

'There's Nothing Left To Cut'

East St. Louis Is Left Struggling Amid Debt and Desperate Choices

EAST ST. LOUIS **CITY ON THE** **EDGE**

PART 1

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Twice this year, the city has nearly run out of gas for its aging police cars and fire trucks. Workers have been laid off by the score because there is no money to pay them or to make regular trash pickups. Angry bill collectors are pounding at the doors of City Hall. The treasury is mortgaged well into the next century, and yet the residents are saddled with the highest property tax rate in the metropolitan area, not to mention the highest in Illinois.

Difficulties that would shake almost any other community to its foundations are a way of life in East St. Louis. The recent financial emergency — as serious as any ever to confront an American city — is no exception. The community has been nudged to the edge of bankruptcy with the halting steps of a condemned man made to walk the plank.

A desperate money shortage has meant that police officers sometimes buy their own two-way radios because the city is unable to pay for them. The fleet of rusting squad cars that looks straight from a demolition derby needs to be replaced. Firefighters no longer take nozzles home with them to prevent thieves from stealing them from the hoses, but nagging problems remain. The department's 50-foot ladder truck sat in a garage for months until the city could scrape up \$8,000 for repairs.

"There's nothing left to cut," said LaMar D. Gentry, the former comptroller and deputy mayor. He resigned last week after nine years with the city.

On his last day at work, Gentry, 41, had to walk down three flights of stairs from his third-floor office at City Hall; the reason was simple and illustrative — the building's elevator was broken.

Millions of dollars in debt, East St. Louis is suffering from an array of problems. It's not surprising that residents like Harold and Deidre Clark say they can't rely on the police or fire departments or on any other service that their crippled government tries to provide.

The Clarks have lived in public housing since their marriage 14 years ago. Harold Clark recalls that he has gone to sleep to the sound of gunfire. He has been awakened at night by shots outside his bedroom window.

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Brief firefights aren't unusual, nor the sight of men and boys brazenly carrying pistols.

One of the couple's painfully learned survival lessons is to warn their three children to stay away from windows for fear of stray bullets. They worry that life will get even worse during the summer when the streets can turn violent.

"The heat," says Clark, a machinist for McDonnell Douglas Corp., "can bring out the beast around here."

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The name alone is almost synonymous for the toughest of tough places. East of anywhere often evokes the other side of the tracks. But for a first-time visitor suddenly deposited on its eerily empty streets, East St. Louis might suggest another world.

Described as an inner city stripped of an outer city, East St. Louis can offer a haunting portrait of urban decay. Large sections of its downtown business district are riddled with abandoned, crumbling, fire-scarred buildings. The 400 block of Missouri Avenue, one of the city's main thoroughfares, tells the story.

Only three of the 13 buildings that line the street are occupied; the rest have either shuttered doors or no doors at all.

The fallen ceiling lay in jagged chunks of tin and plaster in the lobby of the First Federal Savings and Loan; the windows were broken out of a closed newspaper plant; a 13-story office building, the tallest in the city, was boarded. Around the corner on Fourth Street, a well-fed cat prowled a sloping pile of garbage and trash that filled a gaping, 10-foot-deep crater in the sidewalk.

The blight extends far beyond downtown. Block after block of shattered homes and vandalized housing projects are reminiscent of wartime street-fighting scenes. The pockets of desolation call to mind a scathing comment by Eugene McCarthy, who suggested sending a space ship to East St. Louis to see if life existed there.

McCarthy, a former presidential candidate, was being ironic when he made the remark 12 years ago. But the city's vital statistics suggest that the life that does exist is often extremely impoverished.

Since 1960, the number of residents has fallen from roughly 82,000 to the current state estimate of 46,000. The population was once overwhelmingly white but is now 97 percent black. Nearly 43 percent of the residents are said to live below the national poverty level; the city's unemployment

rate is almost three times the national average; more than 60 percent of the residents get public assistance; 25 percent live in public housing. The number of private, single family residences dwindled from roughly 18,000 to 12,000 between 1960 and 1980. In 1982, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that only 235 retail businesses remained compared with twice that number 10 years earlier.

The deep-seated problems choking the community took shape well before the Great Depression, when heavy industry started pulling out of the Metro East area. The plants, situated in National City, Alorton (short for the Aluminum Ore Co.) and Monsanto, now Sauget, were company towns built at the outskirts of East St. Louis. They never contributed a dime to the tax base.

After a brief retooling during World War II, the industrial decline accelerated. During the last 30 years companies like the Aluminum Ore Co. and Hunter Packing closed, throwing thousands out of work. The shuttered plants — hulking brick buildings, warehouses, foundries and sprawling stockyards — rim the community like so many monuments to the dead.

