish at least once, the industry has placed an almost fanatical emphasis on maintaining quality control. As farmers see it, a person from Boston who has lived a lifetime without ever tasting catfish is only going to give it one chance. If that person gets a “bad” fish, there will never be a second opportunity.

Stanley Marshall is known far and wide in the Delta for his ability to detect “off-flavor” fish. A short, blond-haired man with a trim mustache and a ready smile, Marshall samples fish at the Delta Pride processing plant, sniffing and tast-

**“THE BEARDENS
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SION AGENT.**

ing to weed out any fish fouled by too much blue-green algae in the pond.

On a typical afternoon in the Delta Pride kitchen, Marshall takes a fish from a farmer, puts it in a paper sack, and pops it in a microwave. When it’s done, he opens the sack and sticks his nose into the steam billowing out through the tear in the bag. “Whew, man,” he exclaims, wrinkling his nose. “Smells like diesel fuel.”

The farmer’s face falls. More than \$50,000 worth of fish will have to stay in the pond, swimming around until they taste better. “We did have a diesel spill in that pond one day,” he admits. “I just wanted to know how bad it was.”

“Well, give it a couple of weeks and bring one in,” Marshall tells him.

Such slight variations in taste underscore the fragility of catfish farming. Despite its financial success, the industry is not immune to unexpected fluctuations. Every few years, there is trouble — too many fish in the ponds, too few contracts at the processing plants. Twenty-six catfish farmers went under during one such period in 1984, and others just managed to hang on until they signed a contract with Church’s Fried Chicken for more than 54 million pounds of fish.

To stabilize prices, farmers formed the Catfish Bargaining Association in 1989. Over 85 percent of the area’s farmers signed up, along with most of the processing plants. The association fixed the price that processing plants must pay for their fish at 80 cents a pound.

By this summer, however, the industry was entering another rocky phase. Processors competing for markets were charging less for their fish, and in return offered farmers less than the association prices. Many farmers, caught with ponds full of fish, have defected from the association and sold below the 68-cents-a-pound break-even point. If the price wars continue, industry observers say more farmers and processing plants could go under next year.

Despite periodic slowdowns, farmers expect the demand for catfish to continue to grow in the coming years. They look to a future modeled on the poultry industry, which now ranks as the biggest agribusiness in the South. The average American eats 65 pounds of chicken each year, compared to 16 pounds of seafood.

“There’s no reason why we can’t enjoy the same success that came to the poultry industry,” says Sam Hinote, former president of Delta Pride. “We’ve just scratched the surface. If you look at the growth of the industry from 1970 on, you can predict the future. In 1970, the whole industry processed about five million pounds of catfish. By 1980 that had risen to 46 million, and by 1989 it was up to 342 million pounds. My projections are that we’ll be processing over a billion pounds by the year 2000.”

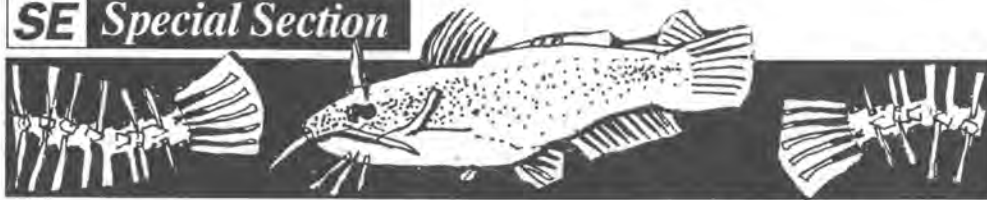
But while catfish farmers profit from the boom, most black residents who provide the labor remain undisturbed by the financial success. If the industry invested some of its profits back in the community, catfish might help lift the Delta out of poverty — but that doesn’t appear likely to happen in the near future. As it is, the rising demand for catfish will benefit a small minority of Deltans, leaving the majority untouched.

“I’ve watched catfish farming around here go from a few ponds to what it is today,” says Bobby Whelan, an Indianola teacher and musician who chopped cotton as a teenager with many of the men currently working as farm laborers on the ponds. “The farmers are making a lot of money, but the people working in the plants and at the ponds are still making low, low wages. It’s black people making the thing work, but they’re the only ones not making money out of it.” □

Richard Schweid is a former reporter with The Tennessean in Nashville.



A WORKER ON THE KILL LINE SKINS CATFISH. MANY WORKERS HAVE BEEN PERMANENTLY DISABLED, PROCESSING AS MANY AS 60 FISH A MINUTE.



THE KILL LINE

LELAND, Miss. — Rose Ross sits on the sofa in her living room, her swollen right hand limp in her lap. “I can’t hardly hold too much in my hand,” she says. “I can’t hold no skillet. Sometimes it hurts me to raise my hand to comb my hair. These curlers have been in my hair for four days because it hurts too much to take them out.”

Ross suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome, a painful nerve disorder brought on by years of high-speed, repetitive work on the “kill line” at the Delta Pride catfish processing plant. She worked for the company for six years, ripping and gutting fish as they sped by on a conveyor belt — 33 fish a minute, 1,980 fish

The **catfish** industry is crippling workers for life — and then **firing** many who are injured on the **job**.

By Eric Bates

an hour, as many as 20,000 fish a day.

When her hand started bothering her, a doctor told her she needed to be assigned to less dangerous work. The company told her she was fired.

“They didn’t give me no workers compensation or nothing,” Ross says. “They told me I was terminated because I couldn’t do the job for Delta Pride. Then

they walked me to the gate. They just showed me the door and told me to get stepping.”

Ross looks down at her throbbing hand. A short, determined-looking woman of 32, she lives in a small blue house on a narrow street with her husband and her blind grandfather. She speaks calmly, but now her anger starts to show.

“It makes me mad,” she says, her voice rising. “They cripple me and just get rid of me. They want all the money for themselves — they don’t want to pay you for your injury. But we’re the ones who make the money for them. They just stand behind us with stopwatches and tell us to work faster. That’s why so many people’s hands are messed up today — because they stood there and made us cut fish so fast so

THE PICKET LINE

INDIANOLA, MISS. — When nearly 1,000 catfish workers walked off the job at the Delta Pride processing plant last September, one of the problems they mentioned most was the bathroom breaks.

The workers, mostly black women, would stand on the line for up to 10 hours a day, chopping and packaging catfish. But when they needed to go to the bathroom, a supervisor would time them. If they took more than five minutes, they were written up.

"Our supervisors would run behind us with a stopwatch," says Ruby Singleton, a Delta Pride worker who joined the strike. "You could only go to the bathroom once a day. Any more, and you would be suspended."

Fed up with such harassment, the women launched what would become the largest strike by black workers in the history of Mississippi. Most were earning only \$4.05 an hour, performing high-risk jobs that often left them disabled by repetitive motion injuries. When the company refused to raise pay by more than 6.5 cents, hundreds of women took to the streets.

"It was the most amazing sight I had ever seen," recalls Rose Turner, an organizer with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1529 (UFCW). "They were backed up for miles down the road. The morning of the strike, only 75 people out of 2,000 went to work."

For three months, workers walked the picket line as labor and civil rights leaders from across the country journeyed to the Delta to support the strike. For most, it was a moment of unity and strength unlike anything they had ever experienced.

"It was amazing to see people come from all over to help us," says Eloise Walker, a packer at the plant. "We didn't ask for any help — it just seemed like help came from everywhere. It made us feel proud. It made us feel like we were doing the right thing."

Workers also report that the union committed itself fully to the strike, reportedly contributing more than \$1

million to the effort. Leon Sheppard, president of the 10,000-member local, personally bought supplies for picketers at a local store the first night of the strike.

"They helped us with our bills and gave us food to eat," says Walker. "There was never one time we had to wonder how we were going to pay our rent."

In the end, workers and organizers credit a nationwide boycott of Delta Pride catfish with forcing the company back to the bargaining table. Supermarkets across the country took Delta Pride products off the shelves, and 125 activists in Atlanta blocked entrances at Winn-Dixie stores when the chain refused to honor the boycott.

The contract ratified by workers in December included better holiday and vacation benefits, the formation of a committee to improve plant safety, raises totaling 75 cents an hour, and an end to timed bathroom breaks.

"It's a lot better now," says Dorothy Minton, a tray packer. "They treat you with more respect since the strike. If you say something now, they gonna stop and listen. They think twice now before they jump."

The strike helped reforge links between the civil rights and labor movements, as activists like Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Council threw their support to the catfish workers. "Ninety percent of the work is done by black people, and 90 percent of the profits go to whites," Lowery said at a union rally. "The struggle is now an economic one. We've desegregated the buses, the schools, the restaurants — but we haven't desegregated money yet. Money is still exclusive and segregated."

Just as important, the strike also empowered the women who work in the catfish industry. "It has changed all of us, really," says Eloise Walker. "It has brought us closer to one another, like a big family of brothers and sisters. We gained confidence within ourselves. I can feel it every day."

— E.B.

and over, thousands of times an hour.

Despite the danger, the industry has devoted most of its energy to downplaying the risks. "We have safety committees in every plant," says Walter Harrison Jr., communications manager for Delta Pride. "We want people to be happy with what they're doing."

But federal records tell a different story. Last year, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited Delta Pride for exposing employees to dangerous working conditions — and for knowingly covering up the risks by failing to report injuries on federal OSHA logs. It was only the second such citation in OSHA history. The penalty: a fine of \$12,000.

To add insult to injury, most catfish workers put their bodies on the line for low pay and long hours. Most take home less than \$10,000 a year in return for working shifts that often stretch to 10 and 12 hours a day. Almost all of the workers are black women, and many are single mothers. Most report being subjected to constant harassment not far removed from the cotton fields.

"Delta Pride is just like in slavery time," Ross says. "Somebody always standing over you, telling you what to do. To them, we're just here today and gone tomorrow. What do they care? If you get hurt, that's just one more black nigger gone and another one coming to get crippled."

"THEY MESS YOU UP"

Driving through the Delta on a summer afternoon, it's easy to see how farm-raised catfish have transformed the agriculture and economy of the region. Large blue ponds punctuate the countryside, shimmering among vast green fields of cotton and soybeans and rice. In all, planters have submerged more than 90,000 acres of Mississippi farmland, and catfish has surpassed cotton as the leading crop in Humphreys and Sunflower counties.

Like cotton, the new harvest has made farmers rich; the catfish industry took in \$360 million last year. But unlike cotton, local farmers retain control of much of the catfish business. Delta Pride, which manufactures more than a third of all catfish sold nationwide, is owned by a cooperative of 160 Mississippi farmers, and most of the feed and equipment suppliers are locally owned.

they could get richer. It ain't right, they cripple you like that and don't give you nothing but a goodbye."

Ross is not alone. Hundreds of workers at Delta Pride and other catfish plants

in the Mississippi Delta have been injured on the job in recent years. Like Ross, most have been crippled by the fast and furious pace of the assembly line, which forces them to perform the same motions, over

Catfish farmers in the Delta are proud of their success. "We do the processing right here, so we keep most of the money right here in Mississippi," says Harrison, the Delta Pride spokesman. "The catfish industry has turned out to be vital to the economic development of this region. Why, many of these smaller towns wouldn't have any reason to exist if it weren't for catfish."

But what is less visible than the acres of catfish ponds is the pain and suffering the industry has inflicted on its employees. Mary Robinson worked alongside Rose Ross as a ripper on the Delta Pride kill line, the section of the plant where fish are beheaded, gutted, skinned, and fileted. She still remembers her first day in the plant six years ago.

"I'll never forget it," she says. "I was shocked. I had never been in a place like that. I was scared of those big old live catfish. It was a stinking scent there, made my stomach sick. Eventually I just got used to it."

Robinson lives in a cramped apartment in Leland crowded with framed pictures of her six children. She has a broad smile and an easy laugh. As she moves about the tiny kitchen, putting away the breakfast dishes, her left arm hangs useless at her side.

Like her friend Ross, Robinson began having problems with her hand after a few years on the job. "It just got plumb numb, like pins be sticking in it." Her doctor diagnosed carpal tunnel syndrome, and cut her hand open last March to try and relieve the pressure on her median nerve. "Nothing they did helped," Robinson says, pointing to the scar on her palm. "My hand just swelled up and hurt. I ain't got no work in my arm."

Then, on June 27, her supervisor called Robinson in to the office and fired her. "It makes me mad," she says. "I did all that work, ripping, ripping, ripping those big fishes with those dull knives from eight in the morning until nine at night. And now I be hurt the rest of my life — *the rest of my life.*"

Robinson's youngest daughter wanders into the room and climbs on to her lap. "Ain't nobody else going to want to hire me, with the condition my arm's in. That's a fact. I can't live without a job. I have my house and my kids to take care of. How can I do that on \$98 a week unemployment?"

Johnny Stuckey was also fired by Delta Pride after he was injured on the

job. A muscular 20-year-old, Stuckey started lifting 60-pound tubs of fish on the file line last June. "It was pure hell, that's all," he says. "The supervisors make it hard. They stay up on you, constantly making you work faster."

Within weeks, Stuckey could barely move his shoulder. "I thought I had pulled a muscle, but the doctor said I needed surgery for tendonitis. It just got numb and tingling. I couldn't even pull my shirt on."

But when the surgery didn't work, the company told Stuckey to turn in his ID badge and leave the plant. "It happens a lot," Stuckey says, shrugging his shoulders. "I know one boy just got his finger cut off on the head saw." He shakes his head. "I don't recommend nobody going out there to work. They mess you up bad."

STAG HOUNDS AND FISH HEADS

The Country Skillet processing plant is located in Isola, just down Highway 49 from Delta Pride. Owned by the poultry giant ConAgra, the factory is a haphazard, low-slung building planted among fields of cotton and soybeans. Inside the lobby, a large framed engraving features imperious redcoats on horseback. The title reads, "The Meeting of Her Majesty's Stag Hounds on Ascot Heath."

Entering the plant from the rear, as

most catfish do, it's not hard to see why workers get hurt. Here, as at other catfish plants, the emphasis is on speed. Thousands of pounds of fish are brought in live, writhing and flopping in the back of big trucks. The philosophy is simple: The quicker they're processed, the fresher they'll be. Workers at the plant gut, chop, filet, and package more than 150,000 pounds of catfish every day.

In the loading area, the fish are dumped into holding vats, stunned with an electric shock, and carried into the plant on a conveyor belt. There, workers on the kill line take over. Women operating head saws decapitate dozens of fish a minute, slinging the heads into a bloody pile. Rippers slice the beheaded fish in half, and rows of "lung gunners" jam suction tubes into the fish to suck out the guts. The heads and other remains ride a separate conveyor belt to a small rendering plant out back, where they are recycled into catfish feed.

The plant is wet and cold and noisy with the sound of saws and belts and cooling fans. A slight fish odor mingles with the smell of chlorine. Workers wear blue hair nets and white lab coats spattered with blood.

On the kill line, workers race to keep up with four machines known as 184s — long gray monsters that perform the same tasks automatically. Using their hands,



MARY ROBINSON WAS FIRED BY DELTA PRIDE AFTER SHE DEVELOPED CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME: "NOW I BE HURT THE REST OF MY LIFE."

nine workers are expected to behead, rip, and gut 60 fish a minute. The same number of workers operating three 184s prepare twice as many fish — and filet them — in the same amount of time.

Like most manufacturers, catfish processors would like to replace their workers with machines. But for now, most simply can't afford it. "I priced one of the 184s one time," says a supervisor who worked at a small processing plant. "When I saw what it would cost, I just give up."

After the fish are ripped and gutted, workers skin them, remove the fins and bones, and cut them into filets with yellow-handled knives. "It's a problem, working all day with a knife," says a woman on the filet line. "Sometimes we stand back-to-back to keep from falling over from exhaustion."

After the fish are fileted, they are washed, chilled, and transferred to the processing side of the plant. Here, they are prepared according to various tastes — marinated, breaded, barbecued — before being frozen and packed for shipping.

Officials at Country Skillet acknowledge that workers face the risk of repetitive motion disorders. "It's getting to be pretty widespread," says Eddie Steele, a former union steward who now works as a personnel manager for the company. "We're doing stuff to prevent it. I won't say eliminate it, because I think it will always be a problem."

Yet Steele and many shop-floor employees say things are better at Country Skillet than at their largest competitor. "Delta Pride treats their employees like they're machines," says Steele. "They're run by farmers, and farmers are more inclined to treat people like machines. They still have that old plantation mentality. They're just hard — all that money they're making, and they still don't want to look out for their people."

FLOWERS AND CRUTCHES

John Short lost both his legs to a machine at the Delta Pride plant in Sunflower last February. He was working a Sunday-morning shift when he slipped and fell into an ice grinder. He was stuck in the auger of the machine when an ambulance arrived.

"When they removed him both his

legs were still somewhat attached, one by skin," said Jimmy Blessitt, administrator of South Sunflower County Hospital. "The other had nothing left but bone." Doctors amputated Short's right leg below the knee and his left leg above the knee.

Four months later, Tony Foster was on his regular shift "working the floor" — lifting trays at the main Delta Pride plant in Indianola. "A dude had quit, and my supervisor asked me if I would work in the ice room. I said sure, since it was easier than what I was doing. Working the floor was bad on your back."

Foster, a wiry 22-year-old, started chipping ice on a conveyor belt. "The floor was wet, and my foot slipped," he recalls. "The guard around the auger that runs the conveyor belt slipped, and the auger started grinding up my foot."

Barely two weeks have passed since the accident, and Foster is sitting in the living room of his family's rickety wooden house in Beulah. His 10 brothers and sisters crowd the tiny room, watching television. Beulah is 40 miles from the Delta Pride plant, but Tony and his relatives would crowd into a van early every morning to make the drive. He attended Mississippi Delta Junior College, but couldn't find a job. "I used to chop cotton," he says. "I didn't want to, but I didn't have no choice. Wasn't nothing else 'round here to do, so I just started working at Delta Pride."

Foster reaches down and peels the bandage off the stump on his right leg where it was amputated below the knee. As he talks he strokes his leg, gently, as if he cannot believe part of him is no longer there. A quiet man, known to his friends as "Dirt," he wears a t-shirt, shorts, and one black sneaker. He speaks softly, and shrugs a lot, and smiles shyly, both pleased and uncomfortable with so much attention.

"At first I was scared, but since then I've been taking it calm and cool." He shrugs. "I get a new leg fitted next week."

And the company? "They haven't even talked to me since it happened," Foster says. "They sent me flowers, but that was it."

When Tony leaves the room on crutches to answer the phone, other family members erupt in anger. "As much as Delta Pride is making, and they can't take better safety precautions," says his older

sister Bearlene. "It should be their number-one priority."

His brother Marvin shakes his head. "It's dangerous in there," he says. "They're the biggest industry in the city, and they're making a killing off that cheap labor."

GOD AND ROSE

Rose Turner heads out of Indianola, driving north on Highway 49 toward Memphis. She has put 75,000 miles on her car in the past two years — "all of it on this road," she laughs.

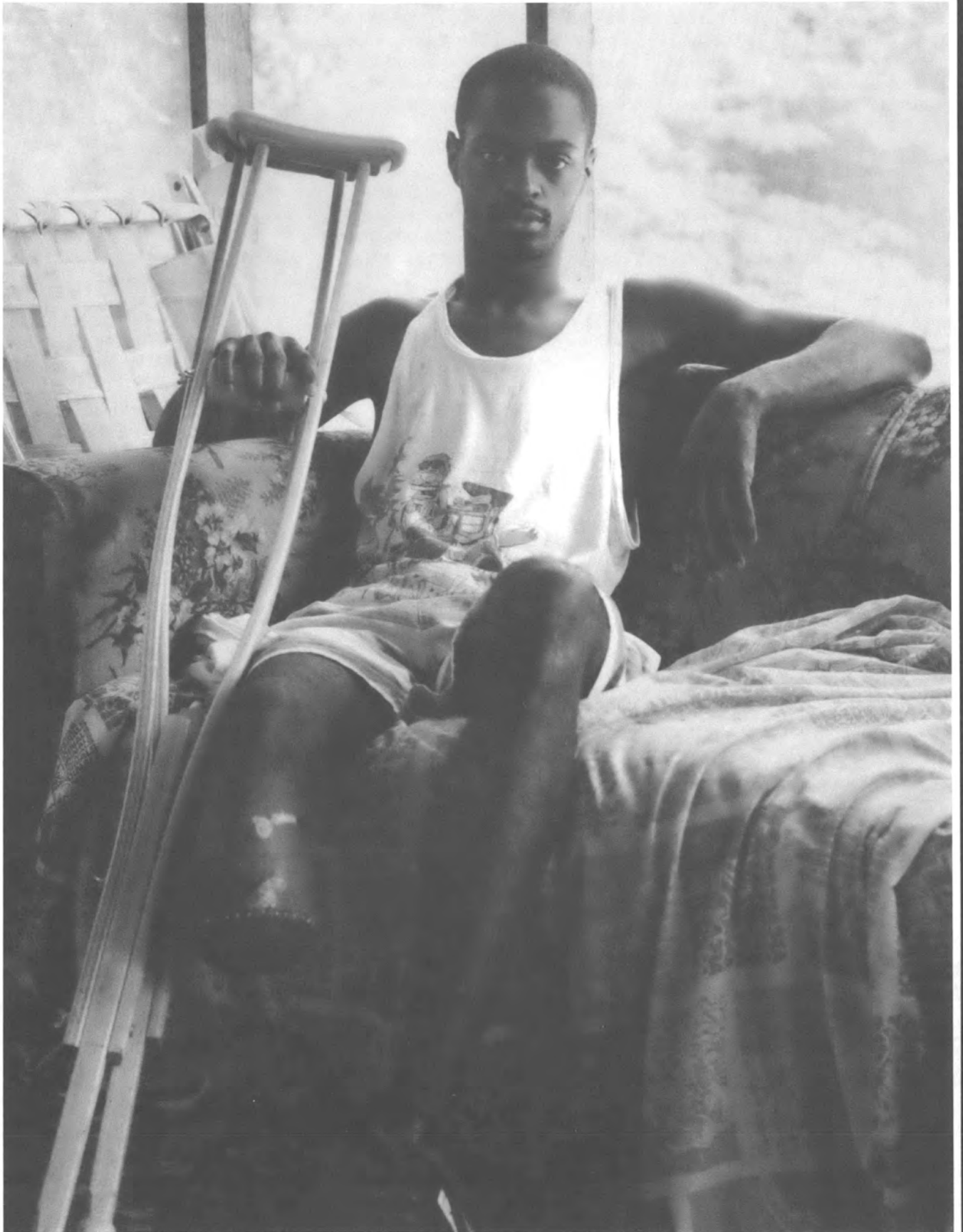
Turner represents catfish workers who belong to United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1529, and she crisscrosses the Delta keeping in touch with the membership. Workers at various plants joined the union in the mid-1980s, and they showed their clout last year when nearly 1,000 of them walked off the job at Delta Pride, touching off the largest strike by black workers in Mississippi history. (See sidebar, page 24.)

