

The Toxic Tour of Texas journeys through a state that prides itself on being the biggest, the best. And it is. Texas has the largest concentration of oil refineries and chemical plants in the nation. Texas ranks first in the United States in the amount of known or suspected carcinogens released into the environment. Texas also leads the nation in the number of hazardous waste disposal sites, 70 percent of which leak and threaten ground water. And Texas industry discharges the highest level of toxic air emissions in the country.

The guides on this tour are farmers, priests, mothers, ranchers, engineers, nurses, and teachers who are intent on protecting their land, their children, their homes, and their communities from exposure to hazardous waste. Their activism crosses social, economic, and racial boundaries. This coalition for the nineties aligns the century's labor, civil rights, women's, peace, and ecology movements.

Their united plea is now for the basic life-sustaining elements of clean land, air, and water. They have influenced and reversed government decisions. They have halted harmful industrial practices. They have changed their personal lifestyles, habits, and attitudes as a model of shared responsibility for maintaining this balance of life on Earth.

T O X I C T O U R O F T E X A S

Sharon Stewart

Editor's note: In 1988, writer Steven Fenberg asked photographer Sharon Stewart to attend a legislative strategy meeting of statewide grassroots environmental organizations. After engaging several groups to tell their stories, Fenberg and Stewart set out across Texas to interview these activists, as well as industry representatives and state agencies, in an effort to understand the complex issue of hazardous waste creation and disposal. In 1992 Stewart published Toxic Tour of Texas, from which she has selected photographs and written updated narratives for this issue of Cite.

The above introduction to the narrative photoessay *Toxic Tour of Texas* was written with statistics compiled from the Environmental Protection Agency's 1990 Toxic Release Inventory (TRI). When I called the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, the state's licensing and regulatory agency for government and industry air, water, and ground emissions, for the most recent TRI figures (1995), I was disappointed to find Texas still leads the nation in these designations, though overall volume of emissions has declined.

We are a society accustomed to the consumption of convenience and the convenience of consumption. Texas provides a majority of the resources and means consigned to our national defense and enabled us to achieve a standard of living envied all over the world. The issue of creating a balance of resource extraction and maintenance is one of the most contentious in our free-market economy. The driving question of this issue is profitability from present consumptive demand versus sustainability for future supply. Representatives of these opposing forces demonize one another while the consumer citizen looks to the democratic

system for protection when something goes awry.

Economics drive this issue. The influence of money, in the desire for profits or influence, continues to be the greatest deterrent to long-term solutions at the legislative, corporate, and personal levels. Our ability to assess the consequences of our consumptive lifestyles is overwhelmed by a cascade of conflicting data from investigative reports, academic studies, congressional findings, lawsuits, and advertising campaigns.

The Tour focuses on Texas citizens who are directly affected by hazardous waste creation and disposal practices and who made the conscious decision to challenge the status quo. The following excerpts from the 1992 *Toxic Tour of Texas* can make for uncomfortable viewing. A daunting dynamic of perception is revealed in this pressingly complex issue.

How then to proceed as participants in the dynamic? As removed as most of us are from the manufacture and disposal of the items we consume, we are nonetheless affected by their byproducts in the form of reduced air, land, and water quality. It must be remembered that this is of universal concern, contrary to a

common response that this is just a Texas issue. Thus, we can reflect on our individual contributions to this dilemma, and alter our behavior. We have been directed how to do so for over 25 years now. How we choose to proceed is as varied as those of you who read this: radicalism, persuasion, or denial. ■



HUDSPETH COUNTY

MANUELA DOMINGUEZ, MARY ALCORN, IRMA AND CHUY DOMINGUEZ ATOP EL DIABLO PLATEAU OVERLOOKING A PROPOSED TEXAS LOW-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE DISPOSAL SITE.

"Again and again, the echoing question 'Why here?' rang through my ears as I stood atop the Diablo Rim looking into the beautiful West Texas sunset. Clearly, any proud Texan, if they stood there, would be moved to say, 'This is not the proper place, this is unjust.' The splendor of this land and these people should not be risked merely because the time to choose a site is running short or the Authority has already spent millions to qualify this site."

Judge William Moody, 34th District, presiding:

El Paso County v. Texas Low Level Radioactive Waste Authority

"The people who fight this hinder progress. We will lose a lot of little battles. We will win a war. All they can do is prolong the agony for them and us."

