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Trendley Avenue resident Ruth Chandler at the Lanson toxic-waste site

DEAD-END STREET

*How toxic chemicals, a soaring cancer rate
and environmental racism moved in on Trendley Avenue
in East St. Louis. And why residents can't get them to leave.*

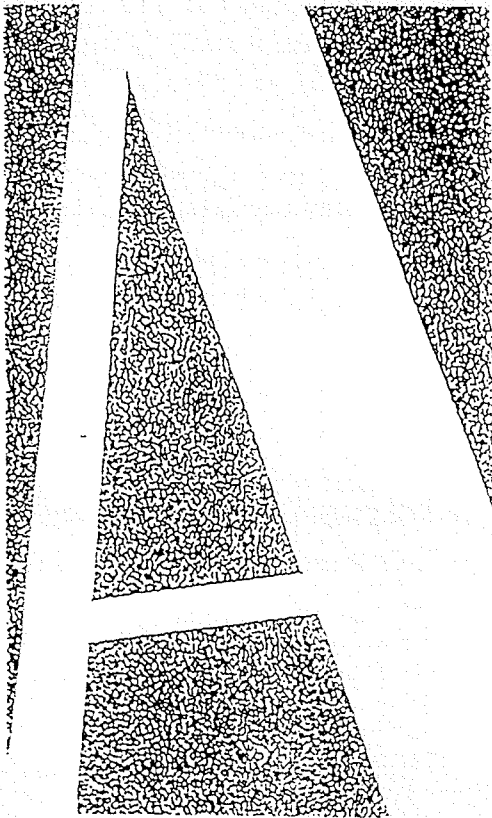
BY C.D. STELZER

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DEAD-END STREET

How toxic chemicals, a soaring cancer rate and environmental racism moved in on Trendley Avenue in East St. Louis. And why residents can't get them to leave.



An early-morning thunderstorm has filled a ditch with rainwater alongside the abandoned Lanson Chemical Co. site on the southern edge of East St. Louis. The water backs up under Piggott Avenue and meanders behind Ruth Chandler's home. Since moving to Trendley Avenue in 1959, the 80-year-old Chandler has grown okra, collard greens and tomatoes in the vacant lot behind her house. The common ground has also yielded crops for others in the Alta Sita neighborhood.

But for the past two growing seasons the field has remained fallow. There is good reason for this.

The drainage ditch behind the Chandler residence is contaminated with highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), according to an unpublished draft assessment by the Illinois Department of Public Health. Property records in Belleville show the landlord of the contaminated ditch and the surrounding garden plots to be the trustees of St. Clair County. The local government has no plans to clean up the property and denies any legal liability.

This story didn't just happen yesterday. It has literally been covered up for decades, while its potentially cancerous consequences have continued leaking for years. There are those in the civil-rights community who argue that if this situation existed in an affluent suburb of St. Louis County it would be dealt with more expediently. There are those in the business world who say race has nothing to do with the problem.

Then there are those who live and die on the 3100 block of Trendley Avenue.

So the political debate escalates, and the institutionalized lethargy continues. Meanwhile, some have resorted to measures of desperation.



Trendley Avenue resident Ruth Chandler: "I feel forsaken."

In a 1992 incident, which one state health official now calls an "act of civic-minded vandalism," 6,000 gallons of hazardous wastes were mysteriously released from a tank at the former Lanson Chemical Co. Prior to the spill, the state and federal Environmental Protection Agencies neglected to clean up the hazardous-waste site even though it was known to have been contaminated with PCBs in 1978.

Illinois EPA (IEPA) soil tests have revealed dioxins and furans are also present at the site. In addition, the amount of dioxin contamination has been underestimated, according to a scientific analysis of the IEPA data conducted for *The Riverfront Times*. Dioxin, furans and PCBs are all suspected human carcinogens. IEPA records show many other hazardous substances were also dumped on the property and into the sewer system.

Illegal waste disposal by the original owners first came under the scrutiny of local authorities more than a quarter of a century ago. The latency period between exposure to a carcinogen and the onslaught of cancer is 20 to 30 years. Not surprisingly, the cancer rate on Trendley Avenue has been increasing lately, and some survivors attribute the rise to their toxic neighbor.