Today Turner is headed for Pride of the Pond, a small processing plant in Tunica and the first to vote to join the UFCW. "I started out with them from day one," recalls Turner, settling back for the long drive. "I'm close to these members. The company ain't going to shit with these crazy-ass people up here. They got unity. They're going to stick together."

Turner is a short, slender woman with a brilliant smile, but she has a fierce stare and a mouth that would frighten the most hardened prizefighter. "God can't intimidate Rose Turner," says a union supporter who has watched her take on company officials. "A black woman in the Delta dealing with all these white racist motherfuckers — how far do you think she'd get if she let anyone intimidate her?"

Turner seeks to ignite others with her fighting spirit. "I want my members to learn to stand on their own feet. I try to teach them that the union is only as strong as its members. You have to know your contract, and you have to fight for it." With the support of the union, she points out, catfish workers have won better pay, vacation, and working conditions. "You can't run from a problem," she says. "You have to fight it head-on."

In Tunica, Turner meets with workers from Pride of the Pond at the local senior citizen center. Luella Smith, a member of



TONY FOSTER LOST HIS LEG TO AN ICE GRINDER AT THE DELTA PRIDE PROCESSING PLANT: "THEY SENT ME FLOWERS, BUT THAT WAS IT."

the union negotiating committee, reports that some women almost passed out that afternoon, working in near 100-degree heat. "It was so hot in there, they had to open the door to the cooler," she says. "Instead of putting all that money into the flower beds on the front lawn, they should get us some air conditioning."

Smith remembers the days before the union, days when workers received no vacation and only three holidays — Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July. "It was tough times then," she recalls. "We never knew what time we would get off. One night we just left at 11 o'clock at night — we couldn't take no more."

Smith and others remember skinning and fileting 1,000 pounds of fish a day. "My hand hurts right up through here," says Sonora Armstrong, pointing to her palm. "It gets so stiff and puffed up, I can't open it."

Throughout the week, in meeting after meeting, Turner hears the same stories from workers at different plants. Supervisors who won't let them go to the bathroom. Hands crippled from overwork. Long, unpredictable hours. Wages too low to support a family.

At a meeting of Delta Pride workers, union members report that the company is making them work a seven-hour shift each weekday, and then ordering them to work on Saturdays to make up the remaining five hours — without paying them overtime.

"We've worked 'bout every Saturday for six months," says Mary Ann Diggs, who packs boxes at Delta Pride. "I'm tired of going in every day and never getting any overtime. I want to see my children on Saturday."

Corinneiler King, a filet cutter, nods in agreement. "I can't get a babysitter on

Saturday," she says. "Sometimes I have to leave my children at home alone."

JAILING THE WITNESS

The company tactics get to Rose Turner. Back in the union office in Indianola, she tells Roger Doolittle, an attorney from Jackson up to handle an arbitration case, about a Delta Pride worker with carpal tunnel syndrome. "They said she couldn't perform her job duties and told her to file for unemployment."

Doolittle looks startled. "Not workers comp? Unemployment?"

"Yes!" Turner shouts. "People get hurt, they just fire them. We need to get rid of these motherfucking no-good sons of bitches!"

Doolittle leans back and puts his feet up on a desk. "I don't think this company had much respect for this union before the strike," he muses, stroking his beard. "There are still problems with health and safety, but it's improving."

"Shit!" Turner interrupts. "I'm tired of these assholes!"

Doolittle is quiet, thinking. As part of the settlement of the OSHA citation, he says, Delta Pride has agreed to implement an ergonomics plan to slow down the kill line, rotate workers in hazardous jobs, improve equipment, and provide better treatment to injured workers. "I look to organized labor in Mississippi to be the leaders in workplace safety. I don't think the companies are going to come forward on their own. I think this union has accepted the challenge to provide more than just money and holidays — they are fighting to provide a safe workplace."

For the most part, Delta Pride has fought efforts to improve working conditions every step of the way. Before the strike, the company refused to negotiate employee grievances, insisting that every com-



A "LUNG GUNNER" USES A SUCTION TUBE TO SUCK THE GUTS OUT OF DOZENS OF CATFISH EVERY MINUTE.

plaint go before an arbitrator — a costly and time-consuming procedure. Of the dozen cases that have gone to arbitration, the company has lost all but one.

The morning of July 10, Turner and Doolittle sat across a table from company attorneys at an arbitration hearing in the Quality Inn in Indianola. The union wanted to reopen the case of Louis Cain, a Delta Pride worker fired in 1988 after he allegedly threatened supervisor Jerry Hynes with a pipe. Fred Boatman, a worker who had testified against Cain, was now coming forward, saying the supervisor had bribed him to lie about the pipe incident.

On the witness stand, Boatman said he had been fired from Delta Pride when he got a call from Hynes. He said the supervisor offered to pay him \$400 to testify against Cain, get him his job back, get a job for his girlfriend, and drop criminal charges he had brought against Boatman for allegedly stealing his color TV.

After Boatman testified, he got his job back. His girlfriend also got a job at Delta Pride. And no action was brought against him on the theft charge.

Boatman clearly had nothing to gain by coming forward; on the contrary, he was putting his job at risk and opening himself up to the criminal charge brought by Hynes. "I came forward because it was on my conscience," he testified. "I told my girlfriend 'bout every other night that it bothered me that I had lied."

Company attorney Henry Arrington picked at inconsistencies in Boatman's story. Where was he when Hynes paid him the bribe money? Why didn't his girlfriend hear their conversation when she was standing two feet away? Boatman floundered for answers, but stuck to his story.

Hynes, on the other hand, looked confident on the stand. He flatly denied that he had bribed Boatman. Then why, Doolittle asked him, didn't he press the theft charge against Boatman? "I tried," Hynes insisted. "I called to Greenville four times about the case. They said they didn't know where Boatman was."

Doolittle looked surprised. "But you knew where he was. He was at the plant every day. Why didn't you tell them to come pick him up?" Hynes offered no real explanation.

The next morning, after the hearing was over, police showed up at the Delta Pride plant and arrested Fred Boatman for theft.

Less than 24 hours after he testified against the company, he spent the night in jail.

SINGING SPIRITUALS

The message seemed all too clear: If you mess with the company, you better watch out. It was a message that Rose Turner took up at a meeting with Delta Pride workers that same night.

"Remember y'all, just because we got this contract don't mean the fight is over," she said "It's just starting. Look at Fred Boatman. He just wanted to tell the truth. He had nothing to gain; he had everything to lose. He told the truth, and asked for forgiveness — and tonight he's sitting in jail."

"Uh-huh!" shouts one member. "Tell it! Tell it!" adds another.

As with so many of the troubles in the catfish industry, the fate of Fred Boatman harkens back to the days of slavery. Whites still call the shots and make the money, and blacks still do the work and speak up at their own risk.

And, as in the days of slavery, whites still complain that blacks just don't work hard enough. Never mind that the catfish industry offers crippling work at poverty wages — the real problem is welfare. "We have a subculture of professional indigents," confides one catfish manager who asked that he not be identified. "Government programs have made it too attractive not to work."

You don't have to travel far in the Mississippi Delta to find the plantation past. Down the road from Delta Pride is Floewood, a 19th-century plantation lovingly restored to its former glory. There are 27 buildings in all: the planter's mansion, overseer's house, cotton gin — even the privy and the poultry house. On the entire 100 acres, however, there is not a sign of where the slaves lived, not a single building to mark their presence. It is as if they never existed — or as if their lives merit less attention than livestock and outhouses.

The Cotton Museum, located in the Visitor's Center, likewise pays scant attention to the central importance of slaves in the history of cotton. Slaves, in fact, are mentioned only once in the entire museum — on a plaque that defines the plantation system as "a type of agricultural organization in which slaves were employed under unified direction

to produce a commercial crop."

One building on the plantation that does make a passing reference to the slaves is the church — "where slaves would hold worship and sing their spirituals." It is the romanticized image of the happy slaves, singing away their sorrows under the benign gaze of a white god.

On a sweltering Saturday afternoon in the breathless heat of a Mississippi July, hundreds of friends and family members packed the St. James Missionary Baptist Church in Indianola for the funeral of Ruthie Mae Robinson. She had worked at Delta Pride for nine and a half years, and died of a heart attack on July 4 at the age of 38.

The simple white church stands just off Highway 49 on a dirt road a few miles south of the catfish plant. The altar overflowed with flowers brought by Robinson's co-workers. People sat in the pews, weeping softly, as Rose Turner stepped up to speak. "Miss Ruthie Mae was a good woman," she said. "Her life will speak for itself."

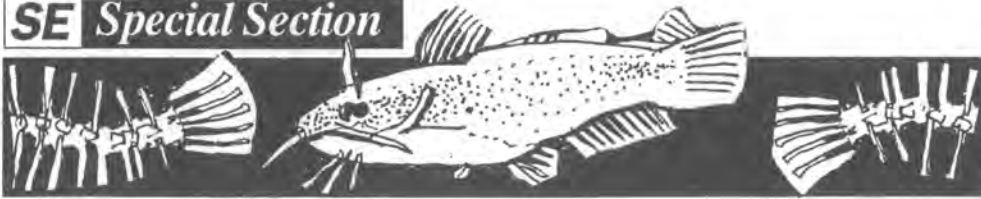
Then the Reverend R.L. Reed began the eulogy. He started slowly, almost painfully, but his words gradually gained momentum. "It's all right to die," he said, "It's all right to die. Death is a place we go to ease our suffering and our pain. We say, 'Lord, when my misery gets too great, call me home.'"

Reed began to gasp for breath with each sentence and a deep rattling shook in his voice, as if the words were being wrenched from him by some force beyond his control. People screamed and wept; the entire congregation seemed to vibrate in the heat. A woman cried out and collapsed in the aisle; she was carried out by three men.

"The Lord knows she worked hard to support her children!" Reed shouted. "The Lord knows she worked hard! Her strength was her faith in God. Our strength is our faith in God!"

He raised his hands above his head, his voice rising to a deafening crescendo. "Now she has gone on to everlasting peace! Heaven is everlasting peace. It is the paycheck for the worker who has done the job. And we will carry on, we will do the job, until we have Heaven, our everlasting peace, here on Earth." □

Eric Bates is managing editor of Southern Exposure.



“SOMETHING AS ONE”

Sarah White lives with her two children in a three-room apartment not far from where the Southern crosses the Dog—the intersection of the old Southern and Yazoo Mississippi Valley railroad lines. For generations the spot has been part of the folklore of the Delta, remembered in song and story as a turning point, a place where a decision must be made, a direction chosen. For many black Mississippians, it has represented a way out of poverty and prejudice, a way north to Chicago.

Sarah White chose a different direction. Like most of her friends and family, she grew up working in the cotton fields for \$6 a day. She went to college and studied to be a teacher, but wound up pregnant and on welfare. Determined to do better, she got a job skinning catfish at the Delta Pride processing plant.

Sarah White talks about how she and her fellow workers at Delta Pride **fought** for better **wages** and working **conditions**.

Interview by Eric Bates

The work was dangerous and the pay was low, but White didn't leave town or head north. Instead, she decided to stay and fight for a safe workplace and decent wages. Working “seven days a week from sun up to sundown,” she and a few friends convinced their fellow workers to organize a union at Delta Pride.

As she talks about her experiences, White leans forward on her living room sofa. A coffee table overflows with photos of her family. On one wall hangs a simple plaque inscribed with the Ten Commandments; on another is a diploma from Delta State Community College bearing the credo, “Live for Service.”

When she is not at work, White spends much of her time attending meetings, talking to people, or organizing. In her few spare moments, she likes to read Harlequin Romances and watch Arnold Schwarzenegger movies. “I like him,” she laughs. “He's strong, and he always gets what he goes after.”

Although White has traveled all over the South in the past year educating people about working conditions in the catfish industry, she still describes herself as “just a little country gal.” The union offered her a job in Atlanta, but she turned it down. “That would have been a chance for real advancement,” she admits, looking around her tiny apartment. “But this is my home. This is where I want to be.”

I started at Delta Pride in 1983. They put me on the kill line skinning fish. I was only there a few weeks before I got to experience how the company mistreats you — hollering and yelling for you to do this and do that.

I was only supposed to skin 12 fish a minute, but they would whoop and holler at you to do as many as you could. I would do 40 a minute — that’s the speed they wanted us at. If you only did 16 or 17 a minute, they would call you in and write you up.

We used to have to stand in ankle-deep water all day, for nine or ten hours a day. The debris from the fish — guts, water, skin — would fly in your face. They wouldn’t let you wash it off, so you had to stand covered in guts for hours.

A lot of people would have skin rashes. Our hands used to ache and hurt, but we didn’t know what it was. We knew it was from the job, but at that time we didn’t know it was carpal tunnel syndrome. We didn’t know its name.

The supervisor would harass us. We would ask to go to the bathroom, and they would make us wait for an hour. Then they would come inside the bathroom and holler at us that our time was up. If they didn’t like your attitude, they would just fire you. You couldn’t voice your opinion in no kind of way. It was, “Do what we say do.” There was no other way.

One day my baby was sick. I went to my supervisor and said, “Miss Hines, my baby’s sick. I need to take her to the doctor.” She said, “If you got to go to the doctor, we don’t need you.”

A lot of reporters come in and ask why people put up with that kind of abuse. I guess it’s just Mississippi — that’s what our grandparents did and our parents did. It just grew up in people that you do what you’re told. If you want to work, you do what the man say do. We were unaware of the route you could take to change things. Once we found out that we do have rights, that we can take steps to make our lives better, we took it.

What got me was seeing them firing my co-workers, people I had worked around and had feelings for as friends. I was so angry, I just got filled up. I wanted to do something that would put them in their place. I wanted to say, “We’re human beings and you can’t treat us like this. We got feelings just like you.”

I worked on the same machine as another girl, Mary Young, and we used to talk about how we didn’t have any voice in the plant. We didn’t know a hell of a lot about unions, but in 1986

Mary got an authorization card from the United Food and Commercial Workers. She said, “Sarah, we need some kind of help because of the abuse.”

Mary sent that card in to the union, and three weeks later a representative from the international come down and tell us what we need to do to organize. That’s really how we got started off.

It was four of us trying to organize 1,200 people in the plant. We had to sign up 30 percent of the people on cards saying they wanted to organize a union. We would talk to people during breaks in the bathroom, at the Piggly Wiggly, the WalMart — we worked seven days a week from sunup to sundown, trying to organize.

People were afraid. You just didn’t talk about unions in Mississippi. You go to talking about a union here, you’re looking at losing your job. Once we started to organize, the company got wind of it and started making examples. They fired 16 of us for trying to organize, but the labor board made them give us our jobs back.

The company did more besides firing us. One day they brought \$180,000 in cash into the plant in an armored truck. They stacked all of this money on a table, with all these guards around it. They said, “This is the money you’re going to put out in union dues if you join the union. All the union wants is your money.”



CATFISH WORKERS AT DELTA PRIDE WALKED THE PICKET LINE FOR THREE MONTHS UNTIL THE COMPANY AGREED TO RAISE WAGES AND IMPROVE SAFETY.

Well, it didn’t fool me no kind of way. I knew it was just a tactic to keep the people from organizing. I believe that in any kind of organization you’re going to pay some type of dues. The catfish farmers do it — they put money into their organization. They don’t call it a union, but it’s a group of fish farmers united to make decisions to help themselves. That’s all a union is — a group of workers united to make decisions together.

The company brought in the brother of Medgar Evers. He

said, "The union isn't good for you, the company is going to treat you right. It's best to keep this plant as a family — don't bring no outside people in."

Once we decided to organize, the company suddenly gave us all this good stuff — they threw barbecues, gave away money, gave away fish. We told people, "Go ahead, drink their beer, eat their barbecue. But on October 10, vote yes for the union."

People were afraid, but we kept on and tried to instill it in them that the union would be better than being harassed and not having any kind of voice. The company had treated everybody so bad, they felt it was the only way out. They thought, "Maybe if we organize, somebody can help me with my aching arm." When the vote came on October 10, it was 489 to 349 for the union.

After we got organized, we got our first contract. It gave us two extra holidays, a pay raise, a pension plan, a grievance and arbitration procedure. It gave us a voice to say what we want.

But things didn't change. The company said, "Ain't nobody going to come in and tell us how to run our business. You all wanted to organize, so we're going to make you pay." They kept on harassing us, trying to get away with a lot of stuff. They just disregarded that there was a union.

When we had a grievance, they would refuse to talk about it. They made us take cases all the way to arbitration, just because they could. We took 27 cases to arbitration, and we only lost two.

When it came time to renew our contract last year, I served on the negotiating committee. The company only offered us a six-cent raise and said we could only go to the bathroom during lunch hour. People thought it was ridiculous. People said, "They think we're crazy. We're just not going to accept this."

We gave them until midnight on September 13 to bring us something better, or we would go on strike. But they wouldn't do it — they really thought people would accept it and come back to work. So we went on strike.

I was scared. I wanted to believe that my people knew the company was just messing with us, that we couldn't progress with what they was offering us. I wanted to believe that I had their total support, but something had me afraid. So I told myself, "Regardless of what the results be, I'm going to be out on that picket line if I'm the only one out there."

At midnight on September 13, I went

out there with my picket sign, and there was 100 people there. When the shift started at eight o'clock that morning, cars went to pulling over everywhere, all the way from the plant back down to Highway 49. Everyone came out of the plant. All the workers refused to accept the contract.

You talking about proud, you talking about filled with joy — to see for once that we could stand together and fight this company. I stood at the front of the entrance and people came by and shook my hand and said, "Sarah, I'm not crossing. I'm with you."

It wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. I thought once we all came out, maybe the company would decide it had to do something. But the company felt they could get other workers. They was losing money, but they were determined to go as long as they could.

The union supplied us with groceries, gave us \$60 a week in strike benefits, paid our bills. We had a turkey for Thanksgiving and a nice ham for Christmas. But sometimes we were down and out. We weren't progressing like we wanted to, but we were willing to sacrifice to make this company do right by us.

I think that support from other states is what really kept us strong throughout those three months on strike. Folks from all over came to walk the picket line with us. It gave the people strength. It picked us up and made us see that this was some-



THE ACTION AT DELTA PRIDE WAS THE LARGEST STRIKE BY BLACK WORKERS IN MISSISSIPPI HISTORY.

thing we were doing right. It showed us that we didn't have to take the abuse. It made us feel pride in ourselves.

Finally we decided to launch a nationwide boycott of Delta Pride. We picketed grocery stores, and they took Delta Pride catfish off the shelves. If it hadn't been for that boycott, I believe we would have been fighting even longer. But when the company started having trouble selling their product, they came back and settled the contract real quick.

That strike changed the people. I've been with them from day one, and the attitudes are totally different. People used to be afraid, but now they are loud and lively. They won't stand for it when the company tries to mistreat them or cheat them out of something. It's not just me and three more running around trying to sign people up. Now you got people all throughout the plant that will take an application and go to a new worker and say, "Hey, brother, we need you to join this union."

The morale is stronger now since the strike. We learned that if you do something as one, you most likely succeed.

The farmers couldn't believe we went on strike — 900 black single mothers fighting all this harassment and abuse. You always hear the farmers say, "I don't see what they're going on strike for. They was on the welfare line before." Well, that's what it's all about — trying to do better. A lot of single mothers was tired of the welfare line. We wanted more than \$120 a month to support our kids. That's why we went to work, so we could earn our own money and feed our families.

The whites always think of us like we are still in the days of slavery. We chopped cotton. Our parents before us chopped cotton. Our grandmothers worked in their houses. Mississippi has always been based on that plantation mentality, that prejudice. We say it's time to change. There should be opportunity for all, not based on the color of your skin.

I chopped cotton. I was 12 years old, I used to go to the field with my aunt after school and during the summers. We had to go, because we had to help Momma. We picked cotton and chopped cotton from seven in the morning until six in the evening, with just an hour lunch break. We would make six or seven dollars a day.

My big momma used to tell me stuff about when she was growing up, about how white people used to do when she was working in their houses, how hard times were. I never paid any attention. But when I got older and went to Delta Pride, I understood that plantation mentality she was talking about. I experienced it. I didn't believe that people had that much prejudice in their hearts, because I had never experienced it.

