September 2017

The Neighborhood of McCook Field: Putting the Community and the Environment Back Together

Claudia Hampel
University of Dayton

Rebecca Richardson
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, and the Rhetoric and Composition Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol4/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.
The Neighborhood of McCook Field: Putting the Community and the Environment Back Together

Writing Process
Our assignment was based on the concept of community and all it entails. Each student pair in our class was assigned a neighborhood in Dayton (ours being McCook Field) and given the task of identifying an asset of their respective neighborhood, along with demographic information, physical geography, economic characteristics, etc. We initially began our assignment by talking about how communities are defined and constructed, then we began doing research on our assigned neighborhood in order to find one asset. In our case, we chose to focus on the issue with volatile organic compounds in McCook Field and the steps being taken to correct that problem. Additionally, we conducted primary research and secondary research to discover new information about the volatile organic compounds as well as the impact on the neighborhood. We constructed an annotated bibliography to help us get our paper started. There were a total of two drafts in this writing process: one was peer reviewed/edited, and the final draft was reviewed and suggested for submission by our professor.

Course
ENG200

Semester
Spring

Instructor
Prof. Joseph Craig

Year
2017
Introduction:

This research was conducted on the neighborhood of McCook Field in Dayton, Ohio. It explores the history, demographics, geography, and economics of this community, in addition to a major environmental issue involving Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). This issue has been ongoing since the late 1980s (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). McCook Field is home to one of the largest VOC plumes in the country, and both the Ohio and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agencies are working diligently to correct the problem (Williams). Overall this problem has not only affected the neighborhood’s environment but the population as well (U.S. Census Bureau). The most important research questions we are focusing on which will be later explained are, “How have volatile organic compounds impacted the neighborhood of McCook Field?” and “What steps are being taken to help businesses and residents recover from the exposure to volatile organic compounds in McCook Field?”

Background:

History:

The neighborhood of McCook Field is not one that has been around for a long time. The neighborhood used to be part of Old North Dayton (Bowling III). The area was named after the McCook Airplane Field that was present in the area following World War I and into the 1930s.
According to Tina Bradley in her work “Getting Things Done,” the association for the neighborhood was created in October of 1996. She explains the first thing that the association did was rebuild, or revamp, what the community already had in place, including the renovation of Claire Ridge Park. Although it is no longer in the same shape that it was, it provides insight into how the neighborhood wanted to improve itself from the beginning. The association was given a grant to redo Claire Ridge, with new features, in hopes of making it a better place for the community to bond. The park received an updated baseball field, new benches, new grills, and more. Within the first couple years of the association, the neighborhood approached the city to see if they could receive a grant for more signage. With this, the neighborhood wanted people to know who they were and make sure no one would confuse them with Old North Dayton (Bradley).

However, this approach of beautifying the McCook Field neighborhood soon ended. In the early 2000s a discovery was made that changed the neighborhood completely. The discovery of VOCs changed the outlook on the neighborhood, the residents that live within the neighborhood, and the quality of life there. VOCs are defined by the U.S. EPA as “a type of organic compound that tends to change from a liquid to a gas at low temperatures when exposed to air” (U.S. EPA A-6). According to the United States EPA, McCook Field’s problems with VOCs technically began in the 1980s. The Ohio EPA originally discovered and tried to resolve the issue, but the problem turned out to be much larger than they originally thought. The public was informed, and the U.S. EPA became involved in the late 1990s to early 2000s (Williams).

