

“The phosphate companies take good care of us; the county doesn’t.”

LINDA O’CONNOR, Duette resident

# Where neighbors say, ‘Yes in my backyard’

In Duette, they see an upside to a mining expansion

By CHRISTOPHER O’DONNELL  
chris.odonnell@heraldtribune.com

DUETTE — Driving his pickup truck along dusty Bill Parish Road, Pat Carlton slows down when he spots a tractor tilling dark, loamy earth.

“Man, that’s pretty,” he said. “When you get it on your hands and you can’t get it off, it gives me the fever to farm.”

Five generations of Carlton’s family have lived in Duette. A long dust-and-shell road that winds north through Duette is named after his family.

So to an outsider, it may seem odd that Carlton and many oth-

ers in Duette support a proposed mine expansion in the area that will destroy pristine scrubland and 400 acres of thriving wetlands.

And yet, Duette residents in general back the plan by mining giant Mosaic to mine 2,000 more acres of land known as the Altman Tract.

The Manatee County Commission will consider the expansion at a special meeting Monday; county staffers are recommending denial of the plan.

SEE DUETTE ON 14A



STAFF PHOTO / CHIP L...

Leanne Seng, 5, throws bread into a small pond for fish behind the Country Store. The store, which her mother and father own, is one of the few commercial ventures in the remote community.

*About 800 people live in the 136 square miles covered by the Fire District. There are two small churches, two convenience stores and a pole-barn fire station staffed by volunteers.*

# In the town of Duette, neighbors say, 'Yes in my backyard'

## DUETTE FROM 1A

Some Duette locals feel like the community, about 30 miles northeast of Bradenton, is already the dumping ground for Manatee County.

For example, when commissioners recently dismissed a request by a developer to build a landfill near Port Manatee on the county's northwest side, several commissioners suggested they look to put the dump in Duette instead.

That, along with a long-held perception that Duette residents pay taxes that are mainly spent elsewhere, has left many feeling that Mosaic does more for them than their own county does.

That sentiment was solidified when Mosaic, the world's largest phosphate mining company and a major local employer, offered to build Duette a new fire station and park if the mine expansion gets approved.

Disgruntlement has led community members to put forward a candidate for the county commission to represent them.

The residents' support for mining and the expansion plans are rooted in the community's history and its people, many of whom see the land as a tool to be used more for gain than for admiration or preservation.

## A proud community

It was families like the Carlton's that created Duette, turning rugged land into crop



STAFF PHOTO / CHIP LITHERLAND / chip.litherland@heraldtribune.com

Charlie Rutledge sells red potatoes from Jones Potato Farm out of the back of his truck at the Duette Country Store in Duette on Friday. Now 76, he is a lifelong Duette resident who has worked on farms and mines. Environmentalists are troubled by a planned mine expansion, but area residents aren't.



It is Duette's isolated location and small population that make it suitable for large mines. But the real lure, however, is what lies beneath the soil.

## Living in Bone Valley

Duette's landscape was shaped millions of years ago when retreating seas left behind a layer of marine creatures and ocean sediments.

The result was Bone Valley, an phosphate-rich area that includes parts of Hardee, Hillsborough, Polk and Manatee counties.

The seam of phosphate lies about 25 feet to 40 feet below the surface. The only way to extract it is to tear up the land.

Duette lies on the southeast corner of Mosaic's huge Four Corners mine — named because it straddles the boundaries of Manatee, Hillsborough, Polk and Hardee counties. The 60,000-acre mine, which employs 500, produces an average of about 7 million tons of phosphate per year.

Tall draglines with booms as long as a football field propel a bucket the size of a garage into the ground. The thud can be heard and felt by residents far from the site. Illuminated by huge lights, mining continues all night.

"It was like Yankee Stadium," said John Korvick, who moved to Duette to start an organic fish farm. "It sounds like a car crash when the draglines hit. Everyone's dog barks; there's sand everywhere."



ture for cattle.

In the early 1970s, the community changed when mining companies began buying vast tracts of farmland laden with phosphate used in fertilizer.

Today, farmland and mines stand side by side. The dust that blows across the community in dry weather could be from mined earth or fallow fields.

About 800 people live in the 136 square miles covered by the Duette Fire District. The homes are so far apart, locals load up their pickups with candy and park at the Dry Prairie Baptist Church so children can go trick-or-treating on Halloween.

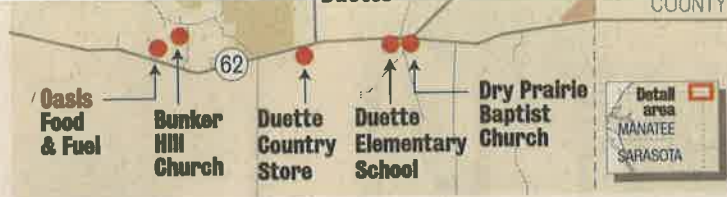
The community is easily missed by truckers that hurtle through it on State Road 62. There are two small churches, two convenience stores and a pole-barn fire station staffed by volunteers. One point of pride is Duette Elementary, famed for being the last one-classroom schoolhouse in Florida.

