

# The Times-Pi

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MONDAY



Wilfred Greene says he will never sell his land.

## St. John plant pits

By **BOB WARREN**  
*River Parishes bureau*

Like it was yesterday, Wilfred Greene remembers toiling in the fields of the big plantation on St. John the Baptist Parish's west bank.

He was younger then, and the plantation known as Whitney was a world in itself. The labor was seasonal, hard. He'd cut cane part of the year and work in the rice fields part of the year — all to earn money for school and the chance to get out.

That was long before St. John Parish became industrialized.

Now retired, Greene said he'll never leave. Formosa Chemical Corp., which wants to build a \$2 billion plant down River Road from his modest brick home, can't offer him enough to sell his memories, he said.

"I'm alone here," Greene, 68, said recently. "It's mine. This is what I don't want to give up."

Paul Stein has lived not far away, on Ninth Street, for 40 years. His thoughts differ from Greene's. Progress is progress, and he doesn't mind living near Formosa's proposed plant.

"Look at this place," Stein said one recent, sunny day. "There's nothing here. People want jobs. Maybe this is it. I think it is."

Stein and Greene represent the two sides in an issue that has divided St. John's west bank. One side offers the promise of prosperity in an area desperately in need of an economic boost. The other questions the toll progress will take on the environment and the nearby community.

Both sides said they have the numbers — Greene saying 70 percent of the Wallace area opposes the plant; Stein saying 80 percent favors it.

Greene said he has turned down at least three buyout offers

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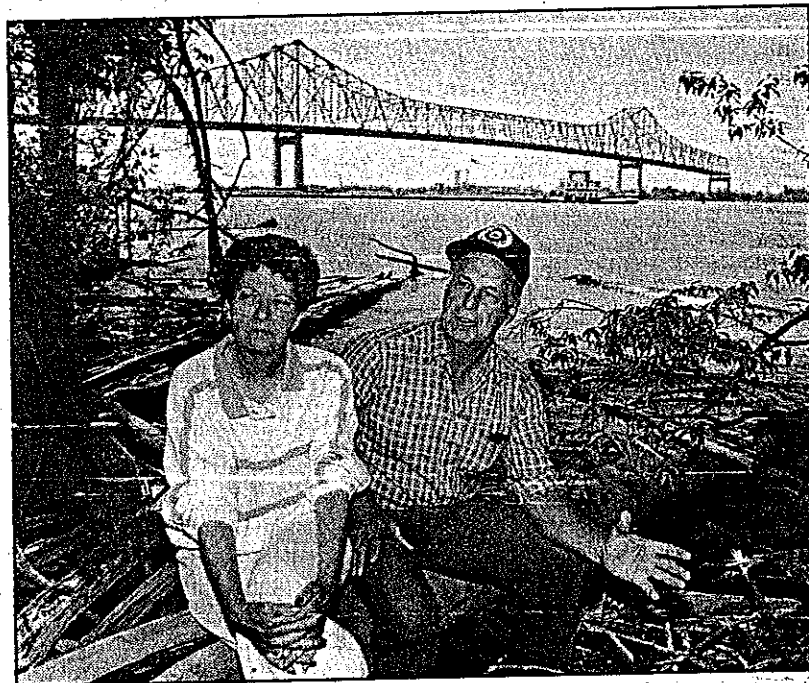
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Mary Ann and Paul Stein say they don't mind selling their batture land for progress.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN McCUSKER

See PLANT, A-4

# Plant

From Page 1.

for some or all of the 11 acres he lives on, which includes some of the batture fronting the Mississippi River. Stein has agreed to sell 89 feet of his batture land for \$275 per foot. The offer of \$24,475 was fair, Stein said.

To political officials and people such as Stein, Formosa means jobs and tax dollars, a fiscal alchemy they promise will make things better for all of St. John.

To environmentalists, it means further destruction of the fragile environment. People such as Greene, who had a chance to leave Wallace after he graduated from Xavier University in New Orleans but whose heart called him back, see it as a forced uprooting of a close-knit community that, has been primarily unchanged for a hundred years.

Greene doesn't know if the company wants all of his property. It's unlikely, since he doesn't live on the proposed plant site. But he fears that industry will soon surround him, making his property virtually worthless, except to Formosa.

Formosa Plastics Corp., a huge Taiwanese company, announced in 1989 it intended to buy 1,800 acres near Wallace for a rayon plant and petrochemical complex.

The wheels were set in motion early in October 1988, when the state persuaded Formosa Chairman Y.C. Wang to locate the company's next American plant in Louisiana. At that time, Louisiana had just lost the competition for another Formosa plant to Texas.