Physical Geography:

The neighborhood of McCook Field is located in northeast Dayton. It is divided by Interstate 75, and its boundaries include part of the Miami River and Mad River. The businesses
of McCook Field are intermixed with the residential areas, but a majority of the businesses are in the northern part of the neighborhood. Overall it is a predominantly urban area; however, it does have a few green spaces, including the Island Five Rivers Metropark and Claire Ridge Park. Additionally, McCook Field is home to the Kettering Softball Complex and the Dollar Bookswap warehouse. There are mostly houses as living spaces in the neighborhood in addition to a handful of apartments. Some of the houses are in better condition than others based on observational data. There are different parts of McCook Field that have these condensed residential areas. The interstate that cuts McCook Field almost directly in half, Interstate 75, is one major way of transportation. There are public bus routes that go through the neighborhood as well. There was once an elementary school in McCook Field called McGuffey Elementary. The school had to be torn down because of the VOC intrusions, and now those students attend Kiser Elementary (Bowling III). McCook Field also has a community center, the Kroc Center, which sits on 17.5 acres in the heart of the neighborhood (Bowling III). The main industrial area of McCook Field is along the east side, which is home to a Mahle Behr plant and a Pepsi plant.

Demographics:

The median age in McCook Field is 42.3 (“Median Age - McCook Field 2015”). The median age in Montgomery County is 39.4, which is 2.9 years less than the median age in McCook Field (“Median Age - Montgomery County 2015”). Within the population though, 18% of the population is between 45 to 54 years of age, according to the 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau). Between 2000 and 2010 though, the younger people that initially stood for a majority of the population grew older, thus leaving the population as statistically older individuals. According to the 2000 Census, most of the people living in McCook Field were between the ages
of 25 and 44. This age group held 40.5% of the population, and in 2010, 32.8% of the population was between 25 and 34 or 44 to 54 (U.S. Census Bureau).

In the year 2000, the population of McCook Field was 2,107, but the population has drastically declined since then (U.S. Census Bureau). In 2010, the population was 763 and therefore the population decreased by 176.1% (U.S. Census Bureau). From our research, we found that a collection of homes was demolished to develop a $230 million-dollar office, home, and retail project (“Housing Authority to demolish Parkside Homes in favor of new $230M project”). It is believed that this demolition caused the population decline. According to Social Explorer’s map function, you can see the difference in population sizes between McCook Field and Old North Dayton especially. Old North Dayton has a population of 5,949 whereas McCook Field, as of 2015 estimates, has a population of 859 (“Population Differences”).

The neighborhood of McCook Field has been statistically white based on the censuses that were taken by the U.S. Government. In 2000, the population was 48.8% white, and in 2010 the population was 79.8% white (U.S. Census Bureau). Within the white population, 13.737% was of Turkish ancestry (“Turkish Population - McCook Field 2015”). Although the white population was prominent in the area, the African American population held the next greatest number (U.S. Census Bureau). In 2000, the African American population was 47.5%, which is only a 1.3% difference with the white population; however, in the 2010 census data there was a 64.9% difference between the races.

**Economic Characteristics:**

The average household income recorded for McCook Field in 2015 was $26,521, which was significantly less than the average income recorded for its surrounding neighborhoods, as well as Montgomery county’s $60,110 average as a whole (“Average Household Income -
McCook Field and Montgomery County 2015.”). An estimated 23 households, or 6.85% of the McCook Field population, were recorded as receiving some sort of public assistance in 2015 (“Households with Public Assistance - McCook Field 2015.”).

In most recent years, the median price for a home in McCook Field is about $23,200 (“Median Household Value - McCook Field 2015”). The prices of homes in McCook Field have fluctuated greatly in recent years. In 2000, the neighborhood’s median household value was $47,400, and the price rose to $54,300 in 2010 (“Median Household Value - McCook Field 2000, Median Household Value - McCook Field 2010”). In 2015, only about 38% of the occupied houses in McCook Field were owned (“Percentage of Homeowners - McCook Field 2015”). In 2015, nearly 50% of the working population over the age of 16 in McCook Field had a job that involved some type of maintenance work (e.g. building or grounds cleaning), serving and/or preparing food, or construction (“Occupations - McCook Field 2015”). As of 2015, 11.53% of McCook Fields’ population over the age of 16 are unemployed (“Unemployment Rate - McCook Field 2015”).

