

# One Reporter's Experience Covering the Environment in the Heartland

By **Bob Bajek**, on April 1st, 2014

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RANTOUL, Ill. — Journalism is about seeking the truth. That is why I wanted to be a journalist.

After college, I eventually landed my first fulltime job as a reporter at the Rantoul Press, a small weekly newspaper in the village of Rantoul, Illinois. I believed the newspaper would look out for the best interest of its readers. I was wrong. That, perhaps, naive notion was dispelled when the newspaper's editor and general manager decided the village's economic interests were more important than the public health.

I **wrote a story** on Aug. 28, 2013 about how Agent Orange was possibly on the now shuttered Chanute Air Force Base's property. The story was how a former airman named Michael Glasser in the 1960s mixed the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T into what would later be known as Agent Orange. He then buried some of it by Heritage Lake, a manmade body of water that used to be a sludge pit on the base. Today, some area residents use the lake for recreation.

Local readers gave me positive feedback on the story, saying they would never have moved to Rantoul had they known of the pollution concerns.

The following week, on Sept. 4, I wrote a **followed up** story for the Rantoul Press about a Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) meeting addressing the Air Force's efforts to clean up of the skeet (munitions) range. The story also reiterated environmental concerns about Chanute, especially how chemical seepage might affect the ground water and the possibility that drums of Agent Orange might be buried at the site. Photographs of the polluted Heritage Lake (now under village control) also accompanied the story.



Reporter Bob Bajek picks up a rock by Heritage Lake in Rantoul. Heritage Lake used to be a sludge pit in Chanute's 900 area, but it was converted into a man-made lake in the 1980s to be used for the airmen's and later public's recreation. This lake is by four landfills that produce chemical runoff.

A day after publication, the Rantoul Press' general manager, Tim Evans, talked to me about the Agent Orange stories. Evans, a hefty 59-year-old newspaperman, said these stories "weren't what community newspapers were about and made the town look bad." Evans then insisted I go with him to then village administrator Bruce Sandahl's office "for an off the record meeting."



Bruce Sandahl

Once there, Sandahl, a bespectacled, imposing man with a ruddy complexion and a walrus mustache, said these stories were "pure opinion and crap." He never told me, nor did I agree, that the meeting was off the record. Sandahl also criticized **a Rantoul Press report** about the multi-million dollar pork plant, Rantoul Foods, indiscriminately dumping hog waste in rural Rantoul. The plant's unsanitary disposal produced a sickeningly pungent smell that negatively impacted several nearby residents. The village and Illinois EPA took no actions against Rantoul Foods for its carelessness.

Sandahl—hired in 2008 and paid \$157,196 annually, about twice as much as the going rate for town managers of Rantoul's size — emphatically said that story was "horseshit" and damaged the community. But others believed that story prompted Rantoul Foods president James Jendruczek **to announce at a public study session in August** that his company would construct a \$10 million rendering plant that should be completed by fall 2014. Jendruczek declined to be interviewed by the Press after the announcement, running out of the building before my editor, Dave Hinton, could ask him questions.

Village administrator Sandahl went on to say to me that "you are on one extreme by maintaining the base is severely contaminated, and the Air Force is on the other saying its perfectly fine. I believe its somewhere in the middle." I asked him if he believed it was in the middle, wouldn't that concern him. Sandahl snapped, swore and became agitated with me and said, "This meeting is getting nowhere." He wanted me to see his side, but I asked, "Am I just to take your word for it? You are paid well by the village to make it look good." Sandahl abruptly ended the meeting, and told Evans, "I will talk to you later about this" as we were leaving the office.

Throughout the meeting, Evans did not support the paper or me. He took Sandahl's side. Evans and Sandahl are on good terms outside the office. Evans, like many local newspaper executives, is a member of Rantoul's Chamber of Commerce.