Clottee Pettis, who lives at 3141 Trendley, is one of those who feel victimized. "I know people have cancer, but everybody in the neighborhood shouldn't have cancer," she says. Pettis, 60, moved to Trendley Avenue in 1962, the year Lanson Chemical Co. began operating one block away. She underwent surgery for colon can-

cer in 1989. "What I'm concerned about is the damage that's done to us already," Pettis says. The longtime resident expresses an even more enduring fear: "For all we know, our children could be affected for the rest of their lives."

After decades of inaction, the 1992 spill created an emergency the U.S. EPA could no longer ignore. The federal agency has so far spent about \$2.3 million to remediate the property. Meanwhile, none of the six "potentially responsible parties" in the case has been held liable for the cleanup by the government.

The Lanson site is an anomaly because it is no longer anonymous. The Rev. Buck Jones, a veteran civil-rights leader in the St. Louis metro area, counts 22 other hazardous-waste sites in East St. Louis, a city that is 98.1 percent black. Federal and state officials consulted for this story aren't exactly sure how many there are.

There is one certainty, however. "Not one site in East St. Louis is on the (U.S. EPA's) Superfund priority list," says Jones. "I contend that if there was that kind of contamination in Clayton, they would provide the money to clean it up."

Jones' charge is part of the national debate over environmental racism, which pits groups such as the Committee for Racial Justice (CRJ) of the United Church of Christ against the Center for the Study of American Business (CSAB), a conservative think tank at Washington University.

The CSAB's malignity toward the environmental-justice movement redoubled earlier this year, after the Clinton adminis-

tration ordered all federal agencies to make sure their programs and policies didn't subject poor people and minorities to environmental harm. At the same time, moves at the U.S. EPA, backed by pending federal legislation, have belatedly dusted off the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a means of confronting unequal environmental protection.

If the congressional bill stalls this year, it is expected to be reintroduced in the next session. The law would allow plaintiffs to sue government regulators for issuing permits to companies that disproportionately pollute minority communities. Multinational corporations that have long profited from their dirty work in these overlooked locales could find their bottom line affected. With stakes this high, the resulting bombast has only obfuscated the issue.

But when viewed from the street, the human consequences of the bureaucratic inertia and corporate intransigence are less confusing.

A month before the latest spill finally forced the U.S. EPA to take action, Chandler had a cancerous lump removed from her left breast. There is mounting evidence that organochlorines, such as PCBs and dioxin, are responsible for increases in cancer, including the rise in breast cancer among women. Breast-cancer cases have been increasing more than 1 percent annually over the last 20 years. This year, an estimated 182,000 women will be added to the statistics. More than 46,000 will die from the disease. Of course, within the scientific community, the connection between environmental pollutants and any form of

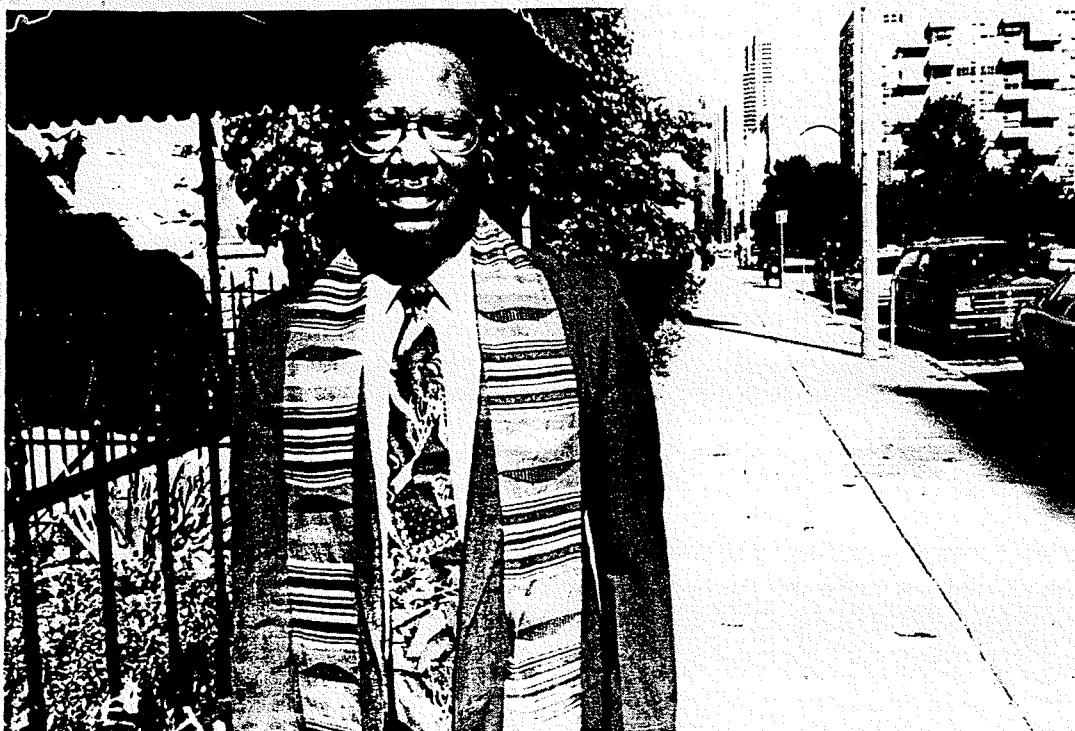
cancer is still a matter of controversy.