At Delta Pride, our supervisor would tell us point blank, "You're too dumb and stupid to do anything but use your hands." I guess we showed them how dumb and stupid we are. We really have some intelligent people working in the plant, people with college degrees. Sure there are people in there who can't read, but they have common sense, and common sense is the best sense you can have.

As far as I'm concerned, we had it better out there in the heat of the cotton field than we do in the catfish plant. All they did was put a roof over our head. At least in the field we could go to the bathroom when we needed to. In the plant, the mouth is the whip, the pencil is the whip. At Delta Pride, it

was either you do it our way or you hit the gate.

When we started at Delta Pride, that company was in a three-room trailer. We made this company millions and millions of dollars. We missed PTA meetings, we missed graduations, we sacrificed our families for this company. We're not trying to take over, we're just trying to be fair. Give us a decent workplace, a decent medical plan, a decent pension plan. We don't want the whole pie, but what's wrong with a slice?

When I was growing up, I really wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to advance, to do something to help my people. Since I started working with the union, I've met so many people with a mind to help the world. Since I got that feeling in my heart, I don't think there's anything I'd rather do than show a brother or sister that things can be better — that their workplace can be changed if they put forth the effort.

My interest is working with the people, showing them that they can make it. My whole goal is to see Delta Pride turn out as a decent workplace, so my daughter can go to work there if she wants to.

I hope that reading about us helps other people decide that they don't have to take abuse that a company dishes out. If anybody's in our situation, now's the time to make a stand.

I am a different person now. I believe in The Dream. I had heard about Dr. King and what he was trying to do for black folks, but that didn't mean nothing to me. Now, dealing with the union, trying to organize, talking to workers from all over the world, it has taught me a lot. I am stronger than I used to be.

Before, I was Sarah White. I was just another black worker. Now they respect me for who I am. I feel better about myself, because I let that company know what I'm capable of doing. They talk to me like a woman. We live by the Bible — and the Bible is our union contract.

We didn't bring outsiders in — we are the union. It's the people. It was our choice to change that plant so it wouldn't be harmful to us. We speak for ourselves.

When people say "union," they think it's people coming in trying to run their business. I don't think it's about that. It's about democracy — the most purest form of democracy you can have. It's a way to make that company respect you, give you the dignity you deserve, so you can profit from your sweat and hard labor.

We were just hard-working women wanting to advance, wanting to come off the welfare line, wanting to give our babies more than what that welfare check could do. These white farmers wanted to take advantage of us, work us for nothing. We just found a tool to back them off, to make us respect us for who we are — hard-working women who want to advance in life.

Things are better now. We have a long way to go, but I'm not discouraged. You got to crawl before you walk. It's going to take three or four contracts, but we're going to see results. I know it's coming. Because this catfish is not going anywhere — it's booming, and it's here to stay.

I'm here to stay, too. The fight is not over. Maybe one day in 10 years you'll see me again and say, "Well, Sarah, you said you was going to lick 'em, and you did." □

Eric Bates is managing editor of Southern Exposure.



PARTING THE WATERS

HOLLANDALE, Miss. — They were gathered together on a hot summer Saturday in the Delta: doctors and lawyers, mayors and ministers, university presidents and civil rights activists. All of them were leaders in their communities, and they had all come to talk about what they could do to change the catfish industry.

They had been talking for hours, thinking and strategizing, when Arnett Lewis stood up. Lewis, a large black man with a calm and commanding presence, was founder of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, a community group that had been on the forefront of the civil rights movement in Mississippi for years. He began to speak, slowly at first, but with an increasing intensity.

"If we want to impact the catfish industry in all the ways we have discussed today, we must find a way to hold the industry accountable to the community," he said. "It's not going to happen just by organizing the plant and the workers; it must

Catfish workers and community activists are **organizing** what could well become "the second civil rights **movement.**"

By Eric Bates

extend to the family and the community.

"I recall coming home one night in Alabama years ago at about two thirty in the morning and seeing a lot of folk — mostly black women — walking in the street, going in the same direction. There was a bus parked down at the end of the street, and they were all catching that bus to go pluck chicken in a poultry plant 40 or 50 miles away.

"That experience had a tremendous effect on me, especially when I hear things about how black people don't want to work, how they're lazy. Need dictates that a mother get up and leave her children and go to a dehumanizing workplace. Black women in this country

are being enslaved, and we must help communities develop effective organizing strategies and educational programs to place a different demand on the catfish industry — a demand that the industry reinvest its profits in families and the community."

With a few simple words, Lewis captured the essence of that remarkable gathering. Inspired by the ex-

ample of hundreds of black women who had gone on strike at the Delta Pride catfish processing plant, community leaders had come together to see what they could do to extend the struggle beyond the plant gates.

Afterwards, everyone in the room had the sense that it was the start of something momentous. "This movement is something that was a long time coming," said Mayor Robert Walker of Vicksburg. "We cannot in good conscience let what happened in the cotton fields happen in the catfish industry."

L.C. Dorsey, executive director of the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, put it even more simply: "I see it as being possibly the second civil rights movement."

DEPARTING FROM THE PAST

The catfish project, as it soon became known, got its start among workers in the processing plants. When women at Delta Pride struck for better wages and working conditions last year, civil rights leaders from across the country traveled to Mississippi to join them on the picket line.

For Isaiah Madison, it was a trip home. The son of a Desoto County sharecropper, Madison was born and raised in the Delta and worked for 25 years as a civil rights activist, public interest lawyer, and Methodist preacher. As a senior attorney with North Mississippi Rural Legal Services in the late '70s and early '80s, he represented black farmers being driven from their land at the same time that white planters were beginning to cash in on catfish.

"It was during that time that I was struck by the tremendous economic potential of the catfish industry — and by the painful exploitation of the mostly black female workforce," Madison says. "I witnessed the systematic restriction of black Mississippians to low-paying jobs, cutting and gutting catfish at great cost to their physical and emotional health."

When workers at Delta Pride walked off the job, Madison was one of the first to join them on the picket line. As executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, North Carolina, he began talking with catfish workers and community activists in Mississippi. It was time, he concluded, to bring together those fighting for reforms in the workplace with those struggling for change in the community.

"It is clear that we need to organize a movement that will build on the resources of the church, grassroots community organizations, black small farmers, the union, and universities," he says. "The time has come to pull together in a cooperative effort."

The result was the June gathering in Hollandale, an unprecedented meeting of diverse participants from across the state. Those attending included health professionals from clinics in Tchula and Mound Bayou, labor leaders with Mississippi Action for Community Education and the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the mayors of Hollandale and Vicksburg, and educators from Jackson State, Mississippi Valley State, and Memphis State.

Although each participant came to the session with different perspectives and experiences, all agreed on one thing: the need for a bottom-up, grassroots organizing effort to empower the community.



"This is a very important and historic meeting," said Dr. Leslie McLemore, director of the Universities Center at Jackson State. "The plantation mentality prevalent in the catfish industry has been a part of our state for a long time. However, there is a sense in which this gathering is a departure from the past. The project we're discussing is a judicious combination of planning and organizing — basing our actions upon sound and systematic research."

GREED AND NEED

In essence, participants say, the strategy of the project is twofold: to fight to improve wages and working conditions inside catfish plants, and to push for true economic development that benefits the entire community.

"We seek to combine social change strategies of *economic justice* and *economic development*," says Madison, the interim coordinator of the project. "We want to effect needed changes in the catfish industry, but we must also develop and strengthen the internal resources of the workers and their communities."

The key elements of the project include:

▼ **Research.** Catfish workers and Mississippi-based researchers will prepare a detailed case study of the role and status of women in the catfish industry, and review their findings with workers, farmers, and grassroots leaders. The re-

sults will guide organizing and education strategies.

From the start, workers and their families are playing an active role in the project. "Often folk come in to do research and supply a guinea-pig status to the people," says Leroy Johnson of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center (ROCC). "We plan to guide researchers, so that the entire community is part of the research process."

▼ **Organizing.** Community activists will hold a series of workshops to train local leaders among catfish workers and their families, educate workers about health care and compensation for injuries, develop a "workers manual" on employee rights, and push for federal safety standards for repetitive motion disorders.

"The union is the right way to go to protect workers, but we can't begin to unionize these plants without serious, organized community support," says Charlie Horhn of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. "Without community support to apply pressure, these companies will not comply with existing laws. We have to hold the industry accountable to workers."

▼ **Economic Development.** The project will also provide education and training to enable minority entrepreneurs to break into the catfish industry and related businesses.

"We can't depend on the industry — the plantation system — to provide adequate livelihoods for black, poor people in the Delta because it is controlled by

people operating out of greed," says Isaiah Madison. "It leaves no alternative except to build a movement to enable people to do for themselves, to provide an economic livelihood for themselves."

The bottom line, Madison adds, is that those who do the work must have a fair share in the ownership of the industry. "White farmers are being enriched at the workers' expense. Plant owners are increasingly large national corporations headquartered outside the state. Money is being sucked out of Mississippi, and even the profits that stay in the state benefit white landowners, not poor blacks."

PROFITS AND PEOPLE

Arnett Lewis grows impassioned whenever he talks about the catfish project and its potential for uniting and mobilizing diverse elements of the Delta community. "This is very exciting. For a while now, there has not been a lot of movement activity in Mississippi outside of the political arena. This project offers a very important opportunity for us to organize people around economic issues at the grassroots of the rural South."

Like other participants in the project, Lewis sees it as a chance to address the roots of poverty and racism. "If we're going to turn the living conditions in Mississippi around, we have to look at the economics of the state — and the catfish industry has become one of the principal economic resources, generating billions of dollars and providing thousands of jobs."

Lewis got his start as an organizer in the late 1970s, when he quit his job in the Lexington public schools to lead a black boycott of white businesses. The goal, he says, was to pressure white leaders to put a stop to police brutality against minority youths.

"The demonstrations lasted for almost nine months," he recalls, "but in the end we changed the racial composition of the police department from 20 percent black to 50 percent black."

After the boycott, many of those who participated decided they needed an ongoing community organization to address a broad range of social issues. The result was ROCC. Over the past decade, the group has helped bring drinking water to isolated communities, led a campaign to halt the jailing of mentally ill patients, and helped students publish an oral history of African-Americans in Holmes County.

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"Organizing is what we do," says Lewis. "We help communities respond to problems as they perceive them."

That same philosophy extends to the catfish industry. "It means enabling people to do for themselves," says Lewis. "We have an abundance of resources that have not been tapped. I think the project offers an opportunity to consolidate some of those resources so they can benefit not only the workers, but the entire community."

Lewis says the project also represents a chance to extend the vision of the civil rights movement to include economic rights. "I think the catfish industry owes something to the community. Is the industry putting enough of its profits back into the education of the people who create those profits? Is the industry concerned about health care for the citizenry of those communities? Is the industry concerned about other issues like drug abuse and teenage pregnancy, and is it giving money to address those problems? The industry must be held accountable."

THE ART OF WORK

Before she became head of the Delta Health Center, L.C. Dorsey eked out a meager existence as a sharecropper. She likens the catfish industry to the days when cotton ruled the region.

"It's very much like the sharecroppers 30 years ago," she says. "Cotton was king. The owners of the plantations were making a killing, and we weren't making anything."

Dorsey says the legacies of slavery and sharecropping have crippled the Delta just as surely as high-speed jobs in catfish processing plants are crippling workers. "The most significant challenge we face is the economic status of the area," she says. "This is such a poor area. The owner always knows that for every worker who says, 'I'm not coming back till you do something,' there are 40 unemployed people waiting to take that job."

Working in the clinic, Dorsey sees injured catfish workers almost every day, their hands crippled by the rapid, repetitive motion of the processing line. Already, she says, black women who work in the plant are taking part in the organizing project.

"The best direction for us who want to help alleviate the problem must come from the people who feel the pain," she says. "It is very important that we look at how women who are employed in the industry perceive their work. In our effort to improve the workplace, we need to find a way not to destroy those things that they feel positive about. For example, I'm sure there are women in those plants who can filet fish as an art. We need to be sure that we don't take away how the little boy or girl perceives his or her mama as the person who can filet the most fish without giving them something else to feel good about."

All of the participants in the project concede that it will take substantial fundraising and years of painstaking organizing to achieve their goals. But it is hard to escape the feeling that everyone involved in the effort shares a tremendous sense of hope — a sense that, this time, the movement won't be denied.

"This is not just another project," says Arnett Lewis. "It's a necessary phase of change in Mississippi. It is a bottom-up strategy that weaves the people who are most affected into the fabric of the process. In the long haul, they are the ones who will change their communities. And if we can change conditions in Mississippi, then we can change the conditions throughout the South and the rest of the country. Once we get rolling, there will be no stopping us." □

Eric Bates is editor of Southern Exposure. Gracie Bonds Staples contributed to this story. Support for this cover section was provided by the Dick Goldensohn Fund and the Southern Labor Fund.

V e n o m

By Clyde Edgerton



There was this incident. It happened to me in the war and I'd never meant to tell anybody about it. Then I flew Liston Edwards down to Wilmington to pick up some canebrake rattlesnakes and on the way back I was explaining it — the war incident — when we crashed and got trapped in the cockpit with the snakes.

I wouldn't have told him if it hadn't been for the way he'd started acting toward me earlier that summer. See, Liston had been in the ground war in Vietnam — an Army Ranger — and I'd been in the air war over Laos, a fighter pilot. It was like he couldn't get enough of trying to compare what he'd done with what I'd done. Especially when somebody else was around.

I met him a couple of years ago, right after I'd gotten back into flying. I'd just bought the airplane — a 1946 Piper Super Cruiser — and was hanging around Hollis Field on week-

ends. He and I sort of struck it off. He was a regular out there — crazy about airplanes, but couldn't get a pilot's license because he lost an eye right after the war — got hit with the tip of a chain somehow. He wore a black eye patch and had a long black beard. I think he'd gotten an aircraft mechanic's certificate at one point — I was never clear about it.

Liston and I were the only two vets out there regularly. It was a small airfield. One paved runway. We'd get to talking about the war, but I'd never told him about this particular incident because it had always been a private thing to me. And still is.

The way Liston would get to me is this: He'd ask a question or say a little something that made it seem like the ground war was a whole lot more dangerous than the air war. Very tiny hints, while we were sitting around talking with some of the guys. I can't even think of a good example. . . . Oh yes, he'd say something about fighter pilots flying home to rib-eye steaks and comfortable beds every night. Stuff like

that. But he wouldn't stay on it — so you might have a chance to respond. He'd just skim over it and leave you a little bit frustrated. Sometimes I felt I was like pulling away from him when we'd talk about the war, like I was fainting, drawing back from a left hook — drawing back from the power in his eye. I didn't want to feel that way. I didn't like it. I wanted him to see that I was as strong as him.

But having been a soldier — we called them “grunts” — he never really knew what the air war was actually like, and to make it worse, the stories I told were never quite as hairy as his. I mean he'd seen blood and actually touched the enemy — hand-to-hand combat, and all that. But I'd never ejected or anything like that or even had my airplane hit. I could talk about ejection seat *training*, but not the real thing. And I hadn't planned to tell him about my war incident. But still, there at the beginning of summer, for the first time in twenty years, I was getting a chance to tell some stories about the war. I was remembering.

I guess I always had it in the back of my mind that if I told Liston about this incident, and changed the ending around a little bit, it would even things up because he'd have a hard time topping it. So when I had my back against the wall, just before the crash, I told it to him, part false. And then, afterwards, all true.

So, about the snakes. On a cold Wednesday morning in November we strapped in, seat belts only — no shoulder harnesses in a Super Cruiser. There's one seat up front for the pilot, one in back. I looked in my little wide-angle rearview mirror and saw Liston — broad-shouldered, wearing his eye patch, his long black beard streaked with grey. He was wearing a skull cap. Behind him on top of the baggage compartment was a small empty wooden cage with a heavy screened front, a hinged top, and through the latch — a small notched stick.

The Super Cruiser is a narrow, light little airplane. The interior of mine was very nice — with red padded seats, part leather, part tough cotton fabric, kind of a red plaid in some places. Gerald McCullers, the fellow who owned her before me, had her rebuilt inside and out and had kept her inspected, as far as I knew.

We took off and leveled at 1,500 feet. The air was very smooth, the visibility was great, and the trees cast long shadows. In some places the frost sparkled. We flew at 1,500 feet mostly, dropped down to 500 feet once in a while, and didn't say much on the trip down.

I'd had the airplane for about eight months, named her Trudy, and felt confident flying her. She was simple to operate, and clean. She flew low and slow and was a lot of fun.

We met the snake guy at the airport in Wilmington and he took us out to his truck. Little man with a mustache and big hands. He shook the four rattlesnakes from his cage down into Liston's cage. Two large ones, a medium, and a small. The

two big ones were over four feet long and bigger than my wrist. As they were all dropped together into the box, their rattles started up, a fuzzy buzzing, then died down after they got settled.

They're all feisty, the guy said. I ain't had them long. He looked at me. You ever seen fangs close up?

Nope.

He looked in his truck bed, found a stick with a metal hook on the end, slid it around the small rattlesnake and pulled it up. All the rattles started up again. He dropped the snake on the ground, pinned the head with the hook, reached down slowly and took hold behind the head and picked it up. It twirled, found his arm and wrapped around it. He pressed the hook into the snake's mouth and opened it wide in such a way that two tiny white nipples dangled. He pressed harder. Two small, white, sharp, slightly curved bone-needles emerged, one dripping.

Piece of work, ain't it?

Sure is, I said.

He dropped the snake back in with the others. The rattles started up, sounding like bees.

Liston stuck the little stick back through the latch, then paid the guy ninety dollars.

We put the cage on the baggage compartment lid behind Liston's head and took off.

I had gotten a kick out of the look on people's faces when I told about planning this trip, about Liston being an Army Ranger who had been a snake handler and all that. I never once mentioned his resentment of my being a pilot, and I'd never worried once about anything going wrong with the airplane engine.

On the way back we started talking some.

Say you got shot at right much over there? he asked. He'd asked that before.

Oh yeah, I said. But I'd have to look at the records to really know, you know, exactly which days and all. But if we were putting in ordnance at places like Miguia, the Dog's Head, or the H in the river, we about always got shot at.

Say you never got hit?

Never got hit. But I was on my flight lead's wing when he got hit. (This is when I started my story.)

Did he go in?

Yeah, he did.

Got killed?

Yeah.

And here's where I decided to go on and tell about the whole incident if he kept asking — leaving out what happened in the end, the true ending. I mean, Liston had just mentioned to the snake pilot that I was a former fighter pilot and had stayed, as he put it, *high and dry* during the war.

I guess we were about fifteen miles south of Horseshoe Lake. I looked in the rearview mirror at the stick in the latch.

Wadn't it hard, said Liston, flying around up there by yourself, not being able to rape something or kill somebody when one of your buddies got killed? You know.

We were able to shoot up some stuff.

What?

Oh. Whatever was available. A jackass.

A jackass?

Yeah. Find something on the roads, I said.

I'd never told anybody about the donkey. I'd told people about the people. I'd told that part of it in the bar right after I did it. We told about those things. It was just shooting gooks.

We got quiet and I was thinking about how I could tell Liston about Lew, about me and Lew. Our friendship. I decided I couldn't explain that. But I went ahead and started telling him about the incident, right up to the end, including the false ending.

Lew was my best buddy. We'd met in Bangkok on the way to Nakong Phanom where we were stationed. I'd actually met him in the Philippines during survival training but we hadn't had a chance to talk until in a bar in Bangkok.

Lew looked like a vulture sitting on a limb—no butt, stooped shoulders, long neck, big nose, cow-lick in the top back of his head. He was loose jointed, and when he'd had a few, his nose got red. Sometimes he'd come over to my room around midnight with a six-pack of tall Blue Ribbons and a flip-top pack of Winstons and we'd sit and talk for a couple of hours.

All of a sudden, about ten miles south of Horseshoe Lake, what you hope and believe in your heart will never happen, happened.

Engine failure. A cylinder head had separated and the cylinder cracked. At least that's what the investigation said. It sounded like a car engine does when you lose a muffler. The engine was suddenly very loud and I felt extra heat on my knees. I first thought the muffler had burst—which would have been manageable—but right after the noise started, the rpm began dropping. I grabbed the throttle, thinking it had slipped back somehow, but it was stationary. The throttle was stationary—right where it was supposed to be—but the rpm was dropping. The needle looked like the second hand on a clock going backwards. It was like holding the accelerator on the floorboard while the car slows down and keeps slowing down. Then there was a powerful vibration and the propeller froze.



Black smoke was coming through the heating vent. I bent over and closed it.

We had been in a left bank above Miguia Pass, when Lew's nose dipped funny—a quick pitch down, then up—and at the same time I saw out of the corner of my eye something tear loose from the tail end of his aircraft.

Fox two, I think I'm hit, he says.

That's affirmative. I'll drop back and check it out. I pulled back on my power. He was out to my left. When I was behind him, I saw that his left elevator was gone.

What's wrong? asked Liston from the back seat. Very casual. Very calm.

Through my mind flashed what I'd always planned to say to a passenger if this happened: that I needed to practice a precautionary landing. That it'd be fun and not to worry. But I knew that wouldn't work now.

I don't know what's wrong, I said. Something blew. We'll have to put her down somewhere. I was trying to sound calm.

I made my radio call.

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Piper 2662 Charlie. Engine failure. Landing about nine miles south of Horseshoe Lake. Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Piper 2662 Charlie. Engine failure. Landing about nine miles south of Horseshoe Lake.

No answer.

