

## **In Peru, a poisoned town, a driven man**

Highland Park crusader devoted to helping city polluted by U.S. plant

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By **CRAIG CHEATHAM** / Special Contributor to **The Dallas Morning News**

LA OROYA, Peru – In the chill of an Andean night, Hunter Farrell arrived at the bus station here, his tired eyes focusing on the stone mountains.

Smoke from the nearby Doe Run Co. smelter filled the valley. Mr. Farrell, a Presbyterian missionary from Highland Park, could hardly breathe, nearly choking on the gas and dust.

"You could taste the poison in the air," he said.

Four years later, in an interview at his home in Lima, the capital, he recalled seeing four families standing near him that night at the station. "All the kids were coughing," he said. "I remember thinking this must be the most polluted town in Peru."

Until then, he had heard very little about La Oroya, but it would soon become his obsession. Mr. Farrell, 47, has spent the last several years of his ministry working with families in this poverty-stricken city of 35,000 residents nestled deep in the central Andes.

The massive metallurgical complex owned by St. Louis-based Doe Run is the biggest employer and the biggest source of pollution in the community, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

A study conducted by Doe Run and the Ministry of Health a year ago showed that virtually all of the children tested in La Oroya had lead poisoning.

Two-year-old Angel Jesús, a small, wide-eyed boy in La Oroya, is hyperactive and irritable and cries a lot. Tests conducted on samples of his blood found that the boy has severe lead poisoning. – five times what is considered poisoning by the CDC. That much lead in a small child's blood can cause brain damage, hyperactivity, kidney problems, seizures, coma and severe pain, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Mr. Farrell's concern for the children of La Oroya has become the focus of his mission work.

"When I first started visiting La Oroya, it was like a switch flipped in me," he says. "I thought of my own children and what it must be like for the children here.

"It always comes back to the kids."

Friends say Mr. Farrell has always had a little fire in his belly. Reid Slaughter, one of Mr. Farrell's childhood buddies, remembers how, even as a 7-year old, Hunter would defend schoolmates against bullies. "He was always for the underdog," Mr. Slaughter said.

### *A missionary's roots*

Hunter Farrell was born and raised in Highland Park. His parents were the All-American couple at Southern Methodist University. Mr. Farrell's father, Bill, was a swimmer on SMU's first conference championship team and the student body president in 1952-53. His mother, Tyke McFarland, was the football homecoming queen in 1952, escorted by her future husband.

Hunter followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a star swimmer and class president at Highland Park High School. In 1976, after graduation, he spent the summer in Chile as an exchange student. He returned home and majored in Latin American studies at the University of Texas- Austin.

Mr. Farrell, who had worshipped with his parents at Highland Park Presbyterian Church as a boy, said he rediscovered his religious roots, and eventually his mission work and passion for knowledge took him around the world. He spent several years in Washington D.C., where he met his wife, Ruth, five years in the Congo and a year in Paris studying at the Sorbonne.

Hunter and Ruth Farrell adopted three children from three countries: Bill, 16, is from Peru; Ndaya, 16, was born in the Congo, and Andrew, 13, is a native Kentuckian. They arrived in Peru in January 1998, ready to embrace a new mission. Mr. Farrell was the director of a small group working with children in Lima and the central Andes.

In 2001, he helped form a network of organizations in Peru and Bolivia that focuses on issues relating to hunger. It was an extension of "Joining Hands Against Hunger," a U.S.-based mission sponsored by the Presbyterian Church, USA. Mr. Farrell was also involved in a study of the poorest communities in Peru. In September 2001, his research took him through La Oroya for the first time.

Within the next year, he invited activists from La Oroya to join the Hands against Hunger Network. Volunteers near St. Louis, involved in the effort to raise awareness about health problems near a Doe Run-owned and -operated smelter in the St. Louis area, connected with residents in La Oroya. The Peruvians visited St. Louis and began pushing for the first major independent study of health and the environment in La Oroya, the results of which will be released Tuesday. Mr. Farrell played a crucial role in bringing the two groups together.

