Louisiana Has a Wild Plan to Save Itself from Global Warming

Too bad the state is being destroyed from within

By Nathaniel Rich

1. Noses

In response to complaints some years ago about blocked plumbing along New Orleans’ Claiborne Avenue, city workers opened up the sewer main and found a human nose. Following the line down the avenue, popping open manholes and looking inside, they discovered ears, fingers, fingernails, shriveled flaps of skin, viscera. Where had it all come from?

To solve this mystery, the Sewerage and Water Board turned to Warren Lawrence, a former plumber who served as the utility’s inspector. Lawrence conducted his job with the perspicacity of a criminal detective. It wasn’t enough for him to repair a drainage problem; he made a point of pursuing each disturbance back to its source and holding
the perpetrator responsible. When, for instance, Lawrence encountered a section of corroded pipes, he traced the damage to a battery factory near the Superdome that had been illegally pouring acid down the drain. After finding a black-and-white jumpsuit in a sewer, he learned that inmates of Orleans Parish Prison had been stuffing their uniforms into the toilets in an effort to back up the jail’s plumbing system. To increase their odds of success, every prisoner flushed their toilet at the same time. They called this a “Royal Flush.”

Lawrence followed the trail of body parts to Charity Hospital. The manhole that led into the hospital’s sewer line was clogged with flesh. Lawrence asked hospital administrators why they were dumping bodies into the sewer. They explained that, until recently, they had incinerated all unclaimed corpses. The stench was abhorrent, however, so they had installed a $1 million, 15-horsepower grinder pump. The machine ground the bodies into a slurry, but small parts escaped the blades. Lawrence ordered the hospital to remove the grinder. As he was backed by the force of City Hall, the hospital had no choice but to comply.

Lawrence remembered all those severed noses, ears, and fingers more than three decades later when he noticed that the home he had built for his retirement 30 minutes from New Orleans was regularly being coated by fine black dust. It was no small inconvenience, the dust, because the house was gigantic, with three floors, three porches, a swimming pool, and a second-floor deck the size of a helipad. And every surface—the railings, the roof, even the bottom of his pool—was painted white. In the driveway sat his white Toyota. At the end of his dock floated a new 24-foot party barge, also white, with white leather benches.

Lawrence is 74 years old. The house, the car, and the boat represented the sum of his life’s work. Though he had ascended by the end of his career to an executive position at the Sewerage and Water Board, he and his wife, Gayle, had never moved out of the small two-bedroom house they had inhabited for 43 years. “When people came over,” Lawrence told me, “they would say, ‘You live in this?’ ” But he was saving for his retirement.

After Lawrence had spent several months touring properties across the Gulf, one of Lawrence’s sons called with a lead. A luxury housing development was being built in Plaquemines Parish, which hugs the Mississippi River immediately south of New Orleans but in its culture, character, and overwhelming sense of remoteness might as
well be another country altogether. A firm had built levees around hundreds of acres of marsh and spent a decade draining the land. They called it Myrtle Grove. Homeowners would have immediate access to the abundant fishing, boating, and natural beauty that gave Plaquemines its nickname, “Sportsman’s Paradise.” One hundred thirty-three lots would be sold; Lawrence was determined to buy one. He began driving down to the site every day to watch the crew pave the streets. Lawrence showed up early on the morning the lots went on sale and was second in line. He bought one of the largest and most expensive sites, situated at the junction of two canals. The rest of the properties were gone by the next day.

Lawrence asked his wife to design the house. She drew a 4,000-square-foot mansion, with balconies cantilevered over the adjacent bayou. “I drew it so big,” Gayle told me, “because I didn’t think he’d build it.” He built it.

“When you get older,” said Lawrence, “you’re going to find out that when Momma’s happy, everybody’s happy.”

Gayle wanted the house white. Lawrence painted it white.

