

- [March 25, 1991](#)
- [Vol. 35](#)
- [No. 11](#)

His Family Ravaged by Cancer, An Angry Louisiana Man Wages War on the Very Air That He Breathes

By Susan Reed

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [E-mail](#)

Amos Favorite is 68, and he has a story to tell. "I lost my uncle James Barber and his son Israel," he says, ticking off the names on his fingers. "I lost another uncle, Jorden Favorite, his wife, Pipine, and their son Isaac. Then there was another uncle, Herbert Favorite. My cousins Lizzie and Emily died in their 40s. Then there was my aunt's husband, Josene LeBlanc." Favorite shakes his head—nine members of his family gone in 13 years. "Our people used to live to be 95, 100, years old," he says. "Now even the young people are dyin'."

Favorite thinks he knows the cause of those deaths, and if you visit him in his hometown of Geismar, in Ascension Parish, La., he might climb into his secondhand blue 1984 Lincoln Continental and take you on what he calls a "toxic tour." Located 10 miles south of Baton Rouge, Ascension is a poor and rural area, a place of pastures, live oaks and small brick houses. At the intersection of highways 30 and 73, however, the bucolic scene changes abruptly. Across the road sits a massive, Oz-like city of steel pipe, cylinders and tanks. Steam billows from the cooling towers of plants with names like Rubicon. Liquid Carbonic and Borden Chemical, and flames from burning chemical waste leap from 200-foot-high stacks. Strange odors and a fine mist fill the air.

Inhabited mostly by blacks, Ascension Parish lies in the heart of a notorious 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi Valley that has come to be known as Cancer Alley. Between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, 125 companies produce 20 percent of America's petrochemicals for such products as fertilizers, herbicides, gasoline, paint and plastic. In the process, more toxic chemicals are spewed into local air, land and water than in any other state in America—more than 2 billion pounds from 1987 to 1989. Dr. David Ozonoff, an environmental epidemiologist at Boston University's School of Public Health, calls the chemical corridor "a public-health catastrophe." Dr. Velma Campbell, who was a physician at New Orleans's Ochsner Clinic, says, "The area is like a massive human experiment conducted without the consent of the experimental subjects."

No one is angrier about the situation than Favorite, a retired aluminum-plant worker who is president of a fledgling environmental group called Ascension Parish Residents Against Toxic Pollution. "We got some deadly poisons out here," he says, as he drives past BASF, Vulcan, Triad, CF Industries, Shell Oil and Air Products & Chemicals, some of the 18 chemical companies that crowd the 296-square-mile parish. In 1989 these companies discharged 124.4 million pounds of toxic chemicals, including the carcinogens vinyl chloride and benzene, as well as ammonia and mercury, which affect the nervous system, and chloroform, toluene and carbon tetrachloride, which can deform fetuses. "We call it toxic gumbo," says Ramona Stevens, another local activist.

Yet there is little agreement about the severity of the problem—or even whether there is a problem. According to the National Cancer Institute, Louisiana has the highest lung cancer mortality rate in the country among white males, and Ascension Parish ranks in the top 10 percent nationwide for pancreatic cancer. So far, however, scientists have failed to make a direct link between those numbers and chemical pollution. "Carcinogens in Louisiana have been well regulated," insists Richard Kleiner of the Louisiana Chemical Association, an industry lobby group. Kleiner argues that smoking and diet contribute more to the state's high cancer rates than chemical emissions. "Studies don't suggest that the environment plays a major role," says Kleiner.

If that is so, critics ask, then why have three major chemical companies—Dow, Georgia Gulf and Exxon—spent

millions of dollars recently to relocate people living near their plants in the Mississippi Valley? "Companies are moving people instead of reducing pollution," says Marylee Orr, executive director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network. "They're dealing with the effects, not the causes."

One difficulty in establishing a cause-and-effect link, says Dr. Linda Pickle, bio-statistics director at the Lombardy Cancer Research Center at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is that "environmental pollution is very difficult to assess. There are so many chemicals in the air down there, and no one really knows the effects of long-term, low-level exposure. Cancer takes at least 10 to 20 years to develop, so the current mortality rates in the state probably reflect conditions two decades ago." Still, she cautions, "Studies on asbestos and cancer have suggested that toxic chemicals may very well have a synergistic effect. People who smoke and breathe chemicals are likely to be at higher risk."

The absence of a direct link, argues Lois Gibbs, executive director of a Virginia-based group called Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, allows chemical producers too much leeway. "Chemicals should be guilty until proven innocent," says Gibbs, who notes that the Environmental Protection Agency regulates only eight airborne pollutants. "In this country, they're innocent until proven guilty. And the public is guilty of hysteria until proven right."

