



AP

Toxic shock: Despite a ruinous flood and contamination, 'river rat' Joe Caskey vows to stay

The Trouble at Times Beach

Even at its best, the small Missouri town of Times Beach is not a particularly pretty place. Dilapidated houses, mobile homes and old cottages resting atop cement-block foundations shelter a population of 2,500, many of whom call themselves "river rats"—an affectionate reference to the nearby Meramec River. But early last month the river lashed out at Times Beach, swirling 22 feet above flood level and damaging virtually every one of the town's 800 dwellings. Then, just two days before Christmas, federal agencies confirmed that hazardous levels of the chemical dioxin had been uncovered in soil samples from the town, and residents just moving back after the flood were urged to evacuate once again. "This is phenomenal," says Fred A. Laiser, director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. "Very few people in the world have dioxin problems, and very few people in the world have flood problems. We have both."

Dioxin is among the most toxic chemicals created by man. About 50 sites around Missouri may have been contaminated by the substance when it was improperly mixed with other wastes and used as fill for homesites, buried on farms, even stored in a tank on a school campus. But for Times Beach, 25 miles southwest of St. Louis, the problem was even worse: dioxin-contaminated oil was generously sprayed on the community's dirt streets to control dust in the early 1970s. Although the streets were later paved, the deadly chemical's legacy lingers under the surface and in the soil all around the town.

The contamination of Times Beach has raised serious questions about the federal government's role in environmental emer-

gencies. As far back as 1974, the Centers for Disease Control determined that dioxin had affected the health of at least 10 people and killed hundreds of animals at various Missouri locations. The CDC had traced the chemical to the now defunct Northeastern Pharmaceutical and Chemical Co. Thus, the government suspected that dioxin-laced oil had been sprayed on Times Beach. It was not until last November, however, that the Environmental Protection Agency went in to test soil samples. Now many fear that the recent flooding may have spread the dioxin pollution even farther, making it much harder to clean up.

Nowhere to Go: Times Beach is in a quandary. The CDC has strongly recommended that townsfolk stay clear of the contaminated area until a new round of tests are conducted. But roughly a third have come back to the flood-ravaged town to live or to salvage what they can. "They have nowhere else to go," said resident Laine Jumper. "That's why they're returning." On the streets, and at an emotional mass meeting in nearby Eureka last week, some residents questioned whether there is a danger at all. "I've lived here for 30 years and built a good life here," said Evelyn Zufall. "I cannot believe this is as dangerous as they tell us." Even if future tests reveal that the flood actually mitigated the danger by diluting the dioxin, the river rats still face tough times—with little hope for financial assistance. In 1980, residents of Times Beach voted by almost a 2-to-1 margin to withdraw from the national flood-insurance program because they thought that federal regulations connected with it were too stringent.

MICHAEL A. LERNER with MARJORIE MANDEL in Times Beach and JOHN McCORMICK in Chicago

The Unseasonal

It was too warm, too wet and even too white. Christmas '82 brought unseasonal excesses across the nation—blizzards in the Rocky Mountain and plains states, torrential downpours in the South and record warm temperatures in the eastern half of the nation.

Colorado's Christmas blizzard, its worst since 1913, paralyzed much of the state for days. Two thousand people were stranded Christmas Eve at Denver's Stapleton International Airport—closed for the first time in almost 30 years. At least four Colorado's died in the storm, which dumped two to three feet of snow on Denver and similar amounts throughout the Rockies. "If this were rain, we'd be building an ark," said Ronn Irving of the National Weather Service in Denver. Cleanup operations in the city, costing about \$2 million, moved so slowly—even with help from Army reservists—that they may become a factor in upcoming mayoral elections. Meanwhile, a new blizzard dumped from 6 to 24 inches of snow from Kansas up to Minnesota and across to northern Michigan. This time it was the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport which was frozen shut, with 17 inches of snow, and the roof of the Minneapolis Metrodome deflated with a mighty gnan.

Sandbags: Louisiana's Christmas crisis was rain—more than 20 inches in some places by the end of the week. Flooding in 19 parishes led Gov. David Treen to declare a state of emergency. At least six people died and more than 10,000 were forced to leave their homes. The flooding caught state officials by surprise, and Louisiana's Office of Emergency Preparedness had to seek sandbags from rain-soaked Mississippi. In Alexandria, 175 miles northwest of New Orleans, residents complained that they were left to fend for themselves as waters rose three feet in some neighborhoods. "My parents talked to everybody," said Doug Murray, "and they seemed to say, 'You are there now, just stick it out.'" President Reagan, scheduled to fly back to Washington from his holiday in California, planned to observe some of Louisiana's worst flooding at Monroe, where the rain-swollen Ouachita River had risen more than six feet above flood stage.

Compared with last week's killer snows and floods, the East's balmy temperatures were merely a pleasant oddity—with many Americans beginning to expect that the infant New Year would be able to do without even its traditional diaper. It was so warm—a record 65 degrees in New York City at 11 p.m. on Dec. 28—that one could almost imagine Times Square revelers greeting 1983 in Bermuda shorts and T-shirts. Sixteen Midwestern cities, stretching from Ann Arbor, Mich., to Milwaukee, also posted record highs that day; the reading at Chicago's O'Hare Airport (65) was 13 degrees warmer than the date's previous high.

But Chicago's weather always has a