

## Sunflower Tour

On October 24, the Eudora Area Historical Society hosted a tour of the former Sunflower Ordnance Works, which was renamed Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant in 1963. The tour opened with a 35-minute film produced in the 1960's. The film described production steps and sites, including Blender, Roll House, Slitter House, Press House, Breaker Roll, Annealizing, Sawing and End Inhibiting, Rest House, Doweling, Ballistics, Final Inspection, and Shipping. Safety measures in S.O.W.'s Zero Defect Program ("do the job right the first time") and quality control were also detailed.

Gayla Frazier, a 31-year plant worker whose father Eldon Lovett also worked at Sunflower, answered questions from the 50-member tour group. Carrol Gersternberger noted the safety sprinkler systems that deluged buildings with water. Paul Gabriel recounted a wartime death, saying "I was two miles from the plant on my tractor when I felt a jolt. I looked over and saw a lot of smoke. I found out that a man was killed in an explosion. My brother-in-law said all they found were the man's false teeth."

Frazier said that her employer Alliant Techsystems (which acquired Hercules in 1995) markets the plant for commercial use, maintains equipment, and destroys buildings impregnated with hazardous powder and fumes. To date, 404 structures containing asbestos and lead have been burnt and razed. Another 150 buildings are slated for destruction. "None of the contamination has migrated off the plant," Fraser said. "Everything is contained and easy to remediate. That's why the Army hasn't acted sooner as they classify the contamination as low priority."

After the presentation, the bus tour first viewed the plant hospital, Badge Alley (where workers received clearance badges), the Changing Houses, and the bus station that launched workers to various sites on the 10,747 acre facility. Greg Neis, tour bus driver and former Sunflower employee, then drove past the water tanks presently used by DeSoto, the subcontractor gate house, and followed Stringtown Road to the south. Steam pipe lines used for heat and power snake along the road sides and by buildings. Cattle graze throughout because of agricultural leases issued by the Corps of Engineers. Fraser said the area also supports a tremendous deer and wild turkey population.

As the bus traversed the eastern plant edges, Fraser said that developers for the proposed, Land of Oz project have requested uncontaminated land beginning at the F-Line as far west as the water tanks. This heavily forested land provides the trees that the developers want to include in their project. At Five Corners, Neis and Rex Burkhardt, Eudora Area Historical Society president, noted several structures surrounded by tangled rubble, as Frazier pointed out the landmark Twin Pines on Main Avenue by the M-Line buildings. "Much from World War II is long gone," Frazier said. "There's nothing left behind but building foundations."

At the former town site of Prairie Center, Frazier stopped to take photos for the EAHS, because recording devices are not allowed on plant grounds. As the bus turned west, it passed never-used magazine buildings and turned north on Perimeter Road where tour-goers were treated with glimpses of Captain Creek and abundant stands of giant Bluestem grass. Close by was Robert's Lake and its charming stone lakehouse that DeSoto has requested in the land disbursement. Heading north, the bus went by Gate H, where the Army National reserve conducts training exercises across from Press Houses, mounded with concrete and grass, which also were never used.

Nearing the tour end, the bus passed through the fenced-in nitroguanidine facility buffeted with its own security gates. Large conveyer belts link the buildings. Heading east, the tour passed by towers maintained by Sprint and Southwestern Bell, the DeSoto ballfields, and Sunflower Nature Park. On its final leg, the tour looked at receiving warehouses; tall, narrow Still Houses; the brick pilot plant for nitroguanidine production; and maintenance offices that still announce their functions with signs, such as Painting, Lumber, Carpentering, and Scrap Metal. The plant tour concluded with a wish to reunite Sunflower workers before the plant's final closing. "It was a family here when my husband worked," Louise Smith said. "They had their own activities and a happy time here." Long-term Sunflower worker Burkhardt, who began his plant employment constructing a laundromat with his father, said "We were a family. We had a softball and volleyball team. A lot of us would go the Royals games and there were always covered dish dinners. You made friends here that you have for the rest of your life."

*Cindy Higgins, 10/1998*