No road signs acknowledge the community save for a wooden hand-painted welcome sign erected by the local 4-H club.

The community's remoteness and understated personality have bred a fierce self-reliance. Farmers lend one another equipment, labor and time. The Southern custom of bringing cooked meals to sick neighbors is still alive here.

"I have come to love that close-knit community feeling," said Felicia Tappan, president of the Duette Civic Association who was raised in the suburbs of St. Petersburg. "How can you live next to people and not get to know them?"

But Duette is changing.



STAFF MAP / NICOLE SNEED

Its cheap land brought an influx of people who fled city life and deed restrictions or came to pursue long-held dreams.

Larry Woodham, a 61-year-old former Winn-Dixie product manager who lived in Tampa and Bradenton, bought and cleared a 23-acre site and started a vineyard seven years ago.

Now, he grows six varieties of muscadine grapes. His summer crop averages about 17,000 pounds of grapes. In autumn, when the vines produce again, they will probably yield another 9,000.

During the day, people come to pick their own grapes and enjoy the scenery. At dusk, he watches deer nibble on the fruit, a sight he could never see in the urban landscape where he used to live.

Also fed up with the bustle of Bradenton, Carroll and Kim Young moved to Duette seven years ago, buying a six-acre plot that can only be reached by a mile-long muddy road.

A 6-foot high sign reading "Tortuga Inn" from Anna Maria Island that was going to be discarded marks the entrance, along with a neatly arranged pile of about 50 paint and varnish cans.

The worn path that leads up to their house is lined by decorative wooden posts with thick rope strung between them that would not look out of place on the grounds of a museum.

The Youngs keep horses, ducks and white turkeys. Their

9-year-old granddaughter, Katelyn, has the run of their land in her pink golf cart.

Carroll Young had always promised his wife he would buy her an island if they ever won the lottery. Tired of waiting, he dug and filled a 5-foot-deep moat, creating a 60-foot island in one corner of their land.

The island is reached by a wooden bridge. The Youngs have bonfires on the island, roasting weenies.

"I love it out here," Kim Young said.

Newcomers to Duette are made welcome, and allowed to re-invent themselves as they see fit. But those who complain about mining or farming are quickly rebuffed.

The long-timers find it hard to warm to anyone who comes to such a remote, rugged area and expects to find the amenities and polish of the suburbs.

"A lot of people come out here because they want to live in the country but they want town comforts," Carlton said. "They don't want to smell cow poop or fertilizer on the ground. They've got to understand country is different."

### Freedom at a price

But the privacy and open-space that Duette residents value comes with a price.

The nearest grocery store is about 20 miles away in Parrish.

Their post office is in Bowling Green, almost 25 miles away. The Hardee County ZIP



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code they must use is a major source of irritation for residents, who would prefer to pick up their mail in Parrish.

It also causes health insurance companies to assign residents to doctors 50 miles away in Sebring, when there are closer practices in Manatee.

When refrigerators and other appliances break down, residents face a long wait for repairmen to be dispatched from Lakeland, where a Sears is located.

"If you want it fixed right away you have to put it on the

back of a truck and take it somewhere," Tappan said.

Duette's remoteness brings a host of other problems. There is no county water, sewer or cable. Most residents get their high-speed Internet connection through satellite dishes or cell-phone lines. The service is expensive and does not work well in rain or fog.

Parents face long trips to get children access to swimming pools and other recreational facilities. The school bus ride for students takes more than an hour.

mate not-in-my-backyard horror show produces only a handful of complaints. Few in the community of farmers question the need for more fertilizer.

"When Lakewood Ranch stops fertilizing their grass, we can stop mining," said Tappan, who is running for a seat on the Manatee County Commission.

Mosaic works hard to keep the support it has in Duette. While the Manatee County School District has tried several times to close Duette Elementary, Mosaic regularly donates money and materials to the school. If a resident's well runs dry, the company pays for a deeper well to be dug.

"The phosphate companies take good care of us; the county doesn't," said resident Linda O'Connor, whose husband worked 25 years with IMC Agrico, the phosphate company that merged with Cargill to form Mosaic.

For more than seven years, Mosaic spokeswoman Diana Youmans has been the company's representative in Duette.

She regularly attends community meetings and chats with locals like an old friend. At fund-raising events like pie auctions and fish fries, she buys a pie or fish plate.

"I do it because these people are friends of mine," Youmans said.

"They're committed to things that are the most important to their community. I think they are used to pulling together to address issues and things that they want to see happen to their community."

But Mosaic is not always seen as a friendly company.

Environmentalists oppose the damage the mine expansion and other Mosaic activities cause. And beyond that, some critics of the expansion plan say the company is trying