THE KANSAS CITY STAR
KANSAS CITY, MO.
D. 258,312 S. 399,606

AUG 23 1981

Hazardous trail of wastes marks a dealer

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Ellisville, Mo.—Russell Bliss owns on a sprawling farm, a stable of prize show horses, a score of exotic luxury cars.

His business is waste oil—buying it, reselling it—and sometimes hauling away a load of toxic chemicals.

With Bliss' success has come a certain notoriety.

But the embattled waste oil dealer says he is a reputable man. He talks as if he is just another victim of the events for which he has been blamed.

After his drivers sprayed three horse arenas in 1971 with oil containing the lethal poison dioxin—killing nearly 100 horses and making several people seriously ill—Bliss said the firm that generated the chemical passed it off as ordinary oil.

When deadly PCBs were dumped four years ago into a pit next to a Meramec River tributary—a mess that cost the federal government more than half a million dollars to clean up—Bliss blamed an employee's poor judgment.

When the state this year exhumed decaying drums of chemicals near a stream adjacent to his property, Bliss said he didn't know who put them there.

These explanations did not impress the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. Under the state's new hazardous waste law, the agency must deny a waste transporter license to anyone who has "habitually engaged in waste management practices which pose a threat to the health of humans or the environment."

The agency has decided that Russell Bliss is such a person. His is the only application denied since the law took effect.

Bliss—whose appeal will be heard this fall by the state Hazardous Waste Management Commission—has made a handsome living collecting waste oil from garages and service stations and selling it to refineries and other customers. He also has helped big companies such as Mercantile, American Can and Union Electric get rid of chemical wastes.

He thinks the license denial is shabby treatment of a man who has probably kept millions of gallons of oil from going into sewers, ditches and streams.

The problem, the state says, is the frequency with which his cargoes have fouled land and water—threatening health and draining limited government cleanup funds.

Success story

Although only 47, Bliss has been in the waste oil business more than 30 years. A shrewd and flamboyant man, he was 16 when he dropped out of school to get married and join what was then his father's company.

For a man who admits he "can't hardly read" and "can spell very few words," Bliss has achieved considerable success.

On an average day his company, Jerry Russell Bliss Inc.—named for his son and successor—makes a $1,500 profit on waste oil sales. Bliss pays himself $1,000 a week. His success shines in the lustrous gold crosses and crucifix that hang from the tangle of chains on his neck.

He lives on 12 acres in Ellisville in a home filled with antique stationary and pictures of horses and cowboys and the boundless space of the western frontier.

In Rosati, Mo., Bliss has a 200-acre farm and 500 exotic creatures, including buffalo and rare breeds of sheep and fowl. At his home in Ellisville are his world-champion appaloosa show horses and a veritable fortune in expensive celebrity cars—including a custom Excalibur convertible; a 1952 Mercedes convertible once owned by John and Jacqueline Kennedy; a cream-white Cadillac Eldorado pickup truck once owned by Elvis Presley; the Eldorado station wagon of Howard Hughes; and a $100,000 custom Auburn convertible built for the shah of Iran. Bliss calls the cars his "built-in pension fund."

Bliss moves with a stiff horseman's gait. He is a man of easy informality, gracious and amiable when not discussing the Department of Natural Resources.

The sympathy and regard of some fairly illustrious people is proof to Bliss that he is a responsible man.

"I know Russell Bliss to be a conscientious businessman," said Rep. Richard Ichord, D-Mo., in a letter to DNR Director Fred Lafser last December, "and, quite frankly, the possibility that unnecessary regulatory obstacles may threaten any small business concerns me greatly."

Added testimonial is the engraved invitation "to attend and participate in the Inauguration of Ronald Wilson Reagan . . . and George Herbert Walker Bush." Bliss also was asked to the inaugural reception held by Sen. John Danforth, R-Mo., who wrote, "Sally and I look forward to seeing you."

"I doubt if any of those —— got one," Bliss scowled, his thoughts turning again to Jefferson City.

Bliss thinks the scrutiny he gets should be trained on those who generate waste. "I am sure that we have been slipped things many times," he said. "There's no way to look at it and tell."

Besides, Bliss said, "I have done absolutely nothing (wrong) in anybody's eyes" since the hazardous waste laws took effect.

"It should start with a clean slate, like any other law," Bliss said. "(But) they (DNR) keep pounding on the past."

But interviews, court documents and state records suggest that the burden of events lives on in the present.

The dioxin incident

In the summer of 1971, Andrea and Lori Platt—6- and 10-year-old sisters—led an idyllic life near Moscow Mills at the horse arena part-owned by Judy Platt, their mother.

