

GRATIOT COUNTY

Why it's important to map out health issues

By Linda Gittleman*For the Morning Sun*

From outlandish rumors claiming the Pine River is radioactive — it is not — to far more numerous and serious concerns about health, the St. Louis contamination occupies the minds of most current and former residents.

They want to know if the health issues experienced by their family members and themselves were caused by the chemicals left by the Velsicol Chemical Co.

It wasn't always this way.

For decades, the most common belief was that everything was fine. Pollution of the ground and river wasn't even on the radar screen.

In fact, Jeff Salisbury who grew up in the St. Louis area can still hear his grandmother saying, "there isn't anything wrong with DDT" since a couple of calves once ate a bucket of it and nothing was wrong with them.

His grandmother had worked at the then Michigan Chemical Co. during World War II and routinely brought home free samples of the pesticide.

He can also remember the spraying for mosquitoes around his family's farm.

But when Salisbury, now 49, entered kindergarten he began having convulsions. Taken to one doctor after another, it was years before one doctor provided

MAPPING » PAGE 2

Mapping

FROM PAGE 1

a diagnosis of a form of epilepsy.

He was given drugs and they worked, allowing him to play high school football. The illness disappeared at about age 30, not long after his Type 1 diabetes kicked in.

Diabetes runs in his family.

Kevin Leonard, now 47, lives in Sumner, but he too grew up in St. Louis.

A few days after he was born, he had spinal meningitis and his younger sister was born with yellow jaundice.

But a few years ago, an ambulance had to be called when Leonard woke up one morning unable to move- paralyzed from his waist down.

Follow us on
TWITTER

Be the first to receive news updates on what's going on in Mount Pleasant and statewide. Mention us and your comments could be featured in print.

FOLLOW US @MPMORNINGSUN

Turns out he had a rare form of non-Hodgkin's disease called Burkette's lymphoma, an illness more commonly seen among African boys.

"It's usually a silent killer," he said.

But because he had a very rare tumor, doctors were able to remove it and he's fine today.

Yet like nearly all the many residents who experienced health problems, physicians made no connection to the St. Louis plant.

And, it's very hard indeed to draw a direct line from the chemical contaminants to health issues.

"I personally believe there is a straight line (from the chemical company to illnesses)," Salisbury said.

It should be up to the health professionals/government to prove that there isn't, he added.

Prior to the 1980s, there were a lot of heart problems in Joanne Hall Scalf's family.

Scalf grew up in St. Louis and now lives in Texas and she's the one who originated the Pine River Superfund Voluntary Health Map.

Since the 1980s, "several members (of her family) have had cancer, thyroid cancer and other

thyroid problems, autoimmune diseases.

"I personally have had my thyroid partially removed and other precancerous cells found," she said

She's also has a birth defect as does one of her children.

Ryan Serna, 39, of St. Louis has so far escaped health problems but he is concerned.

He's seen too many illnesses and deaths.

"There's too high a rate of cancer for a small town," he said.

Minus the prison inmates, the population is about 4,400.

It's not unusual that some frustrations are felt by Serna and a few other community members.

He believes the situation is such that "the government" should pay people for their property and the community be abandoned.

His views however, aren't shared by most who have worked hard to maintain their churches, schools, parks and library - all that and more which makes up a community and home town.

About \$100 million was spent on the clean up of the sediment in the river, a project completed by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2006.

Preliminary work on the remediation of the plant site has begun.

Even so, some remain disturbed, like St. Louis resident Kim LeVigne.

Her late brother was born with a genital problem, and she said she heard of other boys with similar problems.

"But it was all hush hush," she said.

Pine River Superfund Task Member Jane Keon said she understood that Emory University, which conducted PBB tests a few years ago, had in fact learned of genital abnormalities in several males.

PBB, like DDT is the other contaminant believed to be the major causes of health problems in the area.

According to Alma College Professor Ed Lorenz, speakers from Africa at the international conference on DDT hosted by the college a few years ago spoke at some length about the significant numbers of genital abnormalities found among infants in African villages that continue to use DDT.

"This is qualified - more research is needed on cause and effect, but it seemed to raise questions," Lorenz said

Those are just a few of the reasons Scalf began the project.