With merchants, industry and residents in full flight, the tax base dropped to \$50 million from \$176 million since 1965. By comparison, the assessed valuation of Fairview Heights — heir to much of the city's precipitate commercial exodus with one quarter of East St. Louis' population — is \$126 million.

Blessed geographically, East St. Louis seems an unlikely spot for such a chronically hapless city. It sprawls across 13 square miles of potentially prime real estate on the shore of the nation's largest waterway, the Mississippi River. More than 35 percent of the nation's manufacturing plants are within 500 miles. It lies at the doorstep of a major city and is almost within the shadow of the Gateway Arch, a gleaming monument to the progress and expansion that have always seemed to elude East St. Louis' grasp.

Over the years, enough studies have been churned out on East St. Louis to fill a small library — as many as 125 in the 1960s alone. One published report concluded that "hundreds of millions of federal and state dollars" have been spent on the city. And yet few would deny that despite the many financial life-supports applied in the last two decades and occasional signs of a faint pulse, its case often has appeared to be terminal.

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The Clarks have already experienced some of the worst that the city has to offer from the vantage of their two-story, three-

bedroom apartment in the Villa Griffin Homes.

The 99-unit public housing project, a maze of brick-and-frame buildings, courtyards and parking pads, is in Lansdowne, a neighborhood that was once a showcase.

"There was shooting just last night," said Clark. "I was in the bathroom; it was very close. . . . After awhile you start to get used to it. You don't even pay attention."

He reconsidered a moment. "There was one time when the shooting got so bad I got out of bed and lay down on the floor — just in case."

So far, no one has broken into their apartment; an iron bar as thick as a broom handle is wedged across the back door.

It was different when they lived in the Roosevelt Homes, another East St. Louis housing project. They were robbed six or seven times.

"You'll notice we aren't wearing our wedding rings," said Clark, 36. "They were stolen when someone kicked in the door."

The Clarks would love to move away from their \$273-a-month apartment, but so far debts have prevented that. They want their school-age children to play without fear of exposure to armed teen-agers, dropouts and what they view as unhealthy social pressure on children.

Deidre Clark, 33, has a simple child-care rule in the projects: "I don't let them go outside unless I'm there to watch them."

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Just this month the city was embarrassed by the spectacle of a prosecutor declaring in open court that one-third of its 79 police officers have complained about faulty squad cars and defective radios. The police officers are spread so thin that Illinois state troopers help patrol the streets.

With tardy police responses a fact of life, residents like Walter Powell say they try to look after each other's property. Powell, who recently enlisted in the Marine Corps, had lived with his mother in a single-story, freshly painted house in the middle of the city.

He told this story of an elderly neighbor who noticed someone suspicious looking at Powell's car: "He went and got a shotgun and just kept watching the guy. He told me later he would have shot the bastard if he had tried to get into my car."

Mayor Carl E. Officer appreciates that no-nonsense approach.

Asked whether he was concerned about his police department's staffing and equipment shortcomings, Officer smiled. He's heard that one before.

"The citizens will do as they've always done," he said. "We'll take care of ourselves."

The police department wasn't always understaffed. It had nearly 50 more officers in the 1970s — the comparatively fat days of federal revenue-sharing and other programs. It wasn't uncommon, some veterans say, to discard serviceable cars

equipped with the very items now lacking — working radios.

The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act alone pumped \$20 million into East St. Louis, officials estimate. Inflated by CETA salaries, the city payroll peaked at 1,400 employees. Today the work force is about 270, excluding 25 employees laid off at the end of last month.

As federal money began to evaporate, the city increasingly relied on borrowed money. Since 1975, its bonded indebtedness has soared to about \$12.5 million from \$1.6 million. The borrowing paid utility bills and old debts.

The inevitable crunch finally came last year, when Congress, at the urging of President Ronald Reagan's administration, eliminated revenue sharing. The program had been worth about \$1.3 million a year to East St. Louis. That money had represented nearly 20 percent of the city's budget and was the slender difference between a precarious financial balance and the threat of insolvency.

"While other cities used their (revenue sharing) money to build golf courses, we never got a chance at luxuries like that," said Gentry, whose last day as comptroller was Wednesday.

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Political feuding hasn't helped resolve the lingering financial emergency. When the city council passed this year a budget for \$6.9 million — nearly \$1 million more than the revenue that is anticipated — Officer accused the council of irresponsibility. The budget not only failed to deal with the deficit but it failed to deal with \$2 million in debts carried over from last year.

One of many flash points involved \$350,000 earmarked for a new trash collection contract. Vacant lots, alleys and

back yards have been turned into so many dump sites since October, when a hauler refused further pickups because the city had fallen behind in its payments.

The mayor has refused to approve the trash contract, saying the city lacks the money.

Powell, 25, fumed, "You've got to blame the government for this."