In Verona, Mo., a company called North Eastern Pharmaceutical and Chemical Co. had entered a deep financial slide.

The company made hexachlorophene, a skin cleanser later banned as a suspected health hazard. The compound from which hexachlorophene is made—abbreviated TCP—is also the chemical parent of 2,4,5-T, an ingredient of the Vietnam War herbicide Agent Orange.

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Production of hexachlorophene or herbicide from TCP creates a waste called TCDD—a particularly lethal member of the dioxin chemical family. Dangerous in concentrations of a few parts per billion, the chemical causes weakness, headaches, weight loss, disorders of the joints, skin, liver and other organs, and has been linked to cancer and birth defects.

North Eastern initially sent its dioxin-contaminated wastes to Louisiana for destruction in a special high-temperature incinerator. Then it began to cut corners. Years later, authorities learned that at least two area farmers were paid to allow waste drums dumped on their land. The company also hired one of its suppliers—Independent Petrochemical Corp. of St. Louis—to dispose of wastes. Independent subcontracted the job to Bliss.

Court records show that Bliss drivers hauled about 18,000 gallons of dioxin-contaminated wastes in six loads between February and October 1971. Bliss used waste oil to suppress dust at his arena, and promoted this service to others. Three arenas hired him when dioxin was being blended into his tanks.

Shenandoah Stables, Mrs. Platt's arena, was oiled on May 26, 1971. During a horse show four days later, the ringmaster Frank Hampel—Mrs. Platt's partner—complained of headaches and nausea. "Persons in attendance . . . noticed the unusual absence of insects in the arena," noted a subsequent report by a Washington University research group.

Soon birds roosting in the rafters began to die. Cats that prowled the arena lost their hair.

The horses were afflicted with pain. Their hair fell out, they developed bloody ulcers on their bodies, they urinated blood and their noses ran. Their weight plummeted, their coordination and eyesight deteriorated. They bumped into things, fell down and struggled to rise again. The first horse died in August; dozens more followed in ghastly procession during the next several months.

Almost from the state, Mrs. Platt recalls, "none of us were feeling well and I assumed we were all working too hard taking care of sick animals." She believes now it was only "because we took showers every day (that) we didn't end up like the horses."

Early on Aug. 22, Mrs. Platt returned from disposing of a dead horse to find 8-year-old Andrea writhing in pain and bleeding from her urinary tract. The child was hospitalized more than a week. In November, her weight failing, Andrea was hospitalized five more days. Doctors believed she was "chemically intoxicated but they didn't know by what," Mrs. Platt said in a 1978 deposition.

Both girls developed arthritis-like ailments that made riding painful. The girls' knees sometimes swelled so badly that "I've had to cut them out of their blue jeans with scissors," Mrs. Platt said.

Andrea, who regularly played on the arena floor and likely absorbed a large dose of dioxin through her skin, appeared to suffer more chronic effects. Since the kidney hemorrhage, Mrs. Platt testified, the girl "still has trouble holding her urine."

In 1978, Andrea was back in the hospital with headaches and severe knee and pack pains, according to Mrs. Platt's deposition.

But the doctors were more concerned "with something that had to do with birth defects if she would have children when she grew up."

"They called a conference . . . to prepare me that Andrea and Lori, both girls, had a much higher possibility of getting cancer . . . (They) told me that when the girls became engaged or considered being married they would like to talk to the girls and their boyfriends."

The plague was not confined to Shenandoah Stables. Illness and death also rode with Bliss trucks to Bubbling Springs Ranch near Fenton and Timberline Stables in New Bloomfield.

At Timberline, horse trainer Patricia Drinkard's 3-year-old son and another child developed chloracne, a skin eruption that is a trademark of dioxin exposure.

Mrs. Drinkard says her health deteriorated to the point where she is semi-invalid at age 41. She complains of chronic weakness and joint and muscle stiffness so severe that movement is punctuated by cracking sounds. She said her husband Jerry's health seems to be following the same course. "He's approximately three to four years behind me in the aching of the joints and the grinding and the crunching."

The toll at the three arenas: at least 97 horses, 12 cats, six dogs, two goats and thousands of wild birds killed; at least 10 persons suffering temporary or chronic illness symptoms consistent with dioxin poisoning.

Solving a mystery

It was three years before the victims knew the origin of their tragedy.

In August 1974 the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta discovered dioxin in arena soil and learned where the chemical came from.

At no time did North Eastern, Independent Petrochemical or Bliss offer a clue to the cause of the disaster.