**Primary Sources**

In order to better understand the environmental challenges impacting the McCook Field neighborhood, our research consisted of interviews with a community member and an employee of the Ohio EPA.

In the first section, we introduce the story of Jerry Bowling. A man in his late fifties, Mr. Bowling has lived in McCook Field for nearly all his life and now holds the position of President of the neighborhood association. He has seen the neighborhood change, for better or worse, and the neighborhood has seen Jerry change as well. Jerry’s story is one of personal reinvention at a time when the neighborhood itself was being reinvented. In the final section, we outline our
interviews with Leslie Williams, an employee of the Southwest District of the Ohio EPA. Ms. Williams is currently working to resolve the issue involving the VOCs in the neighborhood of McCook Field.

Primary Source 1 - Jerry Bowling III:

Note: This section was first produced by the authors for the Facing Project, a nationwide organization that collects individual’s stories from different communities and publishes them to preserve the neighborhood history of the area. Due to the nature of The Facing Project, this section is written in first person.

This is McCook Field, not Old North Dayton. I find myself subtly correcting people. We have to have pride in our neighborhood. We have to have pride in ourselves. McCook Field is a working class neighborhood. The housing stock isn’t great, but it’s being improved. It takes time like anything else. My sister, who lives across the street, is working on fixing up her house now. Throughout my life, I’ve lived on three different blocks and in four different houses. This neighborhood is my home and my support system.

In 2009, I lost my job as a contractor at Delphi, where I worked for 15 years, the engineering center closed. I didn’t have a degree. I was a designer by trade. I went on unemployment and got a part time job at Kohl’s. I picked up two other part time jobs and went back to school to get a degree in engineering. In 2012, I obtained my degree from Sinclair College. I also filed for bankruptcy, probably later than I should have. With the stress of three jobs, finances, and school, I began to experience physical issues. In December of 2013, I went to the hospital. My heart was fine, but $8,000 later I found out that I had diabetes and high blood pressure. Things would get better, though. I was in the process of reinventing myself.
In 2009, McCook Field became a Superfund site because of the Behr Plant contamination. McGuffey School even had to close a week before school started because of the toxins. They’re remediating the situation now, but it’s an ongoing process. The groundwater is contaminated and moving toward our houses. We have vapor mitigation systems in our homes to keep the air clean. Residents are legally obligated to disclose this information to future homebuyers. Revitalization is slow moving. The first step was tearing down the public housing projects, which tainted the reputation of the neighborhood. The second step was the $72 million investment in the beautiful Kroc Center, built on a 17 and 1/2-acre campus. This neighborhood center is only the start of reinvention. I’m waiting for the next step.

Financial issues are difficult, but I have support. At first, there was a lot of shame. It’s difficult to ask for money. It gets easier even when you don’t want to do it. I had to think, “Alright, who do I go to first?” Of my seven brothers and sisters, three helped me big time. I needed a retainer for my lawyer and my brother helped me. The engine went out on my truck and I couldn’t rent a car with my credit, so my sister rented it for me. Later, a friend at the garage lent me a car.

In 2014, I finally got a job. It was a three-month internship. I was asked to stay longer and then eventually hired. Now, I’m approaching three years’ employment. I’m reestablishing myself, but it’s an ongoing challenge. I make three quarters of what I used to, but I have to make the best of it whether I like it or not. After filing for bankruptcy, I made weekly payments in the form of a money order. The bankers started to ask, “Oh, are you getting a money order Jerry?” I was required to attend financial classes as a result of bankruptcy court. There were so many people there, I realized “oh, okay I’m not alone.” Being president of McCook field was another
sort of support system. It gave me purpose in my personal life. By giving back to the community and helping others, I helped myself along the way.

