



The Champion Paper plant in Canton is the state's largest employer west of Charlotte. Pollution has raised few complaints there.

STAFF PHOTOS BY COREY LOWENSTEIN

Upstream friend, downstream foe

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STAFF WRITER

HARTFORD, Tenn. — For generations, residents of this tiny mountain village tossed their dogs into the toxic waters of the Pigeon River as a cure for ticks and other parasites.

Nowadays, optimistic locals are encouraging tourists to jump in the river, in hopes that whitewater rafting might bring money and jobs to a region that has little of either.

For nearly a century, the Pigeon River has brought decidedly mixed blessings to the Great Smoky Mountains. As it winds along a 75-mile course from North Carolina into Tennessee, the river is by turns, cherished and mourned.

Upstream of Hartford, which abuts the state line, the Pigeon is hailed as an economic godsend, bringing prosperity to Western North Carolina in the form of 1,300 manufacturing jobs that spring from the Champion International Corp. paper mill in Canton, N.C.

Downstream, however, the Pigeon is seen as an environmental embarrassment, where untold tons of pollutants from the paper mill have turned the river into an industrial drainpipe as it washes across East Tennessee.

The river has been this way for as long as anyone can remember, ever since Champion opened its steam-belching factory in 1908 and turned the once-pristine Pigeon into a smelly, chemical-laced, dark-stained mess.

But now, after strong protests by East Tennesseans and personal intervention by Vice President Al Gore, change may be in the offing. The Environmental Protection Agency has reluctantly agreed to review Champion's operating permit, which for years has given it special permission to violate standards set by the federal Clean Water Act.

A decision is expected next month on what else, if anything, Champion might be required to do to clean up the river. But there is widespread hope that life might finally improve in towns such as Hartford, which are scraping to find ways to benefit from the long-suffering Pigeon.

"The bottom line is that this community has been the sacrificial lamb for about 90 years and we're tired of it," says Harold Cates, a Hartford native and the county executive in Cocke County, Tenn., which absorbs much of the river's pollution. "It's time to clean up the river. We need to turn the Pigeon from a liability into an asset."

Their champion

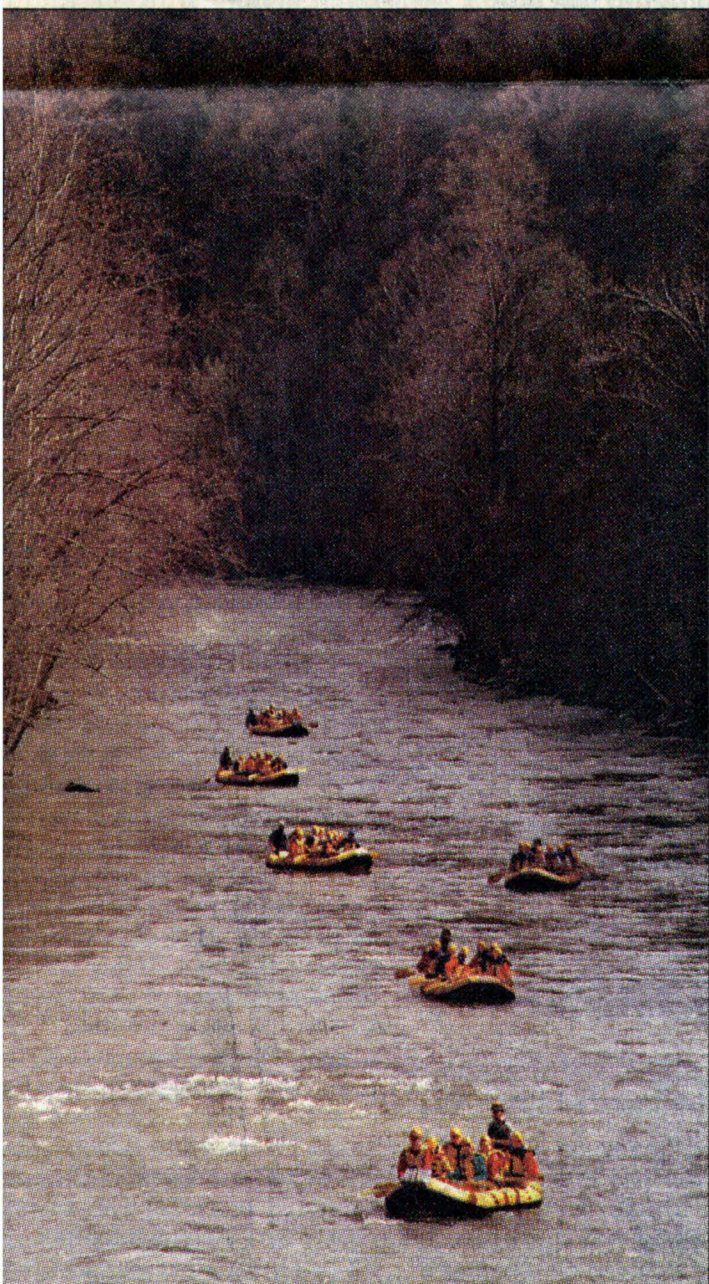
The Pigeon River is named for the passenger pigeon, now extinct. The last one died in 1914, six years after Champion opened its Canton mill.

