

No Comfort in Point Comfort

By Kate Cahow, with editorial assistance from Julie Herman

It was the middle of the night and Marion Traylor was alone. There was no warning, no alarm, just a call from her nephew close to an hour after the fact. She was not prepared for news of an accident at the neighboring chemical plant, neither was she surprised by it. She didn't take the time to change out of her nightgown, just grabbed some clothes for later, woke friends in a neighboring town to ask for a place to stay, and was out of the house in five minutes.

"As I got in my car and was leaving, two huge clouds were coming over my land," said Traylor, the matriarch of a Texan ranching family. "I could see them with my vapor lights; a smaller one followed by a bigger one.

Her only concern at that moment was to get away from the clouds, "because you know whatever is in them you do not want to breathe; it is certainly going to burn you if you do," she said.

The clouds were later attributed to a peroxide fire at the plant. The time before that, while her grandchildren were visiting, it was a hydrochloric acid leak that sent her and the children on a similar flee for safety.

Traylor was afraid for her family, her health, her land. But she chose to join arms with two other local women to fight their fear of the Formosa Plastics Corporation by taking action. Traylor, Diane Wilson and Luann Morris are three very different women who live very different lives. For the last several years, they have locked horns with Formosa in an attempt to expose the company as a flagrant industrial polluter. They fight because toxic vapors, dust, smoke and odors have invaded their homes, devalued their property, poisoned their air, water and soil. They fight because for them, the "comfort" in Point Comfort is long gone.

A Neighbor's Ire

Point Comfort is a tiny Texas community located on Lavaca Bay in Calhoun County, 100 miles southwest of Houston. Traylor is one of nearly a thousand residents who for years proudly called this little town home. But, when the company she had been neighbors with for more than a decade announced plans to expand its operation in Point Comfort, Traylor was spurred to action.

"I started fighting then and I haven't stopped," she says. "I would get shot and killed if it would close that plant. That's how strongly I feel about it."

What inspires such ire and commitment in a woman who has lived most of her 76 years in the comforts of the privileged is a long story that goes back several years and several synthetic yarns.

Traylor's 1,600 acre ranch has been in her husband's family since the mid 1800s--it is her refuge, and her children's and grandchildren's heritage. The land lies adjacent to Formosa property. Walking outside her sprawling ranch house at night, one

can hear the plant rumbling and see it lit up like a mile-long Christmas tree.

Formosa Plastics Corporation is **among** the world's largest manufacturers of polyvinyl chloride, or PVC--that synthetic stuff that appears to hold the world up these days. From credit cards, shower curtains and office furniture, to window frames, wire insulation, imitation leather and Venetian blinds, the planet is littered with the stuff. **And, the proliferation of PVC has virtually displaced the more benign and renewable materials such as wood, glass, ceramics and cotton.**

The bitter twist to this all-pervasive substance is that in the process of making and disposing of it, toxic wastes are dispersed into our environment...legally. By arrangement with state and federal regulatory agencies, plants like Formosa dump chemicals into the air and water, and produce hazardous waste that has to be disposed of--in any number of ways, all of which threaten human health and the environment. This so-called "permission to pollute" creates a false sense of security, because ultimately, these chemicals accumulate in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and we cannot avoid being exposed to them.

Formosa built such a chemical plant near the Traylor ranch in 1981. **Several years later**, the company announced expansion plans that would transform the Point Comfort facility into the "Big Daddy" of chemical plants: the largest expansion in the U.S. in more than a decade. The \$1.5 billion project would produce more than 1.5 billion pounds of various chemicals a year--chemicals like chlorine, ethylene dichloride (EDC) and vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), deadly chemicals we could all do without. EDC causes cancer and genetic mutations. VCM is linked to liver, stomach and brain cancer, as well as miscarriages and birth defects.

Traylor feared the company's impending expansion, and with good cause. According to news reports, the chairman of Formosa, Y.C. Wang, chose to expand his facilities in the United States rather than clean up his act in Taiwan, where Formosa is the largest industrial conglomerate. Texans United, a grassroots environmental group, describes Taiwan, Formosa's homeland, as an environmental disaster area--cancer is the leading cause of death in the country; birth defects and lung disease rates are steadily rising.[reference needed] As a result of Taiwan's severe pollution, companies like Formosa are being pressured to clean up their facilities.

By the time Formosa made public its plans for the Point Comfort plant, Traylor had already collected a passel of "bad neighbor" stories inspired by the company. It wasn't long before she began broadcasting her opinions in letters to the local paper's editor, and sharing her collection of newspaper clippings and documents attesting to Formosa's reputation with those who wanted to know. Her family warned that her efforts could get her hurt, but she wouldn't stop. One day, while driving through town, a bullet struck her windshield. She was unharmed, and chose not to report the incident fearing such action may incur further violence.