

Witness

an online magazine

Cancer Alley Louisiana

by
Les Stone

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Cancer Alley - Louisiana - USA

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In Louisiana, along the once pristine Mississippi River, stretching 80 miles from New Orleans to Baton Rouge lay one of the most polluted areas of the United States. Because of the dense cluster of oil refineries, petrochemical plants and other chemical industries the area is known as Cancer Alley. Designated as an enterprise zone, loose oversight has enabled industry to release into the environment extremely toxic levels of dioxin and other highly toxic chemicals. Among the worst are the facilities that manufacture Polyvinyl Chloride or PVC plastic. Recent studies found that some communities had dioxin levels in their blood three times higher than the national average. Dioxin is a known cause of cancer and other illnesses. There are more plastic plants, oil refineries and other chemical plants in this small area than anywhere else in the United States.

The entire population of this region has been exposed to thousands of toxic chemicals and very little - if anything - is being done to clean up the mess. Over 23 million pounds of toxins were released over the town of Convent alone. The population of the town of Ella was reduced by two-thirds due to deaths related to vinyl chloride and arsenic poisoning. Cancer, skin rashes, and respiratory problems among children is of great concern. One has only to glance at the obituary section of any local paper to notice the amount of deaths from cancer or go to any local cemetery to see the amount of infant mortality. Children go to school with respirators and whole communities live under the direct shadow of these facilities.





There are several communities that have been wiped off the map. They no longer exist. They were so polluted that the companies bought the towns and bulldozed them. In Morrisonville, for example, the only thing left is a public cemetery adjacent to the Taft oil refinery and Nuclear power plant.

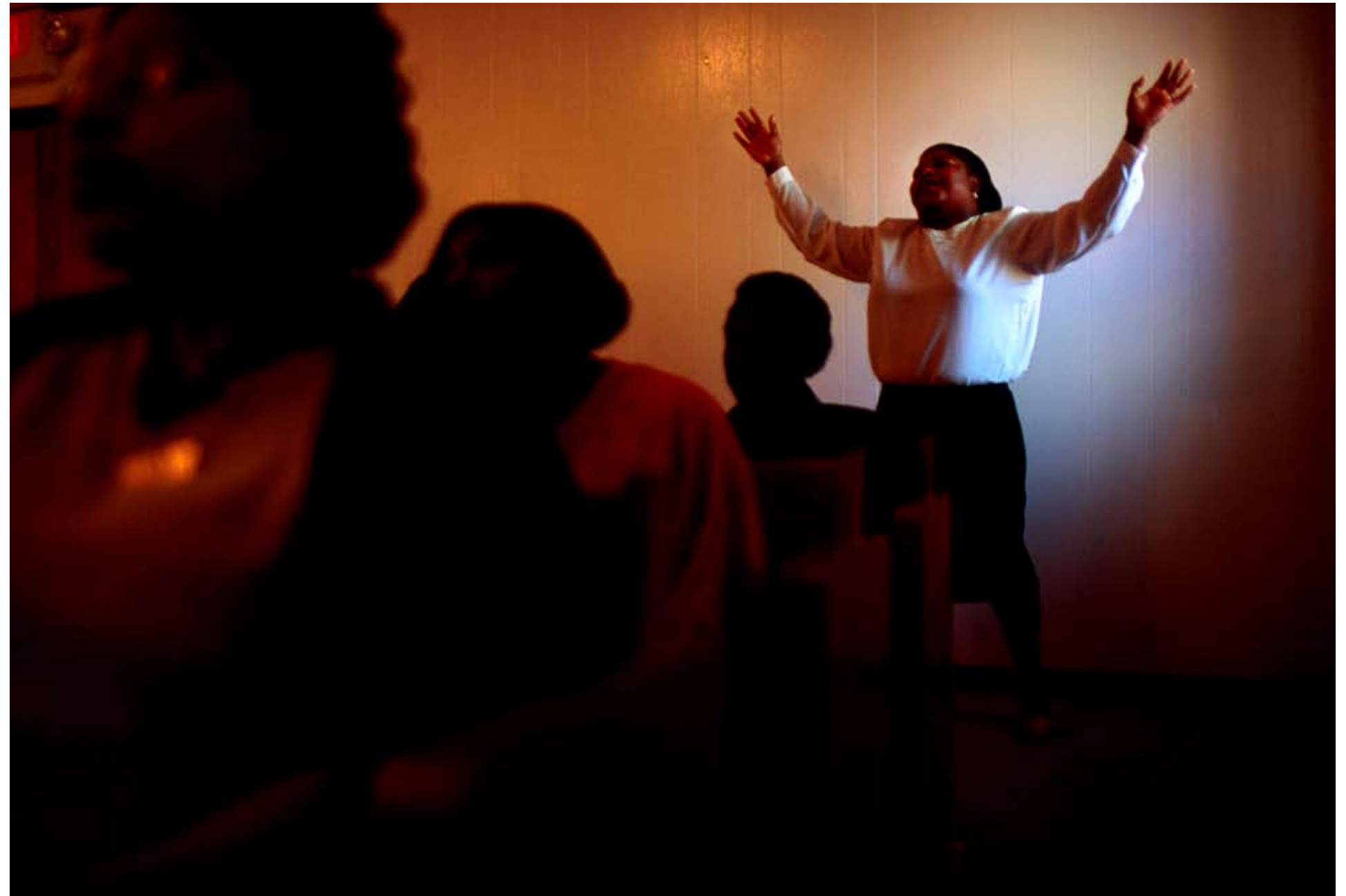




History has been unkind to the majority of people here. The last vestiges of the days of slavery still exist in these former plantation communities; illiteracy, racism and segregation still reign large here.