The river begins in the highlands of southern Haywood County, where the water is clear and clean enough to support trout and other native fish. Then it passes under Canton's Main Street bridge and flows into the 200-acre paper mill complex.

Each day, boxcars haul 4,800 tons of wood chips into the mill. They are cooked into pulp in a process that sucks 29 million gallons of water from the Pigeon. The pulp is bleached and converted into juice cartons, fast-food soda cups and other white-paper products.

By the time the water is returned to the river, it is several degrees warmer and loaded with tannins and lignins, wood byproducts that turn the river brown and cloudy. The pollutants make the Pigeon unlivable for the trout and most other fish species.

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Locals in Hartford, Tenn., try to pitch the once-toxic waters of the Pigeon River as a great site for whitewater rafting.

PIGEON

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Canton, population 3,800, is a company town with an official nickname: Papertown, U.S.A. The mill occupies the heart of downtown and is bordered by roads such as Fiberville Street and White Pine Drive.

Champion is the state's largest private employer west of Charlotte and pays wages that average \$48,000 a year. Folks in Canton are fiercely loyal to the company, which has provided jobs to the same families for several generations.

Residents are unlikely to complain about the ever-present stench that comes from the pulp production. Likewise, they play down the mill's effects on the Pigeon.

"I don't know where we would be if it wasn't for Champion," says Canton Mayor Bob Phillips, who landed a job at the mill after World War II and worked there for 39 years.

"They're doing a very good job as far as the environment goes. We're on a small stream, not like the Mississippi or something. If you were on a larger river, the pollution wouldn't be as apparent."

Champion says it is doing its best to keep the Pigeon as clean as possible and cites as evidence a \$330 million modernization project that was completed in 1994.

The upgrade enabled the mill to reduce its water intake by 35 percent and to cut down on its color discharge into the river by 75 percent, according to the company.

It also greatly reduced the use of chlorine, a practice that had created dioxin — a highly toxic substance and suspected carcinogen. Champion says dioxin production has dropped to nearly undetectable levels since the late 1980s.

"This is the latest technology available to the pulp and paper industry," company spokesman Al Joyce says. "It doesn't get any better than this."

Critics disagree, saying Champion is ignoring cleaner methods adopted by paper mills in Europe and elsewhere.

Champion's modernization has also cut the need for labor. The mill now employs 1,322 people, down from 2,300 a decade ago and about 3,000 in the 1950s.

