

Perry County Herald

January 29, 2010

EDITORIAL:

At the risk of making a pun on "moral bankruptcy"...

We apologize if this week's front-pager on the landfill owners' bankruptcy woes seems convoluted. Imagine how we felt trying to piece together all of the players in this bizarre saga for you.

It's the story of a few Georgia real estate bigwigs and some multi-million dollar businesses; a confusing shell game of small corporations whose owners are difficult to pinpoint; money of dubious origin; one of the largest and most bulletproof public utilities in the nation; and corrupt or incompetent or apathetic government officials at every level.

It's a story about greed, and the way greed warps people, makes them view the very earth itself as something to be exploited and stripped and pumped for every last dollar it will yield up. The way greed makes human lives, thousands of them, no more important than figures on a ledger.

It's the story of Perry County, and in one way or another it's been our story for as long as these borders have existed. There is no way around it; our county and its long-gone riches were built on the backs of oppressed and enslaved human beings. This is a story the people here know well. But that kind of oppression, when white citizens here made vast fortunes by owning the lives of their black brethren, is gone. We are all in it together now.

Perry County has had a hard, painful road towards reconciliation. Its citizens, black and white, still often have a difficult time trusting each other in light of our troubled history. But we're trying. Look around you: the people, the regular citizens of Perry County, are not its problem.

We may disagree on politics, but we sit together at Commission and City Council meetings and treat each other, mostly, with respect. We are working, just by living here together, toward building a future for this home of ours. We know, and have for a long time, that we all need the same basic things out of life, and as long as we need them together, we can seek them together.

The old bad guys are dead and in the ground. The new ones drive SUVs with Fulton County plates.

...put down your Blackberrys, guys, and stay your attorneys. We don't mean you're "bad people." But in this story, you are the villains.

You're chasing the American Dream, of course, just trying to make a dollar, providing the country with the valuable and much-needed service of efficient and affordable solid waste disposal. You came by your permits legally, and with the full-throated blessing of Perry County's elected representatives, who were, after all, just trying to get a little revenue for their little cash-strapped county.

No matter.

Here's our fear: no amount of money will be able to make up for what the landfill, particularly the coal ash deal, has wrought. The City of Marion has met with ADEM's furrowed brow over its handling of leachate from the Uniontown facility. While an environmental lawsuit against the city has been halted along with the leachate shipments themselves, environmentalists tell us hazardous materials have already made it form the treatment pond into Rice Creek. If that's not bad enough, we have seen what appears to be photographic evidence of landfill workers in Uniontown pumping the sludge onto the ground right next to Chilhatchee Creek. Marion may get unscathed, but we wouldn't bet on it. Phillips & Jordan can afford to pay whatever fines it may incur for whatever its employees may or may not have done. Can the city?

The investors who are taking the bulk of the \$95 million generated by the coal ash contract will never have to set foot in our county again once the landfill outlives its usefulness. They'll never drink our water, or breathe our air, or eat bream from our creeks. They can call the shots from offices with glitzy addresses, never get a speck of ash on their hands, and endorse fat checks until those pristine fingers need a latte break. Can you?

Our elected officials are, for the most part, already better off than anyone who will read this paper. They get power (a teensy little bit, but that's enough to satisfy most people), they get to rub elbows with folks who have even more money and power than they do, and they get the feeling of knowing they have done something "good" for the people whose lives they govern: they got a smattering of cold, hard cash to spend on pet projects. Feeling warm and fuzzy yet?

This, if we must remind you, is the county where people were willing to sacrifice their livelihoods, their personal safety, even their lives in the struggle for the right to vote, the right to say, "In this small way, my voice matters. I have a say, and mine is worth as much as yours is, no matter who you are." That voice is now all but drowned out by the sons of the men who fought to get it.

Do you remember the smirks the landfill investors wore as they sat in the bleachers of RC Hatch's auditorium, a deafening cry directed right at them, telling them, "We don't want this landfill?" We remember. It's the same look our elected leaders get when we plebes dare to question their wisdom. It's the look Franklin Hill gave us when he came to tell us how EPA was

going to make sure nothing bad happened here. That look is the look of power, certain of its rightness. Or, if not of rightness, at least of the fact that it will get what it wants.

They get it all, we get their trash.

Or maybe not. Environmental lawsuits get filed one minute, leachate shipments stop the next. A few weeks after that, the owners of the landfill are asking for bankruptcy protection. Doesn't mean anything's going to change just yet, far from it. Every statement these fellows have released takes pains to reassure the public the landfill will press on even through these trying times.

Here's what it does mean: somebody listened. John Wathen listened. David Ludder listened. When people, regular, good, voiceless people like Jackie Fike and Ruby Holmes pleaded for help, money clouded the judgment of anyone who could have. The fatcats saw money, as did your elected officials, and even ADEM. TVA and EPA saw a way out of that embarrassing little flap up in Tennessee.

Fortunately for us, someone looked at Perry County and saw something besides a poor, ignorant little county no one's heard of, with cheap land and cheaper politicians for the taking. Someone looked down here and saw, of all things, people. Human beings, whose very quality of life had become a mere casualty of the quest to collect as many little green pieces of paper as you can before you die. And somebody realized that was wrong.

When we can step outside of the endless pursuit of more and see that all those things we're knocking over to get at it have eyes and mouths and names and beating hearts like ours, we're not so quick to leave them lying in our wake. It's a lesson Perry County has come by honestly. Will this fiasco finally teach its leaders?