

# WASTING AWAY IN ATCHISON COUNTY

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## My Neighbors Prefer Economic Depression to an Incinerator

BLAKE HURST

I Instead of Edmund Burke and the *Federalist Papers*, I have to admit I spent my youth reading westerns. So, even though I should be an expert on the French Revolution, I can probably tell you more about the Lincoln County War or the shoot-out at the OK Corral. It's a fixture of all Western range wars that each side would hire gunfighters to champion its interests. This is the story of a latter-day gunfighter, a man named Hugh Kaufman, who came to my town, won his shoot-out by terrorizing the community, and left to fight again. Of course, gunfighters today use the 6 o'clock news instead of the Colt .45, but they still deal in fear and are paid in notoriety.

Atchison County, Missouri, has 8,000 people, half of our population at the turn of the century and 7 percent less than 10 years ago. The county has essentially no industry. The leading source of income in the area is Social Security, with farm income a distant second. A small Presbyterian college here has a theater program famous throughout the Midwest and several satellite campuses that rank highest in the nation for student loan defaults. At least running student loan scams shows more entrepreneurial imagination than is normally found in this depressed area.

### Showdown at the Gym

Late last year, Waste-Tech, Inc., a Colorado subsidiary of Amoco, announced it was considering our county as a site for an incinerator of hazardous wastes—mostly oil refinery wastes, printers' ink, dry-cleaning fluids, and agricultural chemicals. The initial reaction to the news was positive. The small-town papers, civic groups, and chambers of commerce favored the project. When opposition did develop, the first signs were letters to the editor in the local papers quoting from environmental groups such as Greenpeace. Soon, handwritten fliers announced the arrival of a high EPA official in Atchison County to speak in opposition to the project.

Now, this seemed strange to me. After all, the company planning to build the incinerator had made it clear that the EPA felt that incineration was the "best available technology" to handle the wastes in question. So why were the opponents of the project bringing in someone

from the EPA to speak against official EPA policy?

Enter Hugh Kaufman. Kaufman first gained widespread attention when he blew the whistle on Rita Lavelle's dilatory cleanup of Superfund waste sites. However, that wasn't the first time Kaufman had been at odds with the EPA. In fact, under the Reagan administration, the EPA was stopped by court order from firing Kaufman. Well known as a spokesman for the radical environmental fringe, Kaufman receives 8 to 10 invitations a month to speak against various projects across the country during his leave time and on weekends.

The scene was set for the confrontation. In the western novels of my youth, the showdown would have occurred in the dusty main street of our small town, but Main Street is a lousy place for sound bites on the evening news, so Kaufman spoke at the local high school gym. The gunfighter of the past would have been tall, taciturn, and unshaven. Kaufman, on the other hand, is short, bespectacled, and personable, not the type of figure to strike fear into the heart of the populace.

### Yellow Waste-Tech

Of course, it could hardly have been called a confrontation: Waste-Tech declined to attend. This was a major mistake because Kaufman made serious and incorrect allegations that cried out for immediate response. With the program held on a Saturday, the charges Kaufman made dominated the news all day Sunday with no reply from anyone on the other side.

In a telephone conversation with a Waste-Tech official, I asked if the company regretted its decision not to attend. He said it did not. However, it was clear that Waste-Tech's absence made an impression on the fold in attendance. The only way to deal with Kaufman's irresponsible attacks was to answer them forthrightly, honestly, and most of all, promptly. Waste-Tech's unwillingness to do so had to give even supporters of the project pause.

Kaufman began his remarks by accusing Waste-Tech

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BLAKE HURST *helps operate the family farm established by his grandfather in Missouri. He last wrote for Policy Review on agricultural subsidies.*



The Tarkio Avalanche

**Gunslingers in the old days used to terrorize folk by shooting up the town. Hugh Kaufman uses the 6 o'clock news instead of a Colt .45 to scare people out of their wits.**

of "potential fraud and illegalities" in a permit application for a similar plant in western Nebraska. He called for a Nebraska grand jury investigation of these "criminal acts." The Nebraska attorney general did investigate Kaufman's charges and found them without basis. The attorney general's office remarked that it had some difficulty in its investigation because Kaufman failed to answer five different requests for substantiation of his charges in writing. One of the central charges made by Kaufman was the alleged failure to list an existing plant in Colorado in the application. Not only did Waste-Tech mention the plant in the appropriate place, but it gave tours of the plant to people from Nebraska and Atchison County. The company also mentioned the plant, and its exemplary test results, in each of its public presentations in Atchison County.

