

David Zimmerman
HST 302
13 April 2013

Environment and Economics: The Stigma of St. Louis

Located in the center of the lower peninsula of Michigan in Gratiot County is the town of St. Louis. I have lived the entirety of my thirty years within Gratiot County. From the age of seven on I have lived in Ithaca, a town that's 8.3 miles driving distance from St. Louis.¹ To say the least, my fascination with the narrative of St. Louis is something that has been ongoing for years as I've kept watch through the newspapers, Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force information, local television news reports and personal visits to the town for the purpose of seeing friends and acquaintances. Velsicol Chemical Corporation bought a chemical plant that was originally owned by Michigan Chemical Company in the 1960's, but it should be noted that Velsicol is legally on the hook the toxic legacy it left behind after closing their doors in 1978.² One of the most recent developments in the ongoing saga between economics and environment has been the removal of the symbols that mark St. Louis as a toxic town where Velsicol once resided. The question at the core of this narrative is whether or not the town has recovered enough from an environmental stand point to warrant the removal of this label, or if there is a rush to be rid of this reputation because of the negative consequences this long lasting stigma has had on the local economy.

To begin to understand the interplay between environment and economy, it is perhaps best to approach the topic with the understanding that when St. Louis was first settled, it was a

¹ "Driving Directions to St. Louis, Mi," Google Maps, <http://mags.google.com> (accessed April 15, 2013).

² David McMacken. St. Louis at 150: The Story of the Middle of the Mitten, (Concept Communications, 2003).

relatively small town of but a few men who were interested in logging and using the Pine River as a means of transport. By accounts of maps from the time that were created using information from banks who held the mortgages to the lands, there were dirt roads, some residencies, and a few small businesses, but mainly at this time St. Louis consisted of farm land as the loggers made quick work of deforesting the nearby areas around the town.³ Ironically, it was during this expansion and exploration of the town's natural resources that a search for brine water took place and the magnetic mineral springs were discovered. Water was to be the boon that would begin St. Louis's first economic boom as a story of a man whose hand had been crippled by rheumatism was able to flex his fingers without pain after he had put his hands under the water. The story quickly began to spread to nearby communities.⁴ Thanks largely to Velsicol, however, St. Louis's proximity to the Pine River would also be its bane due to the dumping practices of chemical companies as an easy way to rid the factories of excess chemical waste. This interplay between economics and environment is best described from a theological perspective where religion has essentially granted man the right to do as he pleases with his environment because he is said to have dominion over it all. The exploitation of resources is what drew people to St. Louis, but it's now what holds them there.

Standing at the corner of North Watson Street and Washington Road in St. Louis, one stands directly next to a small restaurant called Tony's. The workers and owners of this restaurant all declined to be interviewed, but simply looking west across the road and at the grass around the building gives clues as to why no one wants to talk about the accident surrounding the

³ E.L. Hayes, Atlas of Gratiot County, Michigan, (Philadelphia: Lake & Hayes, 1889) 12

⁴ <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mislals/mineralsprings/mineralsprings1.html>

plant. The grass around the buildings, especially after walking west across the road, isn't the vibrant green one would associate with healthy grass. Rather, the grass has a grey-green quality at the top of its tip and the lower half of the blade is an almost entirely grey quality similar to that of grey clay. Walking across the road to examine the approximately eight foot tall chain link fence that is topped with orange tubing, one can clearly read a sign that is marked: 'Warning: Toxic Chemical Burial Area. Keep Out'.

These are just a few signs in the area that mark the lasting effects Velsicol has had on the community and land. The original consent decree between Velsicol and the U.S. government states that the fence (which surrounds 52 acres) should forever remain and the land unused. A granite marker was put in place at the site where the chemical plant once sat that reads: 'Warning, do not enter. This fenced area was the site of a chemical plant. The ground contains chemicals, which may be toxic or hazardous and also contains low level radioactive waste. The area has been capped and secured. Trespassing strictly prohibited.'" However, as part of the clean-up project headed by the Pine River Superfund Task Force, in 2004, the consent decree was modified for remediation of the site and the group sought the removal of the granite marker, which was denied. Task Force Chairperson Jane Keon said about the marker that "this symbol of death has represented the stigma St. Louis has lived under since 1982."⁵ The group's only current hope of having what has recently been termed a "tombstone" removed from the site would be if a federal judge allows the consent decree to expire, for which a motion has been filed on their behalf by an EPA attorney.

⁵ Greg Nelson. "Pine River task force hopes to get rid of Velsicol 'tombstone'." Gratiot County Herald, April 4, 2013, sec. News, p. 3.

