

The Times Beach Story

In the words of the town's last mayor.

This story was originally presented at the Third Annual Hazardous Materials Management Conference, and is presented here with the permission of Marilyn Leistner. Marilyn Leistner was the last Mayor of Times Beach.

Times Beach was a small (480 acre) suburban community some 17 miles west of St. Louis on I-44 highway. In 1925 the old St. Louis Star-Times newspaper initiated a sales promotion program to increase the circulation of the paper. The purchase of a 20' x 100' lot in Times Beach, at a cost of \$67.50, entitled one to a newspaper subscription for a period of 6 months. In order to utilize the property and build a house, another lot had to be bought.

The town, situated on the Meramec River, had previously been a flood plain used for farming, but after the promotion it became a summer resort. Since the cottages were built for summer use, construction was definitely makeshift. Because of the flooding many of the cottages had been erected on stilts. As appearances went the community was not too attractive, but the old timers still speak with nostalgia of the picnics, and the high old times they had way back. Rumor has it there were 13 saloons in town, and it was not until 1970 that the town could claim 1,240 people.

During the early 1930s many people moved into their summer homes to ride out the depression. In the 1940s came World War II's gas rationing which made weekend cottages impractical. The post-war housing shortage caused even more of the cottages to become permanent homes. The 1950s brought an upward trend of development which resulted in improved appearances of the ex-summer cottages. New homes were erected and since the flooding seemed to have abated the 4' x 6' stilts upon which the summer homes had been built were no longer used. It was no longer a town of weekend cottages converted into permanent homes. It had become a community of low income housing that was trying desperately to improve its image, and its efforts were meeting with some success.

In the early 1970s, Times Beach (or just "The Beach" as the natives called it) had a population of 1,240 people and two growing mobile home parks. It also had very dusty roads (16.3 miles).

In an effort to control the dust, the city contracted with waste oil hauler Russell Bliss to spray the roads at will during the summer of 1972 and 1973. This was thought to be

a bargain at only 6 cents per gallon of oil used. City funds were insufficient to pave the roads, and spraying was thought to be the only solution to the dust problem.

The city joined the National Flood Insurance Program in August of 1977, but on November 4, 1980, the registered voters of the community voted to repeal the National Flood Insurance Ordinance. The flood insurance program required all new construction to be above flood level and since the entire community was below flood level this would have put the town back on stilts.

On April 7, 1981, I was elected alderwoman from ward 2. 1982 found Times Beach nearing the completion of a metamorphosis from a run-down river town to a lower middle class community.

On November 10, 1982, a reporter for a local newspaper called city hall and informed our city clerk that Times Beach was just possibly among the sites sprayed by Russell Bliss with waste oil containing dioxin. This news was followed by a call from the Environmental Protective Agency confirming the reporter's information. Our community was high on a list of suspected sites. We were told it would be as long as 9 months before any soil testing could be done. We were to live with this uncertainty for 9 months.

Chaos broke loose. The residents immediately recalled that the roads had turned purple after being sprayed. The spraying had resulted in an awful odor. Birds had died and newborn animals succumbed shortly after their birth. One man remembered a dog found in one of the contaminated ditches. They thought the dog rabid and prevailed upon a policeman to shoot it. Another man told how he had called the St. Louis Health Department to tell them about the dead birds he kept finding. The department recommended that he freeze the dead birds and said they would be out to pick them up. No one ever came.

The road commissioner recalled one occasion when he had been infuriated. The city fathers had instructed him to make sure no more of the oil was used on the roads. He had passed this information on to the waste oil hauler, only to discover a few days later that the waste oil truck driver had emptied the contents of his tank truck in an undeveloped area of the city. This particular area was later to become the city's ball park. Our kids all played there, and later we were to learn the soil of the park contained 10 priority pollutants.

No one in our immediate area was familiar with dioxin or the possible effects of this chemical. The fear was all the greater because only limited knowledge was available on the subject. Soon information began pouring in from all over the nation, and none

of it was comforting. The EPA finally announced testing should be done immediately because of the number of people exposed.

The residents had taken up a collection and contracted with a local laboratory to do private testing, since we did not want to wait months to learn the results of the EPA testing. It seemed to us that the EPA accelerated their testing program only after they learned we were conducting our own tests.