Amos Favorite and his neighbors say they don't need statistics to prove that something is terribly wrong. They talk about the former pharmacist in nearby St. Gabriel, Kay Gaudet, who counted 63 miscarriages among local women in 1987. They talk about mustard greens that turn black overnight in their gardens, pecan trees that have stopped bearing nuts, new aluminum window screens that disintegrate in a month, and a white powder that settles on cars and eats away paint. Residents talk about pervasive asthma and their children's chronically runny eyes and noses. Recently, Favorite noticed that huge branches from the parish's hackberry trees had started falling to the ground. "The chemical plant people tell me it's the frost," he says. "I been here 68 years and never seen anything like this."

Favorite and his neighbors breathed, bathed in and drank toxic chemicals for decades without knowing it. That changed on June 15, 1984, when BASF, located in Geismar, locked out 370 local members of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union. Richard Miller, an organizer for the union, traveled to Louisiana to support the workers. "When I got there. I looked around for allies," he says. "I thought, 'Who are the other victims?' The residents of Geismar were the first ones I saw."

Amos Favorite attended a meeting Miller helped convene at the Geismar fire-house and volunteered to become the first president of Ascension Parish Residents Against Toxic Pollution. "Organizing was frightening for many of the people," says Miller. "This industry is economically very powerful in Louisiana. The communities' needs are great, and their resources are few. Often it forces them to accept the companies' money and sing to their tune."

Still, Favorite's group has managed to score significant victories. In 1986 it filed suit to force the state Department of Environmental Quality to increase a \$66,700 fine levied against BASF for violations, including the excess release of phosgene and toluene into the air. (The fine was eventually raised to \$150,000.) In 1988 the group sued the DEQ again, this time to compel it to draw up regulations to phase out underground disposal of hazardous wastes. Favorite's group won the suit, which is now under appeal by the industry. Ascension's environmental activists have blocked a proposed asbestos dump in Geismar and succeeded in rerouting chemical trucks out of their neighborhoods. Indeed, there is some indication that progress is being made. A new state law will mandate a drop of 50 percent in toxic air pollution from 1987 levels by the end of 1994. Says Dr. Paul Templet, head of the Department of Environmental Quality: "Small environmental groups like Ascension Parish influence this agency, and we influence industry."

Much of the credit for those changes belongs to Favorite, an intriguing character who has been an activist for one cause or another most of his life. "I came to Geismar in 1925, when I was 2 years old," he says. "My mother was a single parent. She gave me to my grandparents to raise when I was 6 weeks old." Favorite grew up on the Waterloo sugarcane plantation in Geismar. "It was educated slavery," he says. "Us colored children were only allowed to go to school three months a year until seventh grade. It cost too much to go see the doctor in Gonzales. The plantation vet would look at us when he came to check the animals." Favorite left school to cut cane for 20 cents a ton at the age of 9, the same year his mother died.

World War II offered Favorite a chance to escape. Trained in chemical-warfare defense—the scientific background is useful to him still—he served with the 503rd Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on Saipan and Okinawa. After the war, he married Rosemary James (now his wife of 45 years) and studied electronics under the GI Bill. Hired in 1958 by the Ormet aluminum plant to clean storage tanks, he later filed a class-action suit on behalf of 37 blacks that charged discrimination in the labor contract. The group won \$37,000 in an out-of-court settlement, and Favorite returned to Ormet victorious.

At home, Favorite's children started following their father's example. With the coming of public-school desegregation in the 1960s, Amos's 16-year-old daughter, Barbara—one of nine children—told him she wanted to attend the all-white high school in Geismar. Favorite agreed. "She's stubborn, just like me," he says. "She used to come home with busted eggs all over her, spit on her, strawberries on her clothes. The Klan burned crosses on my lawn. I called up the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., and they put me in touch with an NAACP lawyer down here. He sued the hell out of that school. When the school told us they couldn't guarantee her safety, federal marshals came in to protect her."

Favorite doesn't always have the support of his family. "Some of my kin get angry with me," he says softly. "After I testified at the State Capitol in Baton Rouge about my relatives who died of cancer, a TV crew came to film their graves. A few relatives threatened to sue me. They don't understand that it's silence that hurts us most."

So Favorite continues spreading the word. On a recent Friday evening, he gathered a group of black deacons in Geismar's local recreation hall. There, a representative from the Louisiana Coalition for Tax Justice explained that Ascension Parish had lost \$94 million over the last 10 years because of tax breaks granted to the chemical companies by the state. "We are subsidizing them for poisoning us," says Favorite, amazed. "Discrimination wasn't nothin' compared to what we live with now. The war I fought in was nothin' compared to the one we're fightin' now. As long as these chemical plants keep pollutin', we are livin' in the shadow of death. All of us."