Where am I now? This past spring, I was discharged from bankruptcy after four years instead of the standard five. I didn’t know why, but I didn’t question it either. I went back to the bank and as usual they asked if I was getting a money order. This time I proudly said no. After my disillusionment from my wife, I moved back into the house we used to rent out, next to my parents. The mortgage was paid off a few months later. I was finally able to start saving some money and pay back debts. I even got to buy more presents at Christmas time. I’ve learned that recovery is tenuous. One thing can set you back when money is tight. I worry about medical things and how far away work is, but I’m in the process of recovery. There are steps to progress and the support I receive helps. I can’t give up hope. I have to keep plugging away (Bowling).

Primary Source 2 - Leslie Williams:

The Environmental Protection Agency (or EPA) is an organization that helps correct large environmental issues in different regions of the country in order to better protect it. Working with the Ohio EPA, Ms. Williams understands the issues VOCs have caused for the McCook neighborhood. She stated that the vapor intrusion issue is a direct result of the groundwater contamination, and the EPA is currently trying to pinpoint where exactly the largest parts of the contamination are. They are also trying to treat the issue while the remedial investigation feasibility study is still going on (Williams). Ms. Williams mentioned that the Ohio EPA did not really get involved with the issues in McCook Field until 1999. After assessing the issue, they decided to get the U.S. EPA involved because it turned out to be a larger problem than they originally thought (Williams). Ms. Williams said that the Ohio EPA can only work on
something to the best of their ability, but once the issue gets too big they “kick it to the feds.” However, she explained that the Ohio EPA still stays involved because it is still in their region.

The VOC site began at what is now the Mahle Behr Plant (Williams). The building was formerly a Chrysler plant where they used a chemical called trichloroethylene as a degreaser to clean their machinery. It is also used in several government buildings, other manufacturing companies, and as a spot cleaner in dry cleaning facilities (Williams). Trichloroethylene has also been known to cause several health issues, especially in young kids and pregnant women (Williams). According to Ms. Williams, Chrysler signed up to do a “time critical removal action plan” after the monstrosity of the problem was made known. They agreed to go out and test people’s homes to see if there was a vapor intrusion problem, and if there was, they installed a vapor mitigation unit to help clear the chemical out (Williams). Ms. Williams explained that Chrysler eventually went bankrupt and Behr took over the building as well as the responsibility.

To this day over 200 units have been installed in residential homes across a 2-mile long area within McCook Field and a small part of Old North Dayton (Williams). Ms. Williams mentioned that they were forced to tear down an elementary school and rebuilt it as Kiser Elementary in another neighborhood. She also mentioned that a vapor intrusion barrier had to be put under the Kroc Center when it was built, which added an additional $1 million to the renovation budget. However, those are not the only impacts this VOC plume has caused for the neighborhood. On another note, Ms. Williams said that people were angry at the last public meeting held in McCook because banks are choosing not to loan money to local businesses. This is happening because certain requirements are not being fulfilled, such as installing vapor barriers, and even the homeowners themselves are having problems getting approved for home improvement loans (Williams). There is currently no funding coming in from the U.S. EPA to
help the neighborhood with this problem, but as of May 2016, the U.S. EPA changed its rules and now provides funding for regions with severe vapor intrusion issues (Williams).

The U.S. and Ohio EPAs are working together to help the community the best they can (Williams). Ms. Williams said they are treating all houses equally, or “as if every house has a pregnant lady.” They ultimately want to make sure that people are aware and know what actions they can or need to take (Williams). Ms. Williams said occasionally people do not want the government coming into their homes and assisting them, but other than informing those residents of how dangerous the issue is there is nothing the EPA can do. They frequently hold neighborhood meetings, post the information in newspapers, send it in the mail, and also have a community coordinator that helps get the people of the community involved (Williams).

However, in conveying this information Ms. Williams expressed that they do face a challenge. As mentioned earlier in the report, there is a large Turkish population residing in McCook Field. The EPA produces flyers in English, Turkish, and other languages. They have also reached out to a local Turkish cultural center to do interpretations for them (Williams).

