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Buffalo News (New York)July 27, 2003 Sunday, FINAL EDITION
Correction Appended**SECTION:** NEWS, Pg.A1**LENGTH:** 2195 words**HEADLINE:** 25 YEARS LATER: LOVE CANAL AND HOW IT CHANGED THE WORLD**SERIES:** LOVE CANAL**BYLINE:** JERRY ZREMSKI and ANDREW Z. GALARNEAU; News Staff**BODY:**

First of two parts.

During the same hot summer when sickly-smelling muck seeping into their basements forced Love Canal residents from their homes, a truck rolled along the mountain highways of North Carolina, dropping poison on the red clay roadsides.

It all happened 25 years ago -- both the Aug. 2, 1978, presidential order evacuating part of a **toxic** neighborhood in Niagara Falls and the poisoning of part of North Carolina's countryside.

And ever since, the stories of Love Canal and Warren County, N.C., have been intertwined.

In the tiny string of trailers and one-story houses that make up Afton, N.C., and in other communities from coast to coast, citizen activists look at Love Canal as a guiding star: The place that taught them how to cope with the **toxics** beneath their feet.

"My sister lives in New York, and she knew all about Love Canal and told us about it," recalled Bettye Kearney, 66, who fought for the cleanup of the waste dump in Afton where those roadside PCBs were deposited. "That's how we knew this wasn't a good thing."

That's just one small sign of Love Canal's vast influence on the American landscape.

Love Canal spawned a grass-roots movement that gives Americans a voice in how their neighborhoods should be cleaned up.

It also led to the creation of Superfund, the federal government's huge hazardous-waste cleanup effort, which has weathered scandal and underfunding on the way to fixing hundreds of waste sites.

It sent public health experts on an unprecedented, but still inconclusive, attempt to gauge the health effects of **toxic** chemicals.

And perhaps most importantly, it convinced industry that it had better not be so careless as to bury poisons in drums that might rust, or toss them along the roadside like litter.

"Things are different now," said Kearney's husband, Massenburg Kearney, 74, who shuttled people to the many protests surrounding the Warren County PCB landfill. "They're different because no one wants to end up with another Love Canal."

Gibbs spurs action in Afton

Yet that's just what Warren County residents thought they ended up with, despite their best efforts to prevent it.

When the state tried to figure out where to put that PCB-laden dirt from the shoulders of the roads of 14 counties, it looked to Warren County, in a poor, rural and largely African-American part of the state.

Just as the federal government began its cleanup of Love Canal -- essentially by sealing all the wastes on site -- North Carolina decided to do the same on a hillside in Afton.

Residents, just like the residents of Love Canal in the late 1970s, were outraged. They called it environmental racism.

And they responded just like Lois Gibbs, the citizen activist who went door-to-door in Niagara Falls in the spring of 1978, carrying petitions aimed at closing a school because of the **toxic** threat.

In Afton, too, citizens took to the streets. And now they say such activism is one of Love Canal's greatest legacies.

"It's the biggest factor in how things have changed," said Dollie Burwell, who led Warren County's fight against the PCB dump site. "Lois Gibbs showed people how to organize."

Gibbs was a 27-year-old housewife when she started her campaign at Love Canal, but three years later, she moved to suburban Washington and formed a grass-roots group to help other **toxic**-laden communities.

"I came to think of Love Canal as a symbol of democracy at work, that a small community of working folks can get a Superfund bill," Gibbs said in a recent interview. "It shows how people can make a difference."

So when Burwell called her in 1982, Gibbs traveled to the red brick Coley Springs Baptist Church about a mile from the planned dump site and told hundreds of people to stand up to their government.

They did that by lying down on the hot asphalt of Limer Town Road, Burwell and more than 500 others, putting their bodies in the way of the trucks bringing in the PCBs.

Many got arrested, but they also won a concession from then-North Carolina Gov. Jim Hunt. As soon as the technology existed to get rid of the PCBs, the state would do just that.

Activists said similar scenarios have played themselves out all across America. Again and again, citizens banded together and won hard-fought, modest victories in the fight against **toxic** waste.

"Before Love Canal, everyone thought you could ignore these problems and they would go away," said Penny Newman, who led the fight at the Stringfellow Acid Pits, one of California's biggest waste sites. "Love Canal showed us that was wrong."