Then, overnight, it turned black. It took the Lawrences a day and a half to wipe down every surface with damp rags. The house would remain white for a day, or even a week, but inevitably the dust returned. Lawrence began to keep daily weather records and soon realized that his house was turning black on days when there was an easterly wind. He walked to his rooftop deck and looked east. There, a half-mile away, loomed a cordillera of black hills. They ranged across an 150-acre coal storage facility on the bank of the Mississippi. The black hills contained coal and petroleum coke, a particularly filthy byproduct of oil refining. The coal and pet coke arrived from refineries higher up the river and were collected by ships destined for South America, Europe, and Asia.

Lawrence was aware of the terminal when he bought his plot. But he had believed that, sheltered by the bayous and marshland of his Sportsman’s Paradise, he wouldn’t notice it. Now he noticed it.

Lawrence drove to the terminal. The plant manager was not as receptive to his complaints as the Charity Hospital administrators had been. The manager pointed out that there was another coal terminal across the river, on the east bank, a mile and a
half south. How did Lawrence really know where his coal dust came from? Lawrence responded that, when he stood on his deck on windy days, he could see the black veils blowing off the terminal’s property and advancing toward his house. The manager demanded proof.

Lawrence wrote letters to local politicians, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, and the Environmental Protection Agency. State officials told him that, having known about the coal terminal when he bought the property, he had no standing to complain. Lawrence responded that he did not know the plant would regularly cough soot onto his house. Officials swabbed the white railings and ran tests and assured him that the coal dust was not a health hazard. “I know you’re telling me it’s OK, but I don’t think I can believe you,” said Lawrence. We were sitting beside his pool, the bottom of which was covered by a fresh layer of dust. A brown pelican glided above the canal, looking for breakfast. “If I can see it, how can it be doing my lungs any good to breathe it?” He thought of his own father, a pipe fitter who brought asbestos home in sacks like industrial-sized bags of flour. Lawrence and his siblings mixed the asbestos with cement to make flooring for their house. His father died of asbestosis at the age of 71. His friends’ fathers, who had worked at the same contracting firm, all died within two years of each other.

Warren Lawrence now embarked on a second career. He attended every Plaquemines Parish council session, organized meetings in churches and living rooms, scrutinized local land deals, and researched the handful of property owners, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians who controlled most of the parish’s business. He inspected the parish’s sewage, in other words. He dug up the bodies. And he soon learned that the toxic dust blowing off the coal piles down the road was just the beginning of his trouble.

2. Swamped

Louisiana is disappearing. Since 1932, the Gulf of Mexico has swallowed 2,300 square miles of the state’s wetlands, an area larger than Delaware. If no action is taken, the missing Delaware will become a missing Connecticut, and then a missing Vermont. The loss of the marshes has catastrophic implications, because they are the state’s first, and strongest, defense against hurricanes.
Two culprits are responsible for most of the destruction. The first is the Army Corps of Engineers, which over the past 130 years has built many of the levees that pin the modern Mississippi River in place to prevent flooding. Without a restrained river, Louisiana would be unsuitable for human civilization. But it was the flooding that built and sustained much of the southern part of the state in the first place. For millennia, whenever a breach opened in the riverbank, muddy water rushed through, depositing alluvium that solidified into land. When one crevasse plugged with mud, the river opened breaches elsewhere. Since the Mississippi has been hemmed in, most of its sediment, instead of replenishing the wetlands, discharges straight into the Gulf of Mexico and disappears off the continental shelf.

The other major destructive force in the region is the fossil fuel industry. One-quarter of the nation’s energy supply passes through southern Louisiana, and much of its infrastructure lies in Plaquemines Parish. Over the last century, energy companies have dredged thousands of miles of canals for tanker ships and pipelines. The canals score the marsh, a defacement plainly visible from the window of an airplane flying above. They are like straws sucking in saltwater from the Gulf, eroding the fragile root systems that hold the wetlands together like woven thread. As the Earth warms, and sea levels rise, more saltwater intrudes, accelerating the deterioration.