Susan Odom, Public Information Officer,

Texas Low Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Authority

THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE ESTABLISHED THE TEXAS LOW LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE DISPOSAL AUTHORITY IN 1983. EIGHT YEARS AND \$30 MILLION LATER, DISTRICT JUDGE WILLIAM MOODY RULED THE AUTHORITY HAD FAILED TO MEET ITS OWN SITING CRITERIA FOR SUITABLE DISPOSAL IN FORT HANCOCK. THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE THEN DESIGNATED A 370-SQUARE-MILE AREA IN THE SAME COUNTY, AND DIRECTED THE AUTHORITY TO ESTABLISH ANOTHER SITE FOR THE DISPOSAL OF LOW-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE FROM POWER PLANTS IN MAINE, VERMONT, AND TEXAS. BUYING THE 16,000-ACRE FASHKIN RANCH, IN TEXAS'S MOST SEISMOLOGICALLY ACTIVE REGION, AND THEN INITIATING THE REQUIRED STUDIES TO DETERMINE ITS SUITABILITY, THE AUTHORITY CONTINUES TO MEET RESISTANCE FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CITIZENS OF THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER. IN 1997 THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE DENIED THE AUTHORITY \$30 MILLION IN CONSTRUCTION FUNDS, BUT DID APPROPRIATE \$6 MILLION FOR THE NUMEROUS LEGAL CHALLENGES IT FACES. A CONGRESSIONAL BILL AUTHORIZING AND FUNDING THE COMPACT AGREEMENT BETWEEN TEXAS AND THE TWO NEW ENGLAND STATES, WHOSE WASTE IT NEEDS TO OPERATE PROFITABLY, WAS DEFEATED IN 1995. THE BILL HAS BEEN REINTRODUCED IN THE 1997 SESSION.

"When the Sesquehanna operation was abandoned, there were seven major piles of waste left. One of the piles was completely away from the uranium mill, across the road on this rancher's property. The tailings were dumped back in a mine that is unlined and sits on top of an aquifer. There's a monument on it now."

Forrest Balsler, Karnes County rancher

UNDER PROVISIONS OF THE EPA'S URANIUM MILL TAILINGS RECLAMATION ACT, THE TOPSOIL FROM 700 ACRES OF RANCLAND CONTAMINATED BY THE SESQUEHANNA URANIUM MILLING OPERATION WAS CONSOLIDATED AND CAPPED, CREATING WHAT LOCALS CALL "THE POD." CHEVRON SOLD ITS MILL TAILINGS POND TO RIO GRANDE RESOURCES, WHICH CONTINUED TO RECEIVE MILL TAILINGS, THOUGH NO MINING ACTIVITY OCCURS. REMEDIATION OF THE POND UNDER WAY FOR A PROJECTED FALL 1997 CLOSURE DATE. DR. WILLIAM AU, ENVIRONMENTAL TOXICOLOGIST WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MEDICAL BRANCH, CONDUCTED A HEALTH RISK STUDY IN KARNES COUNTY, FINDING ABNORMAL DNA REPAIR RESPONSE IN COUNTY RESIDENTS. THE PRELIMINARY DATA FROM HIS ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLING STUDY OF AIR, WATER, AND SOIL FOUND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTAMINATION FROM URANIUM MINING AND MILLING ACTIVITY THAT MAY BE A CAUSE OF THE DNA REPAIR RESPONSE ABNORMALITIES AND MAY INCREASE HEALTH RISKS AMONG COUNTY RESIDENTS.

"What we're concerned about is radioactive particles that go up and latch onto a particle of dust, or get into the water from underground. When you drink, eat, or breathe it, a certain kind of energy radiates in the body that nicks this cell, that cell, this cell again, until it is dead, changed, or growing."

Mike Trial, co-chair,

Panna Maria Concerned Citizens

"We contend that we have not damaged anyone, or will we in the future."

Kevin Raabe, Environmental/Safety coordinator, Panna Maria Uranium operations, Chevron Resources Company

KARNES COUNTY

MONUMENT MARKING ABANDONED URANIUM MILL TAILINGS SITE. ERECTED BY THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, BUREAU OF RADIATION CONTROL.



KARNES COUNTY

CHEVRON'S 160-ACRE MILL TAILINGS POND. CONTENTS: SIX MILLION TONS OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE.

**SOUTH DALLAS COUNTY
TIQUESHA ROBERSON PLAYING IN HER YARD ABUTTING WASTE
MANAGEMENT, INC. MUNICIPAL LANDFILL IN FERRIS, TEXAS.**



"Children that grow up in these types of communities don't feel like they have the same right to become lawyers and doctors and stuff like that, as other kids that didn't grow up in these types of communities. . . . They say, 'I grew up with a dump in my backyard, why should I care if my street's cluttered? Nobody cared about me then.' Children need to know people care about them."

