

toxic exposure that would “set it right off the chart.” Further, Petro Processors was not the only off-site impact they were suffering. Nearby, another hazardous-waste treatment firm, Rollins Environmental Services, had already accumulated its own questionable track record.

“We only want to deal with Petro because the rest of this is so complicated,” Fontenot recalled them saying. The statement galled him. “For the health department in 1991 not to be dealing with the complexity of the issue, or not to identify this as a problem, is ludicrous,” he said. “So here we are, 20 years after the waste killed all these cattle, after the major lawsuits have been fought and successfully won through the courts—and the Louisiana health department, who’s working on a contract with EPA, is unable to include in a health study or assessment a *real* health study or assessment. We haven’t moved very far.”⁹

If anyone in Louisiana understands the value of persistence in battling the system over environmental issues, it is Mary McCastle, one of Willie Fontenot’s all-time folk heroes. An African-American woman in her seventies, McCastle has jostled with Rollins Environmental Services since 1976.¹⁰ She is the undisputed leader of the Coalition for Community Action, the organization that has fought for the breathing rights of Alsen residents throughout that entire period. She makes feistiness run in her family. Her son, Roy, integrated the county sheriff’s department by becoming its first African-American deputy.¹¹

By any honest account, the residents of Alsen suffered through a nightmare for several years with little or no effective help from the city, state, or federal government. Residents complained of skin rashes, eye problems, and breathing problems. On one occasion, children in the elementary school began vomiting and had to be carried out of the building. Fumes from the Rollins facility were a constant problem. “You couldn’t dare get out of your car without covering up your face,” Roy McCastle recalls.¹²

The source of these fumes was the Rollins hazardous-waste landfill near the Mississippi River on the western side of Scenic High-

way. Alsen is near the northern end of an 85-mile river corridor unaffectionately known to environmentalists as "Cancer Alley" because of the health impacts of pollution from petrochemical plants, refineries, and associated hazardous-waste treatment facilities. The Rollins landfill was the fourth largest in the nation, representing 11.3 percent of permitted hazardous-waste landfill capacity as of 1986.¹³ As a disposal center for major companies along this corridor, including Exxon and BASF Wyandotte (a German chemical producer), Rollins played no small part in helping Louisiana achieve the dubious honor of hosting one-third of the nation's hazardous-waste landfill capacity by then.¹⁴

But establishing Rollins as the villain required a major effort to organize Alsen's 1,100 residents. Although somewhat better educated and more prosperous than the average African-American in Louisiana, many nonetheless were slow to accept Mary McCastle's faith that a large company like Rollins, whose annual revenue from the landfill exceeded \$69 million,¹⁵ could be challenged on environmental issues. In the 1970s, African-Americans in the South had almost no successful role models for such a struggle. Even Alsen's African-American political officials demurred. Mary's efforts to get the odors tested by state DEQ officials usually resulted in reports that their gauges had failed to show a problem.¹⁶

Fontenot, meanwhile, had his own nose in the air. Ever since moving to a neighborhood just a mile southeast of downtown Baton Rouge and the towering state capitol building, about three-and-a-half miles from Rollins, he had occasionally noticed a strange odor, "like something had died."¹⁷ Because it was often mixed with papermill odors, he knew it came from the north, but he "walked all over the neighborhood" like an environmental Sherlock Holmes, unable to develop a clue as to the exact source.

One day in January 1980, shortly after a new environmental section had been set up in the attorney general's office, newly hired attorney Patricia Norton told Fontenot of a visitor from the day before. "This guy came in here, and his nose was all swollen and red, skin peelin' off," Fontenot recalled her saying. "Says he's taking cortisone shots in his nose 'cause the membrane is being eaten up by

these chemicals comin' from someplace near Rollins. And he has petitions signed by 32 or 36 workers at Allied Signal, this guy was an electrician, and most of these guys were plumbers or electricians and signed a petition saying, 'We feel our health is being threatened by fumes by Rollins.' ”

This is incredible, Fontenot thought. These guys are willing to put their jobs on the line. Even in 1980, it was virtually an article of faith within Louisiana labor circles that some environmental pollution was a necessary tradeoff for well-paid industrial jobs. Workers simply did not rebel over environmental issues.

