



DATELINE

Refuge From Responsibility

by Laura Burke

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AUL BRUCKWICKI IS STANDING ON A HILL BETWEEN A GRASS-covered Army landfill and a creek called Harrison Bayou. Groundwater monitoring wells skirt the edge of the pine forest and the boggy swampland below. Bruckwicki, a thin and energetic biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is explaining how toxic waste from an old bomb plant made its way into the groundwater. "You have got this contaminant mass sitting there and the water table is down there. If you have a real wet season, your water table rises, and it comes up and comes in contact with those contaminants. It's mobile now.

"At one point a fellow took a sample out of the creek here, where he saw seep coming out of this hillside, and he got hits for [the chemical] TCE," Bruckwicki says. "It's like, 'Oh! We have something leaking out of this landfill out here.' Whereby, he was told never to sample again."

The Army has since stemmed the seepage. At least for now.

Ecologically speaking, there is no good place for a bomb factory. But the site for the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant on the shore of Caddo Lake was one of the worst picks possible.

Over the years, this fragile habitat has been sullied over and over again, first by oil drilling (the world's first underwater oil drilling occurred in Caddo Lake), then by mercury from coal plants and toxic waste from the bomb plant that operated from 1942 to 1997. A visit to the small community of Uncertain, home to about 150, is a lesson in what can go wrong when a precious natural resource is not protected, and how hard it can be to hold polluters accountable and restore the environment once it has been damaged.

For most of its 55 years, the Longhorn plant operated with no environmental regulation while manufacturing rocket motors, TNT and other explosives. Toxic chemicals like trichloroethylene, an industrial solvent usually called TCE, and a rocket fuel additive called perchlorate were habitually dumped into unlined ponds and pits. Tubs of toxic waste overflowed into creeks, which then flushed into Caddo Lake.

Caddo often is called the only natural lake in Texas. That designation is only partly true. Sprawled between Texas and Louisiana, the lake formed naturally in the 1700s behind a logjam. After the jam was removed, it was dammed in the 1900s and again in the 1970s. The natural, then artificial, damming created one of the most unique habitats in the United States,

flooding a Spanish moss-shrouded cypress forest that now juts out of the murky water. Some trees date back 400 years. In 1993, the Ramsar Convention to Protect Wetlands of International Importance designated Caddo Lake a "Ramsar site." The bayou hosts the highest diversity of plants in Texas along with rare or endangered animals like the peregrine falcon.

The Longhorn plant's production peaked during the Vietnam War. Two years after the war ended, the Clean Water Act was enacted in 1977. Nowadays we know a lot more about water pollution, but that doesn't mean we're protecting ourselves. The cozy relationship between regulators and industry is apparent in the BP oil spill in the Gulf, and conservative Texas politicians are arguing against tougher environmental regulation, saying jobs will be lost and the economy ruined.

In 1990, the EPA declared the bomb plant a "Superfund" site, one of the nation's worst toxic messes. There are 57 Superfund sites in Texas. The Army has awarded Shaw Environmental a \$17.7 million contract to do the cleanup. Rose Zeiler, the Army's site manager, says additional contracts will be needed. The scariest aspect of the contamination is its human health risk. The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has identified 275 toxic substances most commonly detected at Superfund facilities. When the U.S. Geological Survey analyzed sediment samples from Caddo Lake, surveyors found 54 of those, including eight of the top 10 most toxic substances.

TCE and perchlorate are also in the groundwater. The National Toxicology Program has determined that TCE, sometimes called "tricky," is "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen." Perchlorate toxicity is associated with hyperthyroidism, according to the toxic substances registry.

SEE the groundwater hydrologist George Rice's PowerPoint presentation at txlo.com/haap

READ the EPA memo on better rule enforcement at txlo.com/epamemo



AFTER THE PLANT CLOSED in 1997, the community speculated on the fate of its 8,500 acres. Some wanted to turn part of it into an industrial park, but as local home builder Paul Fortune puts it, “There was a big, huge, grassroots movement to beat that thing over the head, and we did.” Don Henley (yes, the “All She Wants To Do Is Dance” Henley) had another idea. Why not conserve the land as a wildlife refuge? The community liked the idea. In September 2009, more than 7,000 acres were transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the Caddo Lake Wildlife Refuge.

