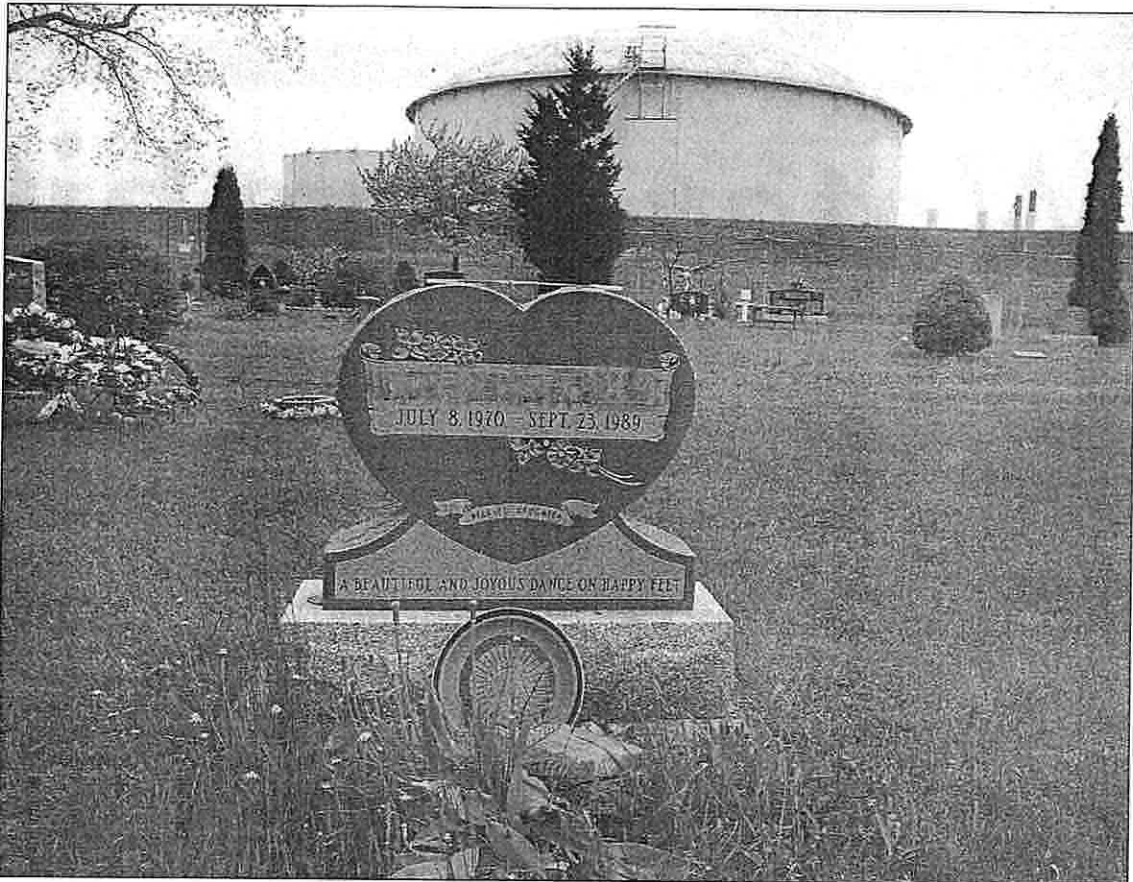
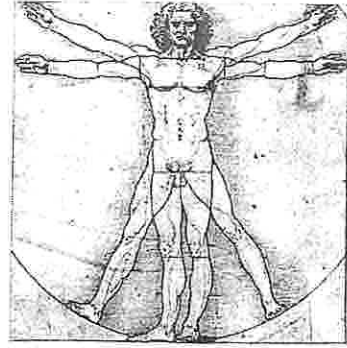


Dying



SUSAN BRADNAM Sun Media

OVERSHADOWED: Even in death, it's hard to escape the Chemical Valley on the Aamjiwaang native reserve.



A pipe from Imperial Oil's site drains into a roadside ditch.



SUSAN BRADNAM Sun Media

Native band member Ron Plain, who helps lead so-called Toxic Tours for visitors to the reserve in the Chemical Valley, stops during one such tour by a creek with a sign warning of toxic chemicals in the stream. Plain is outspoken about the health effects on his people from the industrial area.