December 2, 1982, found the Corp of Engineers and National Weather Service warning those of us in the low lying areas along the Meramec River to evacuate our homes because flooding appeared likely. On December 4, as the flood waters rose, the EPA and our private lab were completing their first round of sampling.

On December 5 the community suffered the worst flood of its history. Many barely escaped with their lives. Flood stage was 18.5 feet and the water crested at 42.88 feet.

On December 13, residents still burden with the worries of the clean-up of their flood-damaged homes learned that another of their fears had been confirmed. The results of the private testing had been made public. Dioxin was definitely present, but the levels and extent of the contamination were not yet available. City officials were bombarded with the questions, "What about our children? What shall we do now? Is it safe to clean up our homes?" We were as ill informed as they.

On December 23, 1982, the residents received what we now call our Christmas message. "If you are in town it is advisable for you to leave and if your are out of town do not go back." Our community, virtually overnight, was transformed to a national symbol of something uninhabitable. The news media flooded the world with specials and reports of Times Beach and its contamination. It was at this time that the full impact of the dioxin tragedy registered with our citizens.

At this time, the EPA was also under very close scrutiny by several congressional committees. Times Beach and the EPA both gained national notoriety; one for dual disasters and the other for alleged mismanagement of hazardous waste. The allegation was that the EPA was consorting with the chemical companies which they were supposed to be monitoring. The effect of the EPA publicity was beneficial to us. In an effort to counteract the unfavorable image it was now projecting, the EPA became very concerned with Times Beach. Residents were finally housed under the Flood Insurance Program in spite of their non-participation. Many joined with the city officials in writing letters and signing petitions requesting either a buy-out or relocation of the entire town. The idea that a total buy-out of all the properties was the only solution to the disasters was actively bandied about. Because of the uncertainty

of The Beach's future there was a reluctance to continue with the clean-up. Was it or was it not dangerous?

Those brave souls who continued with the clean-up found some of their members breaking out in rashes; others became ill. Some of us were sure the rashes were caused by dioxin, and others felt they came from a combination of mud and cleaning fluids. Some continued with the clean-up while most panicked and did not return.

There were no definite plans for there was no foreseeable future for the city. We were so frustrated we wanted to fight, but we had no opponent. Stress was a constant and serious factor. The healthy became ill, the ill died and while most of us survived, all of us paid a price. We were constantly on the defensive. As our financial and health concerns mounted some of our personal relationships deteriorated. Many became skeptics and sank into depression.

As it was the residents lost control of their lives; the choices were no longer theirs. There was a feeling of futility. City employees were told they had to be trained in the use of protective clothing. Then they lost their city jobs because the city no longer functioned. Without city jobs they no longer had health insurance. Next they learned health insurance rates were unaffordable. As ex-employees of Times Beach, they had to obtain costly physical examinations which they could not afford. Thus insurance was out of the question.

When the Board learned that some of the present government officials were aware of the possible contamination of our community as early as 1972 our distrust mounted. Obviously many of us no longer had faith in government or in the system. Our frustrations were evident as we blamed any and all for our health problems. Our futures were in doubt because of our exposure to this chemical, and no one could assure us that we would even have a future. The more informed we became the more frightened we became. Many took their frustrations out on each other. There was excessive wife and child abuse; fathers and husbands who had seldom or never drank began drinking too much.

Media coverage intensified our children's concern. Children learned from watching television that "dioxin" dirt from The Beach fed to laboratory animals killed them. The very dirt they walked on, played in and rode their bicycles over was killing animals. One very small boy asked his father if he was going to die too. Headlines such as "EPA Spokesman Says Dioxin the Most Toxic Chemical Known to Man" did nothing to alleviate anyone's concern.

The federal and state agencies to whom the Board turned for help knew no more than we did. We asked questions, but the answers were seldom prompt or accurate and

were always subject to immediate change. An agency official would interpret a rule one way only to have it changed by some higher authority. We soon learned the rules were being written as we were experiencing the problem. We learned rapidly about agencies and politicians as they learned about us. The big difference was that the agencies and politicians were involved with the problems only 8 hours each day while we lived these same problems 24 hours per day. All of the Board wanted to walk away and never look back; but it was apparent that our friends and relatives needed help.