Allied Signal lay just south of Rollins. And the man had the first smoking gun Fontenot had found in his search for the elusive “dead-horse” odors. Since October 1979, he had been keeping a diary. When the wind blew out of the south, things were okay. When the winds came from the north, the fumes were sometimes so powerful that workers had to don air packs in order to breathe. The man had come to the attorney general's office out of frustration with his inability to get his own company management to complain.

Fontenot called Catherine Ewell, a sister-in-law of David Ewell. She lived on the opposite side of the Rollins site. Because of the problems with Petro Processors, she, too, had been keeping a diary—since 1968. It recorded wind directions, the number of trucks that entered each site, and the types of odors fouling the air. Fontenot compared the two diaries. They matched. Each suffered the effects on days when the other was fine. The culprit lay in the middle.

Catherine Ewell referred Fontenot to Mary McCastle. He called. It took him nearly two weeks to arrange a meeting at her house. When he arrived around 7:00 p.m., nearly three dozen people were sitting in her living room. Fontenot, the only white person there, could “feel the tension.” For the most part, despite their suffering with Rollins for nearly a decade and trying for four years to get someone to listen, the only whites they had seen in their neighborhood had been insurance salesmen and politicians—the latter only when they needed votes.

For nearly three hours, Fontenot tried to win their confidence, noting that a facility like Rollins would be chased out of *his* neigh-

borhood. Two men sitting on either side of him asked, "Where do you live?"

"Near Government and 22nd."

"Where near Government and 22nd?" they demanded with a sudden excitement that sent a chill down Fontenot's spine.

The two, it turned out, delivered mail in the surrounding area and knew Fontenot's longtime carrier. I'd better do something good, he recalled thinking with a laugh, or I may start losing my mail.

"Are you gettin' these terrible fumes in here?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," they answered, "the stuff'll come in, you gotta put wet towels over your head at night, you can't breathe, and you get tired all the time. They have flu-like symptoms and aching joints, and just feeling bad. Skin rashes."

"Well, you ever get any black dust?" Fontenot went on.

"Oh, yeah. That stuff sets in here, it's terrible! You gotta scrape it off your car."

"That's from the Reynolds coating manufacturing back there," Fontenot informed them. "Y'all ever get any white dust on ya?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, we get that."

"Well, that's from Allied Signal. They make those styrofoam pellets," he told them. "That stuff'll blow out. You get that odor that smells like rotten eggs?"

Another affirmative.

"Well, that's from the two paper mills north of here. Do y'all ever get an odor that smells like somethin' died?"

"Oh, yeah! It comes in here horrible!"

"Well, that's Rollins." One problem, he told them, was that Rollins was land-farming the Exxon waste, a treatment technique that involved spreading it on the ground where certain types of bacteria would break down its chemical components. The reality, said Fontenot, is that most of it simply evaporated.

Fontenot got the cooperation he wanted—another set of diary keepers. Mary McCastle and a friend, Emma Johnson, were especially faithful in recording pollution incidents. They began calling him at all hours of the night and day when the worst odors occurred. Fontenot would drive to the scene to verify their observations. He got them to call the DEQ, which was later headed briefly by Norton,

who made a notable personal visit that convinced her to take action against Rollins. In 1980, they also filed a lawsuit for damages from Rollins, enlisting Alsen residents as plaintiffs in a class action. They also began to call city hall. In all, said Fontenot, together they managed to verify 136 complaints about chemical fumes from Rollins.

Collectively, the diaries created damning evidence. Catherine Ewell, who had never before spoken in public, followed Carl Genn, the Allied Signal worker, to the stand in a January 1980 hearing by the state's Environmental Control Commission. What had begun as a minor agenda item resulted in a commission order for the Department of Natural Resources to perform a full inspection of Rollins, the first ever. The agency spent \$60,000 and the full month of April on the investigation.

By April 23, the agency's report documented eight unpermitted discharges where waste was flowing off the site, with cyanide in virtually every sample. Alsen residents turned out at the meeting in force, and Rollins, ordered to do a massive cleanup, held an open house, complete with buses and tours, on May 22 and 23 to show off its progress.

Fontenot attended and was still disgusted. Parts of the site were still off limits, where waste was still pouring out of pits. The "state-of-the-art" pits he saw were "full of black liquids with barrels bobbing around." Around 5:00 p.m., while he was at Louisiana State University, Fontenot got a call from David Ewell. "Willie," he recalled Ewell saying, "you need to get up here 'cause they must have cut one of them pits open. It's the blackest I've ever seen it."