Mixed record for Superfund

It showed the federal government it was wrong, too, for not having a way to deal with the hundreds of waste sites that the public brought to the nation's attention in the wake of Love Canal.

Congress rushed to come up with a program, and by the end of 1980 it created Superfund, setting aside \$1.6 billion to begin cleaning up the nation's worst waste sites.

Love Canal became the first Superfund site, and those 14 North Carolina counties followed. Residents of Afton say their experience proves what a mixture of success and failure Superfund has been.

In the early 1980s, there was no quick or easy way to eliminate hazardous wastes. And so, from Niagara Falls to Afton and far beyond, workers sealed the hazardous wastes underground, as tightly as they could.

"It was all on-the-job training," said Robert H. Harris, who worked on the issue as a member of President Jimmy Carter's Council on Environmental Quality. "It was a federal priority that got out ahead of the science."

Overall, many hazardous-waste experts say Superfund has been successful. The Environmental Protection Agency said cleanups have been completed at 850 of the 1,499 most dangerous sites found to date, with work under way or planned at 630 others.

Yet the numbers disguise what has been a torturous effort.

Cleanups lagged through the 1980s. Environmentalists blamed the Reagan administration, whose first Superfund chief ended up in prison for lying to Congress. But Reagan blamed the law, saying it forced the government into long court battles to force polluters to pay for the cleanups.

The pace of cleanups improved under Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton, with the number of completed sites peaking at 88 in 1997. But that number fell into the 40s in each of the first two years of the George W. Bush administration.

"Bush zeroed the program out," said James Florio, the former New Jersey governor who authored the Superfund law as a member of the House. "It's living on borrowed time."

Superfund's latest struggles come just as technology has made cleanups easier and cheaper.

In Afton, for example, the state kept Hunt's promise. A giant incinerator now bakes the contaminated dirt to more than 800 degrees, hot enough to make the PCBs break down without any dangerous gases escaping. By this December, the landfill that Superfund created will be gone.

Nothing could make Massenburg Kearney happier.

Health effects hard to link

For 20 years, Kearney and his neighbors worried about the dead-animal smell that spread over their farmlands at dawn. They worried about the people who lived nearby who got cancer in their 50s and 60s.

And they were mystified that the state said there could be no health effect from the landfill.

The mystery by no means ends there. It's common at many waste sites, as scientists struggle to learn if **toxics** are hurting nearby residents.

Sure, you can show that a **toxic** such as dioxin is likely to cause cancer in lab animals, and a post-Love Canal research boom has made it much easier to test for chemical exposure.

But scientists say it remains difficult to prove that chemicals caused cancer in any one person.

The way people live -- what they eat, whether they smoke and how much stress they face -- can influence their health, too. And things get even more complicated when people are exposed to a **toxic** stew of chemicals, such as the one that seeped into the lawns of Love Canal.

"I can tell you how much PCBs are on that spot," said Joseph Gardella, a **toxics** expert at the University at Buffalo. "How much will your kids be exposed to? I can make an estimate. What's the chance my kid will get cancer from it? I don't know. That's the only honest answer: I don't know."

That answer doesn't go over big in places like Love Canal or Afton.

"It's gut-wrenching to listen to a resident get up and say, 'I did a study on my street and this is what I found. You don't have to test, I already have the answers,' " said Michael Basile, the EPA's spokesman in Niagara Falls.

At Love Canal, scientists still don't have the answers. Early research showed chromosome damage in residents, but no study has proved that cancer resulted from the **toxics** there. The results of the state's long-term health study won't be completed for a few more months.

And in Warren County, the state says it has the answers, but the residents disagree with them.

Although the landfill leaked slightly, state officials say PCBs never reached the wells of any nearby resident, meaning no health monitoring was necessary.

But Kearney wasn't going to take any chances.

He installed a \$5,000 water filtration system that he thinks saved his life.

Cleanup businesses flourish

That's just spare change in the post-Love Canal industrial environment.

Superfund spawned a booming environmental industry and forced companies to spend billions not just to clean up waste sites, but to make sure that new ones won't be created.

To measure how much has changed, look back to the 1970s.

