

JohnHenryVille v. The Juggernaut

You'll see no welcome sight to JohnHenryVille, no downtown, just a sprawl of old houses, many boarded shut, and a few structures providing essentials to the locals: prayer, food, liquor, and medicine. The rain falls yellow there, the water isn't just water, and neither is the air, which you can taste.

This quintessential Cancer Alley town, just off southern Louisiana's I-10, sits among a who's who of petro-chemical plants: Union Carbide, Shell, Shintech, Denka, Formosa -- the list some 150 strong, bringing with them refineries, tank farms, freight rail and so much more. Beyond every window in town they stretch: 24-hour panoramic views of billowing smokestacks illuminated with lights brighter than Vegas. Depending on the day and the wind, auras of highly toxic chlorophene, benzene, and ethylene oxide, just to name a few emissions, prompt so-called forward-looking politicians and business leaders to say, "Smell that progress!"

Self-interest aside, JohnHenryVille is a town still living its history. Slaves once worked the land the town is built on. Some of their descendants haven't left. They still work hard, trying to get ahead. If they do, and if they don't, cancer, heart disease and diabetes send them heavenward far faster than almost anywhere else.

The town's school sits in the shadow of a chemical plant. Kids read, write and do arithmetic, though their eyes burn and their skin itches. There's no cheer in the classrooms, none to be had in town, none along Cancer Alley, just the gloom of tax incentives, lax emission standards and enforcement, and marketing lingo about greening companies and job opportunities -- seldom extended to locals, who know what such plants do to their families.

The town's namesake worked hard, finally beating the juggernaut. It killed him. JohnHenryVille is that kind of town, sick and dying. Such is life in Cancer Alley, where the juggernaut wins in the end.

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