The St. Clair:



High rates of disease, unusual birth sex ratios and tears. Free Press reporter Kate Dubinski reports on how residents of a small First Nation reserve in Sarnia's Chemical Valley lead visitors on a 'toxic tour' of their home, hoping it will help get the word out about the environmental links they suspect.

By Kate Dubinski
Sun Media

AAMJIWAANG FIRST NATION — Ada Lockridge's eyes fill with tears as she talks about the health problems of the Chippewas of Sarnia.

Chronic headaches, diabetes, thyroid problems, skin rashes and multiple miscarriages are only a few.

The process of chronicling all those ailments is emotionally and physically draining on Lockridge. So much so, the woman who chairs the native band's environmental committee sometimes has to skip the so-called "Toxic Tour" she and fellow band member Ron Plain give to visitors on the reserve.

"I guess it shows I have feelings. We have feelings here," Lockridge said, after listing off the health problems and pointing to four massive body maps that plot the health problems of the band.

Many of the adult men suffer chronic headaches, women from reproductive problems and children from developmental challenges.

The Aamjiwaang First Nation reserve is located in what could be called Southwestern Ontario's Ground Zero for diseases and environmental problems, in the heart of Sarnia's Chemical Valley.

industry, the reserve's fourth border is the 64-kilometre St. Clair River, a designated environmental "area of concern" with a long legacy of air and water pollution.

Wherever you go on the reserve — or off it, for that matter — you're never too far from the heavy industry, one of Canada's largest concentrations of petrochemical plants.

It's that combination of 42 plants on the Canadian side, 10 on the American banks, the river in between and the air pollution borne on southwesterly winds, that makes the area a toxic soup melting pot.

Water that flows through the St. Clair arrives from the upper Great Lakes and goes south into tiny Lake St. Clair, then into the Detroit River, another pollution hot spot, and into Lakes Erie and Ontario.

Life expectancy rates, and death rates from some environmentally-sensitive diseases, are significantly higher in Southwestern Ontario than in Ontario as a whole, with no obvious explanations in the population's age or makeup.

That often leaves the environment the suspect, and in Ontario's remote southwestern tip, the Sarnia area to Windsor, the convergence of environmental ills — in the air, water and

the U.S. Midwest — is especially acute.

"The closer you get to the Detroit River, the higher the rate of disease," said Dr. David Hill, scientific director of the Lawson Health Institute and vice president of research for St. Joseph's Health Care in London.

"The Sarnia area is a prime example of that, and (so is) the (Aamjiwaang First Nation)."

The Toxic Tour takes visitors on a two- to four-hour trip on the reserve that includes an old daycare building, where once 70 per cent of the kids were on asthma puffers.

"About 40 per cent of our kids are on puffers," Plain said.

Energy, chemical and utility giants are found in the area.

Imperial Oil, LanXess, TransAlta, Dow, Nova and Suncor all have plants in the 10-km swath of land between Sarnia and nearby Corunna.

Smack-dab in the middle is the Aamjiwaang reserve.

Half the chemicals that come from the area are known or suspected human carcinogens. Almost one-third are endocrine disruptors, capable of wreaking havoc on human hormones and the glands that deliver them to keep body systems operating properly.

But the area has cleaned up its act significantly since its

to live here

THE ST. CLAIR RIVER VALLEY

one-week series exploring the links between high rates of death, disease and Southwestern Ontario's environment



Susan Bradnam Sun Media

EMOTIONAL: Flanked by body maps on which incidents of cancer and other disease in her community have been plotted, Ada Lockridge pauses to collect her thoughts while talking about the reserve's health toll.

Waterworld gone bad

1980s, such as the infamous "blob" found in the St. Clair after 11,000 litres of a hazardous dry-cleaning solvent seeped into the river from the Dow Chemical plant.

"We have seen a constant improvement in the St. Clair River," said Dean Edwardson, general manager of the Sarnia Lambton Environmental Association (SLEA). It's a cooperative of 20 industrial companies which monitors air, water and contaminants in the area.

"If you look at where we are today — notwithstanding the unfortunate spills that we may have from time to time, which are not good news for anybody, not the people who use the river or the companies who had the unfortunate incident — we're always moving forward to make sure those things don't happen," he said.

But the 850 reserve residents have long known there's something wrong with their health. Many thought the diseases simply ran in their families.

Plain's wife has had seven miscarriages; another woman, nine. It's not uncommon to have that many, residents say.

