

# Features

## Lignite coal creates problems for community

By DANA SMELSER  
Battalion Reporter  
Mary Cobb owns a grocery store in the rural community of Carlos, Texas, population: 41. In the past three years, her annual sales have increased more than five times, from \$90,000 to \$500,000.

from east Bryan on a bumpy, crowded highway to work in Carlos. He would like to move his family closer, but he can't find a place for them to live.

Why are these changes occurring in the small, peaceful community of Carlos? The answer: lignite coal.

The land, rich with this mineral, is responsible for a new power plant being constructed near Carlos. The construction is causing 1,000 people to come to the rural community.

Used for generating electricity,

lignite is a soft, highly combustible coal which is strip mined from the land. Because lignite is difficult to transport, the electric generating plants must be constructed in rural areas close to the mines.

Consequently, the construction and operation of these plants have a significant impact on the surrounding communities, such as Carlos.

This influx of people stimulates growth, brings money and helps the economy of an area that has been stagnant for years. But, it also causes a shortage of housing and public services and alters the way of life for many of the community's residents. The lignite mining process may also cause some undesirable environmental effects.

The Carlos plant, under construction since 1979 by the Texas Municipal Power Agency, is just one of many lignite-fired power plants currently operating or being constructed or planned in the state. Although most plants will provide power for metropolitan areas, the strongest effects are in the rural communities.

"The small rural towns just can't accommodate the growth," said Myrna Hoskins, director of economic development for the Brazos Valley Development Council. "A thousand new people all congregating to work at one spot has to have a significant impact."

Finding housing for the workers is the largest problem. "The hous-

ing just isn't here," Mary Cobb, the store owner, said.

"It's very difficult to get builders to build speculative housing because typically the rural market hasn't been very good," Hoskins said. "In Carlos, developed housing doesn't exist. Less than one-half of 1 percent of the workers of the plant live in the area."

In time, houses can be built to alleviate some of the housing shortages, but even that isn't a simple solution.

During the construction stage of a plant, 1,000 workers are needed. After construction, the builders move out and production begins. During the production stage of 25 to 30 years, the plant needs only 300 employees.

What this means, according to a Brazos Valley Development Council report, is "during the construction stage, there will be a greater need for apartments and mobile homes than single family housing. This will change during the operational stage, which will require more permanent type housing and little or no need for temporary housing."

About 80 percent of the people who work at the TMPA plant live in Bryan or College Station, Hoskins said.

Sue Altmore, wife of a builder in Carlos, said they have sold every house they have in Carlos and are beginning to show houses in the Bryan-College Station area. "We have people coming with

their families from Minnesota this week," she said, "and we have to find somewhere to put them."

An alternative to commuting, is to live in temporary housing, such as trailer homes. "But," Hoskins said, "the trailers may scatter all over the community and that's a very expensive proposition to run that many water lines."

To add to the problem, Hoskins said, the water quality of Carlos is not in good shape. Many of the water problems could be solved, Hoskins said, with money to help finance the growth.

The problem of providing utilities has spread into Brazos County as a result of the growth. College Station Mayor Gary Halter said \$50 million in bonds have been issued to help finance the growth. "We're just trying to keep our head above water," he said.

A Texas A&M University rural sociologist, Steve Merdock, said Bryan-College Station bears most of the costs of the commuting workers. "It costs more to provide the services they need than they are bringing into the community," he said.

Although constructing a power plant in a rural area can cause problems in housing and public services, for man, growth can have positive economic effects. Store owner Mary Cobb said: "It's hard to put in words or describe the great effect it has had on the community — it's been wonderful for me."

## Ill effects feared from lignite mining

By DANA SMELSER

While residents of Carlos are seeing the immediate effects of lignite mining in the influx of new residents, others see the possibility of some long-term effects as well.

Probably the most controversial aspect of lignite mining is the environmental effects it may have.

Although the people near Carlos will not need to worry about this until 1983 when production begins, they already have mixed emotions.

"Lignite is dirty and it burns nasty," Myrna Hoskins said.

Because of this, the plants are under tight restrictions by the Federal Clean Air Act Amendments of 1970 and 1977. Basically, these acts require the companies to filter the burned-off air before they emit it.

Mining can disrupt a historically agricultural trend, said Steve Merdock, a sociologist, who is a professor of mining engineering at Texas A&M University. "It takes more people to mine than to raise cattle."

Steve Merdock, a sociologist, said increased competition for labor is bad for farmers because they cannot afford to hire labor at higher costs.

"The growth also brings in new businessmen with larger capital stock and small businesses have trouble functioning," he said. "A new breed of people comes to the rural community along with the new businessmen."

"Before, Carlos was basically a hometown," Mary Cobb said. "Now, it's like a little city in a small community."

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