Yet, the language coming from the Pine River chairperson seems extreme. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word ‘stigma’ as “a distinguishing mark or characteristic (of a bad or objectionable kind); in *Pathol.* a sign of some specific disorder, as hysteria.”⁶ While there is no doubt that the contamination of this town is objectionable, it has become a distinguishing mark only because of the effects that have become ingrained upon the town’s economy. There is a connection between this apparently noble intent to clean up the environment that is embedded in economic underpinnings. Everything to this point has been driven by economic gain, a nod to the free market capitalist spirit of America. Before an explanation can be given as to why the chairperson’s words are overly emotional in tone to appeal past a logical perspective, it would be best to put into perspective precisely what happened in this area.

In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. In Chapter 3 of this book, Carson details the insecticides that were discovered during the Second World War. Amongst them she discusses DDT (originally developed by a German chemist in 1874) , which would be used widely throughout the United States not as the chemical warfare agents they were initially designed to be, but as a way to stop the spread of lice and malaria. Part of Carson’s critique of DDT was the documented hazardous effects it had on water, plants, animals, and humans.⁷ Carson’s critique of DDT and other chemicals would have a negative impact on the profits of the chemical companies and garnered a backlash, amidst which Velsicol sent a letter of cease and desist to Carson demanding she fix what they termed as inaccuracies in her work and claiming her sources were not accurate. This letter was typed August 2, 1962, and mailed directly to

⁶ “stigma, n.” Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series. 1993. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 15 April 2013 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

⁷Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. 2002th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.

Houghton Mifflin in an attempt to stop the book from being released to the public.⁸ A review of Carson's sources brought to light that while there may have been ethical and business differences of opinions, her sources were correct and none of the data had been construed in a false fashion to cause malignant harm. While DDT was not nationally outlawed until 1973, it should come as no surprise that Velsicol deigned it wise to discontinue its production of the chemical in 1964.⁹ Unfortunately, the contamination of the area with DDT was not Velsicol's only impact upon the town.

Another chemical, known as PBB, came to be a wide spread Michigan environmental issue that originated with Velsicol in April 1973 and was partially contributed to by Michigan Farm Services in Lansing, which received the product. While the poisoning of livestock, and ultimately ingestion by humans through consumption of livestock products was accidental, it was the cause of this environmental catastrophe that is unforgivable. The cause of this came down to greed. In court documents, Velsicol claimed that the economic recession forced them to cut costs. To cut back, Velsicol chose to simply use one type of bag for both its FireMaster chemical line (used as a flame retardant in children's clothing) and its feed supplement chemical, Nutrimaster. Originally the bags had been two separate colors. Velsicol and Michigan Farm Services both admitted in the court documents that they employed workers who could not read. Nutrimaster was also sold under several different names and a supervisor simply told the workers who could read that FireMaster was just another name for the chemical supplement. This

⁸ Linda Gittleman. "Telling Stories of the St. Louis Superfund Sites." Morning Sun, August 22, 2010. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://timpanogos.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/velsicol-chemical-vs-rachel-carson-the-lawsuit-that-didnt-happen/>.

⁹ David McMacken. "History by Decades." City of St. Louis. August 22, 2010. Accessed April 15, 2013. http://www.stlouismi.com/1/stlouis/history_by_decades.asp.

resulted in a large loss of livestock, estimated to be nearly 33,000 cattle were slaughtered after being poisoned by mislabeled/packageged cattle feed.¹⁰

The narrative of Velsicol's mistakes would seem warning enough, that if economics takes precedence over the reality of facts that continue to stare us in the face, if words like 'stigma,' 'death,' and 'tombstone' are applied to this town as if it were a person (shades of corporate personhood here), then this town will only ignore and begin to forget what happened if this land is developed. What makes this worse is that a celebration is being planned to parade the granite marker through the town on the Fourth of July if the consent decree is allowed to expire. One of the common complaints of the area is the effect this stigma has had on property values.

Residents have found it difficult to sell houses because no one wants to buy a home that's sitting on what is still considered polluted land, despite Task Force efforts to clean it up and contain the contamination from Velsicol's old underground storage units that leaked DDT into the ground. Some residents have houses that have been on the market for ten years or more.