I pulled the throttle all the way back to idle and turned off the fuel selector handles. We were at 1,300 feet. Ground elevation was 400. Step One: set up a glide speed of 70 knots. Two: look for a field or road. There was a straight country road to the left and behind me—no cars on it. Well, one big truck. Power lines, though. All over. No way. I thought

about that cage of snakes—the latch.

I can't control it, he said.

You have to punch, Lew. Your elevator is gone. My insides were a dull red and yellow and my heart had stopped so still I couldn't get my breath. His aircraft was starting a slow roll to the left. I dropped back farther.

I got to punch, he said. He was trailing smoke.

Get out. Now. It might blow. I moved out wide.

He shot out vertically, away from me and immediately way back behind me. I called for Search and Rescue. They would take at least forty-five minutes to get there. I started a hard bank to the left, over his plane which was going down now, inverted. I had my eye on him, a dot, and then his parachute blossomed bright white and orange, and as I circled back he

was not far below me and almost sitting still, the green jungle drifting along below him, like a hot-air balloon out over some green North Carolina woods. Then there was the flash of his plane exploding into a low mountain about thirty kilometers east. Black smoke boiling up.

Old Lew. Lew Byrd. Foo Bird, we called him. The Mustard Man. He'd put mustard on his head and jump up off the bar so that his head hit the ceiling and left a yellow spot. Twoten, the bartender would laugh, put his hand over his rotten teeth and then say, Captain Foo Bird you break your neck next time. I tell you, you break your neck.

There were a bunch of good Lew stories.

And he was the one I'd cried in front of when I got the letter from Marie saying she was getting married. That she was sorry. That we'd had some great times together. He had gotten up and come over and sat beside me and put his arm around me. That's all. No talking about that one.

One of our best gigs was stealing an army general's jeep and getting it loaded on a C-130 and flown to Bangkok.

Straight ahead were three pastures. I'd go for the pastures. I checked my gauges. The oil pressure was zero.

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Piper 2662 Charlie. Engine failure. Landing about nine miles south of Horseshoe Lake in largest of three pastures together. Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Piper 2662 Charlie. Engine failure. Landing about nine miles south of Horseshoe Lake in largest of three pastures.

Roger, Piper 62 Charlie. This is Cessna 4723 Echo. How do you copy?

Loud and clear, but I've lost my engine and I'm landing in a pasture nine or ten miles south of Horseshoe Lake. Please launch a search and rescue. Copy?

23 Echo. Copy.

Shit, this ought to be interesting, said Liston. I felt him shift his weight around. The plane is so small and light you can feel people move around behind you. I was holding 70 knots. The altimeter read 900 feet. There was a lot of heat coming through the firewall. I would have to shut down the electrical system. A fire is the worse thing that can happen. I needed to concentrate on getting to those pastures out there in front of me. I had enough altitude to glide in for a landing. It appeared that I had enough altitude.

Lew was getting his radio out of his vest when I flew past him as slowly as I could, but not too close. They were firing from below like nobody's business now, smelling blood. Black and white flack bursts. They were firing their thirty-sevens, fifty-sevens, and eighty-fives. He was going to land in the jungle to the east of the Trail.

I saw him bring his radio up to his mouth. Then through my earphones I hear him say, Which way is a safe area?

Hell, I knew there wasn't any safe area. To the east I said. The way you're drifting. Behind you. Steer it toward the sun as much as you can. That would get him away from the Trail as far as possible.

But it was morning and they'd have all day to find him.

He went in. I marked the spot. Two lines of bomb craters and a river, three or four kilometers off the Trail. And I could see them rushing down the trail on foot and on bicycles and I was getting fire from at least four, maybe six positions. I

circled wide, dropping the lowest I'd ever been out there, and made a pass with tracers streaking across my nose, my heart and liver in my throat. I dropped half my bomb load and climbed up and looked back but the bombs had landed long and to the west. I had been too high. I hadn't gotten right in on them like I should have. I needed to get all the way down and strafe if I was going to do any good. I wondered if Lew had seen me. Then he was on the radio again, talking to me from the ground—coming in clear. Fox two, this is Fox lead, he said. How do you read?

I tried to keep my voice calm and pitched low. Loud and clear, I said. Hide. I've launched the SAR. They'll

be right here. I'll sanitize the area between you and the Trail. Hang in there. The SAR will be right out. We'll get you out. I tried to sound calm. I'll keep them off you, Lew.

I think my back's broke, he said.

There were four, not three pastures up there. The biggest was nearest, and the one I'd chosen to shoot for. Electrical wires? No—no telephone poles anywhere. Roads? Where was the nearest road?—for help. Way ahead there, to the west.

Liston, I said, I'm shutting down the engine. My voice was not as calm as I wanted it to be.

I realized I was a tad low. The last thing you want. The head wind was strong. I was going very slow over the ground



and sinking. I had to make that pasture. Airspeed was 70. Best glide angle.

It was very quiet. Just the wind.

I was afraid we might be short. Just barely short. But maybe not.

Master switch, off.

Out to the right was an old barn, but I didn't see a house. Get it back to 60 knots now. Land slow.

Fox lead, I said to Lew, pull in your parachute, bury it if you can. Hide. Turn off your radio until you need it. You got a good radio. I can hear you clear.

An eighty-five burst went off no more than a hundred yards at my eleven o' clock. A burst of thirty-sevens ahead and below. I was going to be down there in the jungle with him if I didn't watch out. I saw that I was going to be down there with him. I just knew it. No need for both of us to be down there, I didn't have the fuel to wait for the SAR. I could wait a little longer if I didn't make any more passes, and talk to Lew. Keep him calm instead of going back in. But I had told him I was going back in.

I can hear them, says Lew. They're to my west. Goddamn, I broke my back. They're coming. Get down here!

I was at 9,000 feet, level.

He started whispering. I can hear them, he said over and over.

Right here is where I went about crazy. In order to be effective with strafing I'd have to get low enough to be in range of the twenty-threes. I could surely do him more good up high talking to him, I figured. It's safer and it will make him feel better for me to be up here where I can talk to him. But if he does get out, he won't like it that I didn't go back in, and he'll tell everybody.

Just before our engine failure I had told Liston that I went back in for Lew — four passes, strafing — and killed a lot of troops and a donkey and that Lew never got out.



he ground is flying under me. It's so quiet.

I've got to stretch the glide over that barbed wire. Nose up. Nose up. Nose up. I'm going to be short of that barbed wire fence. I read about a guy bouncing over a ditch. I'll hit and bounce over the fence. I push the nose over, hard, hit the ground hard with the main gear. Bounce. The damned main gear catches the top two strands of barbed wire. My head snap-bangs forward and back off the instrument panel. The airplane flips upside down and we land on the top, tail first, in the pasture. I'm watching the ground shoot out from behind us, right there at our heads, going away from us as we skid along backwards, upside down on the ground, and I'm watching dirt and grass fly away from us, wondering when we might stop. All the baggage from the baggage compartment — thermal blanket, ropes, tie-down stobs, oil cans, sponges, maps, life preservers, flashlights, rags — is flying every which way and I know I've been hit

hard on the head. I can see where we've been, how we're scraping a swath along the grassy ground.

We slide to a stop.

I'm hanging by my seat belt, upside down.

The first sound I hear is leaking fuel, and then, all around my head, the dry-bones, buzzing sound of the rattles. I smell the fuel and a burning electric smoke. I am so struck with those rattles in my ears that I cannot get my breath and I'm trying to decide if it's knocked out of me or what when it comes in a rush and I gasp, keeping as still as I can.

The rearview mirror is gone.

The rattles stop. There is the midsection of one of the big snakes, moving — the rest of him covered by a thermal blanket and a life preserver — a yellowish streak down his back through the designs. There's another one's head over there. No, wait, it's the same one.

You okay, Liston?

I turn my head slowly, very slowly and look. Liston is hanging still. I want to scream for somebody to come and solve all this. Through Liston's long beard hanging upward I see that the eye patch is gone. The eyelid is closed on an empty socket. It's sunk way in. Blood bubbles up from his nose.

I need to get out, to release the seat belt, fall into the ceiling and get out, or maybe I can scare the snakes out first or something. But it's cold outside. They'll stay in here.

Goddamn shit almighty, says Liston. I thought we were supposed to land.

We did.

What the hell did my head hit?

I don't know. Are you okay?

I hit my head. Shouldn't we get out of this thing?

Well, yeah, I guess so, but those snakes are all around in here. You didn't have it latched right.

Goddamn almighty, my nose is broke. What happened? I thought we were landing?

We hit the fence. Flipped.

We can throw the snakes out.

Can you see them?

I can see three of them. All but the medium one.

I move my head very slowly and look at the door. That door is jammed, I say. Bad. I can tell by looking at it. I don't especially want to reach over there until we figure out where the snakes are.

You sure had a lot of junk in that baggage compartment, says Liston.

I know.

Well if you can get the window open, I'll try to throw these three out.

That looks jammed too. Where are they? — the snakes.

Two of them are right behind your right ear. Coiled. You probably shouldn't be moving your head too much. Until I tell you to. I'll tell you what. I'll catch them and choke them. Don't move toward that window, yet. Okay. In just a second you need to start moving your head back and forth real slow so that'll get their attention and they'll look away from me

and I can grab them. I need to grab both at the same time. Go ahead. Now. Start moving your head back and forth. . . . A little faster than that.

You sure about this? I say.

Yep.

Where's the other one — the one you can see?

Back here in the corner. I think he's injured or something. He ain't coiled. Move your head just a little faster.

I do, and the rattles start up — one, then the other.

I might could do this a little better, he says, if I wasn't hanging upside down.

There is a rushing sweep sound.

Got 'em. This will be just a minute. . . . Just another minute here.

Fuel is leaking out of both wing tanks onto the ground, puddling, and the grass grows up through it like a miniature swampland iced-over.

I heard the fire before I saw or felt it. It was cracking in the engine, like a frying pan.

What had happened was that when they got to Lew they started shooting him and he started screaming over his radio: I'm hit. I'm hit. Jim. I'm hit. And I could hear through the earphones the tat, tat, rat, tat, tat-tat of the guns shooting old Lew. He was screaming and his voice was like a rabbit in a cage squealing. The rat, tat-tat, like little toy guns, sounding little and far away through the earphones tight to my ears, Lew's thumb holding down the transmit button while they shot him over and over and over again. And I was way up there above him, not down there amongst it all, fighting it out.

We're on fire, Liston. The fuel tanks will blow. We got to get out.

Calm down.

Calm down!?! Shit man.

I hear his seatbelt buckle snap open. Then he's down and at the window with his fist. My God, he's trying to get out before me.

I kick at the window as hard as I can. The plexiglass pops out clean. He's starting through it. *Before me.* I'm after my seatbelt buckle. But his leg is caught somewhere. He's hung up somehow. He can't get anything but his arms through the window. The rattle buzzes, the head comes up like a sudden broom handle and pops forward. I feel it just above my knee like the pop in the end of your finger when the nurse takes blood, but sharper and hotter.

Help, I scream. Goddamn. I'm bit.

I unsnap my belt buckle, fall on my head, move away from the snake. Liston is grunting, trying to get his leg loose. I go scrambling, pulling through the little window opening ahead of him — catching my shoulder, then working loose, then out. It seems like he might be screaming. I feel the bite burning, and the wet fuel on my bare skin at my waist in back where my shirttail must be out. This odd thought comes — I must tuck in my shirttail. Tuck in your

shirttail, Jim. You don't want to go to school looking like that. Then I've rolled away and I'm sitting there watching and here comes Liston through the little opening, his one eye straining at me as he pulls through, clear, the fire suddenly rippling across the ground from the engine, going WOOSH, up all around him. He's gone — behind the fire. . . . then he comes rolling out, splashing through the fuel. He's on fire. I stand, get to him. He's rolling slowly, getting the fire out. Except the skull cap on his head is still burning. I fall on him, burn myself some, grab him under the arms and pull him away, smoking and black. He gets up to his knees. I sit down and then vomit.

You got bit? he's saying.

Yes. Yes.

We need to work on it, he says. He's on his hands and knees and his beard is completely gone and it flashes through my head that he is somebody else — somebody come to help. A big man with horrible sunburn covered with soot.

Yeah, but we got to move back from the fire, I say. I think to myself that I want him to see me thinking and acting in the face of danger, after being wounded. It's something he will be able to tell people about me.

We move away. He's crawling and I'm sliding on my butt and hands backwards. When I stop he crawls to me, pushes up my trousers leg and starts working on my leg. You got to relax, he says. Can't have venom pumping all through you.

Will it kill me?

I doubt it. His talking is very bubbly.

I lean back on the ground, look up into the cold blue sky without a thing up there but the airy blueness and the hard fast clear pulsing of the transparent veins in my eyes.

In a few seconds there was a smell — it had to be his burnt hair and flesh.

Then he started shaking really, really bad, tried to stand, and collapsed on me. I got myself out from under him. His face was in the dirt so I rolled him onto his back. I wondered where I could find some kind of salve to put on his burns. Oil from the engine when it stopped burning maybe. He looked horrible. He was black and pink. I looked at his stomach. It had some of his shirt left on it. He was holding his stomach very still like actors do when they play dead on stage. I wondered why Liston would want to be doing that — of all things. I turned and looked across the pasture at the strands of barbed wire and our path across the ground.

From the airplane, black clouds of smoke rolled up into the sky like they were in a hurry to get away.

Somehow he'd gotten my trouser leg up and the bite was like a red tennis ball with two needle holes. I got my pocket knife out and cut at it and sucked until I vomited again.

Then I lay back beside him and while I waited for help I told him what really happened, the truth, the true ending to the incident in the war. □

Clyde Edgerton is the author of Raney, Killer Diller, Walking Across Egypt, and The Floatplane Notebooks.

Malicious Medicine

Our health care system is more than just broken—it's downright mean.

By Denise Giardina

FROM A WEST VIRGINIA NEWSPAPER COMES THE STORY of Christopher Thaxton, two years old. Christopher has an incurable liver disease. His unwed teenage mother works at a nursing home, but her job-related insurance plan will not cover Christopher because of his pre-existing condition.

Christopher needs a liver transplant soon to survive. The large medical center that has treated him thus far specializes in such surgery, but says the operation will not be performed unless it receives 75 percent of the costs up front. The bill could eventually reach half a million dollars. The state where Christopher lives will pay \$75,000 toward the operation if it is done at another, less expensive hospital. Christopher's doctors have told his mother if her son goes to another hospital, delicate tests that could dangerously weaken his condition will have to be repeated. His mother doesn't know who to believe or what to do.

Christopher's picture accompanies

the article that reports his story. He is a slender baby with a beautiful, quick face. I look at him and fear he is about to become the victim of a murder.

WALK INTO A FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT OR CONVENIENCE

store in any small town and you are likely to see a jar with a hole in the lid, and a homemade sign with a Polaroid portrait taped to it, a modern alms basin collecting pennies toward some gargantuan medical bill. Sometimes the most spectacular stories make the newspapers. A migrant worker's child is turned away from a hospital's emergency room and dies before she receives care. Cancer kills a boy who could have been cured with early diagnosis; but his father had lost his job and the son didn't want to be a burden so he kept his symptoms to himself. A woman and her friends demonstrate outside a hospital that has refused to treat her cancer without payment up front.

Payment up front. Americans are

hearing these words more and more often, and they are in direct opposition to the Hippocratic Oath, the bloodless code of capitalism overriding the call to heal. Few of us can purchase our health without the backing of an insurance company, and even then, the holes in our coverage can saddle us with crippling debts.

Perhaps the greatest damage to our national well-being is done quietly, almost invisibly. Preventative care, so vital to health and in the long run, economical, is almost nonexistent in this country because no one from the middle class on down can afford it. Its inadequacy shows up in cancer rates, in infant mortality rates, in poor diets, in all the statistics where the United States performs more like a Third World country than an advanced industrial nation.

The lack of preventative care is hardest on women and minorities. U.S. Health Secretary Louis W. Sullivan recently said that infant mortality and life expectancy in African-Americans were two examples of "clear, demonstrable, undeniable evidence of discrimination and racism in our health care system." Sullivan said that black infants are twice as likely to die as white infants, and that blacks wait twice as long as whites for transplants.

I have my own story to tell. I feel a bit sheepish for complaining, because I'm one of the lucky ones. What makes my situation worth sharing is how ordinary it is. I am middle class, single, and self-employed. I'm also pretty healthy. I've never had a major illness or accident, and I'm a member of that dwindling tribe of Americans covered by health insurance. Between 31 mil-

lion and 38 million of us have no medical coverage, and that percentage is growing as incomes fall and employers drop their group plans. But so far, although it hasn't been easy to provide coverage for myself, I've been one of those people the government isn't worried about. The American health care system is taking care of me.

In fact, I've often experienced the unfairness and downright nuttiness of American health care. As a self-employed writer, I have provided my own medical coverage, but I have taken temporary jobs from time to time. Some of them offered relatively low-cost group medical benefits, so I dropped my own insurance company.

When I quit a job several years ago to write full-time, I didn't expect a problem. But I had the bad luck to contract a case of mononucleosis just as the job ended. I was diagnosed the same week I filled out my new application for health insurance and, *naïf* that I am, noted this on the form under *Current illnesses requiring a physician's care*.

I was turned down. Finally I applied to Consumers United, an insurer that prides itself on being socially responsible. I was told I could be covered after a waiting period, and after a physician had certified that my blood tests were normal. Since I am often anemic, the latter took a while. Altogether, I spent almost a year without health insurance.

It was a worrisome year, but I dodged the bullet. I didn't have any automobile accidents or illnesses requiring hospitalization and I had made enough money to cover the treatment for mono. Finally I was back on insurance to the tune of \$1,500 a year. A Pap smear caught pre-cancerous cells on my cervix that required surgery. But I was covered. Never mind that I still spent more than \$800 to make up what my policy didn't pay. It was better than being in debt for thousands of dollars.

That was a year and a half ago. The book money is gone and my finances are tight. I've survived by cobbling together part-time jobs and writing assignments.

Last winter I suffered through weeks of a sore—possibly strep—throat and a hacking cough because I couldn't afford to go to a doctor to get a prescription for antibiotics. I've postponed mammograms and eye exams (the vision is down in my left eye) as unaffordable luxuries. I

haven't been to a dentist in two years. I needed another Pap smear as a follow-up to my surgery, but I put it off for over a year.

It's a situation Kafka would have appreciated. I'm still paying my insurance premiums, but just barely. And when I'm done, there's no money left to go to the doctor.

THE AMERICAN MEDICAL SYSTEM IS MORE THAN JUST broken, it is malicious. How do we fix it? Some progressives are calling on the United States to adopt a health care plan similar to Canada's. Neocon Democrats in Congress, responding to input from big business, have their own idea. They would set up a national insurance plan supported by employers, for employees. But how would this help the unemployed, or the self-employed? How would it provide preventative care, or help the working poor who can't pay deductibles?

According to a recent statement by the president of Mountain State Blue Cross and Blue Shield, I shouldn't worry. Americans, he assures us, wouldn't want to be like the Canadians,

because their country administers a single plan for everyone. "In America," he says, "we want and insist upon a choice in health coverage, just as we do in automobiles, hamburgers, and television sets." He admits that "the cost of administering variety is a whole lot more," but that's OK. After all, "What do you suppose pays for the Canadian health-care system? Taxes."

I look at the weapons my tax money is building, and Canada sounds good to me. Another newspaper brings this headline—*Hospital tried to turn away Soviet with little insurance, angry friends charge*. It seems poet Bulat Okudzhava was stricken with serious heart problems while visiting Los Angeles and his friends were asked to provide prepayment guarantees. They were shocked.

Where did they think they were, Moscow? Or Libya perhaps, where there is free universal health care? Or Cuba, which also provides free universal health care? Or maybe pre-war Iraq? We've done a good job of making sure Iraqis, at least, don't have a better health care system than we do. It's odd that our supposedly greatest enemy, for all their sins, do a better job taking care of their own people. Maybe we aren't supposed to travel to those countries because we might get some ideas.

Sure, those are poor countries that lack some of our sophisticated equipment. It's nice to know the American rich have the high-tech best. In the meantime, I have just received notice that my health insurance premiums will increase 25 percent this summer. I'll have to decide if I can keep paying.

The Pap smear results have finally arrived too. The pre-cancerous cells are back and I may face more surgery. Oh yes, and I've got a bad tooth that forces me to do



all my chewing on the right side of my mouth. I'm trying to decide how long I can put off seeing the dentist before I get toothaches. It's great to be an American and exercise my freedom of choice. □

Denise Giardina, the author of Storming Heaven, lives in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

The elder statesman of New Orleans jazz recalls six decades of a life in music, from Louis Armstrong to Wynton Marsalis.

"It Was A Thing To Be There"

By Jason
Berry

NEW ORLEANS, LA. — Each day Danny Barker sits for several hours at the dining-room table in his small white shotgun house on Sere Street, not far from the St. Bernard Housing Project. As cars whiz by outside on Interstate 10, Barker works in longhand on legal pads or typing paper or whatever is at hand, tending to the fertile terrain of memory from his six decades as a jazzman.

At 82, Barker is the elder statesman of New Orleans jazz. Born in 1909, he has performed or recorded with

Louie Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Cab Calloway, Charlie Parker, and scores of others. He still devotes his evenings to music, leading the Jazz Hounds at the Palm Court Jazz Cafe in the French Quarter. But his days are given over to telling stories and weaving tales and breathing fresh life into early jazz culture.

"For me, it was a thing to be there," says Barker, a slender, balding man with a pencil-thin mustache and drooping eyelids. "You were identified 'specially with poor people, black and white. It's like you saying, 'My uncle plays with the Dodgers.' We didn't have that in New Orleans, but we had, 'My uncle plays with the Dixieland band, or my cousin works with Chris Kelly's band, my uncle works with Manny Perez' band.' It was a thing that you were associated with — some notoriety to claim a musician."