On Trendley Avenue, however, the correlation is not so difficult to see. Chandler's next-door neighbor, for instance, contracted uterine cancer last year and is now in a nursing home in Belleville. Curtis Riley, the next homeowner in line, died of multiple forms of cancer in 1985, according to St. Clair County and Eastside Health District Records. On Trendley Avenue, these three individuals' homes are located closest to the Lanson site. In addition, a St. Clair County death record shows that Herbert Nelson, who lived at 3125 Trendley, died of bone and prostate cancer in 1980. Other alleged cases on the block are more difficult to confirm because the official causes of death were not directly attributed to cancer.

But an informal survey conducted by Project HOPE, an advocacy group headed by Jones, claims that there are more than two dozen other cancer cases in the last five to 10 years among 50 families in the Alta Sita neighborhood. The RFT's own tally suggests the possibility that at least five women on the 3100 block of Trendley have had cancer in the recent past.

The current scourge on Trendley Avenue implies that more than toxic substances themselves may have been covered up in the past. Pat Costner, a scientist for the environmental group Greenpeace, questions the methodology used by the consulting firm that prepared the 1991 IEPA report. "It's just flat-out wrong," says Costner. In her view, the dioxin concentra-

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The Rev. Buck Jones: "If there was that kind of contamination in Clayton, they would provide the money to clean it up."

DEAD-END STREET

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tions "were not calculated accurately due, in part, to the use of erroneous toxicity equivalence factors." Consequently, the potential cancer risk has also been underestimated, she says: "If they're growing their food in the soil, that means that their exposure is many times — probably somewhere on the order of a thousand times — higher just from dermal contact and ingestion of soil."

The Illinois Department of Public Health's long-awaited health assessment, which has been 18 months in the making, does not measure dioxin levels in the garden plots next to the Lanson site, according to Tom Long, the agency's senior toxicologist in Springfield. But the agency did discover one of its toxic cousins. "There is some low-level PCB contamination in a drainage ditch in that area," says Long. As for the risk those PCBs pose, Long says: "I would hesitate to speculate in the absence of having a final copy (of the health assessment), but the fact that it is low-level would imply a low risk."

Costner isn't quite so optimistic in her appraisal. "PCBs act just like dioxin does, as far as its effects, except it isn't quite as potent," she says.

An IEPA official with knowledge of the early history of the case has told the *RFT* that, prior to a waste lagoon being covered over in 1978, any heavy rainfall would have washed contamination off the Lanson property and into the adjacent field that contained the neighborhood gardens. This means contaminants buried 16 years ago could still be leaching off the site or into the groundwater below.

The IEPA has detected volatile compounds at the Lanson site at depths of 10 to 12 feet below the surface. PCBs have been found at 4 feet. A 1991 IEPA analysis of subsurface samples states: "Another possibility to explain the presence of volatile compounds in these borings is that they

were discharged prior to the landfilling that occurred sometime during 1978."

