

tion process was twofold: first, the citizens needed to have a basic understanding of toxic waste and its effects and, second, they needed to understand the process by which they might initiate change. Both of the tasks were quite difficult. The chemical industry in south Louisiana produces hundreds of chemicals and by-products, many of which have been minimally tested for their effect on humans. In some cases, in the past, when negative health impacts were known by industry, they were intentionally hidden from the workers and public alike.⁴⁹ Additionally, the industry regulated itself until the early 1970s, when the EPA was formed, and it disposed of waste in any way it saw fit. Not until the late 1980s did a real effort to open permitting processes and vigorously enforce regulations occur in Louisiana. This was in large part due to the efforts of a strong environmentally oriented secretary of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Paul Templet. During his four-year term as secretary, from 1988 to 1992, he effectively reduced toxic waste in the state by over 50 percent. He could not have accomplished this without the support of the outspoken citizens living in these industrial communities. The story of how they gained their voice is the story of Willie Fontenot's early work.

Fontenot's Protégés

One of Willie Fontenot's earliest converts was Theresa Robert. She became involved in environmental issues around 1980. "I didn't even know what the word 'environmental' meant other than my surroundings," says Robert. "I didn't even know these plants had hazardous waste before I became involved."⁵⁰ She was a self-described housewife with young children when, in 1979, a company proposed to locate on the property between her home and her business, a local-style restaurant catering to the cultural tourism trade. The proposed facility would have been the largest hazardous waste processing plant in the world. The land between her home and business had belonged to her cousin who had sold it to industry, ignorant of what the company had intended to use the site for. She and a half-dozen of her neighbors formed a group to fight the proposed industry; they called themselves Save Our Selves, Inc. (SOS), and began what was to become a decade-long fight against the IT Corporation.⁵¹

Being the first citizen group to negotiate their way, first through the permitting process and later through the court system, all the way to the state supreme court, there were no precedents they could follow. They contacted Willie Fontenot. "Thank God for Willie Fontenot," says Robert. "He helped us understand the few rights we had." They first attempted to stop IT's permit to build. The company fought them and the battle was not even. As Robert recounts, "They [IT] flew in technical experts from all over, and all we had were a few local professors as experts. We knew we were building a record [from Fontenot's advice] as we knew the permit would be granted and it would end up in court."⁵²

IT was granted a permit from the state. SOS then filed a lawsuit against the Louisiana Environmental Control Commission and the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, the two permitting agencies at the time.⁵³ SOS eventually won and the state supreme court rendered the most important environmental decision to date. Now referred to as the "IT decision," the court ruled that citizens' environmental protection, while not an exclusive goal of the state regulatory agencies, must be given its fair weight along with economic and social factors. Specifically, they challenged regulatory agencies to act not merely in an administrative capacity but also to insure proactively that the "rights of the public . . . receive active and affirmative protection at the hands of the Environmental Control Commission."⁵⁴ The decision effectively made another important mandate to the permit and siting process. It stated that "in determining whether the proposed project fully minimizes adverse environmental effects, the commission must consider whether alternate projects, alternate sites, or mitigative measures would offer more protection for the environment. . . ."⁵⁵ In 1989 the state finally revoked the IT corporation's permit.

With the help of Fontenot, the SOS group effectively changed the face of environmental permitting in the state. After the ruling, chemical companies that sought to locate in Louisiana had to prove that they had fully considered several alternate sites and projects as well as proposed the most advanced pollution control equipment and processes, thus providing mitigative measures. However, a court ruling does little without having a strong enforcement-oriented environmental agency. This was to be one of the biggest problems to face citizen groups in the coming decade.

In his early years as community liaison, Fontenot also worked with educating another group that came to prominence in what became known as the state's environmental justice movement. In 1980 several workers from a chemical plant adjacent to the Rollins hazardous waste disposal company near Baton Rouge came to see him. They had all signed a petition claiming that their health was being threatened by the fumes that they could both see and smell coming over their fence line from the disposal company's open dumping pits. In addition to Rollins's incinerator, one tank truck after the next was discharging toxic waste into an open pit; often the various chemicals would react with each other and send a mysterious cloud billowing off the property. The skin was peeling off the workers' noses, and some workers were getting cortisone shots to stop the discomfort.⁵⁶