A group of civil- and environmental-engineering graduate students accompanied him to the site. While they were observing the discharge, a helicopter flew in carrying employees of the state water-quality division. It was the first time, he learned, that they had ever had access to a state helicopter. The pilot himself was excited to be doing genuine state business; he had always flown state officials for political appointments. Accompanying state environmental officials, they learned that the cyanide discharge had killed fish, turtles, and alligators in the swamp. The resulting melee from the exposure of this information forced the water-quality chief to back down on a positive report on the Rollins cleanup. Instead, the company was

forced to shut down for a week. Worse yet, it had become a focal point for a newly empowered state environmental movement whose catalyst was Mary McCastle, a role model for a host of other African-American environmentalists who would surface in Louisiana in the decade that followed.

In their anger and with their new political savvy, Alsen residents retired some of the African-American politicians who had failed to take up their cause. New leaders, such as State Representative Kip Holden and State Senator Cleo Fields, emerged as key environmental advocates in the Louisiana legislature.

For Alsen residents, however, many bitter organizing lessons still followed. They did not achieve a settlement of their class-action suit until 1987, winning a meager \$3,000 per plaintiff "just before Christmas."¹⁸ In the interim, many residents, particularly the McCastles, lost faith in their lawyer.¹⁹ The settlement shields Rollins from future health-effects claims, but many residents had wearied of the long fight. And they did not win the local health clinic they had wanted. Alsen residents must still drive into Baton Rouge for medical treatment. Finally, Rollins remained open, although its performance did improve.²⁰

Rollins has suffered from the reputation it acquired. In 1989, the company sought a DEQ permit to triple the size of its facility, by installing new landfills and expanding its incineration units, in order to accept more out-of-state waste.²¹ In a packed hearing room, the company heard little sympathy and intense criticism. Its hearing came little more than a month after an accident in which some hazardous chemicals reacted with water to create a poison gas that injured two contract workers, who claimed that they had not been warned of such hazards. An investigation by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration followed.²² That accident prompted the U.S. EPA to suspend the company's authorization to receive or handle Superfund waste, a major source of income for hazardous-waste-treatment operators.²³ The same day, DEQ filed a suit challenging the U.S. EPA's planned disposal through Rollins of 1.7 million gallons of dinoseb, a banned pesticide linked to birth defects and male sterility that the company was to burn in its incinerator.²⁴ Later that spring, Attorney General Guste also moved to block U.S.

Department of Energy shipments of radioactive wastes to Rollins,²⁵ a topic that drew the investigative attention of *Baton Rouge Advocate* reporter Peter Schinkle in an extended series of articles over the next year. In all, the flurry of regulatory activity that attached itself to Rollins was a far cry from the minimal attention prior to 1980. The old order had begun to give way in Louisiana.

In its proximity to the capital, Alsen gained some advantages, however tenuous at times, that in the past have been completely unavailable to minority communities in more rural areas of Louisiana.

Herbert Rigmaiden, an African-American farmer from the Willow Springs area near Sulphur, in Calcasieu Parish, has learned the route from southwestern Louisiana to Baton Rouge, which still seems a world apart from his home. It became familiar during his neighbors' long battle with Browning Ferris Industries (BFI). As he told a congressional hearing on June 22, 1983, the state officials "hate to see us coming through the door."²⁶

Rigmaiden made the statement during his first-ever trip to Washington, by way of his first-ever airplane flight, one he approached with the trepidation of the uninitiated. Willie Fontenot had arranged his testimony through Lois Gibbs, the veteran of the Love Canal neighborhood's fight with Hooker Chemical Company, who had gone on to found the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (CCHW) in Arlington, Virginia. A local activist from the Lake Charles area drove Rigmaiden to the Houston airport, and Gibbs met him at Washington National Airport. Because Rigmaiden was a farmer of modest means from a community of even more modest means, the Subcommittee on Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources of the House Committee on Government Operations had agreed to pay for his travel. Representative Mike Synar (D-Oklahoma) was conducting hearings on groundwater contamination.

Whatever his educational deficits, Rigmaiden knew some very practical things about groundwater. He raised cattle and hay, and for years his family had benefited from the clear waters of the springs that lent the area its name. But for the last nine years, he had been trucking fresh water to his farm for drinking and cooking. His own wells were contaminated, and he blamed it on a hazardous-waste