When Barker breaks into song, he seldom fails to capture the tale-telling flavor of his native New Orleans, whether performing a classic ballad like "St. James Infirmary" or one of his own compositions like "Save the Bones":

*We started out eating short ribs of beef
Then we finished up eating steak
But after the feast was over
Brother Henry just sat down like a gentleman
And kep' his seat
Then I scooped up the bones for Henry Jones
'cause Henry doesn't eat no meat.
—He's a fruit man!
Henry doesn't eat no
—He's an egg man!
Henry doesn't eat no
—He's a vegetarian!
He loves the gristle
Henry doesn't eat no meat!*

What is unique about Barker as a musician, jazz historians say, is that he feels at home playing a wide spectrum of styles. "Here's a guy who can fit in musically with anybody," says Bruce Boyd Raeburn, curator of the William

Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University. "Whether you're talking about a Calloway big band or small combo with Billie Holliday, Danny always did the right thing. How many guys crossed over that traditionalist and modernist line with such ease — not to mention the story telling?"

FAMILY TIES

The story telling. As a spinner of tales, Barker has few peers in jazz. He enjoys the unfolding of a fable, orally or in print, with a relish written in the smiles of his face.

Barker was raised in a sprawling clan, surrounded by music. His mother's family, the Barbarins, boasted 40 musicians, and his uncle Paul was one of the city's finest early jazz drummers. "All they do in the Barbarin family is talk about music, all the time music," Barker says. "So you are destined to be a musician if you want it."

"In New Orleans it was never a problem to have music for some social event because many of the musicians were related to one another," he recalls. "A party was planned and the musicians came and played. There your elders would explain to you, at length, how and why different musicians were related to you. When you greeted each other after that, it was 'Hello, Cuz.'"

Barker got his first banjo at age 13. "I started out on clarinet, and my uncle sent me to Barney Bigard, but he left town, so I picked up my ukulele. I never connected the ukulele with the banjo. Then all of a sudden I'm playing the uke when a famous band passes. I started playing along with the right chords, I guess. An old man, Albert Glenny, had seen me fooling around with the ukulele and he called me over to his truck and said the regular banjo player was drunk and would I play a little? So they watched me and kindly smiled 'cause I was keepin' time, and they said, 'Why don't you get a banjo?' I went and took some lessons and mother bought me a banjo."

In those days, Barker recalls, music provided children with status and a sense of self-worth. "When you give a kid a musical instrument he does something with his personality. He becomes a figure, and he's not so apt to get into trouble. Later on, the kids got into grass and narcotics, but in those days families

would encourage you to play music. There was something about playing music that gave you something special. You were not a wastrel or a bum. Now you can be a musician and still be all those things, but generally you were a little something special when you were a musician. You had extra special talent."

Barker grew up in a world of Creoles — descendants of free people of color — in the city's Seventh Ward, downriver from the French Quarter. The neighborhood culture was built on the skills of bricklayers, plasterers, roofers, carpenters, and cigarmakers — a "self-help" en-

vironment, in the words of the poet

Bartholomey, the first two black mayors of New Orleans. The fair-skinned Creoles descended from African mothers and colonial French or Spanish fathers. In the peculiar caste system of antebellum Louisiana, they occupied a world between the slaves and slavemasters; many Creoles owned slaves themselves. Creole jazzmen who lived downtown read sheet music and endowed their music with a European melodic expressiveness.

By contrast, many black musicians who lived in uptown New Orleans were descendants of slaves. They played a

Photos by Michael P. Smith



DANNY BARKER GOT HIS FIRST BANJO AT AGE 13. "WHEN YOU GIVE A KID A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT, HE DOES SOMETHING WITH HIS PERSONALITY. YOU WERE A LITTLE SOMETHING SPECIAL."

vironment, in the words of the poet Marcus Christian. Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young grew up in the Seventh Ward. So did Ernest Morial and Sydney

rougher style and learned "by ear" — imitating what they heard and capturing the heat of the blues, the echoes of slavery's past.

"They always claimed the greatest jazz musicians came from uptown," recalls Barker. "No, the greatest came from downtown, the Sixth and Seventh Wards — Buddy Petit, Kid Rena, Chris Kelly, Sidney Bechet, Lorenzo Tio, Alphonse Picou. The real down nitty gritty blues people were from downtown. Louis Armstrong and Joe Oliver came from uptown."

OF LIFE AND DEATH

Barker also grew up immersed in the ritual of New Orleans jazz funerals. His grandfather worked for Emile Labat, the most successful mortuary in the Creole neighborhoods, and young Danny often took part as the band ushered the casket out of the church in a mournful procession accompanied by slow, elegiac dirges — then, without warning, suddenly "cut loose," letting the soul ascend while trumpets blared and tailgate trombones pumped out gorgeous melodic currents.

"There were countless places of enjoyment that employed musicians, not including private affairs," Barker writes. "There were balls, soirees, banquets, weddings, deaths, christenings, Catholic communions and confirmations, and picnics at the lake front and out in the country. There were hayrides, advertisements of business concerns, carnival season. Any little insignificant affair was sure to have some kind of music and each section engaged their neighborhood favorites."

Most jazz musicians carry a rich store of memories, but few have Barker's narrative gift and sense of fiction. When the talk turns to jazz funerals, he cannot resist the temptations of a bard.

"Death affects people all kinda ways," he muses. "There was a lady had her husband stuffed. She had a special room in her house. Everybody knew Sadie Brown's old man was there. Some Chinaman, like a taxidermist, took out all the body parts, tanned him down and stuffed him. This was in the Seventh Ward, around 1914. My great aunt took me to see his wife. I peeped in and saw Willie Brown. His eyes were kinda cocked. A lotta things happen. You see King Tut? Willie Brown was probably stuffed 30 years. You know he looked good. King Tut was a lot older."

Barker chuckles. "This town is great for fables. So many weird things happen. Like cemetery stories." He sits back, and the story rolls out.

"There was a girl — most beautiful

completed girl anybody'd ever seen. She'd promenade the bars, drink that booze. She tells a guy, 'Will you escort me home?' They leave the bar, walk two blocks to St. Louis Cemetery. There's a gate there. She says, 'Good night,' and makes a leap over the fence. He stands there in shock, comes back, hands wringin' wet. He tells the bartender and asks for a double whiskey.

"Bartender says: 'Quite a few men have come back here outta breath from that cemetery. The woman comes in here; you see her and you don't see her. She's got a lil' waist like a wasp, hips like them big old horses on Anheuser Busch Beer, and her bosom protrudes like a battleship. She sits down, she orders wine sangrie — that's bourbon, rum, wine, mixed up together. Then she just leaps up, and she's gone with a man. It sounds like the same woman, but I'm back here mixin' whiskey and I never see her face. You never know with these women. It's a world of contradictions."

KATZENJAMMER KIDS

The rich and contradictory cultural landscape of Barker's New Orleans neighborhood paved the way for his parallel career as a storyteller. He has published two books — an academic study called *Bourbon Street Black*, and his vintage memoir, *A Life in Jazz*. He is currently working on a sequel memoir, tapping years of stories about flush times and lean, jazz memories spun of urban folklore.

"I won a prize in the fifth grade writing about the Katzenjammer Kids," Barker says of his literary beginnings. "I won three dollars. I was very observant, cautious. I didn't get into things like boozing and smoking reefer."

Barker received a \$20,000 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Endowment for the Arts for his musical and literary accomplishment — but the prize also recognized his quiet role as a mentor to younger artists in the city.

In the early 1970s, Barker spearheaded a revival of the brass band tradition by shepherding adolescents into rehearsals for street parades with the Fairview Baptist Church Christian Band. Key members of today's Dirty Dozen and Rebirth brass bands, who tour and record internationally, came up through Fairview, under the tutelage of Barker

and his cousin Charlie Barbarin.

It all started when Barker was approached by Reverend Andrew Darby, who was searching for a way to keep teens off the street and out of trouble. "I hear these kids playing horns, and they don't have no teacher," Darby told Barker. "I sure would like to do something with 'em, keep 'em occupied. When I was in my daddy's church, we had a lil' band down there in Lower Ninth Ward, and it drew the people and we'd parade from one church to the other upon occasion. It was a nice thing. Maybe we can get these kids here started."

Barker readily agreed to help. "I'd been thinking about it too. Lil' Leroy Jones was playing trumpet. He was the best around the neighborhood; kids'd congregate around his garage. I said, 'How'd you like to have a brass band?' He said, 'I'm for that Mr. Barker, yeah I'd like that.' I said, 'See how many you can get that's capable of playing 'When the Saints Go Marchin In.' He came around my house about a week later with ten kids. And that's how it began."

Barker chuckles once more, recalling the Fairview boys in their musical infancy. "I put silver caps on 'em. Right away they got cocky; started challenging the other bands. We played a whole lot of things for churches — marching from an old church to a new church. All that was for little money — sometimes \$20. I'd say, 'Play 'em all, the big ones and small ones: The purpose is to learn to play and then you'll be blessed.'"

The encouragement and practice paid off: Leroy Jones and a legion of young musicians has rejuvenated the tradition of New Orleans brass bands. Today the city has more than a dozen brass bands that compete with the rap and pop idioms dominating the airwaves. The parades meld the sound of French brass bands with a looser, African percussive beat. Feet hit the street in surging rhythm as scores of followers engulf the bands in a "second line," dancing and gyrating as the music sweeps them along.

Young musicians continue to look to Barker as a vital link to the musical past. When Wynton Marsalis, the 29-year old trumpeter featured on the cover of *Time*, decided to record an album called "The Majesty of the Blues," he invited Barker to sit in. For the cerebral Marsalis, the recording was a foray into the cultural roots of his native city; for Barker, the

collaboration bridged generations, interlacing blues and jazz with sturdy, polished strokes.

NEW YORK **BLUES**

Family ties and a strong community brought Barker together with jazz singer Louise Dupont in 1930; they have been together ever since. That same year, the couple left for New York, where Danny played with Jelly Roll Morton and Cab Calloway. He also began writing.

"You get to New York," he reflects, "and it's a whole new opening. An element of inspiration you couldn't conceive in the South, where when blacks said something, whites look at you as if you have no foundation. You have an attitude you're not qualified. In New York you had a freedom. You meet artists in the Harlem Renaissance. You see Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Countee Culleen, and they're talking about their aspirations. There was night schools, and sculptors, and paintings. I'm playing music and hangin' around these people."

It was an era of ambiguities. Jazz flourished while the poor stood in bread lines. Barker read the works of Richard Wright, Hughes, Hemingway, and Twain, as well as the gritty urban vernacular of newspaper columnists like Walter Winchell.

Sitting under a photograph of himself and a young Louis Armstrong, Barker muses: "New York is not a blues town. People would sit in the audience and look at some Southern man singing hard times 'cause he lost his wife — *Ohhh, I'm gonna lay my head on a lonesome railroad track* — and they don't move a muscle. 'Cause New York's attitude was, 'You can't get along with Rosy? Then get Mary.' I had a drummer, he showed me six wives he had lived with. In New York you just get rid of it. In New Orleans you linger on."

In 1942, Barker was playing with the Cab Calloway Orchestra when *Esquire*

magazine discovered jazz; writers sought out musicians. He helped many writers, but his own writing met with resistance from publishers. He had many pages of stories, but lacked a unified manuscript. Undaunted, Barker kept writing.

But the New York jazz scene was changing, and by 1965 Barker felt out of place in his old haunts. "Swing and traditional jazz was in decline," he recalls. "Bebop was in the ascent. Them boys had a whole cult — forget about clothes: it



AS A SPINNER OF TALES, BARKER HAS FEW PEERS IN JAZZ. "THIS TOWN IS GREAT FOR FABLES," HE SAYS. "SO MANY WEIRD THINGS HAPPEN."

was Eisenhower jackets and dungarees. I'm from New Orleans. I wanna wear a silk shirt, look prosperous. And they're into narcotics, smoking reefers and they supposed to be hip 'cause they don't shave no more... If you were neat, clean and dressy they look as if something was wrong with you."

Barker returned to New Orleans, where the civil rights movement was bucking Jim Crow. Danny and Blue Lu found themselves showcased at the Jazz and Heritage Festival to a new world of adoring fans. He formed his own group and joined clarinetist Michael White in a

wondrous Jelly Roll Morton revival act.

"I've been asked many times why Jelly was so boastful," he remarks. "You see, Jelly was part of an era that knew nothing of press agents and publicity build-ups. Most of the famous public figures blew their own horns. It was the custom of celebrities in those early days to arrive in a city and immediately go to the main drag, where they would loudly start to boast of their ability, and then mouth-to-mouth, news would spread like wildfire. Jelly pulled this stunt all along the Mississippi River, especially in Kansas City, Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago."

Barker's work resurrects the ambience and environment of his own formative years as an artist. In writings and interviews, he repeatedly returns to the cultural terrain that shaped him and the tradition out of which jazz grew.

"Before the arrival of the big insurance companies," he writes in *A Life in Jazz*, "New Orleans had organizations called Benevolent Societies; some small, some large. Members banded together in these societies as protection and precaution in time of sickness, trouble, death... Nowadays the money in the treasury barely pays the electric light bill, but the remaining members want to exit in style — New Orleans style: the big brass band, three thousand people."

Although a traditionalist in his approach to music, Barker is no militant purist. "Jazz is constantly changing," he says. "Jazz we hear today in New Orleans — 'Bourbon Street Parade' and 'The Saints' — is music nobody wants to dance to. But New Orleans still carries on. When it hits the street, 5,000 people form a second line. Nowhere else will you see people perform like that in the street. There's no end to what can happen with jazz." □

Jason Berry is the author of Amazing Grace, a memoir of civil rights politics in Mississippi, and co-author of Up From the Cradle of Jazz: New Orleans Music Since World War II.

THE GREEN INDEX

For many of us, the word “environment” conjures up visions of snow-capped mountains, trout streams, endangered owls, and “Save the Whale” campaigns. All too often we forget to include people, buildings, cars, farms, and factories — the stuff of human life — in our concept of “environment.”

Yet human life is inextricable from nature. Pollution from factories and farms threaten not only plants, streams and birds, but our own and our children’s health. Car exhaust and acid rain corrode our homes and

make it hard to breathe; pesticide runoff poisons the fish farmers eat; and industrial pollution, generated by the billions of pounds and dumped in our air, water, and soil, devastates communities, exposes workers to diseases like cancer, and ultimately damages the larger ecosystem which affects us all.

The Green Index, published by the Institute for Southern Studies and Island Press, is designed to make the connections between pollution, the natural environment, and the health of workers and communities. Drawing on 256 indicators ranging from toxic waste in the air to voting records in Congress, we have compiled a state-by-state ranking of “environmental health” that acknowledges the links between pollution and disease, between poisons and poverty.

The rankings reveal some clear regional patterns:

▼ The industrial states of the Northeast and Great Lakes continue to pay a heavy environmental price for decades of manufacturing, but they have begun to tackle their serious water and air pollution through progressive legislative policies.

▼ The Rocky Mountain states have less total pollution, but their lush natural resources are threatened by their increased reliance on dirty energy industries like mining and by their frontier approach to planning and regulation.

▼ The Farmbelt states rely on the soil and water for their economic survival, but decades of chemical assault on the land have left the region with contaminated groundwater, a dwindling farm population, and worsening public health.

▼ New England and the Far West fare best in the rankings;

despite smog, depleted forestland, toxic waste sites, and ocean pollution, both regions can boast of durable political support for innovation and conservation.

Of all the regions, the South ranks worst. In the overall standings based on all indicators, Southern states occupy the bottom seven positions. The region has 9 of the 17 states with the highest per-capita emissions of toxic chemicals, 9 of the 12 producing the most hazardous waste, and 108 of the 179 facilities that pose the greatest risk of cancer to the people who live near them.

The region ranks particularly low in two categories: toxic and hazardous waste, and community and worker health. Such poor standings are no coincidence. The South has long condemned its residents to unsafe workplaces and unhealthy living conditions; the region boasts 10 of the 12 states with the highest premature death rates, and all but two Southern states suffer from above-average rates of job-related deaths.

In recent decades, however, the region has also become the nation’s dumping ground. Many of the world’s deadliest waste management companies have intentionally built landfills and incinerators in poor, rural, and often black communities. Knowing that residents are desperate for jobs and tax revenues, the waste handlers enter these impoverished areas cloaked in the guise of economic salvation, promising better times through toxic waste.

The tactic amounts to environmental blackmail, pressuring the poor to sacrifice their health and the health of their children in return for low-paying jobs. In the end, the toxic dumps burden poor communities with waste they didn’t produce, drive away clean industries that could provide genuine, lasting development, and create new health risks in areas already hard-hit by high infant mortality and premature death rates.

As our accompanying report on the battle over a hazardous waste incinerator in one North Carolina county makes clear, the deadly game of jobs-versus-health often centers on the politics of race. When the waste management firm ThermalKEM decided to

burn hazardous waste in Northampton County, it set out to divide and conquer the black majority with promises of good jobs and better social services. The controversy has split the black community, highlighting the racism and economic injustice that so often underlie environmental issues.

By documenting such realities and tying them together, the Green Index brings home a broader, *community* concept of environmental health. The child next door may have trouble breathing because of fumes from a nearby paper

mill; a friend who works in a factory may be exposed to dangerous chemicals on the job; our county commissioners may be selling away our future by building another landfill.

Such environmental threats are pervasive, but there is still time to protect our communities. In Northampton County, black and white residents have come together to forge a grassroots movement determined to push public and private officials to shift their priorities from profits to people. They know that the health of their environment — safer jobs and cleaner

communities — offers the real key to meaningful economic development. "One of these days," says State Senator Frank Ballance, "industry is going to find out that what's good for the economy and the environment and the average person is good for them." □

Bob Hall is research director of the Institute for Southern Studies, and Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate. To order a copy of the complete 1991-1992 Green Index, send \$20 to the Institute, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702.

AIR SICKNESS

Residents of Port Neches, Texas live in the shadow of the U.S. factory that poses the highest risk of cancer from a single chemical. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Neches West Chemical Plant owned by Texaco pumps more than one million pounds of butadiene into the air each year, putting its neighbors at a 1-in-10 risk of cancer.

For years, townspeople have watched friends and relatives in their thirties and forties die of the disease. They complained repeatedly to federal officials, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

Finally, state officials sent Texaco and the neighboring Ameripol-Synpol plant notices last year that they were violating emissions of cancer-causing butadiene and styrene. To date, the federal EPA has done nothing to punish the corporations for their illegal emissions.

The residents of Port Neches are not alone. Half the people in the United States are routinely exposed to polluted air, and many of the pollutants came from industries that poured 2.5 billion pounds of toxic chemicals into the air in 1988 alone.

Yet in case after case involving major corporations, EPA has done nothing to regulate, much less stop, most chemical air emissions. Twenty years after passage of the first Clean Air Act, the federal gov-

ernment has yet to set standards for thousands of chemicals that industry pumps into the air we breathe. Of the 300-odd toxic chemicals companies are required to monitor, 123 are carcinogens — yet EPA has set emission standards for only seven.

Even with the passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act, a full-scale crackdown is still years away. According to an EPA report, setting federal pollution standards "has become increasingly difficult with frequent litigation, and consequently few regulatory actions have been completed in recent years."

While corporate lawyers hold up action, EPA has contented itself with simply adding up the pounds of toxic chemicals released into the atmosphere by major industrial producers. Even then, the agency relies on company measurements, as required by the 1986 Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act.

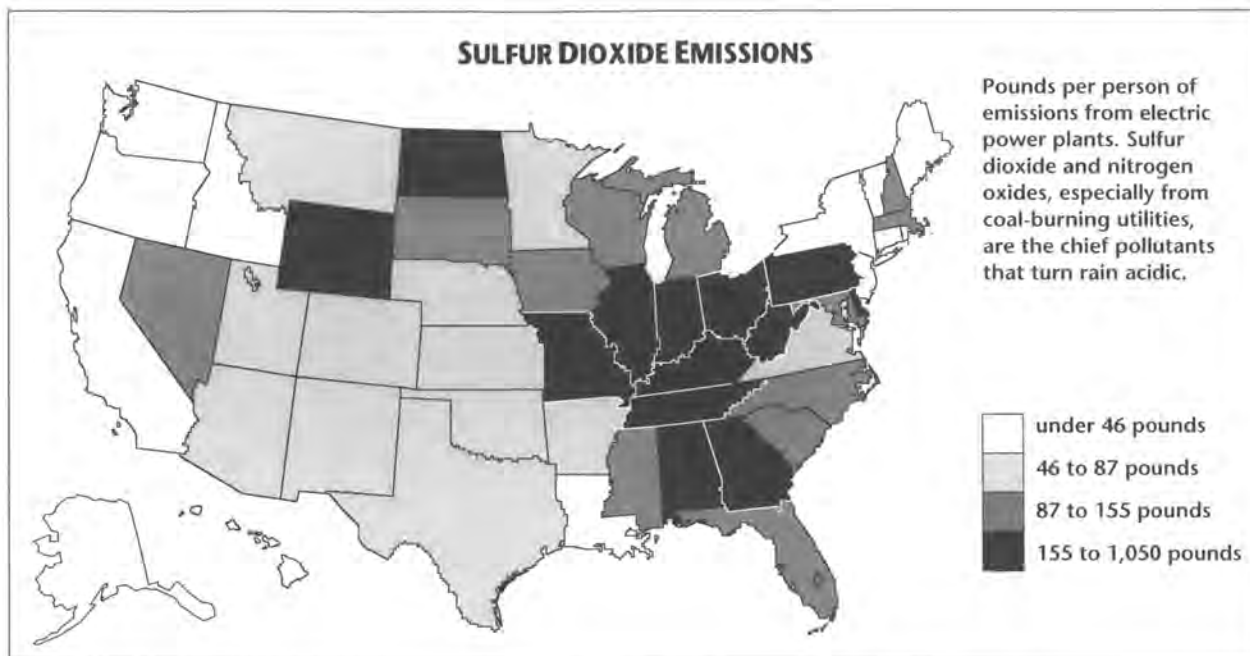
Despite its limitations, the act gives citizens access to information about 300 chemicals released into their communities. For two years, EPA has published the totals in its Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), a survey of chemical discharges to water, air, the land, public sewers, or injection wells.