Interviewed shortly before he reported to Marine boot camp in San Diego, he had just removed from his mother's back yard 40 plastic bags of trash, a winter's accumulation. "You pay your taxes and what do you get for it?"

Smoke in your eyes, many would say. Since the haulers stopped hauling, the odor of smoke has become one of the scents of spring as residents illegally burn their refuse.

Public health officials worry that the trash will attract a plague of rodents and flies when summer arrives. For his part, Powell said he's already seen "rats as big as puppies, bull rats."

Unable to pay for trash pickup or to settle other bills, the city was paralyzed in March when Clyde Kuehn, an attorney in Belleville, froze its assets. Kuehn wanted to force payment of a \$3.4 million judgment in favor of his client, Walter DeBow, who suffered brain damage in 1984 when he was beaten in the city's old jail by a cell mate.

Officials had missed several deadlines to begin paying the debt. With interest, the city owed DeBow a budget-crippling \$4 million. Under the threat of imminent bankruptcy, officials agreed to pay \$79,000 in March, and interest payments of \$20,000 a month beginning next month. A November deadline looms to pay off the principal.

Kuehn's threat, almost a coup de grace,

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forced the city to take harsh measures to cope with its budget problems. For starters, Officer cut last month 25 full-time employees and about 20 contractual employees. Another 80 layoffs are expected before the end of the year.

With their backs firmly to the wall, officials began drafting yet another plan to refinance and consolidate the community's many debts. But the difficulty is that conventional financing methods appear exhausted for East St. Louis. Residents are already overtaxed, officials agree.

The tax bite has been deep. The total property tax rate — the highest in Illinois — is \$15.73 for each \$100 of assessed valuation. That is nearly three times what St. Louisans pay and compares with the \$6.06 rate in neighboring Belleville. The average rate in St. Louis County is \$5.67 with residents in Wellston paying the most, \$8.43.

By the same token, officials admit that property assessments are so paltry in East St. Louis that residents don't pay more in taxes than homeowners in other communities.

"The people who actually are paying the freight are a minority," said Gentry. "It's ironic. It takes more to run a city of this size with the population makeup that we have. In a suburban city you don't need as many policemen, you don't need a fire department that size. Nobody hardly ever calls City Hall. Here, everybody ... calls expecting a godfather to handle their problems."

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Lawrence Coleman made no mention of a godfather when he discussed the problems of living in East St. Louis, but one has to wonder if he wouldn't mind a gas mask.

Coleman, 54, an unemployed butcher, lives in the city's South End. Always present is the threat of chemical spills that spread toxic fumes across the South End. The wail of sirens warning residents to evacuate after a spill is common.

Coleman stood on the enclosed porch of his tiny home, which faces two abandoned houses and a railroad track that curves on a muddy embankment in front of the house. A few days earlier, 450 people went to hospitals complaining of eye, nose and throat irritation after a chemical spill at the Monsanto complex in nearby Sauget.

"We didn't get any of that one," Coleman said of the fumes. "But let me tell you, we've had our share of bad smells around here." He pointed to the tracks. "We've got all kinds of hazardous waste moving along that line. You think about accidents. ... It's a worry you never quite shake."

At the other side of town, Ethel Sylvester doesn't worry about pollution as much as the prospect that she and the other residents of the 264-unit Samuel Gompers Homes will lose their apartments. Renovations at the 45-year-old project, the city's oldest, are scheduled to begin this summer. Some of the people who live there are afraid that they will be unable to return when the work is finished because of higher rents.

Sylvester, 60, is a small, vibrant woman who patrols the long walkways between the barrackslike project in hot-pink sweat pants. She is president of the Gompers Tenants Association. Christmas bells still hang on her front door, which is also decorated with a sign that says, "Welcome Friends." She pays \$2 a month for her one-bedroom apartment.

Sylvester has lived in the Gompers Homes for 28 years and raised five children in public housing. She voices pride in the life she's made for herself. One of her small pleasures is the garden she and her neighbors have planted on a weedy vacant lot. They grow okra, tomatoes, cabbage, greenbeans and other vegetables.

"You can make this a good place to live," she said, surveying the freshly tilled ground. "There are a lot of bad things in public housing, but this is one of the good things. I love it. That's why I'm fighting so hard."

Her fight includes trying to clear out the "troublemakers" — drug users, drunks and rent dodgers. Signs that proclaim, "Do you pay your rent on time?" are posted on the front door of the community center.

For his part, Mayor Officer says the city's problems are not insurmountable. Twice re-elected, Officer, 36, bristles at references to impending bankruptcy. But, he admits, "I'm running out of rabbits to pull out of my hat."

Gentry said that officials were working with Clayton Brown & Associates Inc., of Chicago, to devise a refinancing plan that involves no borrowing. The project was one of the last for Gentry, who announced May 17 that he was quitting.