The Board felt we were in the middle and being pulled on every side. Most of the residents wanted a total buy-out of our properties, but the few who wanted to rebuild their homes and stay were adamant. Threats were made by each faction. City officials were warned to stay out of town as they would be shot on sight. Those still living in town received threats that their homes would be burned. All of us at one time or another received anonymous, threatening, nasty letters.

On February 22, 1983, Anne Burford of the EPA came to Missouri and met with the residents to announce a voluntary "buy-out." Everyone thought our problems were over. We later learned that upon hearing of the buy-out announcement a former resident of Love Canal had said, "Those poor people; their troubles are just beginning."

The pressures on city officials became so great that two mayors resigned. When one learned the contaminated soil contained PCBs as well as dioxin, he resigned and moved away. After his resignation, I became Chairman of the Board of Aldermen.

The Mayor kept saying, "Marilyn, I have to get out of this rat race." I begged him to stay; I felt I could not handle it either and I was next in line. I had not realized how scared he was or how close to a nervous breakdown he had been. He slept each night with a gun at his bedside and his very large German Shepherd in his yard. He was hospitalized for several weeks as a result of a particularly bad experience and resigned on April 30, 1983. I became Acting Mayor.

The federal and state agencies were carefully watching the outcome of this contest. On June 7, 1983, I was duly elected mayor by a vote of 312 to 25. I had run for office advocating acceleration of the buy-out and was pleased at the decisive majority I had obtained. We were again sure that within just a few months the buy-out would be well on its way to being over and our lives would settle down. On election day the city, the state, the county and the federal government signed a four party agreement to get the contractors, appraisers and buy-out moving along as rapidly as possible. My first act in office was to get an ordinance passed for the city to take title.

The SBA advised that loans would be made available to the businessmen. Almost everyone applied. Almost everyone was refused. The reason was that a person applying for the loan had to be running a business. There were absolutely no on-going businesses in Times Beach because the government had cordoned off the town. No outsiders were allowed in the town, and nothing in the town was to be removed from it.

It was August before the first offers were made to begin the buy-out. The offers were low, and again our city was in the forefront of the news. We had gained many friends and supporters nationwide and the media had been instrumental in getting our story before the nation and to the decision makers during the months since the flood. Later as reporters became aware of dioxin and its dangers many became fearful and antagonistic. Reporters refused to enter the town without protective gear.

The low offers and threats of condemnation within 30 days if offers were not accepted caused resentment on our part, and the residents were labeled ungrateful and money hungry. Again the media was instrumental in publicizing our plight. After the board met with legislators and the contractor for the buy-out it seemed better offers were received.

When the first low offers were made the city officials called the contractor and Federal Emergency Management Agency but could get nothing changed. Home owners spray-painted their offers on their homes with TV cameras focused on them. Offers improved. Because of our contact with the legislators and backing by the media, the appeal process was instituted.

As time passed, reporters who were once sympathetic were encouraged to avoid writing of Times Beach and dioxin. Times Beach had lost appeal and sensationalism. We started with a giving, generous, sympathetic, responding public. As dioxin information became available and the public learned of its dangers we became suspect. We might be carriers. Children from surrounding, uncontaminated areas were told not to associate with the Times Beach children at school.

We heard daily of more and more people who seemed to be turning against us. Some were open and vehement in their opposition to the buy-out. We were told by outsiders, "There's nothing wrong with dioxin. It's the flood that's causing the buy-out." We explained patiently, "You don't buy homes in a flood plain with 'Superfund' dollars."

I cringe when someone says "Dioxin never hurt anybody." Dioxin has harmed everybody who has come in contact with it. For us it has meant loss of property values, community, neighbors, friends, identity and security, and, most of all, loss of our health. It has meant marital discord, discipline problems in school children, a type

of forced bankruptcy, red-lining by insurance companies, loss of liability insurance on property.

While some of us are still in temporary housing, our payments to the banks on our Times Beach mortgages continues. In some temporary homes, our utilities are higher, it is farther to our jobs, and many of our children lack the self-reliance their older brothers and sisters showed at their ages. We feel rejected by our new neighbors and viewed curiously by all. Consequently, many of us are on the defensive although we are not sure we should be.