

Holiday Road Trip
by Sandee Buhrt
December, 2006

We live at Camelot Lake, an old gravel pit a few miles east of Milford that was converted into a housing subdivision. Our daughter and her boyfriend were here to visit over the Christmas Holiday. They had flown in from Portland, Oregon and we planned to take them back to the South Bend airport the day after Christmas. We got up that morning, ate a leisurely lunch and were off.

My husband and I had earlier talked about how this might be a good time to visit the South Bend ethanol refinery. We have both been involved with a local Milford group trying to gather more information on the ethanol refinery proposed for Milford. Although the Milford refinery won't look exactly like the one in South Bend, we have been told that both refineries utilize the same thermal oxidizing equipment to restrict odor and pollutants from their smokestack emissions. And since the proposed Milford refinery will be about 20% larger than the South Bend refinery, we thought that anything coming out of the smokestacks in South Bend would be a good indicator of what we might expect here.

After dropping off our daughter and her boyfriend at the airport, we headed toward the refinery. We had seen the refinery in the distance many times over the years as we drove on the U.S. 20 By-pass west of South Bend. This time we wanted to get closer and were surprised that we were able to drive right up to the edge of the refinery. There was a large plume of white/gray vapor coming from the main smokestack. At the point where the vapor first left the top of the smokestack the vapor had a "wavy" appearance – we assumed this was heat given off by the thermal oxidizers. We rolled down our windows and the odor hit us immediately. It was not the "smell of fresh bread from the oven" that has been touted by proponents of the ethanol industry. Rather it was more of a "stale, burnt alcohol smell" – definitely not something a person would enjoy smelling day after day.

The wind that day was from the northwest, so we headed down-wind to see how far we could smell the refinery's odor. Driving southeast, we were surprised at how large of a residential area lies in close proximity to the refinery. But after driving block after block we realized that this is definitely one of the more economically depressed housing areas in South Bend. And when the refinery was built, we guessed that the residents of this racially-mixed low-income section of the city were probably never given a say in the future development of their community.

We continued our drive in a southeasterly direction for about 2 miles and could still easily detect the ethanol odor. Finally we turned east out of the ethanol plume, came to U.S. 31 and headed south to the U.S. 20 bypass. As we turned east onto the bypass we reflected on what we had just seen. As we talked, we both noticed a bitter taste in our mouths-something we hadn't expected. And then another surprise – as we drove on the bypass just east of Scottsdale Shopping Center we both noticed the ethanol smell again. We had again entered the plume downwind from the refinery. My husband later measured this point on a map and it is 4-1/2 miles from the refinery.

It was nighttime when we got home. I walked out on our deck, followed by our cat, Earl. He and I looked out over our lake. It was a beautiful night. The lights of the homes across the lake were reflecting in the water and I took a deep breath of fresh air. It smelled great. I thought of how my husband and I had decided to move to this area 30 years ago. I had grown up in rural North Dakota and he had grown up in this community. As young adults we had lived in four different large North American cities. And although we enjoyed the city life, we made a conscious decision to move to a more rural area to start a family. It was a simple "quality-of-life" decision – friendlier people and a healthier environment. As Earl and I stood in the nighttime silence, I resolved more than ever to protect that "quality-of-life".

Sandee Buhrt
Milford, Indiana