TRI data for industrial emissions re-

veal some disturbing highlights:

▼ **Total Air Toxics.** The six states with the largest amounts of toxics released into the air are Texas, Ohio, Tennessee, Louisiana, Utah, and Virginia. The top polluters are chemical producers, steel and other metal manufacturers, paper makers, and the auto industry. The nation's single largest industrial source of air toxics is the AMAX Magnesium complex in Tooele, Utah. The second largest, Kodak's Tennessee Eastman in Kingsport, emits 40 million pounds, mainly chemicals like acetone and methyl isobutyl ketone that irritate the eyes, nose, throat, liver, and kidneys.

▼ **Toxics Per Capita.** Ten of the 15 states that suffer from the heaviest toxic emissions per person are in the South. One third of West Virginia's air emissions are in Kanawha County, and half of that amount, or five million pounds, comes from the Union Carbide plant in Institute — a sister plant to the one that killed at least 3,500 people in Bhopal, India. In February 1990, a small amount of methyl isocyanate, the Bhopal killer, leaked out and injured seven workers in Institute. Among the toxics the county's dozen chemical facilities dumped into the environment in 1988 were 1.6 million pounds of known carcinogens.



▼ **High-Risk Factories.** Texas has the most plants posing the greatest cancer risk from exposure to a single chemical — 33 out of 179 on the list. Next comes Louisiana with 17, California and Georgia with 11 each, and Washington with 10.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Right-to-know laws have given residents of polluted areas an important tool in their fight for cleaner air. But the Toxic Release Inventory only monitors manufacturing processes; it exempts utilities, government-owned plants, mining operations, and, ironically, waste management firms.

In general, states that host factories producing loads of toxins are also the ones with other hazardous facilities. Louisiana is a perfect example. The state ranks 50th in high-risk factories per capita, 47th in total pounds of air toxins, and 48th on a per-capita basis. Its "Chemical Corridor" from Baton Rouge to New Orleans produces a fifth of the nation's chemical pollution, and has earned the nickname "Cancer Alley" for its above-normal rates of cancer. The state also attracts poisons from all over the country to its waste facilities — none of which is counted in the TRI.

For example, Marine Shale Processors in Morgan City burns 100,000 tons of hazardous waste each year, making it the largest commercial incinerator in the country. The company first burned oil field waste, then began illegally incinerating other wastes like mercury, DDT, and cyanide

without updating its permits. At the same time, the number of respiratory problems, birth defects, miscarriages, and cancers in the area shot up. Neuroblastoma, a fatal nervous-system cancer, struck five children among 64,000 residents near Marine Shale; the normal rate is one in 100,000.

But since Marine Shale is a waste handler rather than a manufacturer, the TRI tracks none of its emissions. The inventory also omits thousands of chemicals that pose serious harm to human health and the environment. For example, the TRI does not monitor sulfur dioxide, even though the chemical is the chief precursor for acid rain. In September 1990, a huge cloud of sulfur dioxide from the Tennessee Chemical Company floated over nearby McCaysville, Georgia. The damage was immediate. At least six people went to the hospital with respiratory distress, and within two days hundreds of acres of trees and other vegetation were scorched brown — the result of instant acid rain.

ACID RAIN

Acid rain is created when the sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides produced from burning fossil fuels react with water in the atmosphere. When the water falls to earth as rain or snow, it wages chemical warfare on the environment. Fish and trees die, marble or limestone buildings corrode, and people with breathing or heart problems face increased health risks.

New England is the hardest hit by acid rain. Hundreds of lakes and streams from New Jersey's Pine Barrens through New York's Adirondacks to the forests of Maine have become acidic solutions.

Acid rain also threatens states far beyond the Northeast. More than a fifth of the lakes in the Appalachians as far south as Tennessee and North Carolina contain acidic pH levels, as do a sixth of the lakes and streams in northern Wisconsin and the Michigan peninsula.

Coal-burning power plants account for 70 percent of all sulfur dioxide emissions and 25 percent of nitrogen oxides. Ohio, with its heavy concentration of coal-fired plants, ranks 46th in sulfur dioxide emissions and 40th in acid rain. West Virginia ranks 50th in sulfur dioxide, generating twice the pounds of the next worst state, Indiana; the two states reap the consequences with acid rain rankings of 48th and 47th respectively. Kentucky is 47th in sulfur dioxide emissions, but thanks to prevailing winds, most of its acid drifts hundreds of miles eastward.

To stop acid rain and revive the damaged ecosystem will require substantial new initiatives, beginning with the control of coal-burning power plants and vehicle emissions. But while acid rain corrodes the dome of the U.S. Capitol itself, lawmakers inside from the big coal and auto states have blocked acid rain regulation proposed by lawmakers from New England.

State legislators from New England

IN THE AIR

State	Population With Air Violating Standards For				Spending on Air Quality		Toxic Chemical Releases by Industry to the Air				Ozone-Depleting Emissions	
	Ozone %	Rank	Carbon Mono. %	Rank	Per Capita \$	Rank	Million Pounds	Rank	Per Capita Pounds	Rank	100 Tons	Rank
Alabama	32.7	25	3.7	24	0.45	28	97.1	42	23.5	46	17.2	28
Arkansas	2.1	14	2.1	19	0.27	43	46.8	30	19.3	42	14.1	41
Florida	51.5	32	0	1	0.51	25	53.1	33	4.3	13	22.2	9
Georgia	41.9	27	0	1	0.38	36	82.5	38	12.9	36	11.8	11
Kentucky	48.5	30	0	1	0.86	11	43.7	28	11.8	34	15.6	27
Louisiana	17.8	19	0	1	0.42	32	133.1	47	30.1	48	7.8	8
Mississippi	2.4	16	2.4	20	0.2	47	54	34	20.5	45	8	21
North Carolina	44.1	28	24.5	32	0.5	26	88.3	39	13.5	37	29.5	32
South Carolina	32.3	24	0	1	0.44	29	62.6	35	17.9	41	25.3	47
Tennessee	53	33	17.6	29	0.58	21	133.7	48	27.2	47	28.4	40
Texas	49.4	31	3.4	22	0.83	13	169.9	50	10.1	29	44.5	17
Virginia	60.6	36	22.9	31	0.64	17	119.6	46	19.9	44	19.3	22
West Virginia	28.5	22	3.6	23	0.4	34	31.9	25	16.9	40	7.3	25
U.S. Total	56.6		32.4		0.87		2453.4		10		1020	

are also well ahead of the federal government in controlling carbon dioxide, the leading cause of global warming. The escalating volume of carbon dioxide — the byproduct of burning fossil fuels — threatens to melt the polar ice caps, hasten the rise in sea levels, distort rainfall patterns, kill plants, and eventually destroy human life.

With only five percent of the world population, the United States produces 25 percent of all carbon dioxide. About a third of that share comes from our vehicles, and another third comes from electric utilities. But instead of tackling the problem, President Bush has chosen to stall, claiming more data are needed.

In the vacuum created by the federal government, several Northeastern states have taken concrete steps to curb greenhouse emissions. Last year, for example, the president's home state of Connecticut became the first to pass a global warming law that penalizes new buildings that fail energy conservation standards and requires new state-owned vehicles to average 45 miles per gallon by the year 2000. Bush's adopted home state of Texas, on the other hand, continues to generate more carbon dioxide than all of Canada or the United Kingdom.

THE SMOKING GUN

The biggest source of "greenhouse gases" that threaten to raise temperatures

worldwide is the automobile. In fact, more than half of all air pollutants come from our cars and trucks.

Leaky air conditioners in vehicles account for one-fourth of the chlorofluorocarbons that are eating a hole in the ozone layer. Billions of pounds of nitrogen oxides from our tailpipes return to earth as acid rain. Smog and carbon monoxide from auto exhaust also cause respiratory ailments, ruin crops, and promote heart failure and cancer. Finally, the car is the driving force behind the petrochemical industry, the biggest source of environmental poisons not on wheels. Without doubt, the automobile is the most lethal weapon in America.

The Clean Air Act of 1970 targeted emissions from motor vehicles, especially lead and carbon monoxide. But since more Americans now drive more miles — four times as many as in 1950 — the air is still badly polluted. "All the progress we are making through fuel efficient technology is being eaten up by growth," says James Bond, executive officer of the California Air Resources Board.

As a result, Americans continue to pay a high price for air pollution. The American Lung Association estimates that 120,000 people die unnecessarily or prematurely each year from motor vehicle exhaust, more than twice the number

their citizens live in cities with repeated smog violations.

California, where smog was first diagnosed, also faces enormous problems. A 1989 study concluded that the Los Angeles basin could save \$9.4 billion in health and lost-time costs if it met federal clean air standards. The state already spends more than twice as much as any other state per person on air pollution programs, but the results have been disappointing. Smog levels have increased for most counties, and last year 90 percent of state residents breathed air violating ozone and carbon monoxide standards.

The failure of smog-control programs underscores the need for a mass transit alternative to the automobile. "The greatest potential for reducing smog lies in providing people with first-class options for getting around," says Ken Ryan, transportation chair for the Sierra Club.

San Francisco, Boston, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Washington, Buffalo, Portland, Sacramento, and San Diego have all recently begun or expanded their commuter train systems, but big spending for highways remains the norm. Thirty-seven state governments spend even more on roads than they bring in from gasoline and vehicle-related taxes. Thirty-one put less than \$3 into public transit for every \$100 spent on highways.

More than half of all air pollutants come from our cars and trucks.

WATER POLLUTION

Scattered among the mountains of Lincoln County in rural West Virginia stand scores of tiny, dilapidated houses. Most aren't more than a stone's throw from one of the many creeks that flow from the Mud River, but few have running water.

With no money to install pipes or septic systems, many families must haul water from streams contaminated by mining, industrial, and household wastes. Kidney disease, worms, and parasites are common. "The water's no good," says a woman who has just brought her daughter home after a bout with pneumonia. "I've had a miscarriage and a stillbirth and this baby's sick all the time. I'm afraid to stay here."

County health officials say thousands of families in rural Appalachia risk their health every time they take a drink. "The vital connection between poverty and sickness is bad water," says one. "So much of the disease comes from the wells. It starts with the baby. You're basically mixing a formula with sewer water."

Few natural elements affect our health and well-being as profoundly as water. The essential ingredient of life, it flows in vast underground aquifers and covers three-quarters of the earth's surface. But this bountiful supply is now polluted enough to cause 10 million deaths a year worldwide.

Half the drinking water consumed in the United States comes from surface water — rivers, lakes, streams, and reservoirs. Although their pollution has been regulated since the 1950s, one-fourth of these waters now fail to meet their designated uses for drinking and recreation.

The other half of our water supply comes from underground aquifers, or groundwater. Like surface water, groundwater is susceptible to contamination from agricultural and industrial chemicals. It is also vulnerable to leaking landfills, waste lagoons, and underground tanks. Groundwater moves slowly, often along an unpredictable path,

and contaminants may concentrate in plumes for years, making cleanup difficult or impossible.

TOXIC TOILET

A third of the toxic chemicals that industry dumps into surface water comes from direct end-of-pipe discharges. The remaining two-thirds pass through public sewage treatment facilities and then into our waterways. Because these facilities cannot neutralize most toxic pollutants, EPA requires generators to cleanse, or "pretreat," their waste before it reaches the public sewage system. However, a recent survey by the U.S. General Accounting Office reveals that 41 percent of the pretreating companies exceed discharge limits.

Companies get rid of even more toxic chemicals by simply injecting them underground, which jeopardizes the purity of groundwater. Altogether, industry flushed away 2.2 billion pounds of toxic waste in 1988 through direct discharge into surface water, transfers to sewage systems, or underground injection.

▼ **Direct Discharges to Water.** The 150-mile section of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the toilet for at least 136 major industrial facilities, receives more toxins than any other stretch of water in the country. In fact, Louisiana has one-half of all chemical waste directly discharged into surface waters by EPA-monitored companies. Many local residents rely on the Mississippi for their drinking water and suffer a higher than normal incidence of cancer and miscarriages.

▼ **Direct Discharges Per Mile.** Louisiana has the most concentrated discharge, followed by Tennessee and several Eastern Seaboard states. The waste from Maryland's two biggest water polluters, W.R. Grace and Bethlehem Steel, continues to foul the once-fertile Chesapeake Bay. Even though thousands of

fishers have lost their jobs, Bethlehem Steel has used its workforce of 8,000 as leverage to negotiate reduced fines and repeated delays in meeting emission limits for various chemicals.

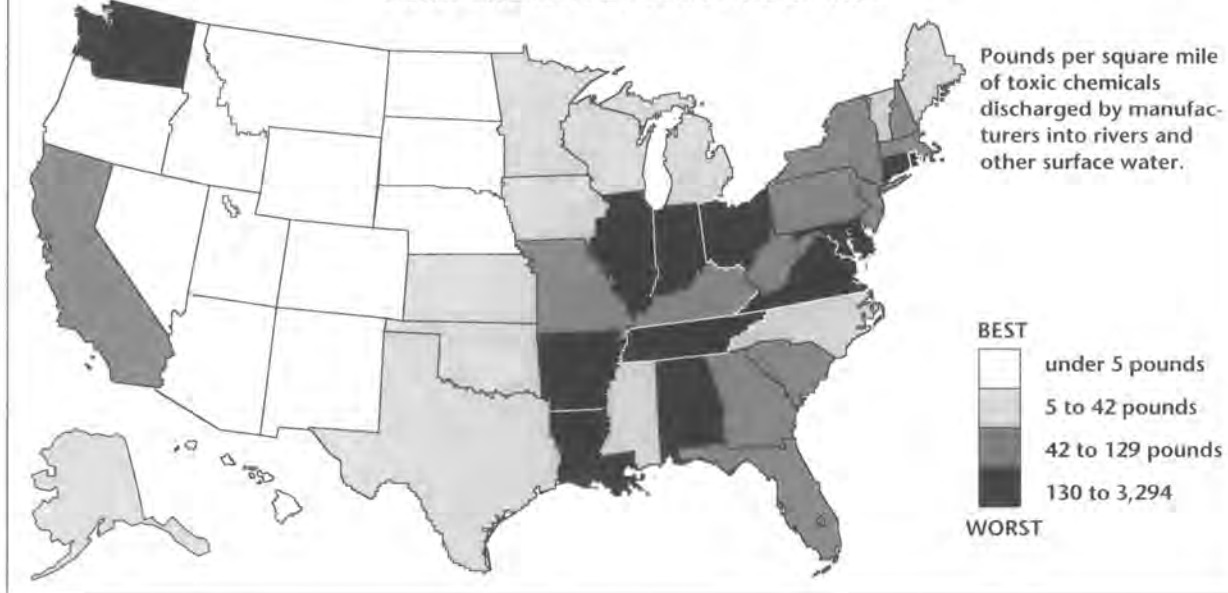
▼ **Toxic Transfers to Sewers.** Missouri sends the most chemicals into public sewage systems — 77.6 million pounds, or 14 percent of the national total, with three-fourths of the waste coming from St. Louis County alone. Sewage systems in Illinois, New Jersey, California, Texas, and Virginia also receive large volumes of industrial toxins, each accounting for seven percent or more of the U.S. total.

▼ **Per-Capita Transfers to Sewers.** The Dakotas, several Rocky Mountain states, and Alaska rank best; they lack the infrastructure or inclination to manage industrial waste through public sewage systems. By contrast, almost a third of all toxic chemical emissions in New Jersey pass through its public sewage treatment plants. The sheer volume helps explain why the state ranks 45th in sewage systems violating EPA standards, 44th in investment needed for adequate treatment facilities, and 2nd in per-capita spending to protect water resources.

▼ **Toxics Injected Underground.** Texas and Louisiana create 69 percent of all toxins pumped underground. Louisiana injects the most chemicals per capita and per square mile, while Texas pumps the highest volume. In Alvin, Texas, Monsanto recently increased by 50 percent the amount of acrylonitrile, a probable carcinogen, it sends underground. In Louisiana, Shell Oil pumped an astonishing 152 million pounds of hydrochloric acid into the ground in 1988.

Ranked according to these and four other indicators for toxic wastewater, Tennessee emerges as the worst state overall. The biggest generators are chemical companies, led by DuPont's facilities in Memphis and New Johnsonville and Kodak's huge Tennessee Eastman plant in Kingsport. But a

TOXIC CHEMICALS PUT IN WATERWAYS



dozen other firms from food processing to textiles and paper making also send a million or more pounds of toxins to sewage systems, rivers, or underground caverns each year.

Too often, getting state and company officials to control, much less reduce, these wastes remains difficult, even when drinking water quality is at stake. Consider the example of Avtex Fiber in Virginia, another Southern state that ranks in the bottom five for overall water-borne toxins. The sole producer of carbonized rayon for the Defense Department and the space program, Avtex Fiber dumped zinc, chlorine, sulfuric acid, PCBs, and other toxic wastes directly into the Shenandoah River for over a decade. Despite evidence of chemical pollution in nearby wells in 1981, high toxin levels in fish in 1985, and a PCB spill in 1986, the state Water Control Board and EPA issued only weak warnings.

Finally, after the Natural Resources Defense Council threatened to sue the company in 1988, the state decided to sue Avtex itself. In November 1989, following new PCB emissions from the company, Avtex was shut down and fined \$6 million. The cleanup is expected to cost at least \$100 million.

"So far, the state has failed to understand the basic problem with environmental pollution — that the price for environmental damage will be extracted," says David Bailey, director of the Environmental Defense Fund in Virginia. "If you don't make the company pay for it, the environ-

ment will pay for it, and the citizens bear the cost."

TOXIC DRAINS

In addition to industrial chemicals, other pollutants — detergents, motor oil, fertilizer, construction waste, pesticides — wash off lawns and city streets into storm drains or sewers. Throughout the nation, aging sewage plants can no longer handle the mounting waste load. In 1988, some 6,250 of the nation's 15,600 treatment facilities reported water quality or public health problems. In Massachusetts, 12 billion tons of raw or partially treated sewage reach Boston Harbor each year — about 500 million gallons per day.

Such waste is taking a heavy toll on the nation's lakes, rivers, and streams. Ten percent of all river and stream miles are already ruined; they can no longer support their designated uses for fishing, recreation, or drinking. Twenty percent only partially support their designated use, and another 10 percent face imminent danger of becoming impaired.

The states ranking worst on fresh water quality are in the Great Lakes and Farmbelt (Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa) or mining regions (West Virginia, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Alaska). Among the best are Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia — even though Alabama and Mississippi ranked among the worst 10 states for drinking water violations, and Alabama

and Georgia ranked 42nd and 41st in toxic discharges to surface water.

The rankings on water quality can be deceptive, because each state decides how much to test and how to define which waters can support their designated use. Minnesota, for example, calculates that nearly two-thirds of its rivers and streams fail to meet designated uses, dropping its rank to 45th — but its monitoring includes a detailed analysis of fish tissue, a procedure ignored by many states.

Dioxin, a deadly poison that can cause birth defects, miscarriages, and nerve damage, is another significant threat to surface water quality. In 1908, when Champion International built the South's first paper mill on the banks of the Pigeon River in North Carolina, the river was clear and full of trout. Today, the Pigeon is discolored, practically dead, and contaminated with dioxin from Champion's wastewater. Four major rivers in Arkansas, recipients of waste from paper companies like Nekoosa Papers in Ashdown, also contain dangerous levels of dioxin. Arkansas ranks 42nd, with 58 percent of its rivers and streams impaired.

Agriculture poses the greatest single threat to inland waters. Pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, other nutrients, and sediment wash, dribble, or blow into the water, impairing 55 percent of the nation's river miles. A study by the U.S. Geological Survey released last year reveals that 98 percent of the streams tested in 10 Midwestern states contain the pesticides atrazine and alachlor, both likely carcinogens.

Agriculture is also a major consumer of inland waters, especially in the Midwest and Rocky Mountains. Seven of the dozen states with the nation's highest per-capita consumption of water (Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, Nevada, Kansas, New Mexico) are among the dozen that rely most heavily on artificial irrigation for their crops; as a result, several are also responsible for draining valuable aquifers.

DEEP THROAT

Underground aquifers in the United States contain 16 times as much water as the Great Lakes. They feed public water systems and private wells, and supply billions of gallons of free water daily to mining, industrial, and agribusiness concerns. In North Carolina, for example, the Texasgulf phosphate operation sucks out more water than is consumed by the entire city of Charlotte.

Groundwater pollution comes from many sources. Poisons leach from Superfund or other waste sites, and agricultural chemicals seep through the soil. Saltwater invades when coastal wetlands are damaged. Underground storage drums — including over 300,000 leaking gasoline tanks — leak benzene and other dangerous substances.