But there are no plans for any major excavations at the Lanson site, says Brad Benning, the emergency-response coordinator for the U.S. EPA in Chicago. The agency completed its emergency cleanup earlier this summer, he says. "Our job was to go in and get the most highly contaminated source material out. Once the removal is done, there still may be residual contamination, either deeper in the ground or possibly groundwater contamination," Benning says. The site is unlikely to receive more federal attention, says Benning, because the surrounding community has a

pipied-in municipal-water system instead of individual ground wells.

The U.S. EPA report gives the exact latitude of the Lanson site in the Northern Hemisphere, but standing at the corner of 31st Street and Piggott Avenue in midsummer is more of an equatorial experience.

At noon, the cries of boxcar wheels in the Alton and Southern Railroad yard are among the few things that can be heard. In the heat, visible movements appear slow and deliberate: a woman stooping at work in her yard; cattle egrets, a species originally from Africa, drifting overhead; an emaciated dog tacking across the vacant

field, where a small grass fire smolders.

There are other movements, too, less discernible ones. Erosion, undetected migrations of soil caused by sun, wind and rain. Fluctuations in the water table, which is only 15 feet below the surface. Invisible hazardous organic vapors wafting through the air due to the summer heat.

Far away from this place, there are motions, too, legal ones, which have ultimately left their mark here: incorporations, annual reports, name changes and bankruptcies.

The beginning and end of this story are posted on the chain-link gate at the front entrance of the 5-acre site. Along with the perfunctory keep-out warning, there is a small hand-lettered sign that reads: "Lanson Chemical, U.S. EPA." A plain, black mailbox is attached to the gate. The name it bears — MARK E — is missing one of its dimestore gold letters.

James Markle, the current owner of the property, purchased the site in 1981. The New Athens, Ill., businessman, who then operated Mid-America Alcohol Producers, Inc., was forced into bankruptcy in 1989. Before his insolvency, Markle also owned Wastetex, which is another known hazardous-waste site in East St. Louis.

Markle told the IEPA that, when he took over, there were more than 2,000 55-gallon drums at Lanson. He pumped an estimated 125,000 gallons of liquid waste into 14 tanks on the property, Markle says. In 1990, a state inspection found some of the tanks still contained waste and were leaking.

But the investigation never progressed to the cleanup stage. That's because in 1985 the Lanson site failed to score high enough on the Hazardous Rating System to be placed on the U.S. EPA's Superfund priority list. Instead, the state took over the case. "It was part of a (program) under former Gov. Thompson called 'Build Illinois,'" says Ken Mensing of IEPA in Collinsville. "But we didn't have any money, so this project and others came to a standstill."

The funding evaporated because in 1990 the state Legislature failed to pass a bill that would have provided \$18 million

CHEMICAL REACTIONS

Herman and Elliott Lanson didn't end their careers after they sold Lanson Chemical Co. and eventually relinquished the management of the company. Instead, in 1978, they formed another company, called Poly-Chem Resin Corp., and moved to Missouri Avenue in East St. Louis, about a mile away from their old plant. Within a year, Poly-Chem changed its name to LanChem. Then in 1984, Akzo, a Dutch conglomerate, bought LanChem. Akzo merged earlier this year with Nobel, a Swedish company, to form one of the top-10 chemical titans in the world.

Meanwhile, in East St. Louis, business goes on as usual. Akzo, which is incorporated in the state of Missouri, still produces resins like its predecessors and legally releases some of the same hazardous substances into the environment, according to the latest available toxic-release inventories submitted to the U.S. EPA.

PCBs, however, are not among those substances, says Elliott Lanson, who now is general manager at the Akzo plant. Furthermore, the PCB explosion, which is responsible for much of the contamination at the waste site that bears his name, occurred years after he and his father cut all ties to the facility, Lanson says. During his family's tenure, "There were no releases into the environment at the Lanson Chemical Co.," says Lanson. "I was no longer with the company when this happened."

The old Lanson Chemical is no comparison to Lanson's current employer. Akzo's institutional investors read like a who's who of Wall Street, according to Security and Exchange Commission records filed March 31. Invesco, a British investment company, owns the largest block of Akzo stock, according to the SEC filing.

In fourth position, with 736,470 shares, is none other than St. Louis' own Boatmen's Bankshares, Inc.

