



# THE MEMPHIS DEPOT TENNESSEE

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## ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD COVER SHEET

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THE ENVIRONMENT • DEBBIE GILBERT

## Burial Grounds

### Anxiety rises over toxic contamination at the Defense Depot.

They words jumped out at us from a seemingly innocuous press release. Defense Logistics Agency Memphis — still and forever referred to as the Defense Depot — announced that potentially hazardous contaminants had been detected in the soil and water on its 642-acre property. The letter added that the agency hoped to "provide the opportunity for interested persons to become involved in the clean-up process."

What? It sounded as if they were enlisting neighborhood residents to come out and shovel toxic waste.

"I probably should have worded it differently," admits public-affairs specialist Denise Cooper. "Citizens being involved does not mean they will actually be cleaning up. But the community, by law, has a right to be involved, and we have to address their need to know what's going on. They definitely want to know what's going on, and their number-one concern is about their health."

Indeed, a community meeting at Corry Junior High on May 24th drew 150 people. Earlier in the month, Cooper's office had surveyed residents of the neighborhood (bordered by Dunn Avenue on the north, Perry Road to the west, Ball Road to the south, and Airways Boulevard to the east) to see how much they knew about the problems at the Depot and to find out how much they wanted to know.

Input from older residents is especially valuable, according to Cooper. "People who have lived here a long time know things," she says. "They've seen stuff being burned on the site."

For a couple of decades after the Depot opened in 1942, the Army buried its garbage — including volatile chemicals such as cleaning solvents and petroleum products—in an open area known as Dunn Field.

"Back in the Fifties, we didn't know about this stuff," says Cooper. "We thought, 'Oh, the ground will take care of it.'"

A preliminary federal study found that both the soil and groundwater are moderately contaminated with pesticides, heavy metals such as lead and mercury, and carcinogens such as trichloroethylene. These substances have not reached the aquifer from which Memphis gets its drinking water, nor have they had any effect on air quality in the vicinity. Nevertheless, residents have voiced concerns about their health, some citing a high incidence of cancer in their families.

The Depot has been on the Environmental Protection Agency's National Priorities List (similar to Superfund) since October 1992. An environmental analysis of the site contracted out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is

expected to continue through 1995, and cleanup could take at least a decade.

"We don't know yet how the cleanup will be done," says Cooper. "Source removal [digging up the toxic dirt] is the standard method. But bioremediation — using microbes — has become a new buzzword. Who knows?"

In the meantime, the Depot continues to hold community meetings, and there's talk of a quarterly newsletter to update citizens on the testing. If you'd like to be on the mailing list, call 775-6753. ■

### Memphis Vegetarians Find Common Ground

Are you offended by those commercials promoting beef as "real food for real people"? Then you're a likely candidate for membership in the recently formed Vegetarian Association of West Tennessee.

The new organization is affiliated with the North American Vegetarian Society, which has chapters in most major cities around the country. It's the brainchild of Catherine Billings, a 29-year-old marketing consultant who came to Memphis eight months ago from Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I had been a member of a vegetarian association there," she says, "and I saw that there

was a need for one here — there's just a huge demand. I started one for West Tennessee because there's already one in East Tennessee — but that one might be fixing to fall apart, so I may take over for the whole state."

The inaugural meeting in April, held at Unity Church on Kirby Road, drew about 40 people, and twice that number attended a picnic at Audubon Park in mid-May. A vegetarian booth at Overton Park's Earth Day festival, featuring free veggie burgers and "eggless egg salad," proved extremely popular, and a repeat performance is expected at the Memphis Botanic Garden's Good Earth Festival June 5th and 6th.

Billings says people are joining for three main reasons: concern for their health, concern for animal welfare, and concern about the environmental destruction caused by the livestock industry. Among the members are several young vegans, or "hardliners," who have just begun serving one-year prison terms for vandalism.

"I made it very clear at our first meeting," says Billings, "that this [organization] is about education and nonviolence. If I go for animal rights, I'll alienate the people who are in it for health reasons. I believe in living by example, kind of like [Paul] McCartney does, in what he calls 'gentle activism.' I see this as a peace movement. Walking up to people and saying, 'You're a cow murderer!' does nothing but give vegetarianism a bad name. With a lot of these teenagers, there is misdirected anger. Spraying 'Meat is murder' on a butcher shop is not the answer. You have to present the truth to people and let them decide for themselves."

The association accomplishes this through cooking classes, guest speakers, potluck dinners, a lending library of books and videos, and a quarterly newsletter, *The River Vegetarian*. Billings is also working on a dining guide that will review all the restaurants in Memphis that serve vegetarian dishes. Membership costs \$10 for individuals, \$15 for families, and \$5 for students and seniors. Call 366-4329 for more information. ■

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