Lorrie Coterill

LORRIE COTERILL'S ORGANIZATION, GROUP ALLIED TO STOP POLLUTION (GASP), SUCCESSFULLY CHALLENGED THE EXPANSION PERMIT FOR THE SOUTH DALLAS COUNTY LANDFILL IN 1991, PROMPTING ITS CLOSURE. IN THE SAME YEAR GASP ASSISTED FERRIS RESIDENTS IN PREVENTING WASTE MANAGEMENT, INC. (WMI) FROM EXPANDING ITS LANDFILL. HOWEVER, WMI REAPPLIED AND IN 1995 RECEIVED AN EXPANDED MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL PERMIT FROM THE TEXAS NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION COMMISSION. THE 667-ACRE FACILITY WRAPS AROUND A BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE TIQUESHA ROBERSON'S GRANDMOTHER LIVED. LIKE MANY OTHER RESIDENTS OF THE AREA, HER GRANDMOTHER WAS GIVEN \$120,000 BY WMI TO RELOCATE TWO FAMILY HOMES. LORRIE HAS JOINED FERRIS RESIDENT VICTOR BURNETT TO CREATE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, AN ORGANIZATION TO FIGHT THE ACKNOWLEDGED PRACTICE OF SITING HAZARDOUS WASTE FACILITIES IN LOW-INCOME MINORITY NEIGHBORHOODS.



**SOUTH DALLAS COUNTY
LANDFILL BORDERING THE TRINITY RIVER.**

"They had a permit they could pump up to three million gallons of water a day into the Trinity River. At this point they are not pumping because they are not in full operation. But what is happening now is the liner is actually seeping leachate out of the site into Dumpster Lake, which runs to the river. They knocked down some trees and stuff where it runs into the river right there."

Lorrie Coterill



DUVAL COUNTY
FENCE DIVIDING THE AHLRICH FARM AND A CLASS I
HAZARDOUS WASTE FACILITY.

You [Texas Ecologists] told us there would be no pollution; that the clay pits would never leak. Now you've got pollution and contamination in the ground water. We are led to believe the water knows where the boundary is, and it stops right there, and it won't cross that line."

Kenneth Ahlrich

The purpose of the monitoring wells is to define the extent of contamination. But to date, the data that I've got available does not indicate that it breached the property boundary."

Bill Jones, Site Manager, Texas Ecologists

EFFORTS BY THE ROBSTOWN AREA CITIZENS GROUP, PUBLIC RESPONSE OPPOSING TOXIC ENVIRONMENTAL CONTAMINATION (PROTEC) PROMPTED TEXAS ECOLOGISTS (TECO) TO CAP THEIR CLASS I HAZARDOUS WASTE DISPOSAL CELLS, THUS ALLEVIATING THEIR STENCH. PROTEC'S PARTICIPATION IN TECO'S PERMITTING PROCESS ALSO RESULTED IN THE COMPANY BEING ISSUED A FIVE- RATHER THAN A TEN-YEAR EXTENSION. THE COMPANY HAS EXPANDED ITS OPERATIONS BY 60 ACRES AND IS LISTED IN THE McALLEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION'S LITERATURE AS THE CLOSEST CLASS I HAZARDOUS WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITY FOR USE BY THE MAQUILADORA INDUSTRIES LOCATED IN NEIGHBORING MEXICO. THE LEAKAGE FROM TECO'S HAZARDOUS WASTE DISPOSAL CELLS HAS NOW REACHED THE SITE'S PERIMETER MONITORING WELLS, ACCORDING TO A COMPREHENSIVE MONITORING EVALUATION BY TEXAS WATER COMMISSION INSPECTORS.



WHARTON COUNTY
THE SINK HOLE INN, A TEXAS HONKY TONK NEAR BOLING, TEXAS.

"On the right is a place we call the Sink Hole Inn. One night it was like a giant lake in the road. The earth just opened up in the middle of the highway, and three pickup trucks drove right into it and disappeared. Luckily, the boys were able to swim out, but the trucks were never recovered. That's what we call a collapse, a sink hole."

