



Unleashing Its Arsenal

By Incinerating a Stockpile of the Nation's Chemical Weapons, Pine Bluff Will Destroy What It Once Created

By Stephen Greene

Certain memories from the Cold War are almost surreal: Schoolchildren in dog tags watching videos of Bert the Turtle instructing them to duck and cover in the event of a nuclear attack. Meanwhile, their parents are building backyard bomb shelters, doing whatever it takes to protect the family from "the big one."

Other remnants from the era are grounded squarely in reality. Count the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons—many of which were manufactured and stored in Pine Bluff, Ark.—among these leftovers. At the Pine Bluff Arsenal, 12 percent of the nation's original stockpile of chemical weapons has sat under airtight security for decades. That is second only to the 36 percent in Tooele, Utah.

Realizing that the Cold War weapons were obsolete and needed to be destroyed, the United States in 1990 began destroying chemical weapons at a remote site, Johnston Island in the Pacific Ocean. But an international agreement signed by the United States and more than 160 other nations in 1993 provided further incentive to destroy weapons at other U.S. sites, including Pine Bluff.

So, starting early this year, more than 600 workers at the recently completed \$700 million Pine Bluff Chemical Agent Disposal Facility will begin dismantling and incinerating nearly 4,000 tons of rockets, land mines and chemical-filled containers at the arsenal. Work is expected to be completed in 2010. As the project sets to commence, local officials are busy trying to alleviate any safety concerns, while lobbying Washington to spare the 63-year-old arsenal from the next round of military base closings.

"A Great Working Relationship"

Kelley Dancer likes to tell strangers where she lives. As an outreach specialist for the disposal facility, Dancer informs concerned Pine Bluff residents that she has no qualms about living close to the gates of the arsenal.

"It's very important to everyone that both the environment and the community are protected," says Dancer. "There are so many safeguards at the facility that I feel very confident when I go out to speak to the community to assure people of their safety."

Dancer says the chemical weapons disposal process will meet all environmental laws, including the Clean Air Act.

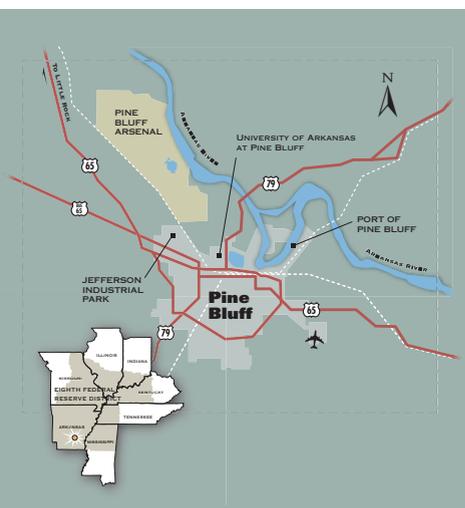
Adds Jim Crider, president and CEO of the local economic development organization known as the Alliance, "We've enjoyed really good support for the program ... This community has had a great working relationship with the arsenal since it was established in 1941."

But will that relationship continue? The Pentagon will announce its next round of military base closings in 2005. Roughly 100 bases, or 25 percent of all current bases, will be shuttered. Although the Pine Bluff Arsenal would appear to be safe, "we're not taking anything for granted," says Chuck Morgan, executive vice president with Pine Bluff National Bank and a member of the Alliance's Industrial Foundation. "We've pumped a tremendous amount of resources into making sure that this place stays open."

The Army depot at the arsenal employs about 1,350. More than 1,000 others work in nonmilitary jobs on the 13,500-acre site. Crider says that a critical factor in keeping the arsenal alive is convincing Defense Department decision-makers of the arsenal's importance to the nation's security.

Besides serving as an Army depot, the arsenal produces items such as gas masks, grenades and portable decontamination units. Crider and others hope that other future plans at the arsenal will also help keep it off the chopping block.

Officials have been lobbying the federal government to choose Pine Bluff as the site for a national biological warfare vaccine facility. A 1994 Pentagon study identified the arsenal as the most logical choice for such a facility. Interest was renewed earlier this year when President Bush proposed a \$6 billion plan called



Pine Bluff by the numbers

Population	55,085 (2000)
Labor Force	24,962 (September 2003)
Unemployment Rate	9.1% (September 2003)
Per Capita Personal Income	\$14,637 (2000)

Top Five Employers:

Tyson Foods	2,400
Jefferson County Regional Medical Center	1,900
U.S. Army - Pine Bluff Arsenal	1,350
International Paper	1,270
Arkansas Department of Corrections	1,100



Project Bioshield, which would quickly make available vaccines against threats like smallpox and anthrax.