Evans then took me to his office once again and said he did not believe Chanute had any problems and he suggested I stop putting time in the story. I said it was not affecting my productivity, and I believed there were problems at Chanute that could negatively impact Rantoul's public health.

The general manager then rustled his hands through his thin, white hair and said, "I don't think (publisher) Mr. (John) Foreman would've published that Agent Orange story." I told Evans The News-Gazette (our sister paper) did indeed **publish it on Aug. 31**, but he still contended Foreman would not run it.

Meanwhile, apparently worried about the town's image from my stories, the Rantoul Press wrote a five-part series about how Chanute's closure 20 years ago has affected the village and surrounding community. Not one story mentioned environmental contamination. For the Oct. 30, 2013 issue, Evans wrote five glowing reports about how Rantoul's economy was on the rise.

In the **cover story**, Sandahl said the Air Force has "recognized their obligations" and been good to work with. Sandahl mentioned "environmentalists need not fear contamination in property on the base, noting if something is discovered, the Air Force is responsible for cleaning it up, whether it be soil, water or structures." Evans wrote Sandahl has "siphoned through thousands of pages of documents and has some 'knowledge of where we've been, how we're doing and where we're going.' "

**Another story** mentioned Restoration Advisory Board member Ian Wang, co-owner and director of the Prairie Village retirement home who bought large parcels of property when Chanute closed in 1993. The story said he wanted to invest \$2 million to "give the community a cultural art center/park on base."

In November, I told Evans and Hinton about my Nov. 8 interview with Betty Panzer and her concerns that her well might be contaminated. Evans said I did not have enough for a story and decided to hold it. That article was never published.

That same week, Evans told me the Rantoul Press would never publish any story about the possibility of dioxin in the water because it would ruin the town. Evans said no newspaper or news organization would pick it up. He also said we are not supposed to be Panzer's voice, and that this 70-year-old woman who is poor, alone and severely ill "should grow some balls and speak at the RAB board." I told Evans she was afraid of them, but Evans dismissed that notion.

Evans went on to say, "You might have 5 or 10 percent of the truth, but I will not publish this." He said I had to have the "whole story" and that "no one would ever publish this."

I wrote a column for the Nov. 13th issue about how the public should attend the Nov. 21 RAB meeting and question the Air Force and Illinois EPA. Both agencies seemed to be misleading Rantoul residents about Chanute's cleanup. I also listed my additional research on Chanute's contaminants, how dioxin was detected in private wells in 1998, and that both entities were stonewalling me every time I asked questions.

Both Evans and my editor, Dave Hinton, read the column and wanted it to be "clarified because it was too confusing." I did and then Evans said he would not run it. He then proceeded to **write an editorial** about the situation, seemingly siding with the Air Force while undercutting my previous reporting on Agent Orange.

Debra Rawlings, a former Rantoul Press reporter who once covered the RAB, is currently a RAB member. She **tried to discredit me** in a letter to the editor on my Sept. 4's story about Heritage Lake and ground water contamination, writing that my story was one-sided (which is her right). She had tried to undermine a source by email to my editor a month before and had overlooked dioxin issues when she was reporting on the board. On Nov. 15, she attempted to publish a letter to the editor with some untrue statements about me and two sources, writing: "Reporter Bob Bajek is relying on information from RAB member and conspiracy theorist Doug Rokke" and "Mr. Bajek might consider that he is only as credible as his sources."

I emailed Illinois Press Association lawyer Don Craven to explain the situation. Evans grew angry with me because "Dave (Hinton) was supposed to do it." I told Evans and Hinton I wanted to make sure I defended myself. Craven advised Hinton to strike out Rawlings' accusations about my sources and me. Here is her **published letter**.

## The November RAB Meeting

A couple of days before the Nov. 21 RAB meeting, I received a phone call from Air Force spokesman Chad Starr asking me if I would be interested in meeting with Linda Geissinger, a public affairs specialist for the Air Force, and personnel from Chicago Brick & Iron to talk about environmental issues concerning Chanute after the meeting. (CB&I, formerly known as Shaw Environmental, Inc., is the contractor finishing the base's cleanup. It has more than **\$3.3 billion from 35 DOD contracts**.)

