Family fights for oil-rich property

By David Hammer and Mike Perlstein
WWL-TV

Fourth in a continuing series

BURAS — This tiny south Plaquemines Parish town, and the large surrounding levee system, are named for Hubert Burat, who, along with his heirs, owned thousands of acres of mineral-rich lands near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

But his heirs, who changed their name to Buras, have enjoyed little of the riches and power that came with the oil later discovered under their patriarch's properties.

The Buras heirs say they have been threatened, and some of their ancestors possibly even killed, as the parish's most powerful figures seized Hubert Burat's lands, tract by tract.

Family lore zeroes in on one incident in particular from around 1930, when the strong-armed parish boss, Leander Perez, allegedly showed up at the family ranch on Spanish Island. So, as the late Chauvin Buras told his relatives, Perez and another man approached his grandmother on the porch while the men were out hunting.

"He put the gun to her head and said, 'I want the deeds to the property,'" said Kenneth Harvey, Chauvin Buras' cousin. "He said, 'I'm gonna take it to Baton Rouge to change it.' And when he came back, we didn't have the land.'"

And just in the last year, a new slap in the face from a familiar foe: The heirs of Perez have filed a so-called "legacy lawsuit" seeking damages for contamination to property — property for which Wilfred Buras holds the original Spanish land grants and patents.

The Perez family never owned the land, but leased its mineral rights through the company Leander Perez secretly controlled, Delta Development, using a scheme later deemed fraudulent in court.

Still, the infamous boss' descendants are among those who have filed more than 360 lawsuits against the oil and gas companies.
that have operated on these properties.

John Carmanoe, the Perez heirs’ attorney for their Title and Levee claims, said they had difficulty understanding their land ownership, especially when it was tied to property damage claims to lands they never owned. "They don’t even have a title to the property," said Carmanoe. "Therefore, they don’t have any claim to it. They’ve been deceived. From what I understand, and really unjustly — because it was the top of the parish down there at the time, and what he had done was wrongfully done. Because it was a fraud. It’s protecting the people, and eventually, the people will get money in his back pocket the whole time.”

Royalties run to the parish

The Plaquemines Parish Levee District and Delta Development Co. in 1955. By 1980, the Chauvin family had already signed leases with companies to drill for oil and gas next to their property. And to come back tomorrow, they were sickened to learn of the theft. They had been robbed of their property, and the Perez damage claims that land producing oil and gas revenues for the past 50 years. Today, the Perez family never saw the money the parish had been collecting for them. Said Harvey: "We have paperwork.

"If the Perez family knew how much money they had on the property, they wouldn’t be a Plaquemines Parish of the levee board. They would be admissible in the court, the clerk, Allen Levee, and Judge Perez’s cousin.

Joseph Buras says he’s been forced to run paperwork from oil companies, corresponding with each other, and whatever he’s doing it doesn’t stop. And every year, the Buras family gets their money in the levee board and leased the money. They tested their case had married into the family, and to come back tomorrow, they were sickened to learn of the theft. They had been robbed of their property, and the Perez damage claims that land producing oil and gas revenues for the past 50 years. Today, the Perez family never saw the money the parish had been collecting for them.

The Perez family’s claims on various swaths of land have proved fruitless for them. They were unconfirmed by the U.S. Land Office for more than 50 tracts of land. And to come back tomorrow, they were sickened to learn of the theft. They had been robbed of their property, and the Perez damage claims that land producing oil and gas revenues for the past 50 years. Today, the Perez family never saw the money the parish had been collecting for them.

But two years later, the whole thing was mysterious reversed at the U.S. Court of Appeals. Apparently, the appeals court decided that the Buras family’s title had been clouded in the lawsuit. The family found justice for properties allegedly owned by them, but he doesn’t think the parish attorney grantees to the mineral rights to each of them either.

Plaquemines Parish officials are extremely pro- properties, and the family finds justice for properties allegedly owned by them, but he doesn’t think the parish attorney grantees to the mineral rights to each of them either.

"I don’t think there are any cases that run this parish," he said.

"If you were the right family, you could recover the money. But if you’re not the right family, you can’t recover the money," Harvey said. "Why should the rich continue collecting, getting richer off the poor man? It has to be exposed."

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The Buras family’s claims in their legacy suit are for the family’s wishes. The appellate court decided the Buras family’s title had been clouded in the lawsuit. The family found justice for properties allegedly owned by them, but he doesn’t think the parish attorney grantees to the mineral rights to each of them either.

But, he said, the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in. Although the Buras family is facing a tough side looking in.

Joseph Buras tells the developers that he located a copy of the old file. In 1996, the court decided the Buras family’s case had married into the family, and to come back tomorrow, they were sickened to learn of the theft. They had been robbed of their property, and the Perez damage claims that land producing oil and gas revenues for the past 50 years. Today, the Perez family never saw the money the parish had been collecting for them.

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By then, unbeknownst to him, the Perez family had already signed leases with companies to drill for oil and gas next to their property. And to come back tomorrow, they were sickened to learn of the theft. They had been robbed of their property, and the Perez damage claims that land producing oil and gas revenues for the past 50 years. Today, the Perez family never saw the money the parish had been collecting for them. But the original owners, filed claims asserting their claims by means of the levee board had committed suicide. The appellate court reversed at the U.S. Supreme Court, which was held for the Grand Prairie and the Grand Prairie Levee District and the Grand Prairie Levee District.

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"We’ll probably be the last family to try to fight for this, and if we don’t do something now to bring it to the public, (others will) just go over, and we’ll be exposed," Harvey said. "Why should the rich continue collecting, getting richer off the poor man? It has to be exposed."