Edwardson said the area's health problems have never been definitively linked to the chemical plants. He rejects the

every boy on the reserve — baby boys made up 34.8 per cent of live births in the community between 1999 to 2003.

In contrast, the Canadian average is 51.2 per cent male births.

The Toxic Tour also takes in the band's cemetery, where the hum of a nearby industrial generator is sometimes so loud that traditional funeral drumming is hard to hear. Suncor's massive storage tanks line another side of the graveyard, where carbon dating has dated some of the buried 6,000 years.

"People have cried about this," Plain said. "Imagine this in London, or anywhere else. It wouldn't happen."

The Toxic Tour is marked by alarming smells, such as that of rotten eggs — often a trademark of sulphur dioxide emissions — and the fumes leftover after electrical fires.

Near the cemetery is Talfourd Creek, which runs through the reserve. Lockridge played in the creek as a kid, but children are now warned to stay away.

"Keep Out. Talfourd Creek contains toxic substances known to cause serious health risks," the sign by the side of the creek on the reserve reads.

"I know kids who've gone in

buried throughout this site," Plain said, walking through tall grasses to a clearing.

The clearing reveals a pond of brown, sludgy water, left over from plant operations.

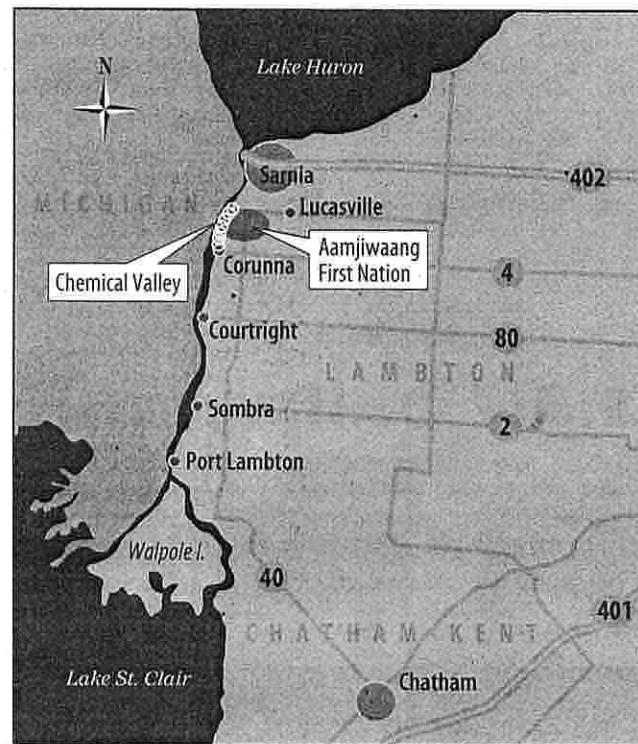
"So, you have deer and birds and everything else drinking out of here, and then they come up to the reserve. If someone shoots that deer and eats it, what are we eating?" Plain asked.

Added Lockridge: "People are always asking, 'Is it safe to eat from our gardens?' People want to know, but what can we tell them?"

A joint study by Health Canada, the SLEA, the band and surrounding counties and municipalities will hopefully be able to one day answer that question, Edwardson said.

"We would like to see a comprehensive health study done to look at the concerns and determine if they're valid or not," he said, adding the study should be lead by Health Canada.

"We'd like to put up resources and money. (But) we don't want to lead the study (because) every time industry does something and we spend our money, (people) automatically believe the study to be tainted . . . We'll take the results, whatever they may



ABOUT THE ST. CLAIR

► Sixty-four kilometres long, it flows past Sarnia's Chemical Valley, its most highly contaminated

tions of the lakes ply the river.

► Agriculture is the main land use within the river watershed, but with



THE SERIES

A special Going Green series — on death, disease and Southwestern Ontario's environment — in the leadup to climate-change crusader Al Gore's May 31 visit to London

Saturday: Dying to live here: our own inconvenient truths.

Sunday: Cancers: There's plenty new under the sun.

Monday: Respiratory disease: a killer in Ontario's smog belt.

Yesterday: Troubled waters: Farming and the Great Lakes

TODAY: The St. Clair: a toxic tour of our Ground Zero.

Tomorrow: Gore's makeover: From presidential loser to climate-change darling.

Friday: Full coverage of Gore's visit.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