For nature-seekers used to a pristine wilderness experience, a visit to the refuge is unsettling. A huge sign in the park office reads: “Unexploded Ordnance.” Pictures of warheads, flares and cartridges are on display. Half-demolished buildings resembling Star Wars battle robots are overgrown with moss and ivy. One site is now called “Stonehenge.”

Mark Williams, project leader for the Caddo Lake Wildlife Refuge, sports black, thick-rimmed glasses and a crew cut. He has a hipster air, though he is straight out of rural Illinois. He and Bruckwicky have been driving me around the former army plant-cum-wildlife refuge in a white F-150.

They take me to Site 49. There’s not much to look at: a sign that reads “restricted area” introduces what appears to be undisturbed forest. It is a former acid storage site. When the soil was tested in 2004, scientists found mercury levels at 776 times the minimum hazardous level, Bruckwicky says. The Army was not required to clean up the site. Still, the wildlife service pressured the Army to remove the mercury-laden soil, and they did. Some of it, anyway. The Army never sampled to see if they had removed all of the mercury.

Practices like these have made scientists like Bruckwicky reluctant to take over the refuge until they are sure it’s cleaned up.

“They asked if we’re gonna take the property, and I said, ‘We won’t take it unless you sample the hole (where the mercury was),’ and they said, ‘We’re not gonna sample the hole.’ It’s like, that’s fine. It’s your property. Keep it,” Bruckwicky says with a shrug of his shoulders.

Down the road is a cheery place called “the burning ground,” where plant workers used to blow up substandard ammunition and clean rocket motors with perchlorate on the bare earth. “So we have a perchlorate plume underground here,” Bruckwicky says. Harrison Bayou is wedged between the burning ground and Landfill 16. Both perchlorate and TCE have seeped into the bayou. “They are trying to stem that flow,” Bruckwicky says. They may have tried too late.

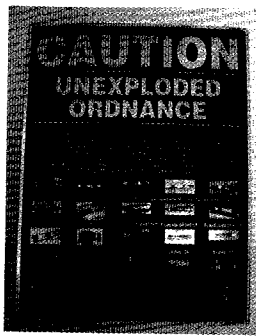
AT A COMMUNITY MEETING in nearby Karnack in May, 65 people crowded into the community center beside the train tracks. They wanted to know why the rest of the Army’s land had not been transferred to the wildlife refuge.

“We can’t take contaminated property into the system. We’d love to have every piece out here,” Williams tells the crowd. He says the 7,000 acres they took were clean. The remaining land is contaminated. The Army has proposed a cleanup plan, but some scientists say it is unsound.

“The Army believes that they have characterized the extent of contamination at this site, but that’s clearly wrong,” says George Rice, a groundwater hydrologist hired by Caddo Lake Institute, a non-profit conservation group. He points to a map of

Caddo Lake
PHOTO BY LAURA BURKE

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WATCH a video interview with Robert Speight at txlo.com/clws

Site 35B. "The red wells are contaminated. Almost certainly groundwater here is also contaminated," he adds, pointing to an area below the red wells to which groundwater is flowing and where there are no monitoring wells. At Site 50, he says, the Army drilled just one well, so it hasn't measured contamination there, either.

To solve most of these problems, the Army is proposing a process called monitored natural attenuation that involves leaving the contamination alone and watching it degrade over time. But it might take centuries for volatile organic compounds like TCE to degrade. Heavy metals never break down. "I don't believe that they've done what's necessary in order to show that monitored natural attenuation is a viable remedy for cleaning up groundwater at these sites," Rice says. "Looking at the data, frankly, I doubt it's going to work in most cases."

