

## Unit 3: Power



### Excerpt from Environmental Justice in Rural Communities:

Alsen is a very old community. Before the Civil War, Mount Pleasant plantation sprawled along the river just north of what is now Alsen. There was also a riverboat landing on the Profit Island Chute, called Springfield Landing, and a road (Springfield Road), which led through the swamp and up to the bluff of what is now U.S. 61 (Scenic Highway). The original cemetery for Alsen was near the old Springfield Landing.

Following the Civil War, newly freed slaves from the plantation and other nearby areas settled in Alsen. ... The people of Alsen were very close to the land. They grew vegetables and fruits in their gardens and hunted and fished in the nearby bountiful Devil's Swamp. Devil's Swamp was once a very productive ecosystem with great biodiversity. Its waters produced a wide variety of fish and shellfish—from the bottom feeders (catfish and crawfish) to the pelagic varieties (bass). Wild game was plentiful, including ducks, geese, wild turkeys, deer, squirrels, 'coons, 'possums, alligators, turtles, doves, muskrats, and others. Many varieties of waterfowl nestled in the swamp, such as egrets, herons, hawks, eagles. In addition, songbird species were plentiful at all seasons. ... Predator species were also present including bobcats, foxes, martins, black bears, and Florida Panthers (the latter two species were spotted in the swamp as late as the mid-1970s). Its forests contained stately old cypress trees, oaks, gums, magnolias, dogwoods, and tupelo and were filled with perennials such as muscadine and blackberries. Wildflowers such as trumpet vine, honeysuckle, trillium, and butterweeds were abundant.

The bountifulness of the swamp spilled over into the community. In the spring of the year, children would line the deep ditches on either side of the main road through Alsen, armed with nothing more than a length of string and a piece of old meat for catching crawfish. These children could take home dinner for a whole family. ... Life in Alsen was idyllic. Many of the houses were in the shadows of a pecan grove. Stately oaks stood throughout the community, each dripping with Spanish Moss. People lived on family plots, some of which had been held for generations. Children played up and down the streets from yard to yard. Residents looked out for all the children.

About two miles north of the main road of Alsen, a Mr. Davis moved his family down from Mississippi and purchased just under twenty acres of land. They lived on a dirt road called Samuels Road, which was eventually paved and became U.S. Highway 61. Across the street from them a "borrow pit" was dug, and the dirt was used to build the overpass for the highway. This borrow pit eventually became the community "swimming hole."

Then, in 1964, Tim Alexander came to town, and Alsen has never been the same. He and a local landowner opened the borrow pit for the dumping of toxic chemicals by industries (Dow, Ethyl, Co Polymer, Uniroyal, Allied Chemical, American Hoechst, Exxon Chemical, Rubicon Chemical, Shell Chemical, and U.S.S. Chemical).

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The family that lived 800 feet across the highway was never consulted or warned about the dangers of the pit, and the children continued to swim in the pit as they had done previously. ...

This pit, called Petro Processors Incorporated, became a nuisance almost immediately. In April of 1965, an official of the East Baton Rouge Parish Health Unit contacted the Louisiana State Board of Health "regarding the possibility of a health problem" at the PPI site. Despite this warning, however, the health of the people of Alsen was ignored for almost twenty-eight years until a fence was built around the pit in 1991. However, the Petro Pit continued to be a nuisance. Regular burning occurred at the pit. The industries reported that fires were set only when the wind blew out of the Southeast so that the smoke would blow over the swamp. ...

The original site filled up very quickly and overflowed into the nearby bayou. In 1968, it was "closed," and a second site was opened one and one-half miles away. This site, the Brooklawn Site, consisted of a bluff area, lagoons, and a cypress bayou. According to my neighbor, Brother Pate, "Cypress Bayou had some of the best bass fishing in the country." Not only was the bass fishing ruined, but the cypress trees were killed as well. One Alsen resident claims that when Petro was opened on Brooklawn, a fence was placed across the road, preventing residents from visiting the grave sites of the original cemetery. This cemetery can no longer be found-the grave sites presumably buried beneath toxic waste.

... both pits continued to overflow into the Bayou Baton Rouge, which meanders for nine miles through Devil's Swamp before finally emptying into the Mississippi River. In 1969, the dike surrounding the Brooklawn site broke and sent hundreds of thousands of gallons of contaminants across Devil's Swamp and into the Mississippi River. Over 100 head of cattle feeding in the swamp on the Ewell farm died within a few days. In 1987, at the urging of Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals half-heartedly posted Devil's Swamp Lake, a popular fishing spot, with "No Fishing" and "No Swimming" signs. However, the signs were facing the shore, and many fishermen approached the lake by boat from the river. Further, the signs were submerged during high water. Neither have the signs been maintained and, by 1991, the land-based signs were practically covered with vegetation.

PPI stopped receiving chemical wastes in 1980, and in 1983, it was placed on the NPL (National Priorities List of Superfund). In 1983, TERA Corporation, an engineering firm, concluded that because of the high clay content of the underlying and surrounding soils of the Petro Scenic site, the waste could be safely secured on-site.<sup>1</sup> Today, the wastes have migrated off-site a considerable distance beneath a four-lane divided highway and onto someone else's property.

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While the Superfund sites developed, other industries moved into the community. They included: five chemical plants, a calcined coke plant, a secondary lead smelter, a tank car company, a rail switching yard, a paint and solvents company, a brickyard, a manufacturing company, a pipe company, a commercial hazardous waste company that has both an incinerator and landfills, and numerous waste pits. Additionally, we are impacted by a chemical plant two and one-half miles north of Alsen, and heavily impacted by a paper mill five miles north of us. Both facilities dump into the river or the swamp.

Most of these facilities moved in during the fifties and sixties when African Americans in Louisiana were denied voting access. Therefore, we were never consulted, considered, or given the opportunity for input on the nature of our neighborhood because of our race. After a few industries were located here, the area was considered an industrial zone, thus opening the door for the others to locate here. Our community received all of the adverse impact of industry and none of its benefits. ...

### Works Cited

Wiygul, R. B., Harrington, S. C., & Robinson, F. T. (1994, January). Environmental Justice in Rural Communities. *West Virginia Law Review*, 96(2), 405-448.