"Back then, you could not find hazardous-materials response teams in the United States," said Curtis A. Moore, a former Senate aide who helped draw up Superfund. "They didn't exist."

Now even the Town of Wheatfield has one.

Meanwhile, countless companies formed to help government cope not only with Superfund sites, but also the less onerous dumps that states wanted to clean up and a huge list of government properties tainted by nuclear or chemical waste.

The result: a new industry that did \$6.3 billion in sales by 2001, according to Environmental Business International.

"It's enormous," said Gary Duke, program manager for Shaw Environmental, which is cleaning up the Warren County landfill. "Out of Love Canal, a lot of small companies sprang up out of nowhere."

While some companies have died in recent years, some grew into major employers. Ecology & Environment of Lancaster now employs 1,000 people worldwide and does work that goes far beyond waste cleanups.

"We're able to work on weapons of mass destruction issues now because of our background on emergency response," said Gerhard J. Neumaier, president and chairman of Ecology & Environment, which sent a team of specialists to Washington to work on the 2001 anthrax attacks.

Chemical companies change

While firms such as Ecology & Environment grew on the back of Superfund, countless others paid dearly because of its polluter-pays provision.

Occidental Chemical Corp., the successor to the company that buried most of the waste at Love Canal, paid the state \$98 million and the federal government \$129 million for cleanup costs.

In North Carolina, Robert "Buck" Ward, president of Ward Transformer Co., spent nine months in federal prison for illegally dumping that waste along the roadsides. His estate paid \$3.5 million for the cleanup.

All told, such polluters have paid \$20.6 billion to make waste sites safe again, the EPA said.

That experience also led to big changes in the way chemical companies behave.

"We needed to, on our own, improve our performance," said Dell Perelman, a spokesman for the American Chemistry Council.

To do that, the chemical industry invested about \$40 billion in recent years to reduce its **toxic** output. And it has done just that: As measured by the EPA's **Toxic** Release Inventory, the industry's total amount of **toxic** releases to air, land and water fell 67 percent between 1988 and 2000.

Chemical companies reduced their **toxic** discharges for a simple reason. Love Canal "put corporations on notice that this whole problem was not going to go away, and in fact might come back to bite them really hard in the ankle," said Richard Clapp, professor of environmental health at Boston University.

Despite all the progress, residents of once-tainted neighborhoods worry the poisons might come back to bite them, too.

The Kearneys and their neighbors got a scare this spring, when contractors found PCBs in the dirt cap to the landfill. That prolonged the cleanup and set everybody off worrying again.

Meanwhile, in Niagara Falls, much of the waste that Hooker buried at Love Canal remains sealed beneath a 40-acre cap. The EPA renovated the nearby houses that could be saved and started selling them in 1990.

They call the area Black Creek Village now. But to Lois Gibbs, it's still Love Canal.

Someday, she fears, it will leak again.

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CORRECTION:

In a story about Love Canal on July 27, the PCBs disposal method was incorrectly described. At a **toxic** waste disposal site in North Carolina, a thermal desorber bakes the contaminated dirt to more than 800 degrees, hot enough to separate PCBs from the soil by evaporation. The separated PCBs are then collected and will be disposed of using an EPA permitted disposal facility.

GRAPHIC: Buffalo News file photo Revelations about the **toxic** waste buried in a Niagara Falls neighborhood caused a media sensation, and made resident Lois Gibbs an icon of citizen activism. As president of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, she announced a federal relocation program in 1980. RONALD J. COLLERAN/Buffalo News President Jimmy Carter with Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs in 1980. Carter established the Superfund in response to the environmental crisis. SHARON CANTILLON/Buffalo News Some residents refused relocation, including the occupants of this house on 102nd Street. Photos by DENNIS C. ENSER/Buffalo News A young protester greets President Carter in 1978. The contaminated Niagara Falls Neighborhood became a worldwide symbol of environmental disaster. Graphic- Love Canal's legacy Lois Gibbs One legacy of the 1978 disaster is a reinvigorated sense of citizen-activism - a quality that links Niagara Falls and Warren County, N.C., in spirit. "Things are different now," says Massenburg Kearney, 74, who shuttled people to protests against PCB landfill near Afton, N.C. "They're different because no wants to end up with another Love Canal." Map Grahic- Love Canal: a timeline

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