Big names, big legacy suit settlements

Governor, oil businessman, heirs of judge famous for fraud among those who filed suits

By Mike Perlstein
WWL-TV

NEW ORLEANS — Legacy lawsuits have been filed by some of Louisiana’s wealthiest and most powerful people.

Former Gov. Mike Foster, despite being a champion of tort reform, won a large settlement against Exxon to clean up his property in St. Mary Parish. One-time Democratic Party Chairman Buddy Leach saw his cleanup efforts tied up in messy litigation even after his $15 million settlement. Lake Charles oilman and big bucks campaign contributor Bill Dore won the largest remediation judgment to date — $57 million — after his oil industry colleagues turned their backs on him.

There are many other prominent names on the list of about 360 landowners who have sued oil companies for alleged pollution to their properties.

But perhaps no plaintiffs are more surprising than the heirs of Judge Leander Perez, the longtime political boss of Plaquemines Parish who made his family fabulously wealthy by securing oil royalties through a legendary act of fraud.

Now, Perez’s secret deals — which he kept hidden for more than half a century — are being cited in two lawsuits by seven of his grandchildren against a handful of oil companies.

“It is an eye-opener,” said former Plaquemines Parish President Benny Rouselle, whose family helped fight the Perez regime. “Anytime you take public funds, you’re depriving the public of something, somewhere. That’s why you see people today go to jail for that. And this was just a devious way to take them.”

Perez served as a judge for only one full term, but the title was attached to his name throughout his iron-fisted rule in Plaquemines from 1919 until his death in 1969, first as district attorney, then later as council president. His unparalleled power continued after his death through his two sons, Leander Jr., who became district attorney, and Chalin, who became council president.

But Perez also handed down something else to his children, an oil fortune worth more than $80 million, with all of the royalties coming from a secret interest that Perez fraudulently obtained.

See SUITS, Page 8A
"It doesn't matter whose land. If it's their land, it's their land. I have no idea how they got it, when they got it. It's their land."

JOHN CARMOUNCHE, attorney for Perez family

The Perez heirs did not return calls for comment.

The Perez attorneys at Talbot Carmouche and Marcello, the undisputed leaders in legacy claims with about 75 percent of all cases pending, defended the lawsuits.

"It doesn't matter whose land. If it's their land, it's their land. I have no idea how they got it, when they got it. It's their land," John Carmouche said.

Carmouche said his firm is still researching the case it filed last year. But the legal petitions are supported by lease documents going back to the 1950s, the same documents that were used to expose how Perez secretly siphoned royalties from Buras Levee Board lands for more than 60 years.

"I can't worry about the past. I have to worry what's happening today," Carmouche said. "I've been asked about the history of the Perez oil interests. He said the goal of the litigation is to clean up the environment, not to bring more wealth to the oil-rich Perez clan.

"How can you look at anyone in the state, not just the Perezes, but anyone in the state of Louisiana who files these lawsuits, and say, well you did this in the past, you did this in the past?" Carmouche asked. "They're suing to clean the environment.

But Rousselle, among others, is concerned. Any compensation from oil companies should go to the parish, not people who benefited from ill-gotten gains, he said.

"If anyone deserves the benefit of the loss of those lands, if it's going to be restored, it's the parish, the public." Gifford Briggs, vice president of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, said that after seeing more than 300 of these lawsuits, nothing surprises him anymore.

Despite decades of contamination by oil and gas companies, and hundreds of millions of dollars paid to landowners through legacy lawsuits, only 12 sites have been cleaned to state standards.

"Who files these lawsuits really is no longer very surprising," said Briggs. "For the large oil and gas operators arecookie cutter lawsuits. The allegations are the same. The only different is the property owners and the plaintiff." Mike Perstein is a reporter for WWL TV in New Orleans, which, along with The Daily Advertiser, is a Gannett company.