Final two residents close book on Wagner's Point

Isolated community in industry's shadow

By Allison Klein
Sun Staff

When James "Jimbo" Smith drove away from Leo Street for the last time, he left his front door swinging wide open.

It was a signal to let everyone know that the last resident had left Wagner's Point for good, and that one of Baltimore's most isolated communities - where Martin Wagner established his food-packing business in 1896 and where later generations lived in the shadows of oil tanks and chemical fumes - was finally history.

"I'm just glad to be gone," said Smith, 35, who lived his entire life in this patch of a neighborhood at the tip of southern Baltimore's chemical belt.

He and his older brother Harvey had held out longer than the rest, and this month became the last of 270 residents to desert the six blocks of homes that made up the tight-knit community.

The brothers, like many of their former neighbors, moved to nearby Brooklyn and Brooklyn Park.

The others began leaving Wagner's Point a year and a half ago, hoping to escape the foul smells, high cancer rates and threat of industrial accidents. Their moves make way for the expansion of a city sewage treatment plant.

They left after the city, state and federal governments, along with two local chemical companies, agreed last year to buy their homes and relocate everyone.

The area has been empty for about a week, but for the past six months, the vacant buildings, shoulder-high weeds and trash heaps along Leo Street made it difficult to tell if anyone was living there. Most of the 90 painted brick and Formstone rowhouses have stood stripped and empty for as much as a year. Nearly all have had their doors kicked in and windows smashed.

"It's depressing how it looks now, real depressing," said Richard Rotosky, an uncle of the Smiths' who lived on Leo Street for 45 years. "I have a lot of memories there. A lot of people lived and died there."

The turn-of-the century rowhouses were once home to workers at the Wagner Co., but after the factory closed, the tiny neighborhood found itself slowly surrounded by chemical plants and other industries.

Though residents often complained of pollution, it was the very chemical companies they complained about that helped sustain the neighborhood,

quietly giving away holiday meals, donating heating oil and even paying rents and mortgages when money was tight.

Residents - in essence, a collection of six extended families - did their best to compensate for living near businesses such as a herbicide producer, an asphalt factory, a detergent maker and a city sewage plant.

They did so by carefully maintaining their homes, decorating them with bright paint and turning them into a surprisingly sweet sight amid the dismal industrial plants around them.

After several highly publicized chemical accidents and cancer deaths in the neighborhood, activists fought to get out and ultimately struck the buyout agreement. Despite environmental problems, and residents' suspicions that the plants caused their cancers, Wagner's Point has been declared clean and safe by city standards.

Within the next six weeks, the Department of Public Works is expected to begin demolishing the homes to make room for the expansion of the city's Patapsco Waste Water Treatment Plant, across the railroad tracks from the neighborhood.

"We're happy the area is clear," said John M. Wesley, a spokesman for the Department of Housing and Community Development, the city agency overseeing the buyouts. "We no longer have to be concerned with the environmental risk that was there or any harm coming to residents."

The Smith brothers stayed in Wagner's Point long after looters claimed it as their playground, because they were waiting to close on their new houses.

Each night when they came home, the Smiths did routine checks around the neighborhood to see what had been pilfered and how much damage had been done to their block. They barely slept at night.

"You hear people crunching around the broken glass at night," Harvey Smith said before he left. "I sleep with one eye open and my shotgun in my hand."

Jimbo Smith posted a handwritten "STILL HERE" note on his door with his pager number and the date next to it so looters would bypass his house.

One day about a month ago, he walked out of his house and found himself face to face with a man taking his screen door.

"Can't you read the sign, man?" Smith yelled. "I'm still here!"

The man apologized and asked Smith: "$10 enough?" Smith grabbed the money and the man took off with the door.

Jimbo Smith moved to a house in Brooklyn, Harvey to a trailer in Brooklyn Park. Their brother, sister, uncle and cousins had moved months earlier.

Unlike many others who left at the first opportunity, the Smith brothers - both laborers - had no desire to move from Wagner's Point until it turned into

a ghost town.

"I never really wanted to leave," said Harvey Smith, who gave away his homing pigeons for breeding when he moved. "I been here all my life."

Some Wagner's Pointers moved as far away as Florida or West Virginia, but many went to nearby communities.

"Everybody is getting a house much nicer than they have here," Jimbo Smith said.

Rose Hindla, an activist who pushed for the buyout and was one of the first residents to take it, said Christmas is the only time of year she longs for the old neighborhood.

"Every year, I wrote out Christmas cards and dropped them in everybody's mailbox," said Hindla, who lives in Glen Burnie. "Now that I'm gone, I don't have that Christmas card drive in me no more."

Originally published Dec 18 2000