The EPA is encouraging folks to get their homes tested by Behr’s contractor, but occasionally they will get calls from residents new to the area who do not know about the problem, or other residents who are having problems with their vapor intrusion units (Williams). Ms. Williams stated that they normally take those issues to the U.S. EPA because they are technically the ones in charge of the site. To help combat this miscommunication, they occasionally send out postcards or things in the mail to remind the residents of what is going on (Williams). Ms. Williams mentioned that there are also some concerns about Dayton’s aquifer water supply. Luckily water flows to the south, and the well field that pumps the water into other areas of the city is north of the plume (Williams). However, Ms. Williams continued to say that it
is possible that the chemical could be pumped through the well field under extreme drought conditions.

Even though the EPA is diligently working to clean up the chemical, Ms. Williams explained that they do not know exactly how long it will take to completely solve the problem. She continued to emphasize that keeping the public educated and keeping track of what is going on in the efforts will allow the progress to continue at a good pace. Out of all the VOC sites that have ever occurred in the U.S., only 8% of them are completely cleaned up, and, if it occurs naturally, the cleanup can take hundreds of years (Williams). It may take 20 to 30 years to get a VOC issue of this magnitude to a point where there is a low carcinogenic risk (Williams). But Ms. Williams assured that, “as long as the vapor units are running everything’s fine.”

Discussion:

The main point of this study of McCook Field was to gain a better understanding of the VOCs and their overall effect on the neighborhood. We were also interested in seeing how those VOCs affected not only how residents had to live their lives, but also how it affected the business industry in the area. We found answers to our initial research questions through both our primary and secondary research.

The major challenges in the area are without a doubt the VOCs, along with the health and economic effects it has on the neighborhood. According to the article “Neighbors Need Cleanup, Not Stalling” trichloroethylene is the primary chemical in the VOCs that gets laced into the soil, and thus continues its way from the soil to residents’ basements. The U.S. EPA defines trichloroethylene (TCE) as such:

A chemical which is used as a solvent to remove oils and grease from metal products and is found in adhesives, paint removers, typewriter correction fluids and spot removers.
TCE is colorless liquid with an odor similar to ether and is a manufactured substance which does not occur naturally in the environment. It minimally dissolves in water and can remain in groundwater for a long time (A-6).

Several case studies we found have explored TCE and the dangers of it in situations similar to that of McCook Field. Chan et al. conducted a study in "Estimated Effect of Ventilation and Filtration on Chronic Health Risks in U.S. Offices, Schools, and Retail Stores" to look at different chemicals in different buildings, such as schools, offices, and grocery stores. They calculated and estimated that if ventilation rates were doubled in these buildings with high concentrations of VOCs, those concentrations would decrease by about 50% (Chan et al.). They further concluded that even though there are some major health concerns as a result of the VOC concentration in these buildings, there is still a greater risk in residential homes. Some of these health concerns are brought up in “Human Health Effects of Trichloroethylene: Key Findings and Scientific Issues” by Chiu et al. in 2013. It was explained that TCE can cause major problems in the nervous system, the reproductive system, and in the immune system (Chiu et al.) Additionally, Rufer et al. conducted a study in 2010 on chick embryos and their response to VOCs. Their results show that there are different heart defects formed at different stages of development based on how much VOCs they are exposed to (Rufer et al.). Additionally, these effects are similar to that of human embryos (Rufer et al.). Understanding all the health effects that the toxins can have is a major challenge the residents have to go through, in addition to understanding the value of their homes.

Joanne Smith and Ken McCall focus their article “Pollution Stigma Blamed for Drop” on the effects of VOCs on people’s homes. They interviewed the Jones’, who are a family in the area, who moved to McCook Field to obtain the opportunity to live in a great area and increase
the value of their home. Many homeowners in the area saw an increase in their homes’ value; however, in 2008 it dropped suddenly due to the economy, but also the neighborhood discovery of VOCs (Smith). With this new discovery, homeowners had to get new vapor mitigation systems that would take the toxins out of the air so residents were not breathing in the dangerous chemicals.

