

Cleaning Up the South Branch of the Chicago River

Margaret Frisbie, the Executive Director of the Friends of the Chicago River, said to me, "Yes, there's still a lot of organic material at the bottom of the creek, and in the summer, the methane still bubbles up. She and I were standing at the edge of Bubbly Creek—officially, the South Fork of the South Branch of the Chicago River. One hundred years ago, Bubbly Creek bordered the Union Stockyards on the city's South Side. Meatpackers routinely dumped unused animal parts into the creek, where they sank to the bottom and slowly emitted methane, which bubbled to the surface and gave this small stretch of the Chicago River its colorful and indelible name. "Here and there," Upton Sinclair fulminated in his muckraking novel *The Jungle* in 1906, "the grease and filth caked solid, and the creek looks like a bed of lava." Today, Bubbly Creek is at the center of an extraordinary grassroots-based environmental cleanup effort on the South Side. That effort is called the Little Village/Pilsen River Corridor Project, and since 2014, it has brought together the Friends of the Chicago River, the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), and the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (P.E.R.R.O.) in an ambitious

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initiative to restore ecologically one of the most polluted stretches of the South Branch of the Chicago River.

The project is focused on a 3.3 mile-corridor of the river and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which connects to the Des Plaines River, the Illinois River, and ultimately the Mississippi. This section of the river and canal flow through Little Village,

Pilsen, Bridgeport, Bright Park, Archer Heights, McKinley Park.

Yet while many parts of the Chicago River have been cleaned up in recent years, this sector remains stuck in an industrial past of unlimited waste and sewage. For more than a century, industries have dumped solid and liquid wastes directly into the waters. What's more, according to Frisbie, "The Racine Pumping Station [at the south end of Bubbly Creek] emits sewage mixed with storm water when the system is overwhelmed. That actually is a bigger problem than what's at the bottom of Bubbly Creek."

Another odiferous problem is the Little Village Collateral Channel, a short distance to the south and west. This human-made waterway connects 31st Street to the Sanitary and Ship Canal. The channel suffers from the same contaminating problems as Bubbly Creek—industrial dumping and direct discharges of raw sewage, all of which coat the bottom of the channel like a putrid blanket. On a hot day, you can smell the results. Frisbie explained, "The contaminants at the bottom are filled with heavy metals, like benzene and mercury, from the old days

when we just dumped things cavalierly into the river."

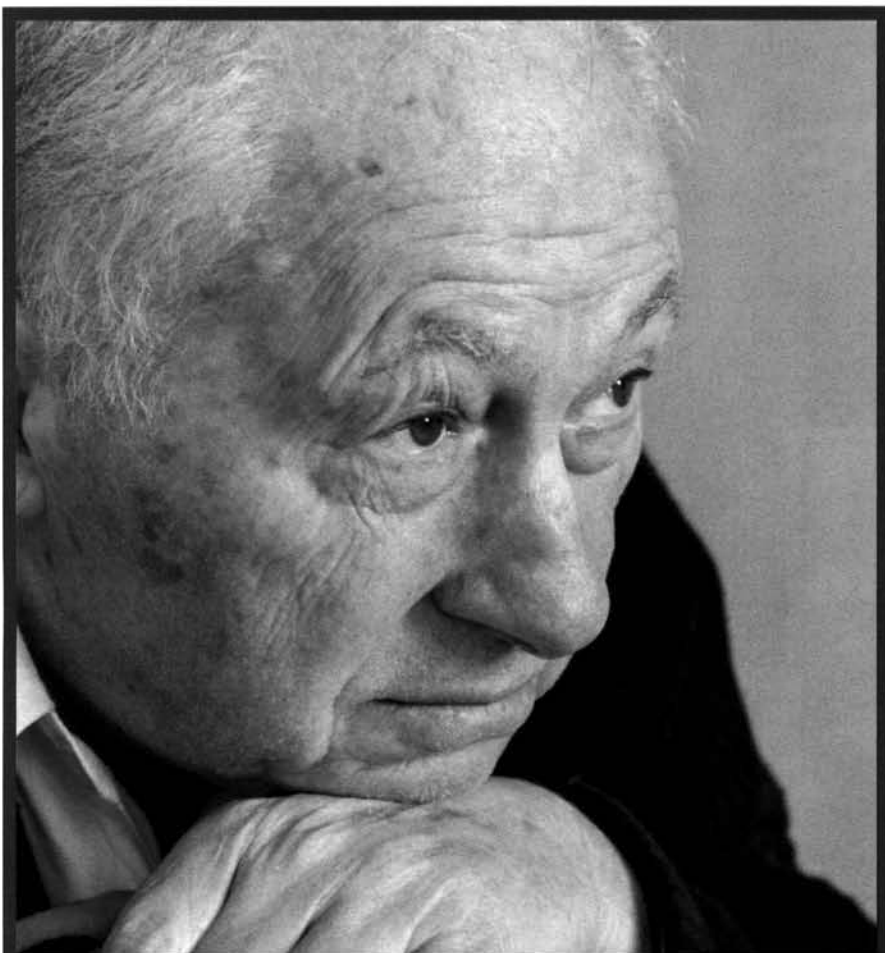
Two of the communities that have borne witness to the century-long abuse of the river have been Little Village and Pilsen. Bound by Ogden Avenue to the north and Western Avenue to the east, Little Village's five square miles are populated by 90,000 people, many of them Mexican-Americans. It's a community of contrasts. Twenty-Sixth Street is a thriving retail district, yet 98 percent of the children in the community qualify for free lunches at school.

Pilsen, located to the east of Little Village and home to Bubbly Creek, is a vibrant neighborhood of Mexican Americans and is home to the nationally famous National Museum of Mexican Art. The western part of Pilsen was once wetland, but in 1900, the Sanitary and Ship Canal displaced those wetlands and forever changed the ecological character of the community, which has been welcoming immigrants since the earliest days of the city.

In recent years, leaders in both communities have embraced the idea of environmental justice. Dr. Antonio Lopez, the



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Executive Director of LVEJO, said, "The environmental justice movement strives on the one hand to highlight the way communities of color and low-income populations are negatively impacted by industrial facilities, such as coal power plants and incinerators. The impacts are based on histories of discrimination and neglect because those members of those communities are not valued."

In the early 1980s, Chicago became a center in the fight for environmental justice. One of the pioneering leaders was Hazel Johnson, who organized neighborhoods against pollution that affected Altgeld Gardens on the South Side. She called the community a "toxic doughnut" because it was surrounded by industrial lands that had been abandoned yet still contained toxic chemicals. In 1994, Johnson was invited to the Oval Office when President Bill Clinton signed Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898, which directed the federal government to address human health and environmental problems that federal programs had on minorities and low-income populations.

Inspired by the movement for environmental justice, Little Village and Pilsen communities rose up in rebellion against the Fisk and Crawford coal-powered plants, which for years had poured pollutants into the air, causing high rates of asthma and heart ailments among local residents. In 2012, the communities succeeded in shutting down the two, Frisbie added, "The communities' interest is in making the river habitable. The river is a huge asset, and if you can't access it, you can't use it. It can be an asset for people's families, for fishing, and for recreation." The groups view the 3.3-mile-long river corridor as a single unit. They agreed on goals--to clean the water, remove or cap sediments at the bottom of waterways, restore natural landscapes, get rid of bad odors, and bring back more fish and other wildlife.

Creating more parks was just as critical. Dr. Lopez said, "Little Village is a densely populated neighborhood, a low-income Latino neighborhood. So any opportunity for community members to get a little bit of peace and tranquility by having access to open spaces and to the waterways is something that we think is really important." □