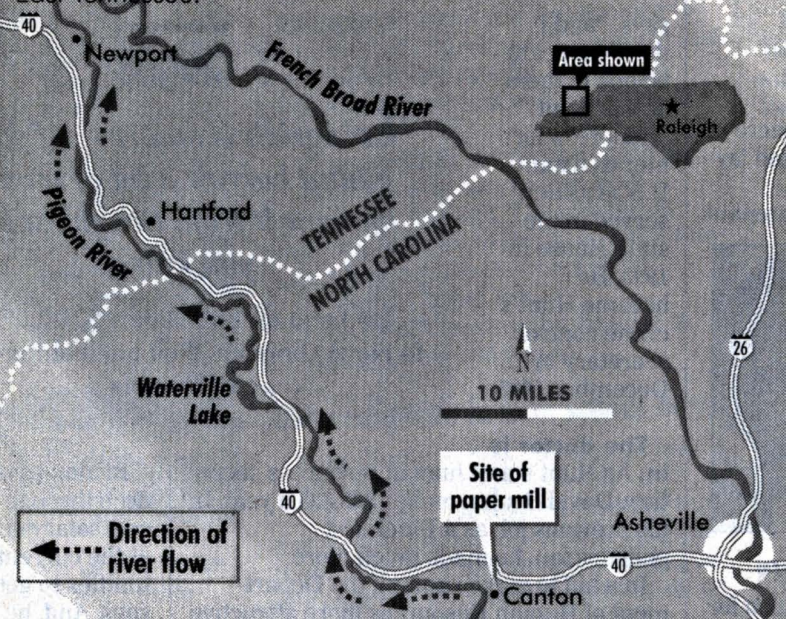
Joyce says the mill is a high-cost operation that has lost money over the past five years, but he declines to provide a breakdown in figures. The giant forest-products company, based in Stamford, Conn., reported profits of \$771 million in 1995 and \$141 million in 1996.

Champion has agreed to spend \$30 million on a pilot project to see if it can reduce its pollution. But Joyce says the company shouldn't be expected to make changes that aren't financially feasible.

"This company is a major economic player in Western North Car-

Polluting the Pigeon

The Champion International Corp. paper mill in Canton provides 1,300 jobs in Western North Carolina. But for 89 years, it has also dumped tons of pollutants into the Pigeon River, which carries the contaminants across the state line into East Tennessee.



GREY BLACKWELL / The News and Observer

olina," he says. "It is vital to people here. Nobody wants to see the plant shut down."

Alarming cancer rate

The Pigeon leaves Canton and courses through 37 miles of woodlands before crossing the state line into Tennessee. The first homes along the riverbank pop up in Hartford, population 400.

In the late 1980s, the river — or more accurately, the pollution that came with it — gave Hartford an unwanted nickname: Widowville.

Residents had always been wary of the Pigeon's water quality, but they began to panic after tests found dioxin in fish and river mud. The source was no mystery; the Champion mill had been dumping it in the river for years.

The discovery led many people to wonder if the dioxin and other pollutants had contributed to a seemingly high cancer rate in the community that had left Hartford with an unusual number of widows. Although causes were hard to pinpoint, it was easy to blame the river.

The scare led to an exodus. The Hartford Grocery closed, as did the Hartford Elementary School, perched on the river's north bank.

Cates, the county executive, grew up on a farm near the river and saw six relatives on his mother's side die of cancer. He still worries about health risks he might face after a childhood of exposure to pollution.

"We'd jump in that river every day," he recalls. "It was dirty, but it was cool. We couldn't wear any clothes because the water would turn them so black. ... And the smell was so bad, like rotten eggs."

Hartford residents acknowledge

that the Pigeon's water quality has improved since Champion modernized its mill. The sickly odor, though still pungent on hot summer days, has diminished; the water, though still the color of weak coffee, is clearer.

Much of the optimism comes from Hartford's fledgling whitewater industry. A dozen outfitters dot the riverbank now; four years ago, none existed.

About 40,000 people plunged in the Pigeon last year to raft or canoe or kayak. Still, some outfitters say they're having difficulty persuading customers to return. Many visitors wrinkle their noses at the dirty water and the smell. Others look warily at signs posted along the riverbank, warning that eating catfish or carp poses a risk of cancer.