These challenges were exemplified in an interview with Jerry Bowling III when he discussed all the problems that occurred after the discovery of the toxic chemicals; the neighborhood home values decreased rapidly and homeowners had unexpected expenses due to the new vapor mitigation systems. Following the discovery of these toxins, neighbors were strongly advised to put these systems into their homes to help protect themselves and their families from the dangerous toxins (Bowling III). These vapor mitigation systems were not only a challenge but a solution to the problem. With these systems, the residents knew they were safe from the health effects from the toxins.

There have been opportunities given to the people of McCook Field by both the U.S. EPA and the Ohio EPA to help improve the VOC issue. In providing helpful information, people have gained a better understanding of the problem (Williams). Ms. Williams mentioned that several people were initially angry when they discovered there was a serious issue that could be harmful to their health. After discussing the community action plan, answering several concerning questions, and providing the vapor mitigation systems for homes in the area, McCook Field has become more aware of what is happening in their community (Williams). Additionally, some people are still upset because local businesses and homes are not getting an opportunity to do renovations or improvement projects. This is a challenge that the neighborhood still faces today.
On the other hand, building the multi-million dollar Kroc Center in the heart of the neighborhood has given the citizens of McCook Field the opportunity to reconnect with each other and their neighborhood. We did not conduct much research on the Kroc Center, which is funded by The Salvation Army. Its website mentions that it offers a variety of programs that include fitness classes and sports, after school programs, church services, and music programs (The Salvation Army). This building creates a very open and accepting environment. The Salvation Army’s mission statement is the following:

The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal Christian church. Its message is based on the Bible. Its ministry is motivated by the love of God. Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.

This mission statement makes it clear that The Salvation Army built this center to provide not only opportunities to engage with others in the community, but also to provide a better and friendlier social environment for those living in McCook Field.

**Conclusion:**

After countless hours of researching and learning about the environmental problem in McCook Field, we believe that this issue is an important one. Our research topic is important because it pertains to an environmental issue that has the possibility of affecting more than just the McCook Field neighborhood. Not only that, but this problem has caused the community a lot of damage. As a part of the greater Dayton community it is our job to help those members in need. We have learned so much in the process of creating this work and we believe that it is an important issue that everyone should know about. The VOCs are a dangerous substance, which if left untreated could cause even more damage. Our argument matters because we as a community
can help those in McCook Field without necessarily being directly affected by the problem itself. We can ask questions to those involved, including Behr Dayton and the old Chrysler management, and figure out what their plans are for helping the community; we can become more knowledgeable about what VOCs are and how they affect the environment around them, and continue to work with the community until the problem has been resolved.
Appendix:

Local book swap located across the street from the Behr plant.

Mahle Behr Dayton Plant, where the contamination was discovered to be coming from.

Claire Ridge Park: the first project that the neighborhood association took over in the late 90s.

Island MetroPark, which is part of the Five Rivers MetroPark system.
These are homes in the area.

The Kroc Center, it is a community center that was a $72 million project and sits on 17.5 acres.
This Social Explorer map shows the percent of residents who are of Turkish descent (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the median age in McCook Field (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the median age in Montgomery County (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the median value of homes in McCook Field (2000).
This Social Explorer map shows the median value of homes in McCook Field (2010).

This Social Explorer map shows the median home value in McCook Field (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the population in McCook Field and surrounding areas (2015).

This is the excel report that we generated through Social Explorer to get more demographic information.
This Social Explorer map shows the average household income for McCook Field and Montgomery County (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the households receiving public McCook Field (2015).

This Social Explorer map shows the unemployment rate in McCook Field (2015).
This Social Explorer Map shows the number of owned homes in McCook Field (2015).

These Social Explorer maps show the different occupations of workers in McCook Field (2015).
Works Cited


Map. 25 April 2017.


Map. 25 April 2017.