### *A legacy of poison*

The smelter in La Oroya fired up its furnaces in 1922. The original owner, the Cerro de Pasco Corporation, was founded with millions of dollars in seed money from some of America's wealthiest industrialists, including J.P. Morgan and the Vanderbilts.

Pollution from the plant filled the valley with smoke, causing damage up to 50 kilometers – 31 miles – away, according to Josh DeWind, author of the book *Peasants Become Miners*. Sulfur dioxide emissions created an acid rain that burned virtually all the green off surrounding hills.

Farmers said the smoke killed thousands of animals and damaged more than a thousand square miles of property, said Mr. DeWind, who examined Cerro de Pasco documents during the early '70s when he conducted research for his book. Cerro de Pasco sold the smelter fifty years later to the Peruvian government. For the next 25 years, the government-owned corporation Centromin did little to reduce pollution. In 1997, with Peru selling its businesses to private industry, Doe Run purchased the smelter.

Doe Run Peru President Bruce Neil says the company has reduced air pollution by 25 percent and water pollution by 90 percent since the purchase. The reductions are required under an agreement with the Peruvian government, but the smelter still pumps out hundreds of tons of pollution every day, according to company records filed with the Security and Exchange Commission. Environmental inspection reports provided by Peru's Ministry of Energy and Mining have said that Doe Run has released excessive amounts of toxins in air and water pollution in recent years.

The most publicized health problem in La Oroya is the staggering rate of lead poisoning. Thousands of children identified with dangerous levels of lead in their blood are not getting any special medical treatment. However, under a 2003 agreement with the Peruvian government, Doe Run is paying for medical exams for the most severely poisoned children in La Oroya.

"Our priority is the health of the community and the children in the community," Bruce Neil, president of Doe Run Peru, said in February. "We have made improvements, and we intend to continue to make improvements."

### *The owner*

Ira Rennert, the New York billionaire who owns the Peruvian smelter, lives on 63 acres of pristine beachfront property in the Hamptons. Mr. Rennert's mansion, Fair Field, is a 100,000-square foot compound with 29 bedrooms and 39 bathrooms, according to blueprints and reports filed with the Southampton Assessor's office. In June, the assessor's office, relying on construction costs provided by Mr. Rennert's builder, appraised the home at \$185 million.

Mr. Rennert's critics say he got rich at the expense of families living near his factories and the people who invested in them. Mr. Rennert, who owns nearly 100 percent of a private corporation called the Renco Group, has built a portfolio of companies with annual revenues exceeding \$2 billion. Those businesses include the lead smelter near St. Louis, a magnesium plant in Utah and a steel mill in Ohio.

Mr. Rennert and his companies face dozens of lawsuits, and federal prosecutors are determined to "pierce the corporate veil" and make the 71-year-old industrialist personally pay fines for the way his companies conduct business. In Utah alone, the Department of Justice is seeking fines that could reach hundreds of millions of dollars for alleged illegal handling and dumping of hazardous waste. Company officials deny breaking the law and are fighting the case.

Mr. Rennert refused repeated attempts to respond directly for this story.

### *Tensions rising*

The situation in La Oroya is getting more intense, and Mr. Farrell feels the stress. He spends more time on the road away from his family and is becoming increasingly concerned about the safety of his friends living in La Oroya.

The stakes are also high for Doe Run. Peruvian officials say the company refuses to pay more than \$150 million in taxes, penalties and interest and millions more in worker profit sharing. In February, a judge ruled that Peru had failed to protect families in La Oroya from the harmful effects of toxic pollution. The government has appealed and a hearing is set for this month. If it loses, Peru may be forced to crack down on Doe Run.