In 1980, at the behest of Senator Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, Congress exempted companies drilling for oil and

gas from hazardous waste disposal laws, allowing them to dump "non-hazardous" waste mud into open pits. That decision has poisoned groundwater, as sludge and brine from oil drilling have seeped into underground supplies. Seven oil and gas producing states — Louisiana, Texas, Wyoming, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Ohio — are dotted with injection wells that leak wastes into shallow aquifers. The seven states are also among the worst dozen for toxic chemicals pumped underground by manufacturers.

Groundwater protection is largely left to the states. Florida not only collects data, but also controls underground injection and storage tanks, regulates septic tanks, and protects aquifers. The Sunshine State ranks 9th nationally for its per-capita spending to protect and improve water quality.

Florida needs all the help it can get. It ranks 49th in pesticide contaminated groundwater, 47th in reliance on groundwater for drinking, 46th in public water systems and 39th in sewage systems in noncompliance, 46th in impaired lakes, and 43rd on the composite toxic wastewater score. Overall, Florida takes last place in our clean water indicators. The dying Everglades, symbolic of the state's problems, supplies the aquifer that feeds south Florida's ballooning population, but state officials have stood by (or even helped) as the sugar and oil interests pollute, siphon, and otherwise destroy these unique wetlands.

DRINK WELL

Drinking water sources all across the nation face similar threats. But EPA regulations only apply to public water systems that serve 25 people or more for at least 60 days a year. Private wells, which supply one household in seven, are not monitored under the Safe Drinking Water Act, even though evidence suggests many are contaminated. In Florida, for example, over 1,000 wells were condemned following the discovery of groundwater laced with the pesticide ethylene dibromide.

Many rural states that depend the most on private wells also rely heavily on septic tanks, which can contaminate groundwater. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont score in the bottom five on both indicators. The problems are even worse in rural Farmbelt communities that also face pesticide contamination, or in Southern states like Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky which allow huge injections of toxic chemicals beneath the ground.

No state depends more on wells for its drinking water than North Carolina. The Tarheel state also ranks 30th in surface and groundwater that may be contaminated and 49th in households using septic tanks. Some areas don't even enjoy the luxury of septic tanks. One small community of black families in Camden County, North Carolina lives in a swampy area where sewage from outhouses runs through open drainage ditches less than 10 feet from their wells.

West Virginia ranks dead last for surface water quality, with 80 percent of its streams and 100 percent of its lakes impaired. The state also ranks 39th in households served by wells, 47th in households dependent on septic tanks, 47th in water used for non-drinking purposes, 43rd in spending for water quality, and 46th in investment needed for adequate sewage facilities.

"When we first moved back here, we had to haul water from the creek," recalls one Lincoln County mother of nine. "We really had it tough. We have a bathroom and a well drilled now, but the water's no good. It turns everything brown." For too many West Virginians, a drink of cool, clean mountain water goes with the myth of country living, not the reality.

IN THE WATER

State	Toxics to Surface Water		Toxics in Underground Injections		Fresh Water Withdrawals		Surface & Groundwater Possibly Contaminated		Water Systems in Non-compliance		Sewage Systems in Non-compliance	
	Per Capita lbs.	Rank	Per Capita lbs.	Rank	Gal. Per Capita	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Alabama	1.7	44	0.4	35	2736	42	39	34	0.15	4	4	7
Arkansas	3.1	47	2.91	41	2925	44	16.3	20	0	1	20	42
Florida	0.6	33	2.8	40	642	12	65	45	4.18	46	19	39
Georgia	1	40	0.01	31	1122	20	26	26	0.64	12	10	23
Kentucky	0.5	29	8.06	44	1234	22	44.9	37	1.06	22	7	17
Louisiana	35.6	50	95.77	50	2676	39	25.9	25	0.34	7	23	44
Mississippi	0.8	35	17.82	46	1110	18	24.9	23	0.21	5	5	10
North Carolina	0.1	9	0	22	1294	24	31.7	30	1.03	21	8	18
South Carolina	0.5	30	0	1	1740	32	40	35	1.33	26	13	30
Tennessee	1.3	42	10.15	45	2098	34	38.3	33	0.55	10	11	26
Texas	0.3	21	29.25	47	976	16	11.9	16	2.69	37	6	14
Virginia	3.3	48	0	26	982	17	31.3	28	1.01	20	17	35
West Virginia	1.7	43	0.05	34	2893	43	5.5	10	2.47	35	18	37
US Total	1.3		5.36		1529		34.1		3.37		11	

COMMUNITY AND WORKPLACE HEALTH

In Plaquemine, Louisiana, a small town 30 miles down the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge, Etta Lee Gulotta discovered 40 cancer cases in a five block radius. Her husband died of lung cancer, even though he never smoked.

In nearby St. Gabriel, pharmacist Kay Gaudet calculated that local women suffered miscarriages at twice the average rate. The vinyl chloride gas emitted by neighboring chemical companies, she learned, is known to cause cancer and is suspected to poison embryos.

Next door in Geismar, a predominantly black town with homes only a few hundred yards from factories emitting dangerous gases, 9 of every 10 children suffered serious respiratory problems.

For residents of towns along the "Chemical Corridor" that stretches from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, the connection between pollution and health problems is all too clear. When the environment is sick, people get sick. Despite our efforts to create walls between ourselves and our waste, pollution seeps in.

In Louisiana, where the petrochemical industry churns toxins into the air and water each day, cancer deaths stand well above the national average (rank 46). An unusually large share of Louisianans work in jobs that expose them to serious diseases (rank 48). They also work in jobs in some of the most highly toxic industries (rank 46).

Indeed, the proportion of Louisiana citizens who do not reach age 65 because of illness or injury — the premature death rate — is one of the highest in the nation (rank 47). At the same time, private employers in the state furnish only half of their workers with insurance (rank 49), and per-capita spending on public health is barely 40 percent of the national average (rank 43).

In Louisiana and throughout the country, the people hardest hit by pollution are often the poorest. They tend to live downstream or downwind of dirty industries, or in areas that lack adequate plumbing, sewage disposal, and public health programs.

Conduct a survey in your community: Are waste dumps and heavily polluting industries located on the same side of the tracks as poor or working-class neighborhoods? Are wealthy neighborhoods located upwind from the dirt and danger? Money flows in the opposite direction of pollution.

Now conduct a survey of your local workforce: Are the most hazardous factory jobs held by people of color? By those with the least education? By contract or temporary workers with few benefits or protections?

DISPOSABLE LIVES

How a company or a state regards the safety of its poorest people says a great deal about its commitment to environmental health. Not only is the environment of working and poor people shaped by high-risk jobs and toxic communities, they are also the first to feel the effects of inept policies that allow individual actions to become public hazards. Like the canaries once sent into the mines to test the air for deadly gases, their pain and sickness should sound the alarm for all of us.

The 23 indicators we chose to measure community and workplace health emphasize this relationship between public policy, pollution, living conditions, and human health. The results are distressing — the nation's community and workplace health is ailing, and no state can claim a clean record.

Not a single state ranked in the top half

in all indicators. Even Massachusetts and Minnesota, which ranked first respectively in workplace health and community health, have significant health hazards. Massachusetts ranks 39th for cancer deaths; Minnesota ranks 36th in public health spending and 27th in homes without adequate plumbing. At the other extreme, Alabama and Arkansas rank below average on nearly every indicator.

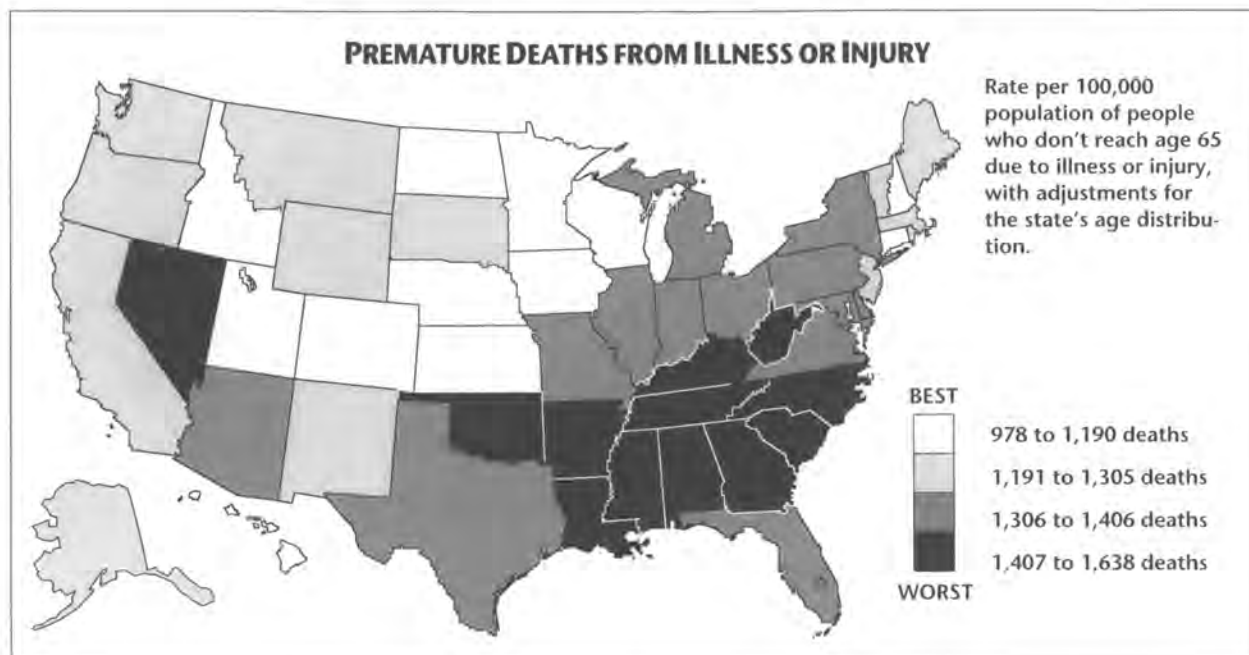
On a national scale, the health data suggest that workers and the poor are considered disposable:

▼ One person in seven under age 65 — 33 million people — has no medical insurance, either through a private plan or Medicaid. The proportion jumps to one in five for African-American children and to almost two in five for Latino children. Regardless of race, families with incomes under \$25,000 are only one third as likely to have insurance coverage for their children as families earning over \$40,000.

▼ Each day in America, more than 100 babies under age one die — 39,500 babies in 1989. The nation's infant mortality rate of 9.6 deaths per 1,000 live births is the second highest in the industrialized Western hemisphere. At the same time, 11 percent of the gross national product goes for medical care, a larger share than any other developed nation.

▼ Using federal data, the National Safe Work Institute in Chicago estimates that 70,000 workers are permanently disabled each year and another 71,000 die annually from occupational diseases like black lung and asbestosis. Yet the share of the federal budget devoted to agencies regulating workplace health has dropped by a third since 1981.

▼ The National Safety Council says that workplace injuries and accidents kill another 10,500 people each year. In addition, the Bureau of Labor Statistics calcu-



lates that *each day* some 11,000 workers are injured seriously enough to lose work time or to be put on restricted work duty. The rate of lost-time injuries has increased by 39 percent since 1974.

UNEVEN STANDARDS

Taken together, such numbers form a powerful indictment of our national health care system in general — and of workplace safety regulators in particular. Just as EPA is charged with monitoring environmental health, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is responsible for ensuring workplace safety — yet OSHA has only one-twentieth the budget and few of the enforcement tools at EPA's disposal.

The U.S. General Accounting Office reviewed the performance of OSHA and found the agency riddled with problems. Among its conclusions:

- ▼ Inspections are few and far between. "Even employers in high-hazard, targeted industries are rarely inspected."
- ▼ OSHA sanctions "provide limited deterrence to employer noncompliance," since the average assessed penalty for a serious violation was only \$261 in 1988.
- ▼ Follow-up is unreliable. OSHA uses employer reports to verify compliance rather than conducting its own follow-up inspections.
- ▼ Existing regulations are inadequate. "Safety and health standards fail

to cover existing hazards or keep up with new ones."

Like EPA, regional OSHA offices vary greatly in their pursuit of a safe environment. OSHA offices in Texas, for example, are among the weakest at penalizing companies for workplace deaths. The agency fined Brown & Root, the giant Houston-based contractor, a mere \$16,285 for OSHA violations related to 22 deaths between 1974 and 1988.

Texas OSHA has been even more reluctant to tackle the huge petrochemical industry. Regional administrator Gilbert Sautler admitted he "was surprised" to learn that an average of 40 workers a year were dying from accidents in the industry. The state never even bothered to inspect the Phillips Petroleum refinery in Pasadena from 1975 to 1989 — the year an explosion killed 23 workers and injured 232, making it the worst industrial accident in the 20-year history of OSHA.

Some Southern states, like North Carolina, have simply circumvented OSHA by setting up their own agencies to monitor workplace safety — yet many homegrown substitutes have never been fully certified by the federal government because they lack the staff or funding to enforce minimum federal standards.

The federal failure to set tough health standards is even more apparent in the area of worker compensation, the employer-financed insurance programs designed to shield companies from negligence suits and to pay injured workers

substitute wages and health benefits. The current hodgepodge of compensation systems breeds inequities between the states and results in different treatment of similar injuries and illnesses.

A study by the *Orlando Sentinel* documented problems in Florida's system that are common to many states: Insurers and employers harass those who file claims, send them to company doctors (often to be misdiagnosed), drag cases out, stall or terminate payments arbitrarily, cut off medical reimbursement, and pressure workers to settle for less money. Many workers are never even told they're entitled to worker compensation, but are instead paid from cheaper company insurance policies.

INFANTS AND MEDICAL ACCESS

Rankings in the Green Index suggest a link between workplace and community safety: Companies that injure their workers are also likely to pollute their neighbors. At the community level, the high correlation between a company's regard for employee health and its respect for pollution standards means that people on both sides of the factory walls have an interest in protecting one another.

In Humphreys County, Mississippi, 33 of every 1,000 babies die before the age of one — an infant mortality rate surpassing many Third World nations. Southern states account for 9 of the worst 10 states for premature deaths and 7 of the worst

IN THE HOME, ON THE JOB

10 for infant mortality.

Why are Southerners so likely to die prematurely? Poverty certainly plays a role, condemning many to poor nutrition and inadequate health care. But Southern death rates rank even higher than those in poor rural areas outside the region. The Green Index rankings show a strong correlation between high death rates and heavy minority

populations — reinforcing the conclusion that race plays a major role in isolating people from resources needed for a healthy life. If you're not part of the "good ole boy" network, you're relegated to the margins of society — which is also where the waste dumps, landfills, and Superfund sites are often found.

Mississippi has lowered its infant mortality rate over the past few years, but it still ranks among the worst 10 states. With one out of four of its citizens lacking medical insurance, it also ranks last in this crucial indicator of health care accessibility.

South Carolina ranked worst for infant mortality in 1989, with a rate of 12.5 deaths per 1,000 live births. The Palmetto state hosts far more than its share of radioactive, hazardous, and toxic waste. It also ranks 50th for premature deaths, 48th for people without insurance, and 39th for doctors per capita. Like seven other Southern states, it ranks among the bottom 10 for homes that lack kitchen facilities, toilets, or hot water.

The states with the best infant mortality rates (Rhode Island, Vermont, Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota, Iowa) also do well in rankings on insurance coverage and Medicaid programs. In all but one case, these same states are among the top 15 for maximum disability payments and for the percent of unemployed workers receiving benefits, indicating a general progressive tilt toward public programs

serving the truly needy.

In contrast to these and other states in the Northeast and Midwest, the South trails in benefits for the disabled and in passing laws to protect worker rights. Even though the region is home to 6 of the 12 states with the largest share of their workforces in high-risk jobs, it also has 7 of the 12 states with the most people lacking insurance coverage and 6 of the 12 with the lowest compensation for unemployed workers. West Virginia — the notable exception in each area — leads the South in union members, public health spending, and disability benefits. But with its dependency on coal mining, West Virginia also leads in unemployment and occupational deaths.

A WORKER'S LOBBY

The rate of union membership among manufacturing workers is an important indicator of the workplace environment. With OSHA doing such an inadequate job of setting and enforcing safety standards, unions must often act as health-and-safety lobbies. Several studies also show that the rise of non-union, contract labor has worsened the job safety records of various industries.

The Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) found that workers for subcontractors of major petrochemical firms suffer an injury rate 2.5 times

that of the major firms. The increasing use of non-union, inexperienced contract workers has led to several disasters, including 17 deaths at ARCO Chemical in Houston last year and the lethal explosion at the Phillips Petroleum refinery in Pasadena in 1989.

In another study, the *Detroit Free Press* determined that while half of Michigan's autoworkers are employed in supplier plants, they experience two-thirds of the industry's serious workplace injuries and fatalities. According to the newspaper, the Big Three automakers have relatively fewer incidents than their suppliers because they have less turnover and a more unionized, better-trained workforce. By not allowing employers to cut corners at the expense of their health and safety, union members protect their job environment.

Although unions have played an important role in defending the health of workers, they cannot tackle the problem alone. The answer to the alarming failure to protect workplace and community health is not simply better enforcement and more compensation for these victims of an unhealthy environment. As with other forms of pollution, the answer is prevention. We must stop the causes of disease, injury, infant mortality, and occupational death; set standards that eliminate hazards; and deliver medical and educational resources that focus on prevention rather than remediation. □

State	Cancer Deaths Per 100,000		Premature Deaths		Population Without Insurance		Households Without Plumbing		Workplace Deaths Per 100,000		Workers in Most Toxic Jobs		Workers in High-Injury Jobs	
	Pop.	Rank	Rate	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	Rate	Rank	% Mfg.	Rank	% Mfg.	Rank
Alabama	175	31	1579	48	19.7	39	4.2	43	8.4	25	29.7	32	37.8	32
Arkansas	165	21	1412	40	22.3	44	4.2	43	11.8	34	24.5	25	45	41
Florida	162	16	1366	33	22.2	43	1.1	2	10	29	26.9	27	33.7	23
Georgia	171	28	1530	46	18.6	38	3.2	38	12.4	38	23.3	22	30.6	18
Kentucky	180	41	1455	42	18.1	37	6.5	49	14	40	27.7	28	30.3	17
Louisiana	186	46	1558	47	25.7	48	2.4	32	12.2	36	45.9	46	41	37
Mississippi	166	23	1627	49	22.4	45	5.9	48	14.9	43	22.1	19	36.5	30
North Carolina	164	18	1478	44	14.8	27	4.1	41	7.9	22	15.8	12	18.1	6
South Carolina	169	25	1638	50	15.3	28	4.1	41	7	16	23	21	17.4	4
Tennessee	170	27	1446	41	15.4	29	3.7	40	8.5	26	29.7	33	29.6	16
Texas	158	14	1308	26	26.9	49	1.9	24	13.2	39	32.2	36	34.4	25
Virginia	189	47	1346	29	14	26	4.2	43	11.3	32	28.2	31	31.4	20
West Virginia	174	30	1517	45	15.9	32	5.7	47	17.2	46	48.3	47	36.8	31
U.S. Total	171				15.7				7.9		31		34.2	

**PLANS TO BURN
HAZARDOUS
WASTE IN ONE
RURAL COUNTY
HAVE SPLIT THE
BLACK COMMUNITY
OVER JOBS VERSUS
PUBLIC HEALTH.**

TOXIC RACE

BY MARY LEE KERR

WOODLAND, N.C. — In front of Town Hall, 50 residents wait out an executive session of their town board in the cool air of early summer. They had packed the meeting hall to protest plans to build a hazardous waste incinerator in town, but the board had ordered the room cleared when the debate grew heated.

Suddenly, someone shouts, "Bill Jones is being dragged out!" A curious crowd surges to the back of the building in time to see one of their neighbors who had refused to leave the meeting being dragged to a police car.

Carrie Ward shakes her head and frowns as police force Jones into the waiting cruiser. The hazardous waste incinerator, she says, has brought nothing but trouble to the town of 850 people where she was born. "Woodland was a friendly place and we never had no problems like this here. It was neighbor helping neighbor. Now this thing come in here and done messed up the neighborhood. Strangers come in here and divide us."

The strangers are officials from ThermalKEM, a German-owned corporation that wants to burn 100 million pounds of hazardous wastes each year near the Virginia border in rural Northampton County. The company says its \$70 million incinerator and landfill will provide hundreds of jobs and millions of tax dollars to an area suffering from high unemployment and few social services.

Despite such promises of plenty, most Northampton residents oppose the incinerator. ThermalKEM has a disturbing record of safety mishaps, they point out, and burning toxic debris will harm their children and scare away other industries. "It sounds good for the town," says one Woodland resident, "but if you kill everybody, you won't need no town."

Yet the widespread community opposition has failed to stop ThermalKEM. For the past year, company and state officials have quietly worked behind the scenes, using their money and influence to convince county leaders to ignore the health risks and accept the incinerator. ThermalKEM has offered free trips to county commissioners, wooed local ministers, and tossed in promises of a new recreation area, better roads, and improved health care.

The promise of jobs and county services has been especially effective in the black community, which suffers from chronic unemployment and poverty. Northampton has been deeply divided between rich and poor, black and white, for more than two centuries, and its history of misery and mistrust makes it particularly vulnerable to a corporation like ThermalKEM. In essence, say some black leaders, the company strategy amounts to little more than environmental blackmail — an effort by those who profit from toxic waste to divide and conquer poor black communities.

"The conventional wisdom now is that you can bribe people," says State Senator Frank Ballance, who represents Northampton County. "I don't mean the kind of normal bribe where you say, 'Take this money under the table.' I mean telling people, 'We're going to build you some roads and give you a school and give you \$3.5 million in taxes.' It's difficult to resist when you're poor."