I told Geissinger I wanted to meet them with my editors and record the meeting. Geissinger was surprised and said she did not understand. I refused to give into her demands.

Michael Glasser, who served as an airman at Chanute in the 1960s, is 69-years-old and now lives in South Florida. He wanted to be interviewed for the November meeting on speakerphone or Skype as he was receiving chemotherapy and radiation treatment for his returning cancer and could not be cleared medically to attend. Glasser was already listed on the agenda to be interviewed about herbicide usage at Chanute. I asked the Air Force's Paul Carroll and CB&I's Diane Gill by email if Glasser could be put on speakerphone since the RAB was exploring potential contamination.

Carroll, who speaks softly and has a Mr. Rogers demeanor, and Illinois EPA's Chris Hill did not get back to me by email or phone. Carroll told me that Glasser would not be interviewed until the next meeting (which would be in February or May 2014). I pointed out Carroll was on speakerphone during an informational meeting about the Chanute water towers during the October governmental shutdown, but Carroll did not answer why it was possible for him to be on a phone call to the meeting but not Glasser.

At the Nov. 21 RAB meeting, Hill — a nervous, lanky man about 40 whose hair is thinning and who wears fashionable jeans at public meetings — presented an "interview" he had with Glasser on Aug. 28 and stated that during their phone conversation Glasser said, "He didn't use Agent Orange."

"What they are doing is using semantics," Glasser said after the meeting. "I didn't know I was being interviewed with Mr. Hill as it wasn't recorded and he misrepresented me. By saying Agent Orange isn't there is like Bill Clinton saying he didn't have sex with that woman."

Glasser also added how Hill told him, "We don't look into the past; we only are concerned about the future."

The Rantoul Press did not publish my story about the Nov. 21 RAB meeting even though the public, the Restoration Advisory Board, the Air Force and the Illinois EPA engaged in heated discussions.

At the meeting, Linda K. May, a controversial local activist from Pontiac and a Champaign County native, provided three documents that she said proves Chanute Air Force Base's chemical usage has contaminated the public water supply.



Doug Wolfe and Linda K. May

An Illinois EPA official said during the meeting that the village's water is tested rigorously for contaminants. The state itself does not test for dioxin and TCE in water supplies, but instead relies on private contractors.

Another concern brought up during the meeting was the wells south of Chanute that tested for dioxin and other contaminants in 1998 and 2001.

Mary Walsh, a longtime rural Rantoul resident, said she and her neighbors worry about the base's uncontrolled contaminated ground water because of the shallow water table and nearby farms.



Chris Hill

"Out there, we are concerned about the ground water being tested on Chanute, and how Rantoul's water supply could have an issue," Walsh said. "But what are we supposed to do? Check our own wells?"

It was when she was asking that question that Rantoul police entered the meeting. A police press release later said that someone at the meeting was concerned when RAB member Doug Rokke left the meeting after a heated discussion and returned with a backpack. When Rokke reached into the backpack, he was physically restrained by the police and then roughly led out the room for questioning. The action postponed the meeting for about 10 minutes.

Rokke said the police released him and apologized for detaining him. They said a man from the meeting called saying he was making threatening gestures and was reaching for a possible weapon in a backpack. Rokke showed the police his backpack. It was filled with public documents.

When the meeting resumed after the police incident, the Air Force's Carroll did not address Walsh's questions about contaminated ground water.

Doug Wolfe, a reporter for Decatur's WAND-TV, asked Carroll if dioxin had been detected on base.

"Yes, sir," said Carroll, after taking a long drink of water before the interview. "There are detections of dioxin that were found. Everything that's regulated by the EPA safe drinking water standards must meet EPA MCL (maximum containment level) requirements. Any public water supply has to meet those requirements, and Rantoul's does as well."