In the last 10 years, Boatmen's political-action committee doled out \$161,415 to Missouri and Illinois congressional candidates, according to the National Library on Money and Politics in Washington, D.C. For instance, Rep. Jerry Costello, whose district includes East St. Louis, received \$7,500 from the bank since 1990. On the other side of the river, House majority leader Richard Gephardt nabbed a total of \$33,000. Last October, Gephardt accepted the single largest contribution on Boatmen's decennial bi-state list — \$9,000.

The bank, however, reserves most of its generosity for its own officers. In 1992, Boatmen's paid top executive Craig B. Andrews III an annual salary of more than \$1.3 million, according to SEC filings. By comparison, the 1990 census indicates that the per-capita income of an East St. Louis resident is \$6,421.

Elliott Lanson, the man named in the 1968 dumping of noxious chemicals into the East St. Louis sewers, now lives within a stone's throw of Ladue and just blocks away from former President Bush's cousin, George Herbert Walker III. In 1987, Lanson estimated his salary at \$68,000 per year, plus a \$9,400 bonus, according to divorce papers on file in St. Louis County. The legal documents also show that Lanson has owned expensive sports cars — a Porsche 911 and a vintage Corvette — but was cited by his first wife in 1984 for failure to pay for his own children's college education.

— C.D. Stelzer



The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Ken Mensing: "There were hundreds of 55-gallon drums just out in the open, not covered, not protected."

for hazardous-waste cleanups. The legislation had been opposed by the Illinois Manufacturers Association, the state Chamber of Commerce and the Chemical Industries Council. It is reasonable to assume not one lobbyist pushed the Trendley Avenue gardeners' agenda during that session, but it wasn't the first time their interests were ignored.

Many harvests have been gathered from the field behind Chandler's home since Herman J. Lanson started his enterprise in 1962. The Lanson Chemical Co. made alkyl resins and emulsion polymers used in the production of paint and floor wax. Solvents used in this work included xylene, benzene and naphtha. Tests done at the site show these substances and others in the soil. The additional contaminants include PCBs, dioxins, furans, toluene, 1-2 dichloroethene and tetrachloroethene.

In 1968, the East St. Louis sewer commissioner cited Lanson and his son Elliott for dumping noxious chemicals into the municipal sewer system, according to an old newspaper account.

The following year, Purex Corp. bought the company and it became one of its divisions. Herman J. Lanson stayed on to head that operation. Then, in 1974, Purex sold the plant to Morris Industries, Inc., a paint manufacturer. The new owner promptly named Elliott Lanson as general manager (see sidebar). The elder Lanson, now 81, disclaims any responsibility for the contamination of the site. After Morris Paint bought the facility, "We agreed to be with the company for a short time," says Lanson. "The Morris Paint Co. did some things that we thought were very unusual and not very ethical, and we left," says Lanson.

By 1977, neighbors had begun complaining about noxious odors and spills at the plant. When Mensing of IEPA inspected the site, he found nearly 600 barrels "were strewn haphazardly all over the property," according to an IEPA

report. The document goes on to say that "liquid wastes were discharged onto the land, and pooling was observed in various areas." Most important, Mensing's written account verifies that "rainfall had caused these pools to overflow off of the site."

"It was not a pretty picture," says Mensing now. "There were hundreds of 55-gallon drums just out in the open, not covered, not protected. A lot of them were in a wet, marshy area, which further compounded the problem. Some were upright and some were on their sides. And I can tell you they didn't know what they had there. I remember them admitting they didn't know what was good and what was bad."

"At various times during the operation of this facility by the various PRPs (potentially responsible parties), these materials did leave the site. They were not contained and that's pretty obvious. How much left the site and what effect it had, that's the \$64,000 question," says Mensing.

"In between the road in front of the building there's an open field," says the IEPA official. "It's been filled in to some extent. But it used to be a kind of depression area. And that's where all the drums were. That's where a lot of this liquid discharge of one sort or another would go, and materials were actually being washed into ditches and moving off site."

