

Fruit of the Orchard

Fruit of the Orchard

Environmental Justice in East Texas

Photographs by

Tammy Cromer-Campbell

Essays by

Phyllis Glazer

Roy Flukinger

Eugene Hargrove

Marvin Legator

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Fruit of the Orchard addresses the sociological consequences of economic change, and examines the long-term effects of modern technology on the human condition. My involvement with the Winona Community has already heightened my sense of my own responsibility as a photographer to go beyond mere documentation and presentation, in order to embrace the more fundamental ethic of using my talents and skills to convey messages that need to be heard.

This book is dedicated to Douglas Hoyne, Amanda Clark, Charlie Adams, and Tommy Lee Bland Jr.

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Tammy Cromer-Campbell

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Introduction

Phyllis Glazer

In 1962, Rachel Carson vividly portrayed a hypothetical town in which “some evil spell had settled on the community.”¹ Carson feared this town could one day become a reality, unless strong legislation dealt expeditiously with the runaway use of toxic chemicals by industry. Nearly four decades later, her hypothetical town emerged in rural East Texas—in a town called Winona.

The story may be traced to the arrival in the early 1980s of a new industry that moved to town, not far from the school. People were told that the company planned to inject salt water from oil fields into *open-ended* wells, and fruit orchards were to be planted on the rest of the acreage. Instead, trucks from all over the United States and Mexico came to Winona to dump their deadly, *untreated* contents into the deep wells, which passed through one of the largest drinking water aquifers on the North American continent. It was then left to migrate under the lands, farms, ranches, schools, and homes in the area. The facility processed nearly every chemical known to man. No fruit orchards were ever planted.

Before long, the people of Winona began to see, smell, and taste the hazardous chemicals in their homes, on their farms, and in the school. Before long, the soil, air, and water were contaminated. Before long, the facility had violated hundreds of environmental requirements. Before long, the people were sick.

On April 30, 1988, the third anniversary of my father’s death, my mother, my husband, and I made my father’s lifelong dream a reality when we purchased our beautiful ranch in the “pineywoods” of East Texas.

For the first few years, my family and I enjoyed going to our ranch on weekends, holidays, and vacations. By the summer of 1990, my husband had grown to dread the drive back to Dallas, with my youngest son and me looking like doom and gloom. He finally decided that Max and I could live at the ranch, and he would come in for long weekends.

However, we soon discovered that our peaceful little spot on earth was not one at all. On October 18, 1991, on our way to his school, my youngest son and I passed through a toxic

Phyllis Glazer is President and Founder of Mothers Organized to Stop Environmental Sins (MOSES)
www.mosesnonprofit.com

cloud of chemical smoke emitted from an explosion or “upset” from a facility we only knew by its noxious smells. We had no idea that it was a toxic waste dump.

Within days, my throat and mouth felt irritated to the point that I took out my make-up mirror and opened my mouth to take a good look inside. What I saw astonished me. It looked like the roof of my mouth had melted with skin hanging down like stalactites from the ceiling of a cave. I was to find out later that these were ulcers down my throat, nose, and mouth. I also had a hole in my nasal septum.

I soon discovered that the Winona community had experienced similar adverse health effects for years. I responded to pleas for help and involved myself in an effort to protect children, families, homes, and farms.

I sought advice from the father of Karen Silkwood. Silkwood, a labor union activist who had died in a single-car crash in 1974 with speculation of foul play, had tried to keep the union work that she was involved with undercover. Her father’s advice was to make sure that nobody knew about what I was doing or that everybody, especially the press, knew about it.

And so, in 1992, I used my inheritance (which my loving mother let me use while she still lives) to organize the community to form Mothers Organized to Stop Environmental Sins (MOSES), a grassroots nonprofit organization using education, litigation, and service to preserve and protect rural, low income, and minority communities from exposure to toxic substances and contamination by hazardous wastes.

Believing that the lives of our children were at stake, MOSES organized pickets, attended public hearings, called on legislators and state and federal regulators, contacted the press, went by bus twice to Washington, DC, and was even invited to the White House in 1996. These efforts were made to force the government regulators to do their job and protect our children.

The facility in Winona is a case study of what happens when the process breaks down, the rules and regulations fail to bring a company into full compliance with environmental laws, and the government fails to protect public health and safety. Communities like Winona have become governmental *oubliettes*, places the government has and wants forgotten.