Most of the people who live in this region are African American. Many are the poor descendants of plantations living in unincorporated towns with no political say in what goes on in their communities. Residents say they are targeted to receive these industries because racism. Reports by a host of environmental justice groups supported these claims and in 1993 President Clinton signed an executive order directing federal agencies to examine policies for disproportionate impact on people of color.





It is children and the elderly who are most at risk.



Mothers have watched their children die of cancer and other complications related to toxic poisoning



For some, cancer defines their life. Others in the community are suing the industries responsible. However, without the support from local government who usually side with the companies, people have little hope of redress.



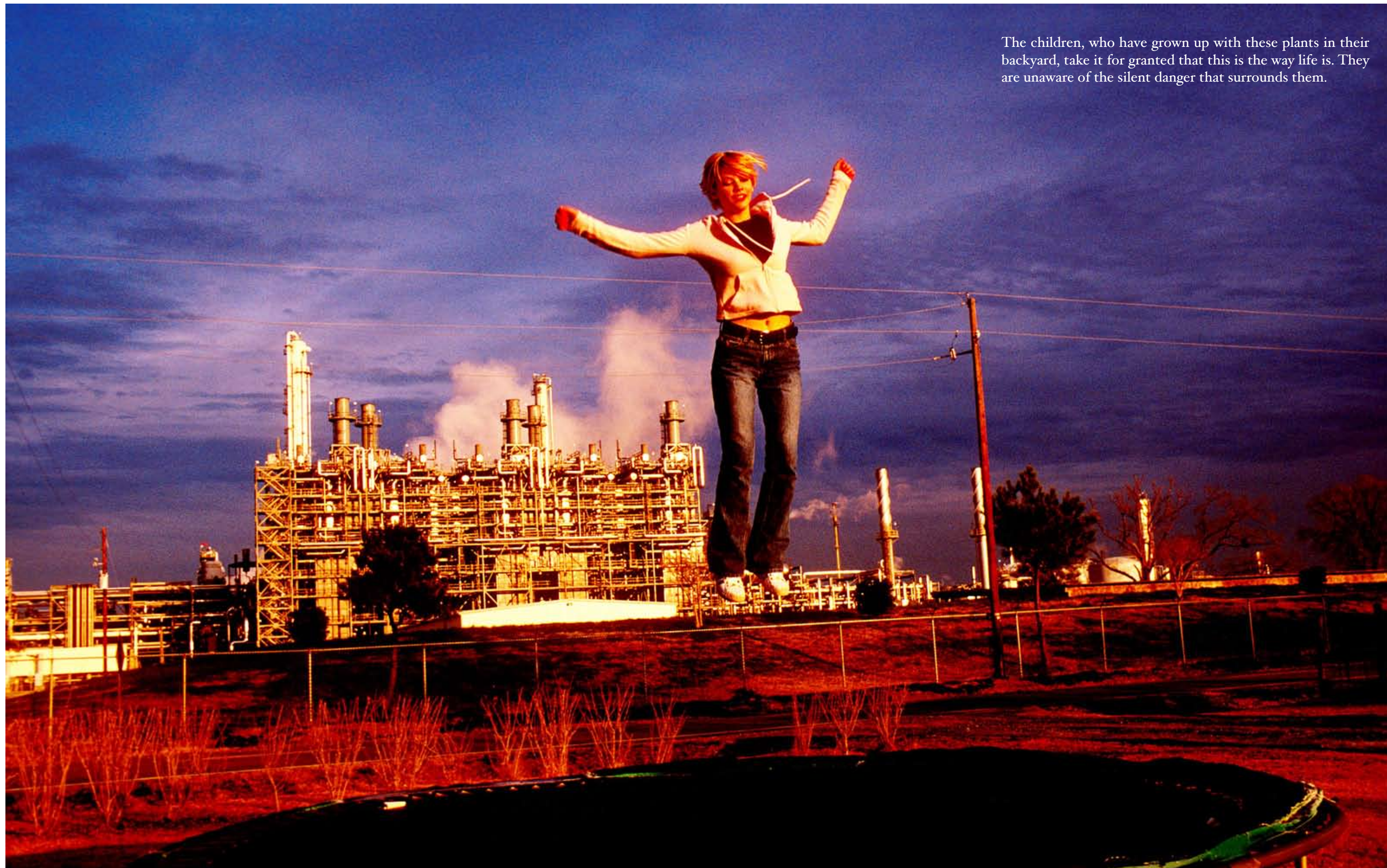
For many of the residents, the value of their homes has plummeted. Many will never find a buyer.





It is hard to imagine that people still fish these waters even though large amounts of dioxin has been found in the fish. Dioxin has also been found in people's pets, and farm animals.

The children, who have grown up with these plants in their backyard, take it for granted that this is the way life is. They are unaware of the silent danger that surrounds them.



The adults, however, have learned about the dire consequences of living in this environment. Many have paid with their lives. Others have watched the slow decay of their families and their community that is caused by toxic pollution.





The travesty of the situation is that the environmental problems have been going on for decades. Each generation confronting more difficult solutions because little or no action has been taken. Without meaningful solutions, life for those who live here will continue to deteriorate and all hope quickly fade.



The environment group, Greenpeace, has labeled the state of Louisiana a polluter's paradise.
Cancer Alley has been given the designation: Global Toxic Hotspot.

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of documentary photography and educational programming related to still photography.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, design, and education.

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