Morris Industries soon high-tailed it off site, too. The company went bankrupt in 1978, and Delta Oil Products Corp. of Wisconsin acquired the property. James Markle, the current owner, has told the IEPA that Delta may have stored or handled PCB-laden capacitor oils at the site. There are also references in the IEPA report that mention the 1978 explosion of a pressure reactor vessel used to synthesize polymers. The reactor contained PCBs, according to the state report. When the fire department responded, they dispersed the toxic liquid further by hosing down the area. After the disaster, the property went through two more quick ownership changes, according to the IEPA file. In 1981, Markle's Mid-America Alcohol Producers, Inc., purchased the property.

The contaminated property adjacent to the Lanson site has long been held in limbo by the trustees of St. Clair County. The trusteeship is a legal entity that is independent of the county government and has been set up to manage untaxed property as required by state law. Other taxing bodies such as school districts, municipalities or townships are also joint owners of such unclaimed land.

"What that management means is not clean and cut grass and paint; it means try to sell the property," says John Baricevic, the chairman of the St. Clair County

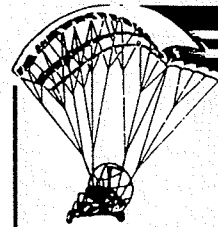
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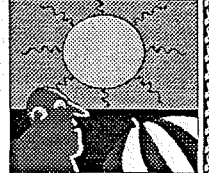


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DEAD-END STREET

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Board. St. Clair County has no legal liability to clean up the property, the board chairman says. "Illinois law does not obligate us to do anything with the property. Our job is simply to resell it," says Baricevic.

The county has no buyers in line at this point.

Although the concept originated in the late 1970s, the environmental-justice movement did not become a national issue until after the release of a 1987 study sponsored by the Commission on Racial Justice (CRJ) of the United Church of Christ. Using zip codes and EPA data, the CRJ researchers concluded that twice as many non-whites lived in the vicinity of waste facilities. In communities where there was more than one site, the number of minority members was estimated to be three times higher, according to the CRJ study.

In April, the Center for the Study of American Business (CSAB) at Washington University issued a rebuttal to the CRJ study and other environmental-justice research. Christopher Boerner, a co-author of the paper, defines the CSAB as a "free-market public-policy group."

The efforts to discredit the environmental-justice movement follow the aforementioned Clinton administration decision in February, which ordered federal agencies to stop policies or programs that subject the poor or minorities to unfair environmental hazards. In addition, the U.S. EPA recently started inquiries in two Southern states using Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which bans discrimination in



Washington University's Center for the Study of American Business' Christopher Boerner and Thomas Lambert

federally financed programs. Concurrently, Sen. Paul Wellstone, a Democrat from Minnesota, introduced the Public Health Equity Act of 1994, which would grant plaintiffs legal means to challenge discrimi-

natory siting policies, which disproportionately affect minority communities.

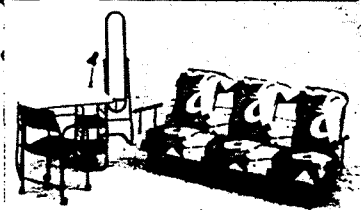
The proposed law would raise the hackles of any red-blooded deregulation advocate and strike terror into the anemic hearts

of the corporate phantoms they are sworn to protect. Boerner wouldn't reveal any names of the CSAB's contributors. He would only say that "financing for the center comes from a multitude of sources:

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foundations, corporate and individual." When asked about this year's budget, he was equally evasive: "I'm sorry, we don't give that information."

The information the CSAB does provide is in sequential order. In Policy Study 121, for instance, Boerner and co-author Thomas Lambert define pollution as an "external cost," or "negative externality," of conducting business. They criticize the CRJ study and others for being both flawed and improperly analyzed. The authors point to recent university research — sponsored by a major waste-disposal company — that purportedly debunks the CRJ's findings. The industry-promoted survey used census tracts and therefore is more accurate in pinpointing racial characteristics, according to the CSAB report. The CSAB authors also conclude that waste is an inevitable byproduct of industry and there is no proof that living near a pollution source endangers health, but, if it does, those affected should be adequately compensated for their inconvenience. Boerner and Lambert chide the environmental-justice advocates for being unrealistic supporters of a policy they call BANANA: "build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything."