Since all three arenas had been sprayed by Bliss, suspicion soon focused on some chemical agent in the oil. But officials who questioned Bliss said he couldn't think of anything that might have tainted the oil. He gave officials a list of sites where he had picked up chemicals, but the Verona company wasn't on it.

Without admitting liability, Bliss paid $10,000 in 1976 to settle a property damage suit Mrs. Platt and Hampel had filed against him, North Eastern and Independent. Facing multimillion-dollar personal injury suits by the Platts and Drinkards, Bliss has filed a $175,000 cross-claim against his co-defendents alleging they misled him into thinking that the dioxin waste "was merely waste oil."

The companies say Bliss was warned; it may be a minor disagreement because Bliss admits he received—but didn't test—a waste sample.

"I never knew the word dioxin. You could have told me it was a new kind of car," Bliss said in a recent interview. As a result, he said, he followed his usual "bad habit" of putting a drop of the oil to his mouth to judge its sulfur content and resale value.

"I wouldn't have tasted it . . . nor would I have put it on (an) arena (if I) was suspicious that it had anything in it," Bliss said.

In fact, Bliss said, the mystery might never have been solved if he hadn't suddenly recalled in 1974 the work he had done for North Eastern.

"In other words," he said, "I'm the one who's responsible for showing them where it was."

Others involved in the case have a much different story to tell.

Dr. Coleman Carter, a Center for Disease Control investigator, said in a 1978 deposition that after dioxin was identified in soil samples, the center consulted a Defense Department registry of companies that made 2,4,5-T herbicide. A Verona firm called Hoffman-Taff Inc. was on that list.

But Hoffman-Taff no longer existed. Along with its Verona plant, the firm had been acquired by Syntex Agribusiness Inc. Several Syntex employees recalled that North Eastern, by then defunct, had leased part of the Syntex plant and had hired Bliss to haul its wastes.

Carter testified that Bliss' memory was jogged by these findings.

"When I located a company and specifically told (Bliss) of our findings and finding this plant in Verona . . . ," Carter said, "he recalled hauling material from it."

One crucial event raises further questions about Bliss' inability to link the deaths of the horses and the North Eastern wastes.

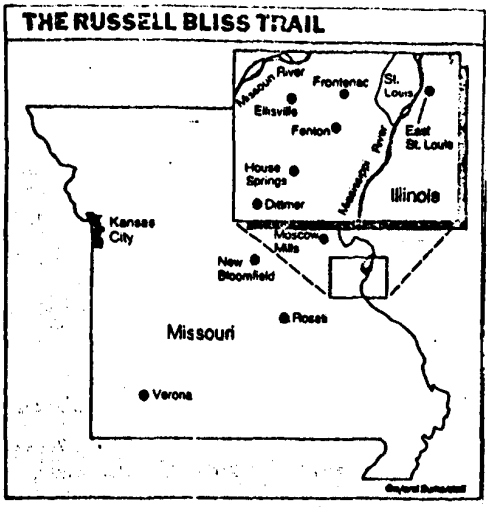
Missouri Highway Patrol records show that on May 20, 1971—six days before the first arena oiling and a month before the others—a Bliss truck eastbound on Interstate 44 was ticketed at a Greene County weigh station for being overweight. The truck, en route to St. Louis County from Verona, left the station without lightening its load but was not overweight at the next station.

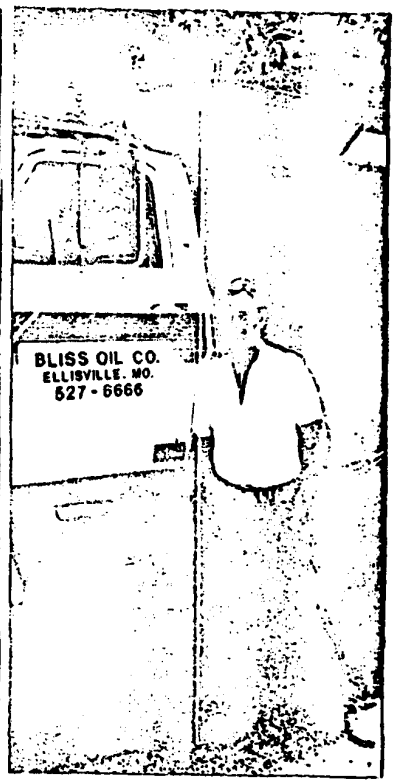
The driver, Delbert Eskew, had detoured to the Bliss farm in Rosati, where he reduced his cargo by spraying a gravel road.

Within two weeks, the farm caretaker later reported, birds were falling dead from trees that lined the road. A dog and 70 chickens also died.