Criticism ran the gamut, from environmental and historic preservation concerns for the 150-year-old Whitney Plantation house, to accusations that the Wallace area was chosen because it is predominantly black, making the land cheap and easy to acquire.

From Greenpeace to the River Road Restoration Coalition, groups cited Formosa's past violations at plants in Baton Rouge, Point Comfort, Texas, and Delaware. They distributed reams of material chronicling what they said was Formosa's cavalier attitude toward the environment.

The problems plaguing those plants, they said, would be repeated at the Wallace plant. The plant would foul the air, water and land with its emissions, putting residents at great risk, they said.

But they were unable to sway planners, who voted unanimously to rezone the area. The Parish Council is studying that recommendation.

In defense, Formosa and government officials, including Gov. Roemer, have promised a clean, new industry, complete with state-of-the-art technology. Many of the company's past transgressions were the result of poorly maintained plants and outmoded equipment, they said.

"Oh, hell yes," St. John Parish President Lester Millet said recently when asked if he thought the plant would be safe. "St. John has to be concerned about what Formosa does in St. John, not other places in the past."

Millet said the plantation home would be spared, that Formosa would donate the building and 5.6 acres to the parish, and that the parish has pledged \$30,000 to help restore the structure.

"This house is more than a legacy, it's a promise that I'd never borrow money on it or sell it. That's what I'm hoping I'm not forced to do.

"I just can't see giving it up," said Greene, a wispy-thin man with chiseled features. "It's hell. My father's life is here. My life is here."

Like the others, he was offered about \$5,000 an acre for his land, he said, not enough if he planned on selling.

Alden Andre, vice president of operations for Formosa, confirmed the prices.

"We came in and saw that the last ones (land transactions) had gone for about \$1,300 an acre," Andre said. "We're offering \$5,000 to \$6,000. Now I ask you if we're treating them fair."

Andre said the 13 heirs who own the 1,500-acre Whitney Plantation have agreed to sell.

But problems have arisen with some of the owners of the other 300 acres. Andre said there are four tracts of land, some with as many as 30 owners, who haven't agreed to sell.

"They're asking for three to 10 times as much as we're offering," Andre said. "It's just not reasonable. It's not economically viable for us to have to pay that much for land."

Greene has vowed a fight.

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Phase 1 will be the largest  
rayon plant in the world, which  
will take wood chips and convert  
them into rayon, a cloth design-  
ers call the poor man's silk.  
Phase 2, which hasn't hit the  
planning stages yet, includes a  
petrochemical complex, com-  
pany officials said.

To help land the plant, parish  
officials promised to use as much  
as \$1 million from St. John's  
economic development fund for  
incentives, as well as tax breaks  
that will amount to \$30 million  
in the next 10 years. In return,  
they got the promise of as many  
as 1,600 new jobs and \$280 mil-  
lion in taxes in the next 20 years.

To Stein, who retired from  
Monsanto in Luling after 32  
years, that's plenty.

"It's dying off," Stein, 59, said  
of Wallace. "We don't have any-  
body building houses out here.  
There's nothing to attract peo-  
ple. This will."

Opposition to the Formosa  
plant boiled over in March when  
the St. John Planning and Zon-  
ing Commission met an angry  
mob intent on stopping rezoning  
for heavy industrial uses. Com-  
mission members were so taken  
aback by the opposition that  
they put off their vote a week,  
and scheduled another public  
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000 to help restore the structure.

Millet, as have other officials,  
criticized the opposition as being  
outsiders from New Orleans and  
Baton Rouge pursuing personal  
political agendas.

"Am I surprised by the oppo-  
sition? No," Millet said. "It's the  
same group that'll fight anything  
that's going to be built from now  
on in the state of Louisiana."

Millet said only two families  
will be displaced by the plant.  
Any others who move would be  
doing so of their own accord.

"Seventy percent of the people  
in St. John want the Formosa  
plant," Millet said. "People in  
St. John have a right to their  
opinions, too."

Greene isn't one of those. He  
remains skeptical that people  
will want to live near a chemical  
plant, and he's in the group  
opposing it.

"The majority of the people  
here have been here all their  
lives," Greene said. "Where are  
they going to go? This is a tre-  
mendous hardship on people.  
They say this is jobs. Tell me,  
how many black folks from Wal-  
lace do you think are going to be  
able to work in that plant?  
None.

"My mother and father lived  
here," said Greene, who was  
principal of Lucy Elementary  
School, down the road, for 27  
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