Meanwhile, coal terminals and oil refineries and gas storage facilities continue to sprout along the lower Mississippi, belching out more emissions, hastening the rise of the oceans, and coating Warren Lawrence’s dream house in soot.
In recent years, Louisiana has tried to have it both ways, restoring its wetlands while encouraging energy development. In 2012, the state published a Coastal Master Plan endorsed by scientists, state representatives, and energy executives, which listed 109 projects that should be undertaken in the next 50 years in order to offset the depredations of the previous century. Of the 109 projects, one of the most critical, and most ambitious, was called the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion.

A diversion is an artificial breach in the riverbank. The new distributary that gushes through it carries sediment deep into the depleted marsh. You don’t have to be a scientist to identify on a map of southern Louisiana the site where a diversion is most desperately needed. It is the spot, approximately 33 miles south of New Orleans, where the river curves east around a section of marsh that resembles tissue paper left to deteriorate in a bathtub. Below those wetlands lie Barataria Bay, named after a
village in Don Quixote governed by Sancho Panza, who is tricked into believing it is an island. That Barataria was not an island, and this Barataria, if left to its own devices, will cease to be a bay. By the end of the century, it will be absorbed by the Gulf of Mexico to the south, and absorb the sinking marsh to the north. When that happens, the land surrounding the bottom 57 miles of the Mississippi River will slough into the sea.

The name of the location chosen for the Mid-Barataria diversion is St. Rosalie Bend. A diversion placed at this turn in the river, where the level of sediment is particularly high, is expected to restore as much as 32,000 acres of land over the next 50 years. Measured by its rate of discharge, the new distributary created by the diversion would qualify as the fifth-largest river in the continental United States. It would be one of the largest land-creation projects in U.S. history, so long as nothing gets in its way.

3. Plots

The man-made monster of a river created by the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion would surge through a plot of land that was once the site of the St. Rosalie sugar plantation. St. Rosalie was established in 1828 by a free man of color named Andrew Durnford, a strict slavemaster who struggled to make a profit, despite the free labor of 75 slaves. Durnford died in debt to the white slaveowner who loaned him the money to buy the land, and Durnford’s heirs were forced to sell the property at a loss after the Civil War. Between St. Rosalie Plantation and Myrtle Grove—formerly the Myrtle Grove Plantation—lies the hamlet of Ironton, which occupies the former Ironton Plantation. After emancipation, Ironton’s slaves gained ownership of the land, and their descendants remain there today, five generations later. But each generation has had to fight to stay.

Ironton’s persecution was especially violent under the rule of Leander Perez, the rabid segregationist who ran Plaquemines Parish from 1919 until his death in 1969. Perez presided over one of the most powerful political machines in Southern history and, in the process, siphoned $80 million in oil royalties into his personal accounts. Called by his own church “the leading racist of the South,” he neglected to authorize levees for the predominantly black areas of his parish, wrote laws that prevented blacks from voting, and blocked desegregation in Plaquemines schools, at one point going so far as to interrupt a catechism class at a local church and expel a black student at gunpoint. After Perez died, his sons inherited his power and continued to enforce his policies. As
late as 1980 the parish hospital had segregated waiting rooms, public parks, and hurricane evacuation plans: whites could take shelter at a local school while blacks had to seek refuge at a Navy station 17 miles away. Blacks were barred from government jobs in the parish, whose council declined to apply for federal anti-poverty funds. But Ironton had it worst of all. The Plaquemines council refused to provide the village with running water or a sewer system. Residents were forced to collect water in cisterns, as the first residents of New Orleans had done two centuries earlier. It was not until 1981, after exposés by Walter Isaacson in Time and Dan Rather for “60 Minutes”—and, more significantly, an attritional power struggle between Perez’s sons—that the parish council connected Ironton to water lines.

