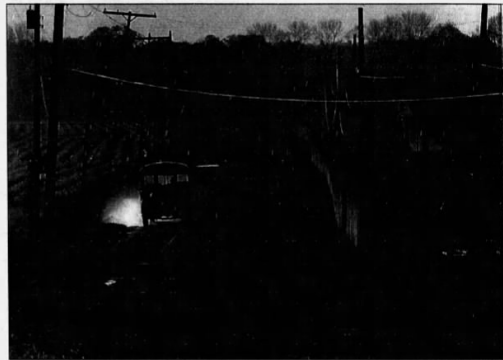


THE BATTLE FOR 'CANCER ALLEY'



Wilfred Greene is one of two landowners who have refused to sell to Formosa Plastics Corp., which wants to build a rayon plant in Louisiana.



A school bus travels an old river road near Whitney Plantation, which Formosa Plastics bought for \$10 million.

A THIN GREEN LINE
Louisiana town fights a chemical giant

By Christine Cheakalos
STAFF WRITER

Wallace, La. — A frail former school principal and an unemployed man half his age are the human wall that stands between their historic Mississippi River town and a chemical giant that wants to construct the world's largest rayon and pulp processing plant on the last stretch of green space along Louisiana's Chemical Corridor.

But the fight is larger than the overwhelmingly black town of 400 — many descendants of slaves who worked the adjacent Whitney Plantation — or the billion-dollar chemical company that has left a trail of pollution from Taiwan to Texas.

This is the story of Louisiana's longstanding practice of welcoming any chemical company that promises jobs, regardless of the effects on the environment of the people whose communities are sacrificed.

The struggle spotlights a controversial law that gives wealthy chemical and industrial companies 16-year tax breaks, an estimated loss of \$400 million annually that would otherwise build roads and hospitals and pay for teachers in a state whose people are among the poorest in America.

"God knows we need jobs," said Samuel Jackson, 35, who along with Wilfred Greene has refused to sell his land to the Taiwanese-owned Formosa Plastics Corp. "And they're waving jobs to desperate people who are thinking about feeding their families. No guarantees, just promises. One day somebody's gonna stop and ask, 'Jobs at what cost to us? What cost to our health and safety and quality of life? Nobody's ever asked us because we're black and poor.'"

The two men have been joined in their fight by historic preservationists, environmentalists and some white property owners who live nearby, perhaps the first time in Louisiana that mainstream groups have allied themselves with a black community to oppose a major chemical plant.

Opposition stuns officials. The level of opposition to Formosa has stunned state and local officials, who have wooed it with

\$450 million in tax breaks and other incentives, including assurances of little community resistance.

To accommodate Formosa, which has spent \$10 million for 1,800 acres that includes the Whitney Plantation and most of Wallace, local zoning officials changed the land use from agricultural and residential to industrial.

Many residents denounced the zoning change, including one elderly man who was physically ejected from a meeting when he repeatedly asked board members whether Formosa had promised them jobs or business.

The school board in St. John the Baptist Parish, where Wallace is located, voted to give Formosa half its 2-cent sales tax revenue during the construction phase — about \$3 million. The school district is \$1.8 million in debt and represents one of the poorest areas in the state.

Last month the board rescinded the tax pledge, but rescinded it a week later after criticism from state and local politicians and threats by Alden Andre, U.S. vice president for

Formosa, that the plant might go elsewhere.

School Board President Ann Tarje, who voted against the tax pledge, said she changed her mind after a call from Kevin Reilly, the new commerce secretary. "Mr. Reilly explained how hard it is to bring industries to Louisiana and how important the tax incentives are," she said. "He said it was an issue of credibility."

School board member Emily Lopez is displeased that Formosa would even consider accepting education money. "If they are really interested in this community — an educated future work force if for no other reason — then they should be giving money instead of taking," she said.

EPA considering permits

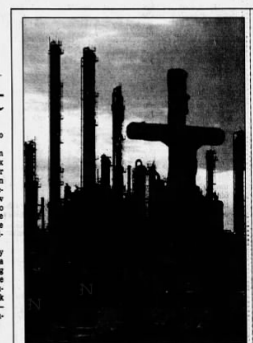
Formosa is applying for federal and state environmental permits to operate a rayon and pulp processing plant that would dump 53 million gallons of wastewater daily into the Mississippi River. To make rayon, Formosa will need 8,800 tons of hardwood daily. The wastewater from the process would include chloroform, which has been linked to cancer, and dioxin, a highly toxic contaminant.

Initially, the Environmental Protection Agency said it would not take into account the company's environmental history when considering the Wallace site, despite leveling its highest-ever fine against Formosa in 1990 for contaminating soil and ground water at its Texas plant.

Mr. Andre said the Texas plant "has had some problems, but it is an isolated case that we're clearing up. We have a great reputation and record here, and we're going to bring those people lots of jobs."

"We didn't push our way in here," he said. "We were invited by the former governor and parish president. Governor Edwin Edwards is very excited and he has personally checked into it and he thinks it's an incredible project. I just don't understand why the people down in St. John don't trust us."

Formosa has several plants in Louisiana, including one in Baton Rouge that has been fined repeatedly for polluting the air. "Last remaining green stretch" Zeb Mayhew, who owns Oak Alley Plantation, a nearby 160-year-old former sugar plantation visited by 100,000 tourists annually. Mayhew politicians for despoiling the state's natural and



A cemetery established in 1878 in Hahrieville, La. is surrounded by chemical plants on three sides.

Dumps, factories put near poor, EPA finds
'Environmental racism' charged

By Christine Cheakalos
STAFF WRITER

Baton Rouge, La. — The Environmental Protection Agency soon will release a study confirming that chemical plants and hazardous waste dumps are most often located in poor, minority communities, adding to the health risks already found there.

Black Louisianians living along the Mississippi River and New Orleans have known that for two decades. They call it "environmental racism."

Many historically black towns, founded by freed slaves, no longer exist. In some cases, all that remains is a cemetery, nestled in the inconspicuous embrace of a large chemical plant.

Janice Dickenson's family lived in Revelletown for six generations. "Nothing like growing up next to woods and farmland and the Mississippi, the sense of freedom that river brings," she says.

Ms. Dickenson moved from Revelletown in 1968. Last month, Georgia Gulf completed its buyout of homes, leaving a 5-acre buffer of pecan and oak trees next to

its plant, spokesman Will Hinson said.

Several major oil and chemical corporations, prompted by fears of lawsuits and damage claims, have chosen to spend millions relocating families in control of the land around their plants.

The Wallace situation is just the most recent in a long history of these kinds of industries going into the areas of least resistance, and those areas happen to be where poor minorities live," said Robert Bullard, author of "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality."

People who can't afford to move away endure insomnia and nervousness from the constant hissing and dripping of smokestacks. Asthma and allergies are common. Garden greens turn brown overnight.

Ms. Dickenson is heartened that Wallace residents are fighting before Formosa Plastics Corp. builds a rayon and pulp processing plant there.

"My youngest girl — she's 11 — vows she's going to be an environmental attorney when she grows up and sells Revelletown back," she said. "I like that."



STAFF PHOTOS BY JONATHAN NEWTON

Dumps of smoke rise from a chemical plant north of Wallace, La., as barges make their way up the Mississippi toward Baton Rouge. This stretch of the river is known as the Chemical Corridor, but public health researchers and those who live near the plants call it Cancer Alley. The plants produce a quarter of all the chemicals used in America. But it comes at a price. Louisiana ranks second in the country in the amount of toxins released into its air, land and water, and it has the nation's highest lung cancer rate among white men.



Please see CHEMICAL, B5 >