The EPA is responsible for approving or rejecting the Army's plan, and back in Washington, EPA staffers admit there has been a problem nationwide with "inconsistencies" in groundwater cleanup. Stephen Tzhone, the EPA project manager for Region 6, which includes Texas, says, "In the past the Army has resisted some of the groundwater restoration policies by the EPA" and that "this is not a Longhorn-specific issue." In June 2009, headquarters sent a memo nudging all Superfund national policy managers to clean up their acts.

Back at the town hall meeting, Robert Speight, who runs Caddo Lake Water Supply Co. in Uncertain, speaks next. The town of Uncertain (the name originates from the surveyors' uncertainty as to whether they were in Texas or Louisiana) has three drinking water wells bordering the hazardous waste site. "We want to be able to produce water safely," Speight says, "not for them to take 100, 200 years and see what happens."

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality tests Uncertain's wells for compounds like TCE every six years. The public water supply is not routinely tested for perchlorate. Under public pressure, TCEQ tested the water supply around the facility for

perchlorate once, in December 2004. Speight says he never saw the results.

The Army didn't attend the meeting to respond to community concerns.

"No one would deny there have been releases [of chemicals] to Caddo Lake in the past," Zeiler, the Army's site manager for the plant, tells me later. She says the Army is confident the chemicals are mostly contained. She says that if they do not disperse naturally, another remedy will be applied. As for now, "I can't say there's no seepage" into those creeks, she says. If TCE is seeping into the creeks, is it reaching the lake a mile away? She says no.

According to Rick Lowerre, an environmental lawyer and the president of Caddo Lake Institute, "The agencies [EPA and TCEQ] unfortunately have taken more of a position of negotiation in cleanups rather than saying, 'Here are the rules, follow them.'" He doesn't think they'll hold the Army accountable.

Since the institute has leases on some of the Longhorn land, it can legally appeal an EPA approval of the Army's plan. "This is one way to get the agencies to stop this negotiation game, is you get the court to tell them, 'You can't do that,'" Lowerre says. The community is waiting to see if the EPA approves the Army's proposed cleanup plan. If so, you can bet the institute will bring out its guns, and hydrologist Rice will be one of them.

As for the 54 chemicals found in Caddo Lake, the Army says the contamination cannot be clearly linked to the bomb plant. "We're not the only contributor," Zeiler says. The contamination could come from any of the industries around Caddo Lake, "including but not necessarily limited to the former Longhorn AAP, lignite-fired power plant, chicken processing plant, coal-fired power plant, steel company, abandoned oil and gas pipeline, oil and gas wells, industrial wastewater outfalls, mine lands, abandoned municipal solid waste sites, marinas, boat ramps, and regional industrial emissions."

In other words, if you cannot determine whose toxic waste is whose, you cannot hold anyone accountable. ■

THE HIGHTOWER REPORT

RIGGING THE RULES

THERE'S ONE GRASSROOTS way that workaday folks can create more fairness in our country's plutocratic, corporate-controlled economy: unite in unions. Some 60 million workers say they'd join a union if they could.

Well ... why can't they?

Because corporate chieftains and Wall Street financiers don't want us hoi polloi having any say over such things as offshoring,

downsizing, wages, benefits and working conditions. So for decades, they have deployed their lawyers, lobbyists and politicians to rig the rules of unionization to keep people from joining.

For example, the Railway Labor Act, which sets union rules for railroads and airlines, has a tricky little provision to sidetrack nearly all new union-

izing efforts. When workers vote to decide whether they want a union, employees who do not vote are counted as "no." In every other American election, people who don't vote aren't counted.

The Obama administration has repealed this absurdity, and—whoa, Nellie!—the airlines have gone bonkers. Sen. Johnny Isakson, a Georgia

Republican and well-funded attack dog for Delta Airlines, stood on his hind legs to declare that deleting nonvoters from the "no" column was an "assault on employee rights."

Really Johnny? How would you like playing by such rigged rules for your own elections? In his last run, 79 percent of eligible Georgians either voted against Isakson or did

not vote—so nonvoters would've soundly defeated him.

Hmmm ... if it would get rid of all the Isaksons, maybe the nonvoter system might be a good thing after all.

—JIM HIGHTOWER

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