This kind of facility would tie in with chemistry and microbiology efforts already present near the arsenal via Jefferson Laboratories, which houses the Food and Drug Administration's National Center for Toxicological Research and other regulatory chemists. Among other duties, Jefferson's researchers examine diseases that may be caused by components of food or drugs. The Alliance is looking to further capitalize on this expertise by creating a life sciences and technology complex called the Bioplex on former arsenal property turned over to the Alliance in 2001 by congressional authorization. The Alliance has begun feasibility studies for the 1,500-acre site where it plans to locate the Bioplex.

Art Norris, who is under contract with the Alliance to help develop the Bioplex, envisions a day when the site could include a business incubator where private businesses can learn from and contribute to research already under way at the arsenal and adjacent institutions.

"We keep looking for opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between government and private industry," Norris says.

Struggling to Keep Pace

They walk the line in Pine Bluff. Not the same line that the legendary Johnny Cash, born in nearby Kingsland, sang about. Here, it's the length of the unemployment line that has people concerned.

South of the fortress-like gates of the arsenal resides the rest of Pine Bluff, where some harsh realities temper any economic success stories. Three statistics begin to tell the tale of Pine Bluff's shortcomings, compared with the rest of the state:

- Unemployment rate: 9.1 percent in Pine Bluff; 5.3 percent in Arkansas
- Poverty Rate: 25.5 percent in Pine Bluff; 15.8 percent in Arkansas
- Percentage of residents 18 years or older without a high school diploma: 26.7 percent in Pine Bluff; 24.7 percent in Arkansas

Located just 40 minutes south of Little Rock and site of one of the state's busiest ports along the Arkansas River, Pine Bluff would appear to have too many natural advantages to lag behind. Several local leaders point to the same culprit—the educational system.

"We're seeing kids come out of high school who are simply not ready to go into the work force, even though they may want to," Crider says. "They just don't have the skill sets needed."

Adds Morgan of Pine Bluff National Bank, "I know plenty of plant and industry managers around town who would tell you that if you've got someone who can do the job and show up on time, they'll put them to work right now."

The Jefferson County Workforce Alliance is committed to reversing this course. The organization's tasks include holding job fairs and providing mini-grant assistance for existing and start-up businesses. But perhaps most importantly, it reaches out to area youth by encouraging them to think about their career path at an early age, helping them develop their job skills and pushing concepts like financial literacy.

"Our education system right now is failing us," says Glenda Williams, executive director of the Workforce Alliance. "When you look at the products that come out ... the teachers are just passing students to get them out of class. These students are not being challenged."

Frank Anthony, the superintendent of the Pine Bluff School District, takes issue with the notion of a failing education system: "I totally disagree with that. For children who have a desire to be educated, we can provide a very suitable education that will allow them to compete globally. We have some obstacles—parental involvement is one factor, poverty is another. I'm not saying we don't have room for improvement, but can we teach here? Yes, sir."

Williams agrees with the need for more parental involvement and better role modeling: "A lot of the people we're dealing with have not seen their parents get up and go to work. So, chances are they're not going to want to do that themselves. It's a whole mindset that we're trying to change."

Photos: The 146-year-old Jefferson County Courthouse (far left) is the focal point of downtown Pine Bluff, where many buildings display historical murals. Jay Whitlock (far right), describes the rocket disposal process at the Pine Bluff Chemical Agent Disposal Facility, where he is the plant operations manager.

Local Industrial Giants

Pine Bluff is not unlike other towns throughout Arkansas that have witnessed manufacturing jobs dwindle in recent years. Since 1995, the state has lost 40,000 manufacturing jobs, with Pine Bluff accounting for about 500 of those. Recently, however, the town's two largest private companies have increased their local investment.

International Paper added a \$60 million production line in 2002. Tyson Food's situation is more of an addition by subtraction. Last August, the company announced that it will close its older Second Avenue plant this year and expand its newer facility located at the Jefferson Industrial Park. That plant will increase its processing from 1.3 million chickens per week to 2 million chickens per week, says Tyson spokesman Ed Nicholson.

"Tyson intends to remain a viable part of this community," he says. "The investment in the Jefferson Parkway facility makes our future in Pine Bluff look very promising."

The Second Avenue plant employs about 300. Although many of these employees are expected to transfer to the Jefferson plant, Nicholson says that it is not yet certain how many jobs will be affected or if there will perhaps be a net increase in jobs.

Establishing more local jobs is also the goal of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, which recently broke ground on a new business incubator downtown. The project will further solidify the relationship between the city and the 130-year-old university.

At the moment, however, Williams finds the overall employment picture discouraging.

"Our unemployment rate is very frustrating," she says. "It's really pitiful when we look at where we are vs. where we need to be."

Stephen Greene is a senior editor at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.