Chapter 1: “Toxic Exposure”: Landmark Cases in the South and the Rise of Environmental Justice Activism

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SUMMARY

This chapter details several cases in which communities faced environmental hazards linked to industrial activities in the region and the response from all parties. Two events led to increased consideration of broader implications of communities living in close proximity to hazardous industrial facilities: pesticide contamination of waterways around Triana, Alabama and the siting of a hazardous landfill in Warren County, North Carolina. Residents of Triana suffered poisoning from a chemical known as DDT for years before testing was done to determine they were affected. While the chemical company, the army, and the Public Health Service were all aware of the DDT contamination during the early ‘60s, the local residents (primarily black) were not made aware until years later. The overall lack of concern shown for local residents led to several lawsuits, which were eventually settled for more than $80 million. In Warren County, residents voiced strong concern about plans to bury chemical waste at a landfill in the nearby area. Yet despite opposition to the landfill, Governor Hunt framed the siting as a “public good” and assured citizens of their safety. Lawsuits followed, and activists organized an EJ group to protest by lying across the road to block dump trucks carrying PCP-laced dirt, which garnered national media attention. Activists claimed the site was chosen because the area was predominantly Black. This led to a wider consideration of the relationship between race, class, and the siting of hazardous facilities. The chapter also mentions an area of Louisiana known as “Cancer Valley” due to the high density of petrochemical plants in the vicinity, where the population is primarily Black and low income. Residents in one community, Diamond, wanted to relocate and asked that Shell Oil to purchase all of their homes in a collective buyout. Yet in court, Shell’s lawyers argued that further proof of danger to residents was needed, and the jury voted against residents. The chapter details numerous other cases in which residents attempted to organize and fight the hazardous environmental issues in their community.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➡️ Why were residents in Triana, Alabama not notified about DDT contamination, according to former mayor Clyde Foster?

➡️ What were the significant outcomes of the Warren County landfill case for EJ activists?