He won't be working for the city again — by court order. On Friday, Gentry pleaded guilty in circuit court in Belleville to charges that he had misused city money to pay campaign debts for the mayor's reelection campaign. Under a plea agreement, he agreed to quit and never seek another position with East St. Louis.

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Michael Harrison knows how easy it would be to write off East St. Louis, the stricken city of his birth. "With the interstates now, you can just ride around the place and keep going and never, never look back," said Harrison, 27, a customer service supervisor for the Illinois Power Co.

He shares a red-shuttered white frame house with his wife, Nicole, two children and a tough-looking dog named Smurf. Their neighborhood is one of the solidly middle-class, frequently overlooked areas in a city scarred by deserted buildings and shattered housing projects.

There's Goosehill on the North Side, Rush City on the South, Edgemont, where he lives, Polish Town, Loisel Hills with its expensive homes perched on forested bluffs overlooking the St. Louis skyline. Harrison spoke of the fine people in every section of the city and how it disturbs him that the many good things in the community are frequently overlooked. It was a cry from the heart.

How to forget the long string of athletic championships won by East St. Louis and Lincoln High, the city's two public high schools? Overcoming adversity is a way of life for many of these athletes, who sometimes don't even have a decent track or football field on which to practice.

How to overlook that East St. Louis has produced men like Donald McHenry, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, or women like Olympic track star Jackie Joyner-Kersey?

"These are good, warm people," says Harrison. "You'll never meet people with more heart. It may seem like the place is falling apart, but the people themselves will hold it together."

MONDAY: The sad history of East St. Louis.

A LOOK AT EAST ST. LOUIS, 1988

Here is a chronological rundown of 1988 highlights — or low lights — in the life of East St. Louis, a community perpetually balanced on the edge of a precipice:

Jan. 1. The city is crippled by the loss of \$1.3 million in federal revenue sharing money at the beginning of the year. The money had helped to pay the police and firefighters.

Feb. 4. Attempting to cope with the problems generated by the revenue-sharing cutoff, Mayor Carl E. Officer proposes selling \$11 million in city property. The idea is to sell, then lease back, six fire stations and City Hall. The proposal draws heavy fire from city aldermen and is eventually discarded.

Feb. 23. John Baricevic, state's attorney of St. Clair County, announces he has charged the city with reckless misconduct based on allegations that police officers had been sent on duty with inadequate equipment. Some officers say that they had to buy their own two-way radios. City officials contend that the problems have been corrected. After hearings that draw national attention, the judge dismisses the case on May 22.

Feb. 25. Some city workers say they have been left without medical insurance coverage because the city is behind in paying the premiums.

March 9. A federal grand jury subpoenas all documents relating to the city's long-delayed \$437 million riverfront-development projects. The grand jury is investigating allegations of fraud in connection with bonds issued to pay for the projects — a housing complex, a waste-recovery and trash-recycling plant and a cargo port.

March 10. Mayor Officer testifies in New York City in connection with a \$26 million suit filed by TechniCo-op of Bridgeport, Conn. The company alleges that it was fired illegally as developer of the port and trash-recycling projects when it refused to pay the mayor a \$500,000 finder's fee.

March 25. Kelvin Ellis, executive assistant to Mayor Officer, and the Rev. Joseph Davis, a political ally of the mayor, are indicted on charges connected with Officer's re-election campaign. LaMar D. Gentry, the city's comptroller and Officer's campaign manager, was indicted earlier in connection with the mayor's re-election. The men called the charges absurd, politically motivated and racially inspired.

March 28. Faced with a \$4 million legal judgment for negligence that threatens to plunge the city into financial insolvency, officials agree to pay monthly installments of \$20,000 to a man beaten senseless in the city's old jail. Traffic offender Walter DeBow suffered brain damage in the beating by a cell mate. His lawyer forced the payments when he had the city's bank accounts frozen.

March 30. Mayor Officer says he was shocked to learn that five aldermen and the city clerk pocketed \$16,000 in salary advances while the city hovered near bankruptcy. The practice, officials say, set a less than uplifting precedent as the city struggled to avoid bankruptcy.

April 14. State and county officials warn that the accumulation of trash in East St. Louis represents a potential health hazard. Regular trash pickup has been stalled since October when the former hauler filed a suit against the city to collect \$262,000 in delinquent fees.

April 25. Twenty-five of the city's 291 employees were laid off to try to staunch the flow of red ink that averages \$140,000 a month. Comptroller Gentry says 115 workers would have to be laid off to pay all the debts.

May 17. Gentry, the comptroller, announces his resignation, saying he is "fed up" with the problems he faces in the job.

May 20. Gentry pleads guilty in circuit court in Belleville to a charge of misconduct by a municipal officer. Admitting he misused city money by using it to pay for campaign advertising for Officer, he agrees never to work for East St. Louis again.