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POLLUTION

## AIR OF SUSPICION

For years, residents in Ocala complained about charcoal plant emissions. Now, there's evidence of violations, and people want to know more.

BY CARA BUCKLEY

**OCALA** - *First of a two-part series.*

Denzel Deason is 3 years old and when he used to play outside his lungs often froze.

As he labored for air, his panicked mother would carry him indoors, whispering softly, and press a clear nebulizer mask to his tiny face. It piped oxygen and medicine, loosening Denzel's airways.

Bobbie Goodson, a grandmother 13 times over, is Denzel's neighbor, but the two have never met. Four years ago, Goodson stopped going outside. Now she is tethered, always, by a long tube to an oxygen tank that drones in her mobile home's living room. Steroids in the oxygen have hastened her osteoporosis, melting inches off her height.

Denzel and Goodson are consumed by asthma. Their neighborhood, Bunche Heights, a woodsy, working-class nook in Ocala's traditionally black west side, is home to at least 10 others who have developed breathing problems, some irreversibly so.

People here blame the soot they say was belched into the air by a charcoal briquette factory that sits more or less in the middle of Bunche Heights.

There's no evidence to establish a link between the respiratory illnesses and the emissions from the factory, which was owned by the nation's second-largest manufacturer of charcoal, Royal Oak. For years, in fact, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection regulated the plant and reported that its emissions were lawful.

Nonetheless, a review of DEP documents shows that in 2002, the agency caught Royal Oak emitting smoke that was thicker and blacker than it was supposed to be -- and gave the company a warning, not a citation. Also, for nearly seven years, the DEP took Royal Oak's word on permit applications that the charcoal factory was equipped with an afterburner to control emissions. But when an inspector went looking for that afterburner in September 2005, she found none.

The inspector did find that Royal Oak's smoke was unlawfully thick, and that the plant was emitting nine times more methanol -- a toxin linked in extreme cases to blindness -- than allowed.

In Bunche Heights, news of the inspection, which first made news in The Ocala Star Banner, only fueled simmering suspicions and mistrust. Now people in this neighborhood want to clear the air.

### BUILT IN THE '70S

Royal Oak's Ocala factory was built in 1972, and much of Bunche Heights grew up around it. The factory was a group of corrugated metal storage sheds and a big gunmetal box, about three stories high, lined with a maze of pipes, iron-rung ladders and zigzagging walkways painted yellow. The box was the factory's furnace; it looked like a giant muscle car's engine. On its top, reaching even higher, two thick smokestacks pointed to the sky.

Inside the furnace, wood chips were baked into charcoal for barbecues. Outside, the people of Bunche Heights say, gritty smoke blew out of the stacks and soot fell softly, like fine

black snow, drifting onto rooftops, creeping beneath windowsills and, they believe, settling in lungs.

Neighbors say the factory smoked every day, streaking the sky with thin gray plumes. Krista Fordham, a childhood asthma sufferer who lived across from Royal Oak, said that twice a week it emitted a thicker, acrid smoke that hung low over nearby houses.

State regulators insist that their inspections consistently revealed the factory's emissions were light enough to be within lawful limits. Also, every day, a Royal Oak worker documented the density of the smoke. According to these self-reports, it was almost never too thick.

## **SOOT EVERYWHERE**

But people in Bunche Heights say otherwise.

It dirtied laundry on lines, they say. It clung stubbornly to cars, siding, blades of grass. When little girls celebrated First Communion, their mothers would rush them to cars, for fear their white dresses would turn gray.

In 1979, when Lily Bell and Tommie Snow built their first house, they painted it mint green with white trim, like saltwater taffy -- colors Lily Bell always dreamed of. But the house wouldn't stay clean, no matter how often Tommie hosed it down. They tried a darker green, but grime still showed. Finally, they settled on slate gray with black trim.

In the 1980s, people began to notice their breathing problems. Goodson, who had asthma as a child, had it return in force. Lily Bell Snow found that hers worsened at home but eased up at work, miles away, where she was a hospital administrator.

A neighborhood preteen, Shavonta Rutledge, was constantly dogged by bronchitis. So was her friend, Jasmine Carter. Fordham suffered from asthma as a child in Bunche Heights, but marveled at how it cleared up after she went to college in Atlanta. Cindy Deason had two children, Denzel and then baby Jeremiah. Both suffered asthma and they shared a nebulizer -- 20-minute treatments, four times a day.

Some in the neighborhood complained to the City Council and the Marion County Department of Health, but they were told that the plant was beyond local control and was regulated by the DEP.

The Environmental Protection Agency began warning of the perils of extra-fine particles from industrial combustion and burning wood and fuel nearly a decade ago.

The body cannot filter out the nearly invisible specks that result from incomplete combustion, and they easily reach the farthest pockets of the lungs, the EPA found. The agency linked the tiny particles to acute respiratory distress, reduced lung functions, increased childhood illnesses and aggravated asthma.

It published its findings in 1997. Bunche Heights' air was tested in 1996. At the request of the county Health Department, the DEP set up monitors near Royal Oak's plant from January to May. The tests came back clean.

The extra-fine particles that the EPA would warn about a year later were almost certainly present in the Ocala factory's smoke, said Peter Yronwode, of the Missouri Department of Environmental Resources.

Missouri is the nation's leading charcoal-producing state -- and after the EPA's warning, in 1998, the federal agency targeted the state's largest charcoal operator: Royal Oak.

The EPA charged the company with violations that carried a \$750,000 fine, and Royal Oak agreed to settle the charges by installing emissions controls. Then, Yronwode said, Missouri's other charcoal factories fell in line. Hundreds of them, dotting the Ozarks' foothills, retrofitted their smokestacks with afterburners, designed to burn up the small particles.

Royal Oak's Florida presence was much more modest.

"The factory was small, far from the FDEP's district office and in a marginalized neighborhood," said Jeanne Zokovitch, an environmental lawyer who began working with Bunche Heights in 2003. "It was allowed to operate under the radar for many years."

Still, when the Ocala plant came up for a permit renewal in 1998, its application said the furnace was equipped with something new: an afterburner that would reduce its emissions by 80 percent.

One shining spring morning in 2002, Goodson walked outside and sat on a small garden stool. Sun dappled her face as she turned earth with a trowel, planting petunias and dusty millers. One of her grandsons was with her. He was supposed to trim a rosebush but was yowling about the thorns. Suddenly, dozens of songbirds -- hundreds, it seemed -- descended like a black shadow on a nearby persimmon tree. Then the wind kicked up, and the birds scattered ahead of a fast-approaching storm.

### **MEMORABLE MORNING**

Every detail of those few hours is engraved into Goodson's memory, because it was her last full morning outside her house.

Doctors had put her on an oxygen tank full time in 2000. The tube looped around her ears, piping oxygen up her nose. She always wore it, even in the shower. When the factory was smoking heavily, her children would warn her, "Momma, don't come outside." Finally, the warnings were no longer necessary. There was no more gardening, just watching TV.

A couple of months before that last morning in her flower bed, something unusual happened at Royal Oak. A visiting DEP inspector saw opaque, inky smoke.

Under the company's permit, it was allowed to give off fumes, but they had to be mostly transparent. On this day, though, the inspector recorded seeing a thick black plume. Royal Oak's manager explained that glass from melted sand -- sand routinely found its way into the Florida hardwoods that the plant used -- built up in the smokestacks and fell, blocking the furnace and causing the black billows.

The state inspector, who noted in his February 2002 report that neighbors had been complaining about smoke the previous week, cautioned Royal Oak's manager that such thick smoke wasn't allowed. Then he finished his report.

"In compliance," it read.