Ironton’s current council representative, Burghart Turner, believes that the relationship between the parish’s black population and its white leadership has not significantly improved since. He claims that the parish government unnecessarily delays initiatives in his district and fails to conduct basic infrastructure maintenance and repairs. Though the energy plants along the river boast of hiring locally, many define “local” as within a 500-mile radius, meaning local employees can come from as far away as Tallahassee or Memphis. “I don’t see that being local,” said Turner’s administrative assistant, Audrey Trufant-Salvant.

I visited Turner and Trufant-Salvant one weekday afternoon at the Plaquemines Parish Government office in Port Sulphur, which was rebuilt with federal dollars after Katrina. It is a grand, two-story brick structure, framed by Tuscan columns and a palladium transom. As far as I could tell, Turner and Trufant-Salvant, along with a secretary who sat in the white-oak-paneled lobby, were the only people in the building.

Turner questioned the motives behind a diversion that would carve a barrier between the wealthier, predominantly white areas of Plaquemines and his district, which contains the majority of the parish’s black population. “You’re physically cutting the parish in half,” Turner told me. “And when you do that, you make it easier to lose the entire landmass.”

Myrtle Grove, and Warren Lawrence’s dream house, also sit on the southern side of the diversion. Ironton and Myrtle Grove have roughly the same populations but inverse demographics: The former is entirely black and working class; the latter is entirely white, with most properties used as vacation homes. Until two years ago, said Trufant-Salvant, “nobody from Myrtle Grove ever talked to anybody from Ironton.” That soon
changed. Lawrence, not long removed from his coal dust investigation, had started asking questions about the diversion. He discovered an incredible thing: The Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, the crown jewel of Louisiana’s Master Plan, had come under attack—from the state of Louisiana. The state had granted a coal company permission to build a major new coal storage terminal on the same plot of land that had been reserved for the project.

Lawrence and Trufant-Salvant began organizing meetings where people from the two towns discussed their options. “Coastal restoration is a joke,” said Turner. “If we’re serious about it, then why are we allowing more coal to come in and pollute the marshes? You don’t play around with cancer. You remove it.”

Lawrence could not understand why the coal company—RAM Terminals, an affiliate of Kentucky’s Armstrong Coal—would buy a plot of land that was slated to be partly blown up for a river diversion. Even without the diversion, the choice didn’t make sense: the former St. Rosalie plantation is a natural flood plain. Adding to the mystery was the fact that the plot lacks access to a major rail line. The single track now in place would have to accommodate uncovered coal trains a mile long. The uncovered coal trains would pass through Gretna, a densely populated suburb across the river from New Orleans, before proceeding down the west bank of the Mississippi, alongside every town in Plaquemines.

“I have concerns about the diversion,” Lawrence told me. “But the coal terminal would destroy us once and for all.”

4. Boom

When Lawrence first met with residents of Ironton, he was surprised to learn that they suffered from coal dust pollution, too. But as bad as the coal dust is, the grain dust is worse. A nearby grain elevator operated by CHS Inc. sheds particles that fall over the town like yellow snow every time there’s a westerly wind. The east wind brings coal, the west wind brings grain—residents can tell which way the wind is blowing by the color of their porches.

“There isn’t a kid born in Ironton without respiratory problems,” said Trufant-Salvant, whose great-great-grandfather, a member of the family who owned Ironton Plantation,
is buried in the town’s cemetery. We met inside her home, which she keeps spare and neat because she has to clean it four times a week. On some days dust swirls on her porch like a cloud of insects. “This is the country. We’re used to keeping our doors open, our windows open. But now we keep our doors closed all the time.”

