

# Grant Report

Stewart K. McCroskey Memorial Fund

---

Grant Funded November 2013, UTK Geography

**MELANIE BARRON**

contact: [mbarron7@utk.edu](mailto:mbarron7@utk.edu)

## **Summary of Project and Research Goals:**

This grant funded two fieldwork trips to Anniston, Alabama in November 2013 and January 2014. My goal was to investigate the long-term consequences of a 2002 legal settlement designed to mitigate the social and environmental impacts of the Monsanto Corporation's decades-long illegal dumping of toxic Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) in the town. Through observation of community meetings about the cleanup, interviews with key community members, and archival analysis of documents related to the cleanup plans, I sought to evaluate whether the legal system's approach to achieving justice resonated with the residents of West Anniston, the primarily African American community most impacted by the pollution's effects on physical, social, and economic health.

## **Progress, Early Results, and Lessons Learned:**

### *Participant Observation*

I attended two meetings held by the Community Advisory Group for the Consent Decree<sup>1</sup> (CAG), wherein this group receives updates on the progress of the cleanup from the EPA and Solutia, the corporate stakeholder involved. Attendance at these meetings is crucial for this project for observing and understanding the public relationships between scientific experts, corporate stakeholders, and community leaders and stakeholders in this cleanup process. In both meetings attended, these relationships appear to be quite contentious. Frustration with the cleanup abounds on all sides in distinct ways. While more observation of these dynamics will be necessary over a longer period of time, at the points in time where I was in attendance, the sources of discord among the groups grew from the following topics:

- Comprehensiveness of the cleanup, particularly in how risk is assessed and reported
- Allocation of decision-making power among the stakeholders involved
- Social and emotional consequences of the pollution and the struggle over its recognition
- Lingering concerns over unmet needs in regard to resolving health problems that are potentially connected to PCB pollution, and compensation for damage to local economic development

---

<sup>1</sup> The Consent Decree is a legal document that outlines the terms of the cleanup process in Anniston.

## *Interviews*

In addition to two formal interviews, I had many informal conversations with people involved in the cleanup process, including members of the CAG, EPA advisors, and ordinary people who attended the CAG meetings. The formal interviews, held with local community members who have been heavily involved in the activism against PCBs and the ongoing cleanup process, yielded insights into the history of the struggle over the pollution, as well as some of the long-term consequences resulting from this struggle. In particular, these interviews shed light on how justice, as conceived by the legal system, does not necessarily align with justice as conceived by everyone involved in the cleanup process. In particular, interviewees emphasized the inadequacy of the cleanup process for rebuilding the West Anniston community economically and socially; the cleanup process itself, especially interacting with corporate stakeholders and scientific experts, was described as frustrating, disempowering, and it fostered deep distrust between the community and these groups.

Informal conversations supported these claims, as people would discuss the events that occurred in the CAG the meetings with me afterward. People were consistently frustrated, and community members consistently had complaints about how the whole process was being handled.

In contrast, scientists and corporate stakeholders also displayed frustration, particularly when their positions on the quality and comprehensiveness on the cleanup were questioned, as well as when their dedication to resolving these issues was questioned openly in the CAG meetings.

Future research will be improved with a larger number of interviews, and with a greater variety of interview participants. In particular, I will seek out more structured interviews with scientific and corporate participants in the cleanup process, both to listen to their point of view and to ask them to address the findings from my conversations with community members.

## *Archival Research*

While I originally intended to focus mainly on the legal documents that guide the cleanup process, I have broadened by interest in archival materials. The legal documents, while valuable as representations of the process necessary to win the cleanup, and as evidence of how corporate actors, in particular, were able to shape the outcomes of the

litigation that ensued in the 1990s and early 2000s, are limited in the perspective they provide.

Therefore, in addition to seeking information about the legal process, I am also seeking information about claims made in court, as well as out-of-court, regarding the health and social problems that resulted from the PCB pollution in Anniston. I also want to investigate how the landscape itself, particularly the West Anniston neighborhood, has changed since the discovery of the pollution and the effort to clean it up, as residents bemoan the economic state of affairs since this time. To this end, I am seeking records about previous residents of the neighborhood via old census data, business records, property records, and newspaper sources to reconstruct a geography of West Anniston that reflects how the pollution, and the legal process to clean it up, has shaped the neighborhood over time.

### **Engagement with the Academic Community**

I presented early results of this research at the Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers (SEDAAG) meeting in November 2013. I have also presented about this research to my committee, as I am currently preparing my formal dissertation proposal and a proposal to submit to the NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement grant program.

### **Future Plans**

I will continue fieldwork for this project over at least the next two years as I conduct research and analysis to complete my dissertation.

I will continue to report the results of this research at academic conferences, including SEDAAG 2014 in Athens, Georgia, and AAG 2015 in Chicago, Illinois. I am also actively designing and writing my dissertation, which will be submitted for publication in various stages over the next 2-3 years.

I also sincerely hope to create resources that can positively impact the Anniston community beyond academic publications. I will be consulting regularly with community members and stakeholders in the cleanup process to determine how my knowledge set and skills as a geographer can be useful, and can contribute to the long-term effort to build justice in this community. This goal reflects my growing commitment to prioritize direct public service in my professional activities.

## Photos: November 2013 Fieldwork Anniston, AL



*Researcher, Melanie Barron, posing in front of the Victoria Inn, a beautiful historic hotel in the heart of Anniston.*



*Closed, empty neighborhood business*



*Home flanked by empty lots*



*View down one of West Anniston's streets*

## Images of West Anniston's Landscape

Future research will investigate whether this depressed landscape was produced, in part, by the discovery of the PCB pollution and the cleanup process.

Many polluted lots were bought by Monsanto, and subsequently many houses were torn down, contributing to plummeting property values and loss of business in the area.

Solutia is now the corporate entity charged with co-executing the cleanup and recovery process.

## More Images of Anniston

*View of Solutia, formerly Monsanto, Inc., the former site of PCB production & pollution (left)*



One of Anniston's memorials to the Freedom Riders, whose buses were bombed by the KKK in 1961.

Its location is not very visible, in an alley off of a downtown street. (below)



Solutia is one of the major funders of these memorials in the city.





The other memorial to the freedom riders, in a more visible location. (above)  
A pavilion in the city dedicated to MLK, Jr. (Below)