Evelyn Freund, Past President, Concerned Citizens Against Pollution

CONCERNED CITIZENS AGAINST POLLUTION (CCAP) SUCCESSFUL APPEAL TO THE TEXAS WATER COMMISSION RESCINDED THE PERMIT GRANTED A FRENCH COMPANY, UNITED RESOURCE RECOVERY, FOR INJECTING 1,500 DIFFERENT HAZARDOUS WASTE CHEMICALS INTO THE BOLING SALT DOME, THE WORLD'S LARGEST. OWNERSHIP OF THE INJECTION WELL SITE REVERTED TO THE SELLER, AN AREA RESIDENT. IN MARCH 1993, HIS COMPANY, SECURED ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT, FILED A HAZARDOUS WASTE INJECTION PERMIT APPLICATION WITH THE NEWLY FORMED TEXAS NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION COMMISSION. IN 1997, THE COMMISSION HAS YET TO ISSUE THE PERMIT. MEMBERS OF CCAP ARE CONCERNED THAT THE SINK HOLES, SUCH AS THIS ONE, INDICATE AN UNSTABLE GEOLOGY FOR STORING HAZARDOUS WASTES IN THE BOLING SALT DOME. THE SINK HOLE INN BURNED TO THE GROUND IN APRIL 1990.

See that little green box sittin' on that building? That's our benzene monitor I pushed to get. The first in the state of Texas. I love that little box. And right by a playground and baseball field! I know the air here is bad. We have 9,000 emission points into the air from the chemical industry. The highest levels of benzene were picked up right here. Benzene causes cancer."

Rita Carlson

THE STATE'S NAMESAKE, TEXAS CITY, RECENTLY GAINED "ALL-AMERICAN CITY" STATUS FROM THE NATIONAL CIVIC LEAGUE FOR ITS EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THIS HOME-TOWN OF SEVEN MAJOR OIL REFINERIES. THREE REFINERIES — AMOCO, MARATHON, AND UNION CARBIDE — HAVE JOINED STERLING CHEMICALS IN A GREENBELT PROGRAM TO BUY OUT LOCAL RESIDENTS WHOSE HOMES BORDER THEIR PLANTS. MAYOR CHUCK DOYLE'S TEXAS CITY GOALS 2000 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PROPOSES A GREENBELT INITIATIVE AS A PRIORITY FOR IMPROVING THE AREA'S ATTRACTIVENESS. STERLING CHEMICAL FACES LAWSUITS FROM 1,500 RESIDENTS SUING FOR DAMAGES FROM THE PLANT'S ACCIDENTAL AMMONIA RELEASE ON MOTHER'S DAY 1996. PROMPTED BY HER SONS' EMERGING LYMPH GLAND DISORDERS, RITA CARLSON MOVED HER FAMILY FROM THE PERIPHERY OF UNION CARBIDE'S PLANT TO RURAL ILLINOIS. THE BENZENE MONITOR, LIKE RITA, HAS MOVED FROM TEXAS CITY. THE TEXAS AIR CONTROL BOARD USED IT FOR AN EMERGENCY IN NORTH TEXAS, AND HAS NO PLANS TO RETURN IT. WHILE UNDER OPERATION IN TEXAS CITY, THE MONITOR RECORDED DECREASING LEVELS OF BENZENE IN THE AIR.

What's in these ditches? A company just put in an application to the Texas Water Commission (TWC) to discharge 2.2 million gallons of wastewater a day into an unnamed roadside ditch that leads to Galveston Bay."

Rita Carlson

The TWC and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have to find a balance of environmental and economic factors in the regulatory process."

John Ward, Water Quality Manager, Texas Water Commission, District 7

The TWC is charged to prevent pollution. That's what the Clean Water Act says to do. They do not prevent pollution, they permit pollution, taking the notion that it must be balanced with economic development, and I agree with them . . . but, let's add in the true cost, which is a reduced productive environment. It's a tremendous cost, huge subsidy."

Brian Cain, Resource Contaminant Specialist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**GALVESTON COUNTY
TEXAS AIR CONTROL BOARD BENZENE MONITOR, AMOCO OIL
EMPLOYEE BASEBALL FIELD.**



**GALVESTON COUNTY
OUTFALL DRAINAGE DITCH IN TEXAS CITY.**



GALVESTON COUNTY

ONE OF 140 HOME LOTS BOUGHT BY STERLING CHEMICALS FOR DEVELOPMENT AS A GREENBELT ADJACENT TO ITS PLANT.

"The buyout was a gradual thing, but in 1990 we defined boundaries, offered to buy lots and homes, or to relocate families and their homes if they wished. We gave equity advances to find new homes, as well as advances on living expenses. Quite frankly, the liabilities of having people living close to the boundaries of the plant, well, we felt it was a better solution all the way around, in addition to the PR aspects of it."

**Jim McPhail, Public Information Officer,
Sterling Chemicals**

"The Greenbelt is a good idea in as much as it puts some distance between the plants and the population. Is that going to be enough in the event of disaster? I think not. It looks nice. It gives a false sense of security. As you drive through this town, you see that the population lives right on top of this industry."

**Sonny Sanders, Secretary-Treasurer,
Oil, Chemical, & Atomic Workers Union,
Local 4-449**