Trufant-Salvant wears pearl earrings and a navy blazer and carries herself with the bearing of a stateswoman. When we spoke she used a patient, even-tempered tone that was at severe odds with the abuses that she related. “It wasn’t until last year that I first heard the term ‘industrial corridor;’ ” she said. “But now it’s in every article you read about the area.” She noted that Billy Nungesser, the parish president, had begun to use the term whenever he spoke about the southern part of Plaquemines. He applied it retroactively, as if this section of the Mississippi River had long ago been granted an official designation. When asked recently about opposition in Myrtle Grove and Ironton to the construction of the neighboring NOLA oil terminal, a facility designed to store five million barrels of oil, Nungesser said, “Anybody who lives there knew that corridor along the river in Plaquemines Parish was going to be industrial.” Trufant-Salvant knew no such thing.

During Nungesser’s term, many of the citrus farms that used to line the lower Mississippi have been sold to heavy industry—not just the three coal terminals, the grain elevator, and the oil storage facility, but also the Conoco-Phillips Alliance Refinery, immediately north of the grain elevator, and the Plaquemines Port complex, slated for a site a few miles south. All of these terminals lie along a single six-mile stretch of the river, surrounding Myrtle Grove and Ironton. (Farther up the river, a former nickel factory was recently purchased by a Connecticut-based energy conglomerate, possibly for use as yet another petroleum or natural gas facility.) Trufant-Salvant remembers a time when Ironton children would swim and fish in the Mississippi River. Nobody goes near the Mississippi anymore. It is the second dirtiest river in the United States, and nowhere is it dirtier than when flowing through Plaquemines Parish.

Lawrence, Turner, and Trufant-Salvant realized that they would need to bring in expert help if they wanted to have a chance of thwarting RAM’s plans. They enlisted the support of Tulane University’s Environmental Law Clinic, the Gulf Coast Restoration Network, and the Louisiana chapter of the Sierra Club. Activists from these organizations have greater resources and expertise, and—most important—no fear of retribution.
The Sierra Club’s Devin Martin grew up in Bayou Lafourche, 36 miles west across the marsh as the bird flies. Lawrence did not have to convince him that RAM Terminal’s decision to buy the St. Rosalie plot was bizarre. The more they looked, the more bizarre it seemed. Not far upriver sat a vacant industrial property, suitable for use as a terminal, connected to a major rail line, and close to an interstate highway. Yet the coal company had bought the St. Rosalie site for $25 million—an astronomical price relative to local property values. The seller, a Plaquemines businessman named Kennett Stewart, had bought the property four years earlier for $5.625 million. That is a profit of 444 percent.

“It’s a really fishy situation,” said Martin. “Something doesn’t add up.”

I asked Martin whether he suspected that there might have been some kind of back-dealing involved. “This is Plaquemines,” he said. “Everything that happens is back-dealing.”

RAM, he believes, would not have paid so much money for land that had already been designated for a massive river diversion unless the company knew that the diversion project would not pose a problem. “Any company that would do its due diligence would need to have some assurance that there would be a way around the diversion—that they could actually use the property and make money off their investment.”

RAM, which has never publicly expressed opposition to the diversion, seems to believe that the project is not incompatible with its terminal. It has proposed that the diversion run through its property, the new river coursing alongside 80-foot-tall piles of coal. When the company applied for its permit, the director of the Louisiana’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, Jerome Zeringue, wrote a letter to the relevant officials expressing “serious concerns” about such an arrangement and commissioned a study from an independent engineering firm. The researchers found that the RAM facility would reduce the amount of sediment carried into the marshes by as much as half a million tons over ten years, while pumping coal runoff—toxins like arsenic, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and sulfides—directly into the wetlands, poisoning the same flora that the diversion is intended to save.

The Coastal Authority, on whose board Billy Nungesser sits, can rule against any new facilities that it deems “inconsistent” with the Master Plan. The body decided that the reduction of half a million tons of sediment did not meet that definition, and RAM’s permit was allowed to go through. “I can understand that on the surface it doesn’t
send the right message, having a coal terminal right next to a restoration project,” said Zeringue. “We would prefer not to have it there. The question is, can we stop it?” Zeringue, citing the authority’s fear of a potential lawsuit from RAM, wasn’t certain that they could. “It’d be great if we could lock up the whole river for the purposes of coastal restoration,” he told me. “But obviously we can’t do that.”