When questioned, Bob Carson of the Illinois EPA said that he does not think there is danger to the public from Agent Orange. "I don't believe there are any threats here," Carson said. "There were a number of threats that were cleaned up. That work is underway. There is ground water contamination at this base. It's to a limited extent due to the geology here."

Wolfe, one of Central Illinois' top broadcast journalists, asked Carson if contaminants seeped into the Mahomet aquifer.

"I'm not aware of any of that," Carson said. "I've never heard mention. Yes, the Wisconsinan, which is the upper level of glacial materials, has the contamination. Below that, I can't speak of that."

RAB member Denise Becnel said she realizes the community has concerns over Chanute's chemical usage. "I am concerned that there are members of Rantoul's community that firmly believe that the environmental condition of Chanute is not right," Becnel said. "I don't have a technical background. I am not saying that there is Agent Orange or other contaminants on Chanute. I absolutely don't know one way or another. But as a RAB member, I'm saying that we have to find a way to address the pressing concerns this community has regarding Chanute's safety."

The RAB voted to meet semiannually instead of quarterly. Linda Geissinger after the Nov. 21, 2013 RAB meeting told me the Air Force did not want to meet "due to what happened at the meeting" and "they were going to have to punt."

After the meeting, I asked Hill why he seemed to avoid the WAND-TV cameras and why he helped apprehend Rokke. He did not answer. Carson told me Hill was ordered not to talk to me and that I can only ask Illinois EPA spokesman Andrew Mason or himself about Illinois EPA issues. I asked if it was common procedure or a special case, and Carson said, "You have to earn it, and, boy, did you earn it."

## The Fallout From the Meeting

Following the intense meeting on Nov. 21, 2013, Evans, my general manager, told me, "You were unprofessional" and "many in the community complain about your professionalism and how you act with others."

I asked Evans to give me examples numerous times, and he said, "It doesn't matter" each time. Hinton and Evans told me they were weary of quoting Doug Rokke and Linda K. May due to their concerns about the sources' credibility. Some local environmental activists like May have mistakenly cited Chanute as a Superfund

site, even though the Air Force prevented its final nomination to the National Priority List. Sometimes advocates offer opinions beyond their recognized expertise. Both Rokke and May were helpful to me by providing government documents and other facts, but my editors were right to question some of their assertions. I never received any complaints personally, by phone calls, texts, emails or letters about lacking professionalism. I reiterated that there were many sources who had opened up about extremely personal issues for comprehensive features.

Evans told me either to tender my resignation on Monday (Nov. 25, 2013), or there would be "other avenues" because "Dave and I won't stand for this anymore and will put an end to it."

On Nov. 25, I told Evans I refused to resign because I did not do anything wrong. The next day I scheduled a meeting for Dec. 3 with News-Gazette Inc. publisher John Foreman to talk about Rantoul's water issues.

Foreman's secretary cancelled the meeting on Dec. 2, a day before the scheduled meeting. I never had a chance to talk to Foreman.

On Dec. 3, Evans and Hinton met with me, and Evans said I was "no longer an employee of the News-Gazette family." I asked why and who made this decision. Evans would not say why I was fired, and that "it was a decision that Dave, I, and Mr. Foreman felt needed to be made."

The Rantoul Press finally published two stories about the Nov. 21 RAB meeting on Dec. 11, but those stories failed to mention the heated debate, the police presence or the WAND-TV coverage. The leads in both stories were the RAB to meet twice a year and RAB working with school children.

I filed a Freedom of Information Act on Nov. 13 to the Illinois EPA and followed up on Dec. 6 with Illinois EPA's Sharon Dawson about why the request had not been acknowledged.