Fontenot became concerned, not only for the workers, who after all went home after an eight-hour day, but for the nearby residents, who breathed the toxic air twenty-four hours a day. The community of Alsen, literally across the street from Rollins, was predominantly African-American. Fontenot asked around, in an attempt to locate people who might be willing to listen. Soon he found himself in Mary McCastle's living room with her and thirty-five other neighborhood residents. He talked to them about what the workers had experienced. Then he began to ask questions such as, Have you ever smelled rotten eggs outside? If so, it meant that fumes from the nearby paper plant were drifting their way. He asked if they ever found white or black residue on their houses or cars. If so, the likely culprit was polyethylene from Allied Signal or soot from the Reynolds' coke plant, respectively. This was the first time the residents had come together, compared their experiences, and were able to give a name to what they saw and smelled.

The stories the people in the area were now telling related to the phenomena that before they were unable to name. One incident involved a tank truck unloading waste (from BASF Geismar) into a storage tank at the Rollins site. The waste from the truck vaporized the toluene and other toxics in the tank causing a thick cloud of gas to escape and travel across the highway into the neighboring community. The gas mixture temporarily blinded Mr. McCastle, who was mowing his yard. The chemical release also temporarily blinded a woman and her dog as they drove by his house. Additionally children in the local Headstart



Figure 2.6
Early environmental activist Mary McCastle. Photo by W. A. Fontenot.

preschool were overcome by fumes and began to throw up and experience burning eyes. Mary McCastle related another incident: “One night a woman, Emma Johnson, woke up and said the odor made her woozy—and then she passed [died].”⁵⁷ Eventually the community settled with Rollins. They received only a few thousand dollars each. McCastle used her money to travel with Fontenot to activist meetings in Atlanta, and to other nearby areas, where they attempted to educate themselves about toxic odors and locate potential hazardous waste sites. She was instrumental in involving blacks in the environmental movement in the South, including Louisiana. According to McCastle, she owes much of her knowledge about chemical plants and fighting them to Willie Fontenot. “It was just me and Willie,” explains McCastle. “We would go to all these plants and he would show me things. Willie and I would take pictures and then we went to the churches and schools and got people involved.”⁵⁸ McCastle also became involved with Lois Gibbs, who came to visit her and helped her to establish her community networking skills. She also allied herself with Greenpeace, which gave her books and explained the dangers of the chemicals around her. Her alliances with

national environmental groups gave her the tools to effectively organize in her own neighborhood.

Several years later, and after their settlement with the first group, Rollins applied for a permit to expand their incinerator and burn PCB's at their facility. There was a general community outcry, as they were sensitized to environmental issues in their community. By this time, the environmental movement was growing in Louisiana, partly due to Fontenot's untiring efforts, and many groups joined in the protest against Rollins. Biology professor and Alsen resident Florence Robinson became involved in the fight this time. The Rollins permit request was eighteen volumes of material. "The first part of getting involved in the environmental movement was just learning," she said.⁵⁹ Next she connected with Willie Fontenot and Mary Lee Orr of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network. These people provided her with the additional information, both practical and scientific, to enable her to organize the community effectively. The community won a more permanent solution this time: the permit to expand was denied, the open dumping pits were closed, and the EPA finally began a cleanup on the worst of the designated Superfund sites in Alsen.⁶⁰

Amos Favorite, an important activist in the early environmental justice movement in the region, also credited Fontenot for his understanding of the local hazardous waste problems. Favorite grew up along the river and spoke only French in his childhood. He began cutting cane on the plantation when he was nine years old and completed school through the seventh grade, which was all that was available for black children at the time. Later, after serving in the military during World War II as a radar technician in an all-black unit in the Pacific, he returned to school on the GI bill to become an electronics expert. He remembers his excitement when, in 1958, the chemical industry arrived in Geismar. He and his neighbors all thought that finally they would be able to get good jobs—but the plants were only hiring white people. Eventually through vocal complaints and involvement in politics Favorite was able to land a job at an alumina facility. Favorite's activism continued into the civil right's era. His oldest daughter was the first to integrate the local schools in 1968. He and his black neighbors formed an informal militia to protect against the Ku Klux Klan terrorizing their homes during this period.⁶¹ Ironically, some of the white families that are now his allies in