"Companies like ThermalKEM thrive on counties with a majority black population," agrees Bennett Taylor, president of the local NAACP chapter. "They think blacks are not really important, so it's not important that the incinerator will raise disease rates. This is a poor county already. ThermalKEM says, 'Here's a few dollars to bring your county up.' Some citizens feel the way I do — that a person's health is more important."

As a veteran union activist at the J.P. Stevens plant in nearby Roanoke Rapids, Taylor has grown suspicious of corporate promises. But ThermalKEM's strategy has met far better success among black leaders who are still tied to the old culture of peanuts and paternalism — and among black contractors hoping to cash in on a piece of the action from new high-tech industries.

SLAVERY'S LEGACY

Route 158 bisects Northampton County, rolling over the Roanoke River, cutting across flat peanut fields, running

BURNING BLACK COMMUNITIES

Northampton County is not the only black community facing the threat of hazardous waste. Across the South, minority areas burdened by discrimination and poverty are fighting to keep their communities from being used as toxic dumps for industrial waste:

▼ Georgia officials want to burn hazardous waste next to Carsonville, an all-black town of 60 people in Taylor County. "I was shocked when I first heard about this thing," says Willie Character, a local resident. "I learn about how much danger there is. They got a lot of folks brainwashed that it's going to create jobs, but there won't be no jobs for people around here."

▼ Residents of Emelle, Alabama have watched as the largest hazardous waste dump in the nation has driven away business and lowered property values. Emelle is 78 percent black.

▼ Two hazardous waste companies have set up shop in Noxubee County, Mississippi to find sites for disposal facilities. The firms are promising a community center, garbage service, scholarship fund, and jobs — tempting carrots to a county that is 72 percent black and suffers from 14 percent unemployment.

The proximity of waste and race is no coincidence. According to a study by the Commission on Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, the most significant factor in determining the site of hazardous waste facilities is the color of the community. And nearly half of the cities and states with the greatest number of blacks exposed to toxic waste dumps are located in the South.

To Willie Character, the Taylor County incinerator is a black and white issue. "We're all black, and you whites are putting it right here," he says. "Y'all got plenty of land, and you're putting it right here."

—M.L.K.

past white-frame farm houses, through the county seat of Jackson and on into Hertford County. The road is part of the Historic Albemarle Tour Highway, marked with placards commemorating the deeds of Confederate heroes like "Boy" Colonel Henry K. Burgwyn and General Matt Ransom.

No historical markers tell of the painful legacy of slavery, but the signs remain. Between the prosperous fields and large homes sit gray shacks, unprotected from wind and rain. Old folks rock in the damp heat on the porch; younger ones lean on rusting cars in the yard. A store on 158 advertises bingo candles and "hot lottery dreambooks" — a quick fix to the poverty that has been cultivated like the soil for hundreds of years.

Numbers bear witness to the continuity between the county's plantation past and impoverished present. According to census figures, Northampton was 60 percent black in 1820. Almost all were slaves, and even after emancipation most continued to work on farms owned by whites. Black residents gained influence within their own communities as ministers and teachers, but whites still dominated county politics.

Little has changed in the past 170 years. According to the 1990 census, black residents still make up 60 percent of

the population. The county remains primarily agricultural, with unemployment above 10 percent among blacks. Per capita income is below the state average, education is substandard, and infant mortality is high. One in four residents lives in poverty, and one in six lives in housing without adequate plumbing. Despite the black majority, only one of five county commissioners is black.

Black leaders insist that the sharp divisions between the haves and have-nots is no accident. For years, they say, white farmers have intentionally discouraged industry from setting up shop in Northampton, trapping blacks in low-paying farm jobs.

"The way they'd protect these farmers was to keep these poor blacks out of jobs and sitting around waiting on the corner," says State Senator Frank Ballance. "So when the farmer comes by and says, 'I have a few potatoes to dig. I'll pay you a dollar and a half an hour,' then those people would have to accept."

Ballance opposes the incinerator, but other black leaders, angered by the calculated failure of whites to attract industry to Northampton, support the ThermalKEM project. After all, they say, white people have never cared about us before. Why should we trust them now when they claim this incinerator is a bad thing?

"Who has the gold has control," says Vernon Kee, a building contractor and the lone black on the county commission. "And black folks don't have the gold in Northampton County. It comes right back to the old white establishment. They don't want industry, but they don't want to pay more property taxes either."

Like many other black leaders, Kee supports the incinerator, insisting it will bring much-needed jobs to the area. To ensure his support, ThermalKEM flew him and two other commissioners to visit its incinerator in Rock Hill, South Carolina. The company also held a training session at a closed-door meeting to teach commissioners how to respond to public opposition.

A few days after the session, Kee assured residents that he would "vote the wishes of the people." Six weeks later, he voted to invite ThermalKEM to burn toxic wastes in Northampton County.

ARSENIC AND RACE

The controversy over the incinerator heated up in 1989, the deadline set by the Environmental Protection Agency for states to find ways to dispose of their own hazardous wastes or risk losing federal funds. Alabama and South Carolina, tired of serving as regional dumping grounds, also threatened to close their landfills to out-of-state wastes. Faced with these dual pressures, North Carolina signed a regional disposal agreement with four other states and pledged to build its own incinerator.

North Carolina chose ThermalKEM to build the waste furnace, and together they launched a public relations campaign to find a site. Despite the promise of jobs and revenues, it turned out to be a tough sell. In county after county, residents mobilized to oppose the incinerator. In Granville County, angry residents bulldozed Governor James Martin in effigy. Opponents also bought up land designated for the incinerator and sold it off in tiny parcels to force the state to negotiate with thousands of owners.

Citizens had good reason to protest. According to a national survey of 27 incinerators by the Citizen's Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste, every facility has experienced serious accidents — including spills, leaks, equipment failures, fires, and explosions. Residents who live nearby have suffered respiratory problems and higher than average rates of can-

cer. Many workers have contracted neurological diseases, and some have died from explosions or exposure to gases.

ThermalKEM itself has a poor safety record at its Rock Hill incinerator. One hundred employees had to be evacuated after an explosion in 1988, and two workers were hospitalized. State inspectors cited ThermalKEM for a long list of safety violations in 1989 and 1990, including evidence that the firm released excessive levels of arsenic and chromium into the community.

Studies indicate that incinerators hurt the economy as well as the environment. "Commercial hazardous waste management facilities do not bring about industrial growth," says William Sanjour, a policy analyst with the EPA. "Rather, they tend to depress any area in which they are located, from the point of view of economics, public health, the environment, and morale." After surveying communities with incinerators, Sanjour concluded that the facilities generally drive away new industry, employ fewer than 100 workers, and lower property values.

Faced with a threat to their health and economic well-being, a total of 19 counties in North Carolina rejected the ThermalKEM incinerator. Blistered by the political heat, state officials decided the incinerator was too hot to handle and told the company to find a site for the facility on its own.

ThermalKEM already had an option on 415 acres of land in Northampton County, but it needed the go-ahead from local officials. Realizing that public overtures would only spark more citizen protests, the company set out to quietly entice county officials to "invite" the incinerator into the community.

"It looked like the state had hit a dead-end, so we were going to have to go and get a volunteer county," says George White, a ThermalKEM spokesman. He

insists, however, that the company "will not come into an area where the leadership and the people don't want it there. The leadership in the county and individuals and groups in the county call the shots."

Yet ThermalKEM left little to chance. The company did its homework, apparently conducting extensive background checks on each county commissioner. Commissioner Jasper Eley says he was approached by ThermalKEM executive Mark Taylor. "He knew more about me

The company promised the incinerator would create 250 jobs and \$3.5 million in fees and taxes — half the county's current operating budget. According to a company letter, Governor Martin also invited county commissioners to a breakfast in Raleigh, where he promised to "provide a new county recreation area, new and improved roads, and better county health services." There was also talk of forgiving the county's large school debt.

Photo by Mary Lee Kerr



GROVER EDWARDS, A NORTHAMPTON CONTRACTOR, HOPES THE INCINERATOR WILL BRING BUSINESS TO HIS LAKE GASTON TOWNHOUSES.

"A LIFE AND DEATH ISSUE"

The promise of jobs and services pleases Grover Edwards, a Northampton developer and former school board member. "If the county is going to do something for the governor of North Carolina," Edwards says with a smile, "then you might want to take advantage of that wish list while it's being passed around."

From the start, ThermalKEM has focused on winning the support of Edwards and other prominent members of the black community. The company flew Edwards to Rock Hill, where he says he was impressed by the town's prosperity.

"It's a booming town — banks, churches, a beautiful place, wages are good," says Edwards as he walks out on the unfinished wood dock of a townhouse development he's building on Lake Gaston. The incin-

erator will be good for his business, he adds — more jobs mean a greater demand for houses.

Charles Tyner also got a free trip to Rock Hill, courtesy of ThermalKEM. An elementary school principal and minister, Tyner says the trip helped convince him that the incinerator "would benefit Northampton County ... with this problem with finances."

The company attention appears to

than I did myself," says Eley.

According to Eley, Taylor did more than tell him how good the incinerator would be for the community — he also offered to get a job for the commissioner's son, who is a toxicologist. "When we get located in Northampton County and he wants a nice job making \$65,000 a year," Taylor told Eley, "tell him to come and see me." Taylor denies the conversation ever took place.

have paid off: Many black leaders either favor the incinerator or are remaining neutral. In a county where many residents have scant education and rely on local leaders to inform them on important issues, ThermalKEM's campaign has been an effective influence on the ministers and teachers who sway community opinion.

The campaign has been so effective, in fact, that many black ministers appear uninterested in learning about the health and economic risks of the incinerator. Ben Chavis, a prominent black minister with the Commission on Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, produced a study showing that toxic waste facilities often wind up in minority communities. When he visited Northampton County and invited 50 local clergy to a luncheon to discuss his study, however, only a handful showed up.

After the luncheon, Chavis phoned the ministers who failed to attend. "How can you lecture people every Sunday with just a little bit of information?" he demanded. "This is a life and death issue."

Some black leaders aren't surprised that ThermalKEM has tried so hard to influence them. James Boone, a local organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, says he has seen J.P. Stevens and other companies use the same tactics to keep workers from joining unions.

"Part of their strategy was trying to get the community on their side," Boone says. "They'd go to the ministers and leaders and tell them that we didn't need a union. ThermalKEM is doing the same thing. They're coming into a community, they're trying to get the churches, trying to get the NAACP, any organization they can get to help them."



BILL JONES IS DRAGGED INTO A PATROL CAR AFTER PROTESTING THE THERMALKEM INCINERATOR AT A WOODLAND TOWN BOARD MEETING.

But company machinations proved more powerful than public opposition. When the county commission met on February 4, no vote was scheduled on the incinerator, and two commissioners were out sick. Suddenly, commissioners Vernon Kee and John Henry Liverman announced that they wanted to vote on whether to invite ThermalKEM to burn waste in the county. Commissioner Henry Moncure objected, and stormed out of the meeting in protest when he was overruled.

Having established a quorum at the start of the meeting, Kee and Liverman proceeded to vote in favor of the incinerator. They also recorded Moncure's vote as "yes," making the official tally 3 to 0 in favor of the incinerator.

At a later meeting, with incinerator opponent Jane McCaleb replacing a commissioner who had died, the vote went 3 to 2 against ThermalKEM. The battle then shifted to the town of Woodland, where members of the town board voted to annex land for the incinerator

and give the company permission to start the permitting process.

BAH, HUMBUG!

After months of behind-the-scenes persuasion, ThermalKEM decided to announce its plans last Christmas Eve. Residents were stunned by the Scrooge-like timing. "A lot of people were upset," recalls Brenda Remmes. "We felt that it was very purposely kept hush-hush until the Christmas holidays when people were occupied with other things."

If the timing was intended to undercut opposition, however, it didn't work. Four days later, 500 citizens met at a local school and formed Northampton Citizens Against Pollution (N-CAP). The group held marches, sponsored speakers, and quickly collected signatures from 3,701 residents opposing the incinerator—half the number that voted in the last election.

FEAR AND MISTRUST

N-CAP maintains its headquarters in a storefront office at the one-and-only traffic light in the town of Gaston. Norma Bryan, a retired beautician, sits by the window, counting the 18-wheelers that pass and answering questions about the group over the phone. Though she has lived in Northampton County for 12 years, Bryan holds on to the fighting ways she learned in New York City. "I'll fight anybody if I thought it was wrong."

But the dynamics in the South are different, she says. Despite widespread opposition to the incinerator, few black residents attend N-CAP meetings. When the

group sponsored a lecture by Dr. Paul Connett, an incineration expert, several hundred residents turned out — but few were black.

Bryan says some of her fellow black residents are afraid to speak out against the incinerator because they could lose their jobs. “If John Doe is working for that little grocery store under Mrs. Someone, he can’t speak too loud because he’s afraid Someone will make him leave.”

Other black residents say they simply feel uncomfortable going to meetings with white neighbors with whom they share little or no history of friendship or trust. Centuries of segregation have taken their toll, says NAACP president Bennett Taylor. “There’s not too much effort of us coming together.”

Yet the reluctance of many blacks to publicly oppose the incinerator doesn’t mean they favor it. Despite the efforts by ThermalKEM to win over black leaders, many black residents say they oppose the incinerator. They may not go to meetings, but their common sense tells them that the facility will harm their health.

A 35-year-old black woman who grew up in Woodland and works in a convenience store remains unswayed by the promise of jobs at the incinerator. “If you got a job and then you’re going to die right behind it, who’s going to take care of your children?”

CLEAN-UP TIME

Despite the obstacles, black and white residents are gradually realizing that a united front is their only hope of fending off ThermalKEM. Slowly but surely they have come together to fight the incinerator, building trust across racial lines and forging an interracial coalition that many hope will outlast the incinerator controversy. “ThermalKEM as an issue has brought us together as a people,” says NAACP president Bennett Taylor.

Ironically, one sign of the growing unity is black support for Dr. Jane McCaleb, a white incinerator opponent selected to replace a black county commissioner who died. Even though her ap-

pointment diluted black representation on the commission, many view McCaleb as a symbol of a new political climate that questions old ways of doing business.

“It’s an old-style of doing things that’ll have to change,” says McCaleb. “It’ll be very painful. In a way it may be worth it if it forces us to face some of the real political problems we have.”

As director of a five-clinic rural health group, McCaleb knows there are “signifi-

attracting jobs. “It may not be an IBM, but we don’t have the educational base to attract that kind of industry,” says Commissioner Vernon Kee. “You can’t take people who worked out on farms and put them in front of computers — you need to train them.”

But Jane McCaleb and others opposed to the incinerator believe that there are clean alternatives — and that improving schools and training workers provide the

keys. “When the schools improve, the people will receive a better education and look better to other companies,” says Audrey Garner, a black health administrator. “But it’s not going to happen overnight.”

Willie Gilchrist, principal of Northampton High School, wishes the commissioners would put aside the incinerator and focus on increasing the school budget. “I have not seen a lot we have done for children as far as dollars and cents,” he says.

Gilchrist and others concede that education and job training won’t provide a quick fix, but

Photo by Mary Lee Kerr



N-CAP MEMBERS LIKE NORMA BRYAN ARE SAYING “NO” TO THE INCINERATOR: “I’LL FIGHT ANYBODY IF I THOUGHT IT WAS WRONG.”

cant health risks” connected with the incinerator. “My experience with occupational health around here is that the economic incentive of the employer outweighs the occupational health issues,” she says. “There’s the issue of the throw-away worker. Once they wear out, you just go on to the next worker. I think that’ll be what happens in this industry.”

As the controversy drags on, it has become clear to most residents that the real issue being debated is the future of economic development in Northampton County. Can a poor, black, rural county attract clean industries and good jobs? Or does it have to settle for work connected to words like “hazardous” and “waste”?

Those who support the incinerator say it represents the county’s only hope of

will gradually promote change that is lasting, meaningful — and safe. Already, they point out, the incinerator battle has prompted many residents to reconsider the needs of their county and question the powers that be. Whatever happens to the incinerator, they say, Northampton County will never be the same.

“I think never again in Northampton County will elected officials feel that they can do anything and not be challenged,” says Audrey Garner. “I think they thought they wouldn’t meet this opposition. They were surprised. Yes, we have a high rate of illiteracy — but that doesn’t mean we don’t have understanding.” □

Mary Lee Kerr is a research associate with the Institute for Southern Studies.

Stock Car Racing

By Heidi Fisher

Source: Survey of NASCAR tracks, Institute for Southern Studies

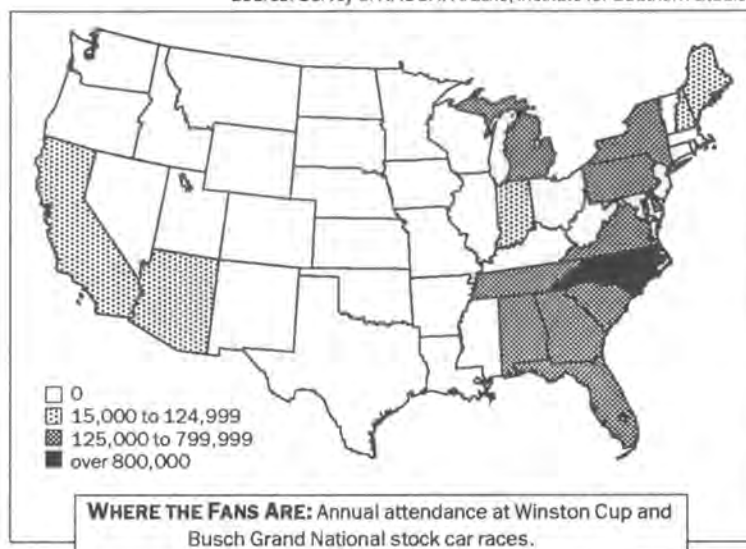
Dirty, glamorous, wonderful, and ugly, stock car racing is one Southern institution that still honors its humble beginnings, even in its glitzier modern forms. Although tracks now stretch from California to Maine, stock car racing remains firmly rooted in good-ole-boy traditions of hard liquor and fast cars.

The earliest stock car racers were Depression-era "likker runners" who souped up their cars to transport bootleg whiskey to market. Farmers who operated illegal stills enlisted the young daredevils to outrun local sheriffs and federal tax agents along the backroads of Appalachia and the Deep South. Legends soon grew up around drivers like Junior Johnson and Curtis Turner, and it was only a matter of time before they started racing each other.

Early races were often disorganized local events staged at old horsetracks by shady promoters who sometimes ran off with the gate receipts. One 1936 race in Daytona Beach was run on a track literally carved out of the sand. In 1947 race promoters Bill Tuthill and Bill France organized the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, hoping to make the sport more respectable — and more profitable.

NASCAR got its big break two years later when it staged the first race of "new cars" directly off the showroom floor. The event was a huge success, launching an expensive rivalry between car manufacturers that continues to this day.

Modern stock car racing has far



outpaced its modest origins to rank as one of the largest spectator sports in the country. Last year more than 3.3 million people attended Winston Cup and Busch Grand National races. Southern stock car fans accounted for two-thirds of the total attendance, with North Carolina, Florida, and Virginia ranking as the biggest racing states nationwide.

The popularity of stock car racing has attracted big money to the sport, making it difficult for local racers to keep up. Cars can easily run at least \$50,000. The constant wear and tear makes them expensive to maintain, and well-heeled sponsors are hard to come by. For most small-time drivers, racing is a family affair, with relatives and friends contributing all the time and money they can spare.

Local drivers have good reason to want to break into the big time. Richard Petty, the "winningest racer of all time," has earned over \$7 million in his career. In many Southern states, Petty and other

big-name drivers like A.J. Foyt and Carl Yarborough receive adulation generally reserved for sports icons like Michael Jordan.

But at local tracks across the region, racers must content themselves with less recognition and low pay. On a typical summer weekend at the Orange County Speedway in Rougemont, North Carolina, eager racers in their teens compete with veterans in their thirties and forties. Chicken wire surrounds the grandstands

to prevent overzealous fans from throwing objects on the track in the hopes of causing a wreck. The largest purse for any of the races is \$2,400 — barely enough to earn a living.

Terry Dease, age 25, has been racing at the speedway since he was 19. "My father used to race," Dease says. "You race for the thrill of it. On the track, you can get speeds of 100 or 110 miles per hour."

Maurice Hill, a veteran of 30 years and the defending champion of the Orange County Speedway, echoes Dease's youthful enthusiasm. "I started out as a crew member and worked my way up," says Hill. "I've been at this since 1960. I like it because it's competitive." Asked if his wife Joan worries much, Hill puts an arm around her and grins. "She's used to it." Joan smiles and looks down at the ground. She doesn't look so sure. □

Heidi Fisher is an editorial assistant with the Institute for Southern Studies.

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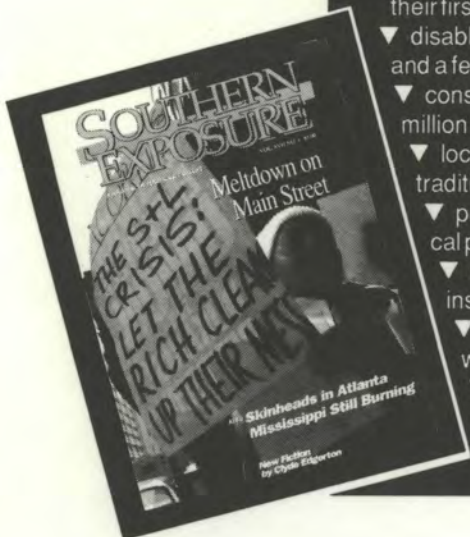
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