Dawson replied by email on Dec. 10 stating, "We attempted to contact you via phone on 12/4 at the Rantoul Press. We were informed that you were no longer employed at the paper. Tim Evans told us that the newspaper was not interested in the information and that we could close out this FOIA request. Therefore, the Agency will not be sending a response and this request is considered to be closed."

Later that day I re-filed the request for DCBureau.org.



Tim Evans

On Dec. 10, I filed a FOIA with the Rantoul Police Department about who made the emergency call about Doug Rokke during the Nov. 21 RAB meeting at the Rantoul Business Center. The incident report, written by Sgt. Justin E. Bouse, revealed that Illinois EPA's Clarence Smith made the call on the police's administrative line. He said that the RAB meeting had a subject "becoming upset, left the meeting, went to his car, and retrieved a backpack." The subject then came back into the meeting with the backpack. Smith said the backpack appeared to contain something "heavy" and was concerned the backpack "may contain something dangerous."



Earlier in the meeting, RAB member Debra Rawlings read for several minutes from a prepared written statement attacking Rokke's credibility. Rokke did not appear upset while Rawlings continually raised her voice.

Bouse continued that he approached Rokke "when he reached into the backpack." Another male subject, Illinois EPA's Chris Hill, moved towards Rokke and "grabbed his left side." The meeting was called to a halt and evacuated for more than 10 minutes. The police questioned Rokke and found that his backpack "contained only papers and other documents."

The police then physically escorted Rokke from the building, not allowing him to return to the public meeting.

Joseph Trento of DCBureau.org and I called and emailed Mason, Smith and Hill for comment about the November meeting and why they called the police on Rokke. All three did not answer

their phones, and Mason twice emailed, "Illinois EPA has nothing to add."

Traci Nally, vice president of human resources and general counsel for The News-Gazette, Inc., emailed me on Dec. 16 saying, "It has been reported to me that you are still reporting on stories from Rantoul and in particular a story regarding environmental issues at the former Chanute Air Force Base." Nally continued by saying the email was a warning regarding my ongoing work, including that any information or photographs obtained while working for the Rantoul Press belonged to that organization. She continued, "You are instructed by this email to destroy that information whether it is now on any of your personal electronic devices (computers or cameras) or in handwritten notebooks."

I had not talked to anyone from The News-Gazette about my work.

When I asked Starr and Geissinger through email and phone calls about the November RAB meeting, both declined to comment. Geissinger referred comments to Starr since "you're no longer with the Rantoul Press."

On Dec. 17, the Rantoul Press **reported** that the economic conveyance agreement was signed by the Air Force and Rantoul so White Hall and the steam plant can both legally be transferred to the village and be demolished in late 2014 or early 2015. The steam plant will take \$5.3 million to demolished and remove materials safely, while White Hall will be in the neighborhood of \$12 million.

On Jan. 15, the Rantoul Press **published an article** that White Hall was the “third most haunted place in Illinois,” according to the Illinois Paranormal Society. Village inspector Dan Culkin said in the article that the Illinois Paranormal Society has “taken pictures inside.” Culkin did not say that anyone visiting White Hall needs to wear a respirator for safety.

Rantoul Mayor Chuck Smith fired village administrator Sandahl on Feb. 28 after five and a half years. Smith declined to give the Rantoul Press a reason for the termination, citing personnel regulations.

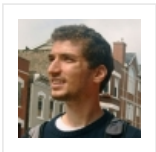
In a March 19 **column praising Sandahl**, Evans wrote, “I truly know of no other person who thought more of Rantoul’s potential than Sandahl. He had insight that others couldn’t see” and “if it wasn’t for Sandahl, we wouldn’t be talking about harvesting crops on former Air Force base property.”

Rantoul wants to use 40 acres on base property to grow food crops for private and commercial consumption starting April 1.