Kaufman went on to call hazardous waste incineration the "most dangerous operation in the world." The U.S. Congress doesn't think so: its Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) of 1976 bans the disposal of hazardous wastes in landfills, but allows incineration. The EPA contends that emissions from incinerators are a minor source of air pollution and "do not pose any threat to nearby residents or the surrounding environment."

Kaufman dealt with his disagreement with the EPA over the safety of incineration in two ways. First, providing no substantiation, he accused EPA scientists of not telling the truth for fear of losing their jobs. Second, he said EPA political appointees "are and are hoping to be working for hazardous waste companies." Waste-Tech does have one former EPA employee on the payroll; he was hired three years after he left the agency and was a civil service employee, not a political appointee.

Kaufman painted an alarming picture of the truck traffic necessary to haul waste to the plant. Visions of lines of tanker trucks festooned with skulls and crossbones clogging the local roads are frightening for any community. However, the Waste-Tech proposal mentioned an average of only three trucks a day. Kaufman flatly accused Waste-Tech of lying about truck traffic and said there was nothing in the permit limiting the number of trucks entering the plant. In fact, the permit applica-

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tion did specify the amount of waste to be treated yearly. If one divided the maximum permitted amount by the capacity of a tanker, and the result by 365, the answer was three trucks per day.

#### **Nobody Next Door**

Land values in Atchison County are a function of the price of grain, interest rates, and the perceived trend of government subsidies. Kaufman warned that if an incinerator were sited here, land values would drop 50 to 70 percent, perhaps even 99 percent. A survey of all land

that had changed hands in the area around Waste-Tech's planned facility in western Nebraska shows absolutely no drop in land prices.

All in all, Kaufman gave a command performance that had its desired effect. Two days after his visit, Waste-Tech dropped Atchison County as a proposed site. I'm sure that if a referendum had been held, a majority of the citizens would have voted against the siting of the incinerator in their county.


Of course, I'd rather have a computer software firm in my backyard than a hazardous waste incinerator. But I'd also rather live next door to an incinerator than to

business here not so dependent on the vagaries of Mother Nature.

### **Decline of the Waste**

The loss of 40 jobs by a depressed county in rural Missouri is hardly of national importance except for this: If the most environmentally safe way of dealing with a national problem cannot be built in Atchison County, what hope have we for dealing with the wastes our economy produces? After all, farmers here work with "hazardous" chemicals every day, many of them the same chemicals that would have been destroyed in the incinerator. We know they are dangerous, but if handled with care, their benefits far outweigh any risks to the environment. If a community used to dealing with these compounds takes the likes of Hugh Kaufman at face value, the reaction of other communities is likely to be even more extreme. And this is not an academic debate. A law passed by Congress in 1984 placed strict limits on what wastes can be landfilled. By 1990, a total ban will be placed on the dumping of untreated chemicals. According to Gregg Easterbrook in a recent *Newsweek* article, 96 percent of these wastes are handled where they are produced, but 4 percent will have to be treated, mostly by incineration. Easterbrook further points out that by failing to use new technologies, we are forced to continue using outdated methods of dealing with waste. So, in effect, Kaufman's efforts will result in more damage to our environment.

One final note. In the weeks after Kaufman's visit, three small businesses here in Atchison County closed their doors. Of course, it would have been too late to make any difference to those businesses. But it seems clear that the citizens of Atchison County have chosen a gradual decline in preference to any environmental risks whatsoever.

In the westerns I loved as a youngster, though the cow town might have been terrorized by the gunfighter, in the end, the citizens of the town overcame their fear and banded together for the good of the community. But, here in Atchison County, fear was the victor. 