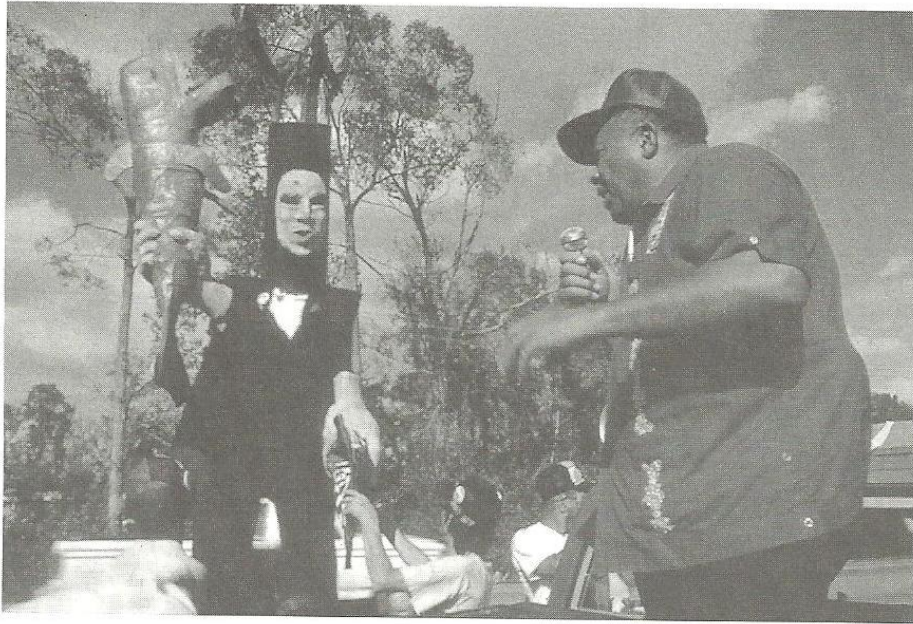


Figure 2.7
 Activist Amos Favorite speaking at a toxics rally. Photo by W. A. Fontenot.

fighting the chemical companies were the same families that blocked the schoolroom door, stopping him and his daughter from entering.⁶²

Favorite said that his first confirmation of the dangers of pollution came in 1985, when Fontenot gave one of his now infamous slide shows. Favorite had his suspicions. Nine members of his immediate family who were living in the area had died of cancer. He finally became outraged when an eleven-year-old boy who was playing with his dog chased it into a nearby drainage ditch filled with an unknown substance. The dog was crying with pain when the boy brought it home. The dog died within hours and the boy died nine days later, his lungs totally destroyed.⁶³

For education purposes Fontenot had created a visual means for teaching people what to look for in their community. He had driven around the area photographically documenting what various types of chemical dumping and disposal looked like. He said: "That community [Amos Favorite's] was dying of cancer. They had gardens that were dying overnight. Many were truck farmers and this limited their incomes. They had respiratory problems and water problems. The people had suspicions but had never seen what a site looked like."⁶⁴



Figure 2.8

A ditch filled with an unknown thick, black waste near Amos Favorite's community. Photo by W. A. Fontenot.

Albertha Hasten, an environmental activist in the region, was born and raised in the house her great-great grandfather built on the land he was given when freed from slavery on an adjacent plantation. Her ten-block community, like many along the river, was settled by ex-slaves after the Civil War. Her father worked for Dow Chemical for thirty-five years and died of respiratory illness at the age of sixty-two. "You could smell the chemicals on his clothes when he came home from work," says Hasten. She attended a few years of college at Southern University, and there she met several faculty who taught her about welfare activism and social justice. Although she lived near several chemical plants, she was not easily convinced that the environmental movement was important for African-Americans. She says: "When I first heard about the environment, I thought it was for white folks. But I had always had a shortness of breath and did not know why. I had a rash on my skin and did not know why. I would turn on my faucet sometimes and the water was as black as me. That's when I decided to get involved with Florence Robinson and Willie Fontenot."⁶⁵ Even after her first contact with these

seasoned activists, she was not entirely convinced. Hasten continues: "At first I thought they were talking Greek. They were talking about things I didn't know. Then I used to be the devil's advocate. I'd say 'don't tell us—it's not about us.' This stuff about hazardous waste, TRI, toxins in the air, emissions, words like benzene, carbon tetrachloride—here they come again telling us all these words and we don't know what they're talking about. But instead of just telling us, they educated us. They took us on field trips."⁶⁶