Steam Plant

*Editor's Note: Bob Bajek's boss, Rantoul Press General Manager Tim Evans, was responsible for Bajek's dismissal from the Rantoul Press on December 3, 2013. His version of events differs from the account that Bajek provided DCBureau.org. Evans told DCBureau.org he considered Bajek a “troublemaker.” When asked why he was dismissed, Evans said, “This is a personnel matter and none of your business.” When I pressed Evans on Bajek’s assertion that he had been fired because he was pushing for Chanute Air Force Base coverage, Evans said, “It wasn’t because of Chanute.” “All that kid did was cause trouble and stir up shit... He didn’t represent our publications very well,” Evans said. While Evans refused to say precisely why Bajek was fired, he said Bajek had been a solid reporter “up until he started covering subjects other than sports. He pissed off people in town because he liked to stir stuff. He began listening to people who like to stir stuff up.” When asked about his paper’s lack of in-depth coverage of the Chanute story, Evans said that the paper did not have the resources to investigate such a complicated story. “You have to trust your community leaders on this. Bajek was talking to troublemakers, and they got him stirred up and we know their history. We were not just going to go there. It took too long to investigate this stuff. He was fired because he upset every community leader in town. They personally told me they could not trust what he wrote.” When asked for names we could contact, Evans said that was none of our business. Bajek’s immediate editor, Dave Hinton, said that Bajek’s inability to get along with people in the way he represented the paper was at the heart of his “problems.” Hinton said he was not specifically fired over the Chanute story, but Hinton was unhappy with Bajek’s reliance on two local sources on the Chanute story. Hinton said that based on his experience, they were not trustworthy. Hinton said he repeatedly warned Bajek about the sources. When asked why Bajek’s story on Agent Orange was spiked, Hinton said it was because there “was no evidence that Agent Orange was ever at Chanute.” When asked if he thought the former airman quoted in Bajek’s story was lying, Hinton said his problem was with the other sources making the claim. Hinton volunteered that neither he nor the Rantoul Press “is in the pocket of the Air Force.”*



### **Bob Bajek**

Bob Bajek is a freelance reporter who has worked for various publications, including Patch.com, BleacherReport.com, Pro Football Weekly, Chicago Tribune, Rantoul Press and Black Sports the Magazine. He taught a summer high school journalism program from 2010-2012 at Midtown Center for Boys in Chicago. He has interviewed numerous NFL and NBA players, three congressmen, a retired admiral and a cardinal, and has explored varied topics from domestic violence, white supremacy, and veteran transitional housing. He graduated from College of DuPage (2008) and Eastern Illinois University (2010) with a bachelor in journalism.

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**sammanzhi** · a year ago

Abhorrent behavior from the local. Great article from Bajek. Where is the defense from the editors? Where is the backbone of the news media these days?

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**LandOfTheFreeHah** · a year ago

Great story, Bob Bajek. The lies from these criminals is tiresome. It's time for all of them - from small villages like Rantoul and all the way to DC - to be rounded up and dealt with. Shame on those in Rantoul and Champaign who are complicit in this cover-up. Wake up people. It's called genocide. THEY lie to you ALL the time.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share &gt;

**Dennis Mudloff** · a year ago

Many thanks to Bob Bajek for shining a light on this ever increasing and far too often hidden problem. Nearly 1 in 10 Americans live within 10 miles of a contaminated military site.

I salute you.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share &gt;

**tdjrr1999** · 10 months ago

I moved away from Rantoul 14 yrs. ago, because of the bs politics in that shithole off a town. YOU SUCK RANTOUL!

^ | v · Reply · Share &gt;

**Jason J. Hertenstein** · a year ago

By the way Chanute is definitely still a Superfund site...

<http://www.epa.gov/R5Super/npl...>

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**Guest** · a year ago

Can't decide the reporter in question is brilliant or a delusional self-promotor. Both seem plausible after reading this story.

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**Dennis Mudloff** → Guest · a year ago

When the type of things that Bob Bajek reports have been witnessed first hand the decision is not so tough.

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