Doe Run is supposed to complete by January 2007 all the pollution-related improvements that it agreed to when it bought the smelter. However, the company says it can't meet the deadline and insists it needs a four-year extension on its 10-year environmental agreement with Peru to finish the pollution reduction projects required by law. If it doesn't get the extension, Doe Run says, it will be forced to close the smelter, putting thousands of employees out of work.

Fear of a possible plant closure prompted hundreds of company supporters to riot last December, throwing rocks at police and destroying property. They also shut down the main highway through La Oroya for two days. In response, the Peruvian government issued a Supreme Decree allowing Doe Run to apply for an extension to its environmental agreement.

"When push came to shove, the government had to go with the superior force, which was the Doe Run company," Mr. Farrell said. "And that was deeply disappointing to us."

A final decision on the issue is expected within the next two months.

Last March, thousands of workers marched several miles carrying signs condemning the organizations pushing for a St. Louis University study of Oroya and burning a symbolic coffin that represented groups and individuals responsible for it.

Mr. Farrell's crusade has turned him into a target. Three years ago, a group of Presbyterian volunteers joined him for a tour of La Oroya, including a "live" interview on local television describing Doe Run's pollution record in Missouri. Seven minutes after it started, police walked on the set, turned off the cameras, took their passports and detained Mr. Farrell and the others. Doe Run denied any involvement in the incident.

"I get scared for him," said Tyke McFarland, Mr. Farrell's mother. However, she believes her son has found his calling. "We're all here for a reason and to serve and spread the idea of serving."

The missionary from Highland Park takes on many roles in Peru, often acting as a key contact for government officials and religious leaders, including Peru Archbishop Pedro Barreto. In August, at the archbishop's request, a team of 80 physicians, scientists and college students from St. Louis University and Peru visited La Oroya to take samples from residents and the environment.

The research was aimed at identifying the amount and location of potentially harmful substances, including lead, cadmium and arsenic, which experts believe are poisoning the community. The research team took blood and urine samples from more than 300 residents in La Oroya and the town of Concepcion. Archbishop Barreto hopes the release of the results on Tuesday will create support for a detailed public health plan for the entire region. .

The researchers had been warned that they could face hostile opposition, and despite police protection throughout the community, it didn't take demonstrators long to find them and pelt them with rocks and eggs.

Several protesters said the research team "invaded" their town with one goal in mind: to shut down the metal smelter.

"The company provides jobs," said one demonstrator. "The study won't give us work."

### ***Work gaining attention***

The mission work in this mountain town is getting worldwide attention, attracting money and expertise from international nongovernmental organizations.

Mr. Farrell said he and his friends are no longer just "the noisy cats on the fence" as some Doe Run employees used to call them.

The work is also inspiring those close to home.

In his office at Mercy Street, a Presbyterian mission in West Dallas, Mr. Farrell's father is selling what he believes is a critical investment in one of the most troubled areas in Dallas. Bill Farrell, inspired by his son, is now on the Mercy Street staff after years of volunteer work. "He's had an influence on me for sure," said Bill Farrell.

Like his eldest son, Bill Farrell seems to share the passion that consumes many missionaries. He talks proudly about Mercy Street's mentoring program involving hundreds of volunteers. "It's really exciting. We're building a church community," he said, adding that he believes the program can help disadvantaged families "transform the neighborhood."

Hunter Farrell's passion has also had a dramatic impact on his old friend Mr. Slaughter, now editor-in-chief of People Newspapers, a group of eight upscale weeklies published in the Dallas area.

The veteran journalist has made three mission trips to Cuba and was stunned by the faith of Christians there. He plans to return to Cuba soon on another mission. "It solidified my faith," he said. "My faith has gotten stronger. There's really nothing I fear."

Mr. Slaughter believes his friend's humility and willingness to sacrifice possessions will help set an important example for many of the local volunteers who are determined to help change lives in Dallas.

However, he says his childhood friend refuses to accept any of the credit. "Hunter tells me that he's just doing what he's supposed to be doing," he said.

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