Bliss said he had no reason to link the deaths on his property with the spraying of the road. He said only a handful of chickens died and he had assumed they died from contact with horse worming medicine.

After the dioxin incident Bliss stayed free of major controversy for a few years, but was still the object of complaints.







Waste oil dealer Russell Bliss believes the problems created by his dumping were not his responsibility and should not continue to be dredged up by Missouri officials. Mrs. Judy Platt, a former arena operator who lost dozens of horses when waste oil containing deadly dioxin was sprayed on her arena floor, believes otherwise. (staff photos by Myron Levin)

• In a sworn statement given to the Natural Resources Department earlier this year, Mrs. Platt and Hampel told of following Bliss in 1972 and '73 in hopes of discovering "what the substance was that he had sprayed on our arena."

A Bliss employee "regularly advised" them when Bliss himself "was planning to dispose of wastes that could not be resold," their affidavit said.

Once they trailed Bliss from Monsanto's St. Peter's plant "to a site outside of East St. Louis, Illinois. There, we observed him drain material from the truck down the side of a levee into a swampy area."

On several other occasions, they said, "his disposal sites were swamps, wooded areas, or the Mississippi River in Illinois and Missouri."

• In a sworn statement last year, David L. Covert, a Bliss driver from 1974 until 1978, told how he would "pick up waste oil and other waste materials in a tank truck from various sites."

Covert said wastes that couldn't be resold "would be dumped on the Bliss property . . . in Ellisville, Missouri, or at some other site, such as roadside ones, a landfill or a creek with running water."

• Near dusk on Oct. 17, 1979, Jefferson County resident Virginia Kaysing was driving on Highway MM when she saw a tank truck by the side of the road pumping its cargo into a stream. Mrs. Kaysing said two men stood beside the truck, which had the words "Bliss Waste Oil Service" on the side.

By the time her complaint was relayed by county health authorities to the DNR, say agency files, "it was a 'lost cause' to pursue an investigation."

Bliss said these reports sound like products of a competitor's imagination. "I personally never did haul anything out of Monsanto," he said, "and whatever was hauled out of there was sold for a dime a gallon."

The Dittmer episode

In February 1977, Albert D. Harris struck a deal with Delbert Eskew, the driver who had dumped the dioxin on Bliss' farm road to avoid getting a ticket. Eskew would haul drums of waste to Harris' land near Dittmer, Mo. Harris would get $25 per truckload and the right to sell the drums.

To sell the drums, Harris had to empty them. He scooped out a pit a few feet from a branch of Calvey Creek, an intermittent stream that feeds the Meramec River.

By March, the cauldron of chemicals and oil was almost full. So Harris set the pit on fire to make more room.

On March 11, firefighters were called to Harris' land after reports of an explosion and fire. They found the pit and several drums ablaze—including one emitting a gas that "burned similar to a cutting torch, but on a much larger scale," according to a fire district report. After the fire was extinguished, the report said, "one of our firemen complained of a headache and a tingling sensation in his hands and arms."

Investigation revealed that most of the pit wastes had come from two places. One was a Monsanto lab in St. Louis that paid Bliss $300 per load to dispose of an experimental chemical produced years before in a pilot operation.

The other was cleanings from Bliss' waste oil storage tanks. These bottom sludges were probably responsible for the extremely high concentrations of PCBs—up to 18,000 parts per million—found in samples of liquid and soil from the pit. PCBs, toxic and suspected of causing cancer and birth defects, were made exclusively by Monsanto until their production was halted in 1977. They are among the most feared pollutants because they do not break down in nature and they build up in the fatty tissues of animals and people.

Officials reported seeing dead worms and tadpoles and a sheen on top of Calvey Creek when they inspected the Harris site a few days after the fire.

On March 25, a DNR inspector issued a notice of violation with instructions that the pit not be disturbed.

Yet on March 29 and again on April 9—as a federal cleanup team was being assembled—Bliss sent workers to drain liquids from the pit and remove drums and soil. Officials still don't know where all this material went.

The Coast Guard and Environmental Protection Agency team later said the cleanup attempt actually spread the contamination, making their job more difficult and expensive. More than 4,300 55-gallon drums were needed to hold the contaminated soil.

The public's bill: $515,482.

Apart from what he spent at the site, Bliss's bill came to $2,000. Without admitting guilt, he agreed to pay that sum in May 1979 to settle an attorney general's suit charging him with violating state clean water laws.

Bliss said recently he didn't know he wasn't supposed to disturb the pit and only sought to help Harris.

He also said he only approved the drum salvage plan on condition that it be "done properly."