5. Fixed

All that remains now is for the RAM Terminal to secure a separate permit from the Army Corps of Engineers. But the Corps has never even asked to review the environmental impact study commissioned by the Coastal Authority. Nor has it granted public hearings to discuss the matter.

“They wrote us off,” Lawrence told me. “They said that they had all the information they needed and that they had no objection to the terminal.”

“Anybody who is willing to issue a permit to RAM Terminals, knowing that the coal is going to have an adverse effect on the diversion, can’t be concerned about coastal restoration,” said Councilman Turner. “It’s a dichotomy; they don’t go together. As the saying goes, ‘What you do speaks so loudly that I can’t hear what you’re saying.’ Go sell that story to someone else. Let me put my dunce hat in the closet, that way you quit talking to me as though I’m stupid, thinking you can sell me anything.”

6. Boss

All roads in Plaquemines Parish lead to—and most of them have been rebuilt by—Billy Nungesser, whose constituents address him simply as “President Nungesser.” In April, Nungesser invited me to his office in Belle Chasse, a hulking building that, like many of the structures in Plaquemines, stands on stilts ten feet above the ground. Out-of-staters might most easily picture Nungesser as a southern Chris Christie. He shares the New Jersey governor’s insouciant charisma, physical build, and winsome indifference to the art of self-censorship that most politicians master by the time they hit the stump. Two years before Christie gained
national sympathy for his passionate response to Hurricane Sandy, Nungesser emerged in the aftermath of the BP oil spill as the state’s leading spokesman, a commanding presence who offered a satisfying antidote to Bobby Jindal’s indignant, mugged-schoolboy pose. Sunburned and sweaty from a day spent riding boats through the crude-slicked wetlands, wearing billowing blue oxford shirts (the tie long since cast aside) and white shrimp boots that he called his “Cajun Reeboks,” Nungesser demanded that BP and Washington bureaucrats be held accountable for their incompetence. When BP’s chief executive visited Plaquemines and denied the presence of large oil plumes in the Gulf, Nungesser said the executive was “lucky he got out of here alive.” He appeared to take the BP disaster personally. When Obama visited, Nungesser told him: “There’s been a failure of leadership at all levels. Who in the hell is in charge?” It was clear, in Plaquemines, who the hell was in charge.

While the oil was still gushing out of the Deepwater Horizon rig, Louisiana’s legislative auditor announced that he was investigating Nungesser for four potential ethical violations. One of the charges was related to the business dealings of Nungesser’s blind trust, which he is forbidden from operating during his tenure but will return to his control once he leaves the job. Among its holdings is the Myrtle Grove Marina, which shortly after the spill signed BP to a $120,000, one-year lease. This was ten days after the oil company had agreed to give Plaquemines Parish $1 million. Financial disclosure records show that Nungesser earned more than $200,000 from his trust that year, but ultimately he was cleared by the ethics board.

In 2012, the FBI launched a separate ethical investigation, but again Nungesser was not formally charged. More recently, Nungesser negotiated, on behalf of the parish, the contract to build the Port of Plaquemines on land near his home—land that he now intends to sell. “He put it where he owns land,” said Lawrence. “Now was that a coincidence, or did it happen for a reason?”

Turner is less equivocal. “It’s obvious he is using his office to enrich himself,” he alleged. “It’s all about money, not the coast. We only move forward if certain companies can profit. Any good that is done ends up being a byproduct, not the focus.” Nungesser insists that he is not privy to the business dealings of his blind trust. He does admit that his friends have profited during his term—an inevitability, he says, given the parish’s small population—but denies any wrongdoing.

