

## Unit 3: Power



**‘The Rock’ residents once lived off the land. They blame a burn pit for turning it toxic.**

The facility is seeking a permit renewal with an expansion from the state

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January 28, 2023 12:00 PM

**GRANT PARISH** – Their chickens had leukemia.

The Hoskins family, residents of a community outside of Colfax known as The Rock, wonder how long they had been eating the eggs of cancerous birds they raised outside their home. It haunts them.

It’s one of the nightmares they and others in The Rock say they have endured from exposure to the toxins released from a hazardous waste facility less than 2 miles away. Its opening permit is up for renewal, and they pray it will be denied.

“It’s gotten too horrible,” said Susan Hoskins, a lifelong resident of The Rock.

Hoskins’ family has lived in The Rock for six generations. Her daughter, Sliska Larry, raised her own kids there and now her grandkids – ages 3, 4, and 9 live there.

Larry told the Illuminator how it was before the chickens died, when her extended family from throughout Central Louisiana would come to The Rock.

“When we’d get together, it was a glorious time. There’s gonna be some food cooking, card playing, dominoes,” Larry said. “If we got something extra, we’d share. If they killed a hog, everybody in the neighborhood gonna have some meat.”

The family would play zydeco music and downhome blues, and cook meals with their homegrown greens, bell peppers and corn. But no longer.

“We can’t do that now because you can’t be outside,” Larry said.

The Rock’s residents say they can’t fish in nearby waters, picnic outside or laze with their children on the lawn watching the clouds roll by. Sing sets are idle, old folks no longer play cards outside or listen to the evening birdsong while sitting on their porches.

Garden beds, once bursting with purple peas, okra, tomatoes, potatoes, watermelons, cantaloupes, and cucumbers, are overrun with weeds. The Hoskins’ once bustling

## Unit 3: Power



chicken coop now houses the family dog. The family relied on their fresh vegetable, fruits, chickens and eggs for everyday sustenance. Now they survive by sharing what they can afford to purchase or donations from area food pantries.

“If one don’t have, we call each other, and then we try to make enough so everybody can eat,” Larry said.

“We relied on our gardens for our basics,” Clay said. “What we could grow in our garden was our free meals. Now we go into the grocery stores and you see the mustard greens, maybe two for \$3, and we have to pay for it. Eggs is sky high!”

“Most of the people here are retired, living on Social Security,” Larry said. “A lot of them don’t get food stamps. You gotta pay your bills and buy your food with your money. So what do you do? How are you living?”

None of the staples of rural Louisiana living are safe according to neighbors of Clean Harbors Colfax, a facility that disposes old munitions from Camp Minden and expired fireworks from Disney World. Thick pillars of black smoke from the open burn pit are visible from backyards in The Rock.

Clean Harbors opened the open-burn disposal site in 2002 and expanded it in 2015. The Massachusetts company is asking the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) to add a closed-burn structure when it renews its operation permit.

Residents of The Rock attribute their various ailments to the facility. A Rapides Parish pathologist has said the lungs of residents there are less healthy than in surrounding parishes.

Clean Harbors has not responded to questions from the Illuminator about neighbors’ health concerns.

Deborah Clay, who lives in one of seven homes that comprise The Rock, has lost almost all of her hair. She’s lived in the community off Louisiana Highway 71 for more than four decades.

“I used to have beautiful shining hair,” Clay said. “I have memories where sometimes I just sit back and cry about things. I know what I used to look like compared to what I look like now.”

## Unit 3: Power



Ray Boutte, who help tend the Hoskins' chickens, has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Angie Sanders, a relative who often visits from nearby Colfax, has chronic sinus allergies. It's rare for her to not clutch a tissue. "I know they don't want me blowing my nose and trying to play cards," Sanders said. "My nose is always running. I cough, my throat hurts."

Larry witnessed her sister-in-law's last breath in Hoskins' living room, where the family was tending her as she neared death. Rhonda Wells had lived in Colfax for 30 years when she fell victim to cancer.

"It's a hard feeling to watch somebody that you love, that you grew up with all your life, that's only 52 years old, aspirate the last time. She was fighting to live," Larry said.

Brenda Redmond said Clean Harbors detonates wastes three times daily – around 8 a.m., noon and 4 p.m. Neighbors blame the blasts for a recent water line rupture.

"I have a two-story house up here. When they bomb, my house shakes," Redmond said. I lost two windows from the right side of the house. I can't even pull the window [open]."

She drinks bottled water in fear of contamination.

"When I take a bath, I say, 'Well, Lord ...'" Redmond said. "People say I talk about the Lord all the time, but if you're not holding on to your Holy Spirit, this situation with Clean Harbors is gonna break you down."

Parents in The Rock say they fear for their children's health. Larry says all three of her grandkids have persistent sore throats, runny noses and coughing.

"In Colfax, all [doctors] know is allergies. They give you the [antihistamines], they give you the little pink medicine, amoxicillin. But guess what? Two weeks later, the baby is still sick," she said. "We're going back and forth to the doctor, and then after a while they start calling Child Protection Service on you because they figure you're not taking care of your child."

Sanders said it's been a challenge to organize the community to oppose the Clean Harbors permit renewal "because they fear their voices won't be heard." But now that the community is at risk of food insecurity, she wonders what it will take to get the right kind of attention to their plight.

## Unit 3: Power



“Does it take for 20 people to die at one time, then maybe you’ll step in when you could have did something before that happens?” Sanders asked in a question rhetorically directed at LDEQ. “Y’all turning a blind eye.”

Sliska said the state’s enforcement against Clean Harbors has been a joke. “The more you fine them, the more they burn,” she said.

The Hoskins family is inviting Gov. John Bel Edwards to sit at the table with them and have a piece of king cake. With the recent loss of his mother, they hope the governor will consider all the illness and death they’ve experienced in the past 20 years. “I would hate to live a little longer to know that this town died out because of Clean Harbors, that The Rock died out because of Clean Harbors,” Susan Hoskins said. “I would like to live to see my great grandchildren breathe clean air.”

### Works Cited

Madeson, F. (2023, January 28). ‘The Rock’ residents once lived off the land. They blame a burn pit for it turning toxic. Retrieved from Louisiana Illuminator: <https://lailluminator.com/2023/01/28/the-rock-residents-once-lived-off-the-land-they-blame-a-burn-pit-for-turning-it-toxic/#:~:text=Residents%20of%20The%20Rock%20attribute,Illuminator%20about%20neighbors'%20health%20concerns.>