

GRAND BOIS Townspeople clasping flickering candles stood silent in a circle beside the handsome bayou and prayed for deliverance.

The quiet ended a few hundred feet away, just across Bayou St. Louis, a waterway that has been residents' highway into the bountiful marsh for a century. On 250 acres where many of them caught their first fish, killed their first deer and learned to swim, heavy machinery crashed and clanged under huge yellow lights in an industrial waste pit operation that neighbors say is destroying their health and environment.

These are the two worlds of tiny Grand Bois - one filled with family, friends and rich memories; the other a no-man's land of oil-field waste pits that residents say produce choking fumes noxious enough to put them in the hospital, or drive them away. Dust boiling out of the site burns their eyes and sometimes obliterates Louisiana 24.

The waste pit operator says it is conducting business well within state guidelines.

Clarice Friloux, 29, a Houma Indian who helped organize the vigil in this remote community southeast of Houma, asked Debbie Smith to say a prayer on this November night.

"We love this place," Smith prayed, "We love the country. We just want a safe environment for our children.

"with God's help we can overcome this."

What the approximately 300 residents of the community with out stores or a city hall are trying to overcome, and remove, is the Campbell Wells Corp's oil-field waste disposal facility. Campbell Wells and its predecessor have been cited a dozen times for failing to provide proper safeguards against the escape of toxic waste into the air and water outside the site. Formal compliance orders were issued on three occasions and on two occasions the company was fined. In 1993 the DEQ singled out Campbell Wells "for continuous and repeated violations of previous compliance orders."

Last year residents went beyond vigils, complaints and prayers. They brought a class-action suit against Campbell Wells, asking that they be compensated for damages and that the corporation be stopped from producing, storing or disposing of materials that might reach residents through the air, water or by seeping into the ground.

The company declined to comment on the suit. In court papers, Campbell Wells argues that it is complying with state law on the handling of oil field waste.

Materials deposited in the pits are, by state law, classified as "non-hazardous oilfield waste," but chemicals in substances like drilling mud are known to contain toxic chemicals such as arsenic, barium cadmium, lead, mercury, hydrogen sulfide and benzene, according to the suit.

Residents say the pits have caused constant headaches, diarrhea, chronic lung problems, dizziness, sore throats, sinus problems, eye problems, and memory and weight loss. Several Grand Bois residents said their doctors have told them to sell their holdings and get out. The town is peppered with anti-Campbell Wells signs: "Trucks, take a load home," and "Close the gates of hell a Campbell Wells."

Jerry Brazzel, division engineer for the firm, said the levels of heavy metals at the facility "are significantly below the limit set in state regulations under which we operate." He said employees at the Grand Bois site have not complained of any of the symptoms. The waste disposal facility employs 15 to 20 people, depending on the work load.

The state Department of Natural Resources has scheduled a hearing for early next year on a request by residents to revoke or modify Campbell Wells' permit to operate at Grand Bois.

Residents of the community, including a large population of Houma Indians, have been complaining about the pits for years, but a turning point came in March 1994 when Campbell Wells accepted about 81 tanker truck loads of oil pit sludge that tests conducted for DEQ found contained high levels of benzene and, according to a company spokesman, some hydrogen sulfide from another waste site in south Alabama. The suit claims that the wastes "contained toxic and hazardous substances, including but not limited to arsenic, benzene and hydrogen sulfide."

"We were all sick," Joyceline Dominique said.

In a deposition taken by attorneys for Grand Bois residents, an Exxon official said the material brought to Grand Bois would have been treated as hazardous waste under Alabama law and would have cost \$85 a barrel to process. Campbell Wells handled the waste for \$6.50 a barrel.

Brazzel said the waste likely contained "some hydrogen sulfide" but not at levels that could have been harmful.

After the March waste delivery, Grand Bois residents flooded the state Department of Environmental Quality with complaints of illness. Some residents left.

Stephanie Rogers, who said her children have had ongoing lung problems, was one of those who fled.

"All we had time to do was cover them with blankets and put them in the car. We moved to my husband's family house (outside Grand Bois). All I'm doing is moving in and out, moving in and out."

Now she's looking for a house in another town.