Wanda Erwin’s family had left Georgia after the abolition of slavery and bought almost three hundred acres in the Winona area. Wanda’s land and home were right next door to the facility. She joined MOSES and we became good friends. Our relationship, though close and loving, was never one of equal footing. Wanda looked to me for empowerment and protection, and I saw in Wanda a possible reason for my being in the right place at the wrong time, with a small fortune and a stubborn determination to protect others who

couldn't defend themselves. We came to believe that there was a higher purpose to what we were fighting for. We came to appreciate and respect each other's friendship and will to fight a hopeless battle. We became loving and lifelong friends.

Wanda told me about her family's health problems. She said that two of her sons were experiencing seizures, her youngest had stunted growth and spontaneous nose bleeds, and the family's hair wouldn't grow, Wanda had permanent liver and brain damage, and they all experienced headaches, body aches, and vomiting. Wanda told me that their livestock had reproduction problems and their crops didn't grow as they had in the past. I knew that I had to get Wanda clean water. I knew in my heart that my wonderful friend's family was being slowly poisoned.

In November of 1994, MOSES was planning a major event. We were planning to picket the Texas attorney general, because he was planning to settle his lawsuit against Gibraltar without doing anything to protect the community. I wanted to get a photographer to take a photo of Wanda's youngest child, Jeremy, as a poster child for the event we would call More Time for Jeremy. My secretary told me that she knew of a photographer who she believed would do it for us—Tammy Cromer-Campbell.

I called Tammy and she readily agreed to donate her services. She had seen me on TV and read about MOSES in the newspaper, and said that she was happy to help. She called Wanda and made an appointment to take Jeremy's picture.

She told me later that she was about to ask him to look sad for the photo, but didn't have to. She took several poses of him, and we decided together on the one we would use for the poster. It was beautiful! Jeremy's little soul reached out to you from that photo, his eyes speaking of anguish and despair. Tammy had finally put a face to Winona's suffering children.

The poster event caused nothing short of a sensation, with results that no one could have expected. A month later the company agreed to settle its lawsuit with Wanda's family, and then its suit with the attorney general. The company then sold the facility. The new owner would continue operations, and MOSES would continue the fight.

About a year later, I received a call from Tammy. She wanted to take pictures of some of the other children who it was believed had been adversely affected. I gave her the phone number of Linda Smiley.

After her photo session with the Smileys, Tammy came over to my house. She was shattered! Tammy told me that she had gotten lost on her way back home, ending up in a grassy field. "It was déjà vu!" Tammy told me. She had dreamed a few years before of that same grassy field where she was protesting with me. She told me, "Phyllis, I know now that

I am supposed to help.” Her work documenting the story of Winona through its children soon became an exhibit entitled, *Environmental Effects—Fruit of the Orchard*.

Early in 1995, the owners of the facility threatened to sue my family if MOSES continued its opposition. We decided we would not back off and go away, nor would we apologize for our First Amendment rights.

In October 1996, the company sued me, MOSES, my elderly mother, my husband, and my husband’s family business of three generations of extended family. The company sued us under the civil RICO (Racketeering Influenced Criminal Organization) statute that the federal government uses to go after the Mafia.

The suit accused us of “creating a climate of fear and apprehension” and claimed that we had exposed the company to public hatred, contempt, ridicule, and financial injury and had impeached their honesty, integrity, and reputation. I believed these allegations were akin to “the pot calling the kettle black!”

We believe that “*The first and great commandment is: Don’t let them scare you.*” (Elmer Davis)

After two grueling years of preparing for court, the company wanted out of the lawsuit. They couldn’t just dismiss the lawsuit and walk out, however, because MOSES had counter-sued them for filing a frivolous lawsuit. It took the urging of many people, including Ralph Nader, to convince me that going to trial was not the thing to do, that I had bigger fish to fry, and bigger and better things to do with my life. Sometimes the most difficult thing you must do is let those who victimized all you hold near and dear, go without justice.

On Thursday, March 20, 1997, the facility announced that it was closing its doors and discontinuing operations because the company had lost too much money. According to a press release, “The resulting closure of a chemical waste processing facility at Winona, Texas, required a fourth-quarter writedown of \$7.4 million.”

MOSES continues to be the public “watchdog” over the closure activities until the property has been cleaned up as much as possible.

The Winona community has paid dearly for our belief in human rights, citizens’ rights over corporate interests, and the rights of poor and minority individuals/communities to equal protection and quality of life under the law. I paid dearly with great sacrifice on the part of my family and myself. Unfortunately, ordinary citizens find themselves placed on the front lines when government agencies fail to protect the public from big corporate interests. Far too many of our representatives simply cannot ignore big money which tends to blind their eyes while lining their purses, keeping them in office year after sell-out year, and caus-

ing public exposure to hazardous substances in the environment that directly and/or indirectly affect all living things on earth.