Ronald Reagan, sitting astride a white horse, peers down from the wall of Nungesser’s
I don’t think that large diversion will ever get built,” Nungesser began. Plaquemines, he said, was assembling its own coastal plan, in response to the state’s Master Plan—the same one he voted to ratify as a member of the Coastal Authority. “There’s very few people that I’ve come across that are actually in favor of the Mid-Barataria diversion,” he told me, apart from “the scientists from California.” He did not specify which scientists he was referring to, but at a State of the Gulf conference held in March, three Louisiana State University (LSU) professors argued that “large-scale sediment diversions from the Mississippi River build the most land in return for the least financial investment,” by forcing sediment far deeper into the wetlands than otherwise possible. “The greatest challenge in instituting large-scale sediment diversions,” the LSU team concluded, “is political support.”

Nungesser was candid as he discussed what he called his “mixed results” in office: “I came out strongly against BP. I believe in business and industry, I love animals, I love the pelicans, I love the barrier islands. I really think there’s a happy medium on everything.” His tone shifted, however, when I brought up complaints that Councilman Turner’s district had been neglected by his administration.

“You never get the true story from Mr. Turner. After Katrina, I bought ten thousand dollars of washers and dryers and put them all over our parish. I wasn’t running for parish president then. I rescued thirty people from that community who lived with me for a month. I paid electrical bills for people in this parish, probably far more than I could afford, because I love helping people.”

He mentioned the $1,000 personal checks he wrote to every church in the parish after Katrina, the therapeutic horse-riding camp he started for disabled children, the check he wrote to a local chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving after he was pulled over for driving while intoxicated as a young man. “It breaks my heart that these people have been misled by one angry person—who is a racist. He is a racist. I’ve never met someone in all my years of dealing that’s such a nasty, negative—would twist the truth to get people to believe in him—as Mr. Turner. If anything’s not done in his district, it’s his fault.

“Listen, I’m a conservative Republican. I got beat up when I gave a lot of money to
Barbara Boxer, Mary Landrieu, and a lot of other people whose political ways I don’t believe in. I did it to get their ear—to ask them to do the right thing. Because when I came into office, I was in an uphill battle to get funding for levees in Plaquemines. I went to Washington, week after week. Does that sound like a guy who doesn’t care about the people of Ironton?”

He had been going on for nearly thirty minutes. I tried to change the subject. Nungesser lives in an estate built on a man-made hill in front of a man-made lake just south of Myrtle Grove and the IMT coal terminal. Did he have problems with coal dust?

“I get a film on my car,” he said. “Is that coal dust? I don’t know. I don’t identify it as coal dust. I don’t know if that’s pollution in the air, dust, or whatever.”

Then he was back on the subject of his “enemies,” for another hour.

“Shame on them,” he said. “They’re going to have to answer to God one day. Mr. Turner calls himself a holy man? I call him the Devil.”


Into the Mire
The muckrakers and mudslingers doing battle over the fate of the lower Mississippi.

7. Bait

ungesser and his critics are not as far apart as it might seem. Plaquemines Parish has made an unholy bargain with the energy industry. But nobody makes such a
bargain without a reason; you only do so if you believe you’ve been forsaken. This is the situation in which Plaquemines found itself in 2006. When the White House announced its plan to rebuild the levee system after Katrina, it excluded the lower part of Plaquemines; a Bush administration representative questioned whether including the parish would be “economically justifiable,” given that its total population stood at just 15,000 before the storm. The unsubtle implication of this statement, and others like it in the months that followed, was that much of southern Louisiana would be abandoned to the Gulf of Mexico, cut off from the rest of the country like a gangrenous digit.

The Sierra Club’s Devin Martin believes Nungesser is luring industry to Plaquemines in order to extort the federal government into paying for flood protection. “They can’t justify getting federal funding if it’s just to save poor people in a flood zone,” Martin told me. “They need industry, in at-risk places.” Under Nungesser, said Martin, “the parish has made an art out of how to acquire FEMA dollars.”