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some of the hog farms I've seen (and smelt) around these parts. An incinerator is also probably better than having nobody next door—on our farm there are four unoccupied houses. On my four-mile drive to farm headquarters each morning, I drive by another four empty houses. A community of abandoned farmsteads, failing businesses, and crumbling roads and bridges is hardly a desirable one. Waste-Tech's project would have posed a negligible risk to our physical environment here in Atchison County, and it would have provided at least some hope of improving our business environment. Now in our second year of drought, we could sure use some



# OFF WITH THEIR OVERHEAD

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## More Prison Bars for the Buck

KEVIN ACKER

**A**cross the nation, burgeoning convict populations have prisons bulging at their limits. Tales of "homeless" inmates who carry their belongings in a pillow case during the day and sleep in the hall at night are not uncommon. Currently, 37 states operate one or more prisons under court orders to improve conditions and reduce overcrowding. At the same time, public support is growing for tougher sentencing measures to lock criminals up and keep them there.

The effects of this new consensus are widespread. The lack of public faith in rehabilitation helped George Bush defeat Michael Dukakis through effective use of the prison furlough issue. In Oregon, a 1988 ballot initiative that forbade parole or probation for twice-convicted felons passed by an overwhelming 79 percent. Clearly, to accommodate the public will, the nation needs to expand its prison capacity.

Building a prison, however, is an expensive task. Prison construction costs average \$50,000 per bed nationally, ranging from \$2,995 per bed for a minimum-security cell in Alabama to \$140,000 per bed for a maximum-security facility in West Virginia. Contributing to the disparity in these figures are varying construction and labor costs, and conditions mandated by state legislatures such as the number of square feet or bathrooms per prisoner. Other reasons for disparity include weather conditions and efficiency in procurement.

Also, as the security designation of a prison becomes more restrictive, construction costs go up. According to the 1988 *Corrections Yearbook*, the average cost for a maximum-security prison is approximately \$67,000 per bed, for a medium-security prison \$53,000 per bed, and for a minimum-security prison \$26,000 per bed. It costs approximately \$16,000 to hold a prisoner in jail, more than the yearly tuition of an Ivy League college. Typically, about two-thirds of a prison's operating costs are personnel-related (salaries, employee benefits); another 15 percent is designated for food and medical services. The remaining amount goes to such things as rehabilitative services and physical plant maintenance.

With crime rampant and taxpayers balking at prison bond issues, finding ways to decrease the cost of corrections has become increasingly urgent. A few prison and

jail systems have come up with innovative ideas—ranging from private sector management to the creative use of inmate labor—to reduce the cost of imprisonment.

### Nebraska's Prison Industries

For most of the 20th century, public abhorrence of using "slave labor," as well as business and union concerns about unfair competition, have led to laws prohibiting prison systems from selling the products of inmates on the open market. The Hawes-Cooper Act of 1929 banned interstate trade of goods produced by prisoners. In the 1970s, the rapid growth of prison populations, accompanied by new concerns about the high cost of corrections, led to a new appraisal of this ban. Recognizing that almost no business can operate profitably if it is not allowed to sell its product across state lines, the 1979 Percy Amendment allowed exceptions to the federal prohibition on interstate trade of prison-produced goods. Today, the American Correctional Association is allowed to grant 20 such exceptions under the Private Industry Enhancement (PIE) program.

Nebraska is one state recognized under PIE. The state's year-and-a-half-old "private venture" program has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars for the state's prison system by bringing in outside businesses to employ inmates at minimum wage. Under the Nebraska program, in place at all five of the state's prisons, private companies pay prisoners to make clothing, outfit conversion vans, manufacture wooden products, and telemarket products such as farm supplies and loading equipment. Five percent of each inmate's wages is deducted for victims' restitution programs and one dollar an hour is deducted for room and board. Even after these deductions the inmates in the program still have a before-tax \$2.29 per hour for their families and themselves—far more than the maximum \$3.29 per day that other inmates earn.

Last year, the "private venture" program added nearly \$200,000 in combined taxes, room and board, and contributions to victims' restitution programs to help offset

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KEVIN ACKER studies government at Dartmouth College, where he is news editor of *The Dartmouth*.