Charles Lee, the research director of the United Church of Christ's Committee on Racial Justice, disagrees with the CSAB's position. "Residential patterns, redlining, the inevitable concentrations of people of color to end up in the most undesirable or polluted and otherwise unhealthy areas are a result of the 'market system,'" says Lee. "To trivialize what is being said, as they are trying to do, is a disservice to ultimately finding solutions that lead to the reduction of pollution."

"The term BANANA arose a couple of years ago when their (business) efforts began to focus around the fear of impending policy and regulatory changes that (would) make the siting processes more stringent and take into account racial discrimination in society. The whole point of what they're trying to address is a view on the part of the environmental-justice community that, irrespective of any racial or socioeconomic status, one should not be burdened with the effects of hazardous-waste or environmental contamination — that that is a right among all people in society."

Boerner of the CSAB repeated another insidious argument in a recent telephone interview. "All the studies that environmental-justice advocates appeal to look at current socioeconomic and demographic data," says Boerner. "You can't simply say that because a facility is in a community which is largely poor or black now, that was necessarily true when the facility was sited. For instance, there are facilities on the East Side that were sited at the turn of the century, when East St. Louis was largely a working-class and, in many areas, a primarily white community," says Boerner.

Boerner's historical analogy, however, shows flaws of its own. By 1910, blacks already represented 10 percent of East St. Louis' population, which then stood at 59,000, according to the book *Race Riot in East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* by Elliott Rudwick.

Spurred by rapid industrial growth, blacks continued to migrate north over the next decades searching for work. The emancipation of African-Americans following the Civil War encouraged Northern industrialists to freely exploit the former

slave labor force as a means of breaking union-organizing efforts.

By 1926, Monsanto Chemical had founded its own town just south of the East St. Louis city limits. Since 1967, it has been called Sauget, after its longtime mayor. But for more than 40 years prior to that, it was known as Monsanto, Ill. When the St. Louis chemical company decided to divest itself of some of its East Side real estate in 1927, its sales pitch included a booklet meant to entice other major polluters to the borders of East St. Louis. Here is an excerpt:

"Colored workers are available here in large numbers, and according to reports, are more intelligent and of a better class than those farther south, being especially useful for different kinds of rough or disagreeable work."

That was 67 years ago.

Chandler has lived in East St. Louis all her life. In 1916, when she was 2 years old, the Alta Sita Improvement and Protective Association decreed she couldn't live in the neighborhood where she now resides. The notice appeared on the front page of the *East St. Louis Daily Journal*: "Be it resolved, that this district be limited and restricted for the residence of white people only." The next summer, at least 39 blacks and eight whites were murdered in East St. Louis in a race riot.

Forty-two years went by before Chandler moved to Trendley Avenue. She arrived three years before the Lanson Chemical Co. By 1960, the black population in East St. Louis was approaching 50 percent. Chandler didn't have time for measuring socioeconomic factors or calculating demographics. She paid little heed to

the chemical company that began operating behind her house, and neither did her neighbors. She was busy raising her family, going to church, paying her taxes and continuing to work as a federal employee until 1976.

It has now been 34 years since she moved into the neighborhood that once excluded her. Reference librarians may not know what Alta Sita means, but Chandler says it's a Romance-language derivative for "high ground." If it is indeed high ground, the incline is imperceptible and relative to American Bottoms, the broad floodplain that stretches for miles on the east side of the Mississippi.

It is a Saturday afternoon, and the 80-year-old matron has just returned from playing sacred music at a funeral. There is a silver tea service in the dining room, where the elegant wallpaper is starting to peel. She wears a pink-chiffon dress. On top of the television is a framed print of A. Philip Randolph, who founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. Her 92-year-old husband, who is a former porter, has gone out to the kitchen, leaving her seated by a piano lined with snapshots of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Since learning of her cancer two years ago, Chandler has compiled a list of neighbors who have died. It is a long list.

"I feel forsaken," she says. "If we leave, we're going to catch the devil trying to sell."

Chandler is sitting ramrod straight listening to some of the academic arguments promulgated by the Center for the Study of American Business at Washington University. She listens and then gives her own one-word rebuttal.

"Rhetoric."

Infinity

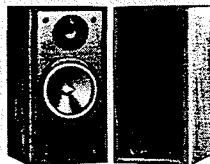
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