It’s true. Since Hurricane Katrina, Plaquemines Parish, with the support of Baton Rouge, has done everything possible to entice fossil-fuel corporations—the very same corporations that have imperiled the existence of the fragile coast—to expand their business on the lower Mississippi. Once situated, the energy plants serve as a blackmail note. When you have industry, in at-risk places, you need insurance. You need levees. And, most importantly, the federal government needs you.

Nungesser, while placing his emphasis differently, doesn’t disagree with this interpretation. “If I had my choice, would I choose this kind of industry?” he asked. “Maybe not. I don’t know. But I do know that we’re going to have another hurricane. I know people don’t want to leave, but it’s coming. With industry there, we have a fighting chance to save these communities.”

Cynical as it may be, Nungesser’s logic has been vindicated. After the rapid buildup of industrial plants along the lower Mississippi during his administration, the federal government had a change of heart about Plaquemines. In 2012, the Army Corps announced a $1.4 billion plan to improve the levees between New Orleans and the southern tip of Plaquemines, raising them to four times their current height. Additional levee projects have since been authorized.

Those levees, of course, will be of little long-term value if the marsh continues to erode and the diversions and other land-building initiatives listed in the Master Plan never
get funded. But if enough energy facilities move into harm’s way, the strategy goes, then perhaps the federal government will agree to cover the full tab. It is hard to believe that Nungesser, or whomever succeeds him as parish president, would oppose the Mid-Barataria diversion then.

8. Forecast

W
arren Lawrence is now busier than ever, as he and his allies expand their fight against industrial development along the lower Mississippi. After two years spent gathering signatures, commissioning scientific studies, and consulting with lawyers from Tulane University’s Environmental Law Clinic, Lawrence and the residents of Myrtle Grove won a class-action suit against the coal terminal that had been blackening his house. The judge gave the facility, which now operates under the name International Marine Terminal (IMT), four years to install sprinkler systems called “rainbirds,” cannons that spray water to wet the coal and keep it from floating away. (Rainbirds are required by law in many other states.) Four years passed and the coal terminal had done nothing. The only relief for the Lawrence’s was that, as a penalty for failing to honor the terms of the settlement, IMT annually sent a team of cleaners to spray their house with power washers. But IMT’s workers refused to clean the floor of the Lawrence’s’ swimming pool, or their Toyota, or the party barge. IMT finally installed the rainbirds in January of this year, though Lawrence can’t tell if it has made a difference. In the meantime, IMT has completed a $190 million expansion, doubling its capacity from ten to 20 million tons of coal.

Lawrence’s coalition still hopes to convince the Army Corps of Engineers to block RAM’s coal terminal, though they are pessimistic about their chances. They are pinning their hopes on a lawsuit against the state’s Department of Natural Resources, claiming that it shouldn’t have granted a permit to RAM because the terminal’s operation will be inconsistent with the Master Plan.

There are other battles underway, including a lawsuit against the United Bulk coal terminal across the river, which is alleged to discharge coal regularly into the Mississippi River. Two additional lawsuits have been filed in protest of the five-million-barrel NOLA oil tank farm that is rising directly across the road from Myrtle Grove.
“They’re in the one spot in this parish that is guaranteed to flood in every storm,” said one of Lawrence’s Myrtle Grove neighbors. “Every storm. That’s the amazing part.”

It did not seem to occur to this resident that those five million barrels of oil might have been placed in the direct path of future hurricanes on purpose. Nor did it occur to him that the presence of the tank farm might be the only thing that will protect his home from the Mississippi River and the rising ocean beyond. And that, really, is the amazing part.


Correction: An earlier version of this article stated that Billy Nungesser's father, William Nungesser Sr., was the state's first Republican congressman since the Reconstruction, and the state's leading Republican kingmaker. Nungesser Sr. was not a congressman, but did serve as the GOP state chairman.