Jerry Kader, owner of Rapid Descent River Co., says the rafting business is good overall. He predicts a record year and plays down the pollution problems. Even so, he wants the EPA to make sure that Champion continues to clean up the Pigeon.

"Over the past six years, it has definitely seen a very noticeable improvement," Kader says. "I'm pleased with what's happening, but I don't want it to slow down."

Turning their backs to it

The Pigeon leaves Hartford and winds 13 miles through Appalachian hollows before reaching Newport, Tenn., population 7,100, the first incorporated town downstream of the Champion mill.

The river bisects Newport's 1930s-era brick downtown, running parallel to River Street and passing by the Cocke County Courthouse, the Hunt Foods cannery, a lumber yard and Cooter's Country Kitchen. A few miles north of town, it meets its final destination, merging with the larger French Broad River.

Newport makes no attempt to gussy up the Pigeon. There is no waterfront park, no boat traffic, not even a stray duck. Picnic tables or pathways are nowhere to be found.

Rather, the Pigeon is looked upon as a ditch. The few homes built along the river are dilapidated shacks that turn their backs to the water. The banks are strewn with trash, the result of people dumping their household refuse, not to mention the occasional dead pig or cow.

While townspeople concede they haven't always treated the river with care, they say the damage inflicted by the paper mill has been far worse.

The company has long been cussed here. "The name Champion evokes hatred; it's a dirty word," says Peg Kucan, 43, a community college student from nearby Morristown, who was part of a delegation that recently met with Champion executives and criticized their business practices.

Residents scoff at TV ads recently broadcast by the company that portray the Pigeon as a sparkling stream, full of tasty fish. The only fish in Newport are pollution-resistant bottom feeders, and even some of them are pocked with sores.

"They're just using the river for a sewage outfall," says Jerry Wilde, president of the Dead Pigeon River Council, a group that has lobbied to fix the river for more than a decade. "There's no question the river is cleaner than it was 10 years ago. But ... it's still not clean enough for people to use it or benefit from it."

Newport is where the movement to clean up the Pigeon began, although it is an unlikely hotbed of environmentalism. Politics here lean to the conservative side, and activists of any type are scarce.

Indeed, Wilde, a surveyor and real-estate broker, resents being labeled an environmentalist. "I'm a business-type person," he says. "I'm more conservative than your average greenie."

Most residents base their concern about river pollution on economics: It's bad for business.

Cocke County's unemployment rate hit 16 percent last month, and many blame the fouled Pigeon for restricting growth. For instance, local canneries won't buy produce from farmers along the river for fear that their vegetables are grown in contaminated soil.

Six years ago, 2,600 Tennessee landowners filed a \$367 million class-action suit against Champion, arguing that the dirty river had diminished their property values for several decades. After a federal jury deadlocked on the issue, an out-of-court settlement was reached in which Champion promised to pay \$6.5 million but admitted no wrongdoing.

Permit renewal blasted

The current fuss over the Pigeon heated up last October, when the state of North Carolina renewed Champion's wastewater discharge permit for five years.

The EPA also approved the permit, which did not tighten any pollution restrictions even though the mill was already violating the federal Clean Water Act. Regulators say they exempted Champion primarily for economic reasons, citing the mill's 1,300 jobs.

The deal brought howls of protest from environmentalists and Tennessee politicians, including Republican Gov. Don Sundquist.

The tide shifted in December when Gore, under pressure from constituents in his home state, asked the EPA to reconsider its decision and review Champion's permit.

"We're finally getting all due attention on this issue, and I think the reason is that Gore's rear end has been on the line in Tennessee," says David Jenkins, a Washington lobbyist for the American Canoe Association.

In addition to conducting a technical review of the Champion mill, the EPA is analyzing the negative economic effect the polluted river has had on East Tennessee, something it did not consider earlier.

Officials say they are weighing all options, from doing nothing to forcing the mill to close, although most people say that is an unlikely outcome.

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- Do you feel compelled to check things over and over, like locked doors or turning off appliances?
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- Do you avoid certain people, places or objects because they might be "contaminated"?

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