This would have been more guidance than Bliss recalled giving his drivers in his deposition in the water pollution suit.

He testified that he did not concern himself with where his drivers hauled chemical wastes.

"How do you know how the drivers determine what to do with the barrels?" he was asked.

"They just take them to a landfill or whatever they want to do with them."

Tug of war in Frontenac

The Department of Natural Resources seemed strangely uneasy in 1978 when the city of Frontenac, Mo., won a court battle to close a Bliss tank storage site for safety reasons.

The tanks perched above Deer Creek—not an ideal spot for thousands of gallons of oil laced with solvents and PCBs.

No barriers existed to keep spills from reaching the stream—a violation of federal pollution laws for which Bliss would eventually pay the EPA a $1,500 penalty.

And the creek was being polluted, said a DNR memo, "apparently as a result of oversaturation of the soil."

Yet when Frontenac won its fight to oust the tanks, the state stepped in to delay the move. A memo by DNR engineer Bob Zeman told why:

"Based on our knowledge of Mr. Bliss' past activities, we feel there is little chance of this material being properly transported and disposed of unless we know in advance every detail of the planned move and have someone physically present to see that the operation is carried out."

In April 1979, 4,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated liquids and sludge were loaded in two tank trucks for transport to a Louisiana incinerator.

A DNR official trailed the convoy as far as Cape Girardeau to make sure it did not stray.

Given the PCB rules then on the books, the official said, Bliss had probably done "more than we could have legally made him do."

Bliss boasted that he "went along with them as a gesture."

He said that when workers at the incinerator received the wastes, they told his drivers: " 'You've got to be joking. We're drinking stuff down here more hazardous than this.' "

Close to home

Thirty miles west of St. Louis, the meadows and woodlands of Ellisville are in retreat before the advance of suburban homes. In a housing tract down the road from Bliss, a contractor last summer found dozens of drums of chemicals wedged in the banks of Caulk's Creek, an intermittent stream that flows into the Missouri.

A second dump was discovered across the road from Bliss on the land of Grover Callahan, an ex-employee. Officials believe Callahan buried the drums found on his land and at the first site.

Armed with a court order, officials this spring confirmed reports of a third site—a trench of decaying drums of solvents on a branch of Caulk's Creek a few feet beyond Bliss' property.

Only the first of the sites has been cleaned—at a cost of $30,000 to the Coast Guard and the DNR.

Bliss admits that Callahan used to haul his barrels but insists he isn't responsible for where they were dumped. If Callahan "had asked me, I probably would have said it was all right, because then it was all right," Bliss said.

Bliss said he has no idea who created the dump just beyond his property.

The state doesn't believe him. In a St. Louis County Circuit Court suit filed last fall, Attorney General John Ashcroft charged that Bliss is responsible for "large quantities of liquid, semi-liquid and solid waste" at the Caulk's Creek sites.

Running a tight ship

"They're doing everything they can to put me out of business," Bliss said recently. DNR Director Lafser "has a personal ax to grind with me and you can print that in the paper."

Bliss also suspects that someone in the agency "has a political contact with a competitor of mine."

To Bliss, this much is clear: There must be more to his problems than meets the eye.

He says he has tried to appease the state—even turning down lucrative road oiling jobs and paying a consultant $300 a month to keep him up on environmental rules.

Recently Bliss showed off the truck parking area behind his house—an expanse of gravel almost as neat as a well-kept lawn.

He was suddenly riveted by the sight of a splotch of grease the size of a dinner plate. Nearby a pair of legs protruded from beneath a truck under repair.

"Get it cleaned up right now," Bliss said. "Whatever you're doing now, stop. You know better than that, Ronnie."

As Ronnie scurried from beneath the truck, Bliss moved on to a barn where a big electric fan drove the punishing heat from his sleek appaloosas.

Nothing, Bliss said, is too good for his horses. "You put a fish in a bowl or a dog in a cage, you better take care of it.

"A man that loves animals and the outdoors as much as I do wouldn't screw up the environment on purpose."

Bliss said he longs to retire to his farm to "live the rest of my life in peace."

Just as he took over from his father, he would pass the torch to Jerry.

But for now he must wait because he doesn't "want to leave my son with these problems."

"They beat around behind these frivolous laws they got that are unconstitutional," Bliss complained. "They're living in the past."

Not everyone is as able to let bygones be bygones.

"Believe me, for my family it's not in the past," said Mrs. Platt.

"Who's going to be next?" she asked. "I feel like Russell Bliss has almost ruined my family's entire future. We've got a lot of grit. We've held up real well.

"But who's going to be next?" /1