Proof that the area is still contaminated can be found on Bankson Street, which is part of the same block which Tony's restaurant resides, running parallel to North Watson and touching Washington and Saginaw roads. Terri Kniffen's house is located just one block south of the former Velsicol site and she has been finding dead birds in her yard for several years, sometimes numbering upwards of ten. While these sites were recently excavated, Kniffen found two more dead birds in her yard last year that had 237 to 250 ppm of DDT in their brains, which is about eight times the amount needed to kill the birds.¹¹ While the areas have been excavated, the

¹⁰ Susan Dykstra. "PBB Contamination of Cattle Feed in Michigan, 1973." Meeting of the Minds 12 (2010): 1-10. http://www.umflint.edu/research/student_programs/MOM/journal/2010/Dykstra.pdf.

¹¹ Greg Nelson. "Researchers to collect dead robins in St. Louis." Gratiot County Herald, April 11, 2013, sec. News, p. 4.

researchers from the Wildlife Toxicology Lab will continue to monitor the birds in the area and will train local residents on how to prepare dead birds found for processing at the lab. This is evidence enough that it is far too soon to push ahead with being rid of a 'stigma' so that the land can be developed and this town can move on.

Velsicol was not always seen as being the bad element in this situation thanks to economic greed taking precedence over environmental preservation. In 1984, a small pamphlet was published detailing past and present St. Louis businesses that was meant to show the youth of the town, that it was once a thriving, booming, up-and-coming community that was meant to go far. Arvilla DeNaples wrote at the end of this book, "St. Louis suffered a great loss when the chemical plant later known as Velsicol Chemical Company was forced to close, throwing over 300 out of a job."¹² DeNaples, in her book, attributes the closing of the chemical company to a slow decline in the town's population and economy with a few businesses closing and others being outright sold off or moved. Between 1980 and 1990, Gratiot County did see a population decline of just over 1,000 people.¹³

Every step of the way through this research, one can see how free market capitalism encourages people to cut corners when there is no oversight for the sake of making money. The theological aspect that man has dominion over all land and animals only makes this worse as the environment is destroyed for the sake of economic gain. The irony is that the people who live in St. Louis cannot eat the money that has been made at the cost of the environment, the cost that has brought a 'stigma,' and the cost that has forced them to seek a water replacement supply with

¹² Arvilla DeNaples. *St. Louis Businesses Past and Present*. 1984.

¹³ United States Census.. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/mi190090.txt>.

the nearby town of Alma.¹⁴ While the people of this town do not deserve to have to live with the mistakes of the past, if they cannot learn to live with them and improve them, they are simply rushing to make the same mistake all over again for financial gain.

¹⁴ Harrington, Roxann, Alan Gatlin, Robert McConkie, and Phillip Moore. "Agenda." Gratiot Area Water Authority. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://www.ci.alma.mi.us/1/307/files/October192012WaterAuthorityAgenda.pdf>.

Bibliography

- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 2002th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.
- “Driving Directions to St. Louis, Mi.” Google Maps. <http://mags.google.com> (accessed April 15, 2013).
- Dykstra, Susan. "PBB Contamination of Cattle Feed in Michigan, 1973." *Meeting of the Minds* 12 (2010): 1-10. http://www.umflint.edu/research/student_programs/MOM/journal/2010/Dykstra.pdf.
- Gittlemen, Linda. "Telling Stories of the St. Louis Superfund Sites." *Morning Sun*, August 22, 2010. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://timpanogos.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/velsicol-chemical-vs-rachel-carson-the-lawsuit-that-didnt-happen/>.
- Harrington, Roxann, Alan Gatlin, Robert McConkie, and Phillip Moore. "Agenda." Gratiot Area Water Authority. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://www.ci.alma.mi.us/1/307/files/October192012WaterAuthorityAgenda.pdf>.
- Hayes, E.L. *Atlas of Gratiot County, Michigan*. Philadelphia: Lake & Hayes, 1889.
- McMacken, David. "History by Decades." City of St. Louis. August 22, 2010. Accessed April 15, 2013. http://www.stlouismi.com/1/stlouis/history_by_decades.asp.
- McMacken, David. *St. Louis at 150: The Story of the Middle of the Mitten*. N.p.: Concept Communications, 2003.
- Nelson, Greg. "Pine River task force hopes to get rid of Velsicol 'tombstone'." *Gratiot County Herald*, April 4, 2013, sec. News, p. 3.
- Nelson, Greg. "Researchers to collect dead robins in St. Louis." *Gratiot County Herald*, April 11, 2013, sec. News, p. 4.

St. Louis Area Historical Society/Ancestry.com. 1889. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mislabs/mineralsprings/mineralsprings1.html>.

“stigma, n.” Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series. 1993. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 15 April 2013 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

United States Census. Accessed April 15, 2013. <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/mi190090.txt>.