Tammy Cromer-Campbell has continued to take photographs of Winona's children. Before I became ill with a brain tumor, I traveled extensively to the Environmental Protection Agency and other governmental conferences across this country telling Winona's story. I always ended by holding up a poster-sized photograph that Tammy took of Jamesia, a young African-American child born and raised in Winona within 1.7 miles of the toxic waste dump. Jamesia was born with albinism, respiratory problems, and is now going blind. The photograph of Jamesia holding one of the "Wasted Babies,"[®] the dolls we mothers of MOSES make so that no one will forget our children, always caused a hush to fall over a room. That is the power of a toy camera in Tammy's artful hands.

1. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 2.

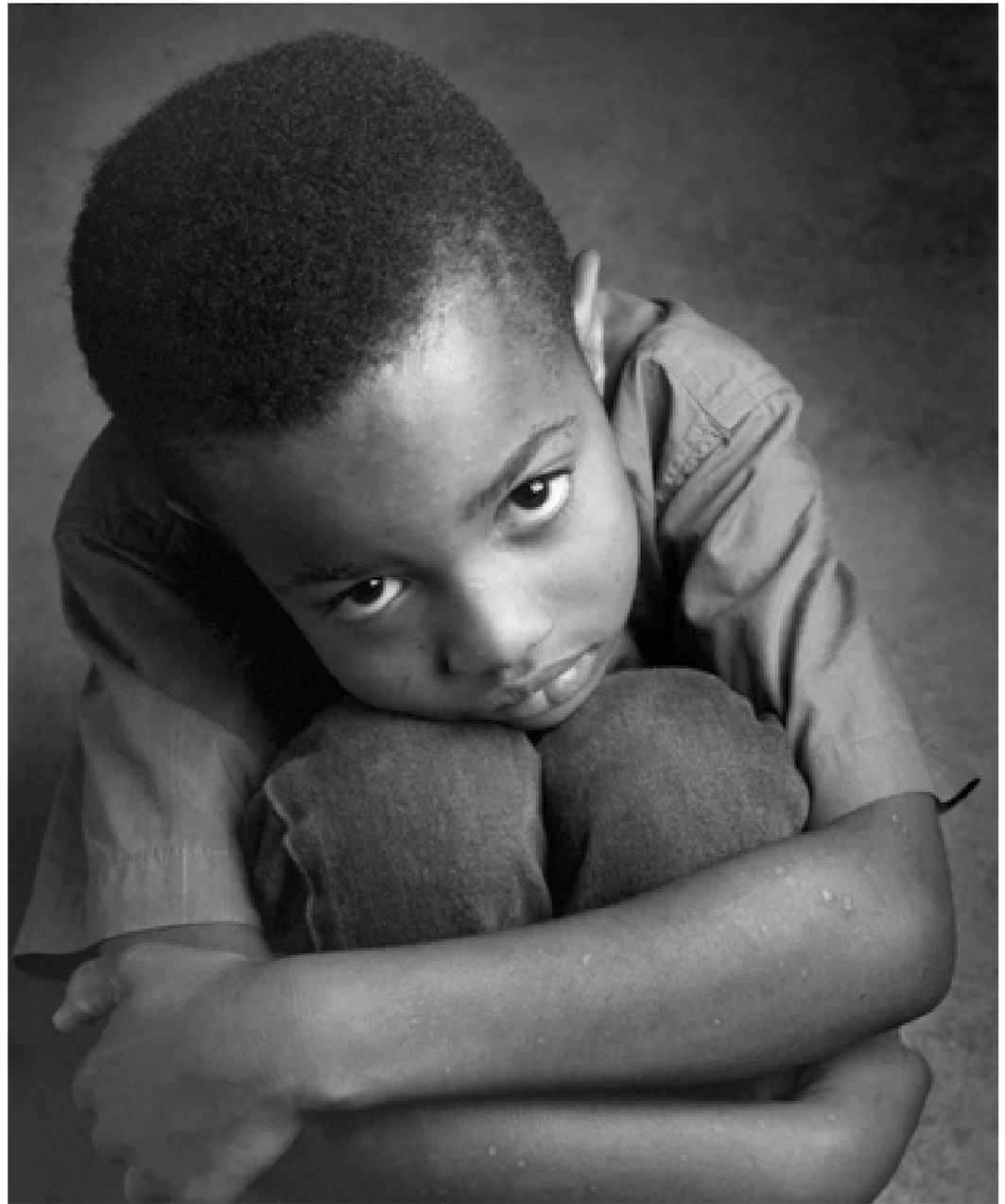


Plate 2 Stephanie and Courtney. 1997



Plate 3 Courtney's webbed toes. 1995