Having her roots in the social activism of the civil rights movement, Hasten was leery about giving up too much power to nonlocal groups. She particularly trusted Fontenot and LEAN because they did not tell her what to do. Instead, she would call them and tell them what her community needed. Assistance would be provided only when requested. Hasten came to trust these outside environmental activists because they did not come in and try to control the movement in her neighborhood. "They only give you technical assistance when you ask for it," explains Hasten, "but you're the one that has to get out and do the work."⁶⁷ She teaches parenting and participatory citizenship skills to members of her community and in the summer runs a literacy program that can enroll as many as 500 people. "You need to know who your public officials are," says Hasten, "so that you can ask questions and make people aware of the problems. . . . Rules can be changed [and] policies can be changed but we have to learn to stand up to our public officials." She explains that what is important in improving the lives of people in her town are the three "E's—education, environment, and economics."⁶⁸

Albertha Hasten has arrived at her own definitions of her community's problems over her years of work in the environmental movement. She calls the pollution she witnesses on a daily basis "chemical abuse." The term includes not only air emissions and ground injections done by the plants but also the pesticide and herbicide use by agriculture and the high voltage power lines that service the plants that run through her community. She feels that not enough has been done to investigate the vast number of learning disabilities and behavioral problems of the children in her community—children exposed on a daily basis to these substances. Her long-held suspicions and local observations regarding the relationship of learning disabilities to chemical exposure were confirmed recently by researchers at the University of Wisconsin.⁶⁹ Hasten has come to



Figure 2.9
Activist Albertha Hasten at an environmental march. Photo by W. A. Fontenot.

believe that the environmental movement is not just for white people. She explains: “The [environmental] movement showed me that you have to be color blind, because these issues don’t have a color.”⁷⁰

Making people aware of the danger of chemical waste in their community was Willie Fontenot’s first task. Even he admits that when he first got involved with the Sierra Club and the Wildlife Federation, there were only white people who were usually focused on some endangered species issue. But things have changed radically since his early involvement. Judging by the numbers of activists who credit him for their understanding of the problems associated with this industry, Fontenot did his job well. Clearly the residents knew that, given the health problems in their area, something was wrong, but before Willie Fontenot helped them put it into words they had little power to change the situation.

Fontenot’s work did not end with educating people about the problem. As community liaison for the state attorney general’s environmental section, he was also responsible for teaching people about their legal and constitutional rights. He printed many explanatory documents laying out simple step-by-step procedures for community groups to follow in filing

complaints. He also helped hundreds of local environmental groups organize often to protest upcoming siting considerations on the part of the DEQ. He says, “The main thing that stops people from acting is that they think they don’t have the resources—not just legal and technical, but they don’t know the system. But all ordinary citizens need is vision and confidence. . . . Environmental disputes often have an additional positive outcome as they can help bring the races together; they often come to the table without the old baggage. They share their food and their homes and treat each other as equals. It does not happen every time but when it does it’s exciting.”⁷¹

Today, Fontenot continues his work in bringing new community voices to the state’s environmental table. During this early period of emerging environmental activism in Louisiana, Fontenot was diagnosed with a degenerative eye disease that left him legally blind. Undeterred, he continues to give his slide show and narrate descriptive bus tours of the corridor for educational purposes. He remains in his position in the attorney general’s office as a leading force in the drive to empower marginalized groups to fight insurmountable odds in their effort to clean up industry in Louisiana.

Future Stories, Future Change

Local production of environmental knowledge occurs when people are able to hybridize many languages, both expert and everyday, in such a way as to reinvent their environment in a way that includes their experiences. Out of the hands of sanitized “experts,” the toxic discourse terrain begins to shift. Narratives develop in marginalized interpretive communities as a “collective story” that becomes “an agent for individual empowerment, liberatory civic discourse, and social transformation, because it provides an alternative plot to absent or powerless texts.”⁷² Within the communities of Louisiana’s corridor, strategic storytelling and local knowledge are major steps toward public participation in the future transformation of the river parishes.

These local stories are part of a larger environmental discourse, an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that inform the particular toxic situation of the corridor. The stories, or popular discourses, that people use to tell about their environment are quickly transformed