Doctors told me I have to move away from here," she said. "Two doctors told me that."

Friloux's family has been in Grand Bois since 1915, when her grandfather left Golden Meadow for higher ground after a hurricane. The property became a waste dump in 1983, when Intercoastal Oilfield Fluids opened oilfield waste injection wells on the site. Although the company told the Department of Natural Resources that it would not operate waste pits, three of them soon opened and by February 1983 inspectors found oil field waste flowing into ditches that led off the property, according to DEQ records.

There followed years of citations from the state for illegal discharge of waste into the water and air, first by Intercoastal, then by Campbell Wells, which took over the dump site in 1990.

Friloux and others remember fondly the days before waste pits.

"There was nothing here but trees and wildlife," Friloux said. "A lot of people catfished for a living along the St. Louis Canal and the Intercoastal Canal." The St. Louis opens into the Intercoastal waterway and state records show that it has been fouled over the years with waste from the pits and the barge unloading area.

"Most of us learned to swim right there where Campbell Wells has its loading dock," Friloux said. An abandoned wooden oilfield platform served as a diving platform.

R.J. Molinere, 34, remembers when the water in the bayous and marsh was so clean that he scooped it up and drank it.

He remembers summer picnics with 25 or 30 friends near what is now the Campbell Wells loading docks.

"We don't do that any more," he said. "Everybody is afraid to swim. Grand Bois means big woods, and they've taken our big woods."

JoAnna Dardar moved here from Pointe Aux Chenes, a 20-minute boat ride on St. Louis Bayou, after Hurricane Andrew devastated that area. by November 1993, Dardar said, she was having painful sinus headaches.

"I never had any sinus problems," she said. "I never took any sinus medicine. Now I live on the stuff. It's got to be Campbell Wells."

She walked down a row of trees heavy with satsumas and oranges. Her fiance and his family are developing the orchard, a couple of blocks from St. Louis Bayou, and it is part of what she likes about Grand Bois. But, like others in the community, she worries about her health.

"It's great out here if you can get past the smell," she said.

Anna and Stanley Matherne are building a roomy two-story house about 1,000 feet from the first waste pit. Now they talk of moving but despair of every being able to sell the Grand Bois property.

"We hae a little fella, he's 10 years old," Matherne said. "He has headaches all the time. He's sickly. He's nauseated. He can't eat.

"The doctor says move, but we can't move."

"We've been sacrificing to build this house and then they come here and make us sick," Mrs. Matherne said. "They do whatever they want to do."

She shows home videos of tanker trucks pulling out of Campbell Wells onto Louisiana 24, stirring a dust cloud across the highway the cuts visibility to zero. In another video a woman holds a Geiger counter that clicks wildly as it registers radioactivity just outside of her house, Campbell Wells has been issued a permit to handle radioactive waste.

Molinere said people in Grand Bois are digging in for a long fight.

"We're going to do what we have to do to get things back to what they were," he said.

Resolution showed on the dark night that the townspeople gathered by Bayou St. Louis. Reggie Dupre, a legislative candidate from Pointe Aux Chenes, burned a \$1000 campaign check he said Campbell Wells sent him, declaring the money "too dirty." He won his runoff with 56 percent of the vote.

Then the group crossed the bridge and moved slowly and silently along the highway to the Campbell Wells entrance. Children held their noses and older people cupped scarves over thier faces agianst the smell of the petroleum-based waste. In front of the entrance they crossed the highway and returned to the bayou.

A speaker system played American Indian music as they gathered again to sing a song that has become part of the campaign against Campbell Wells.

"God has given us the power to create the world anew "If we touch the earth together me and you."

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#ART:

Grand Bois

VIEW FULL-TEXT ON MICROFILM.

STAFF MAP

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Illustration:

Defiaant displays stand near a group of Grand Bois residents gathering for a candlelight vigil and march to the gates of the Campbell wells waste pit recently. Residents say the company is responsible for persistent headaches and other illnesses in the bayou town.[COLOR]

Grand Bois protesters carry candles on their way to the entrance of the Campbell Wells plant, which residents have accused of polluting their air and water.[COLOR]

TWO STAFF PHOTOS BY ELIOT KAMENITZ

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