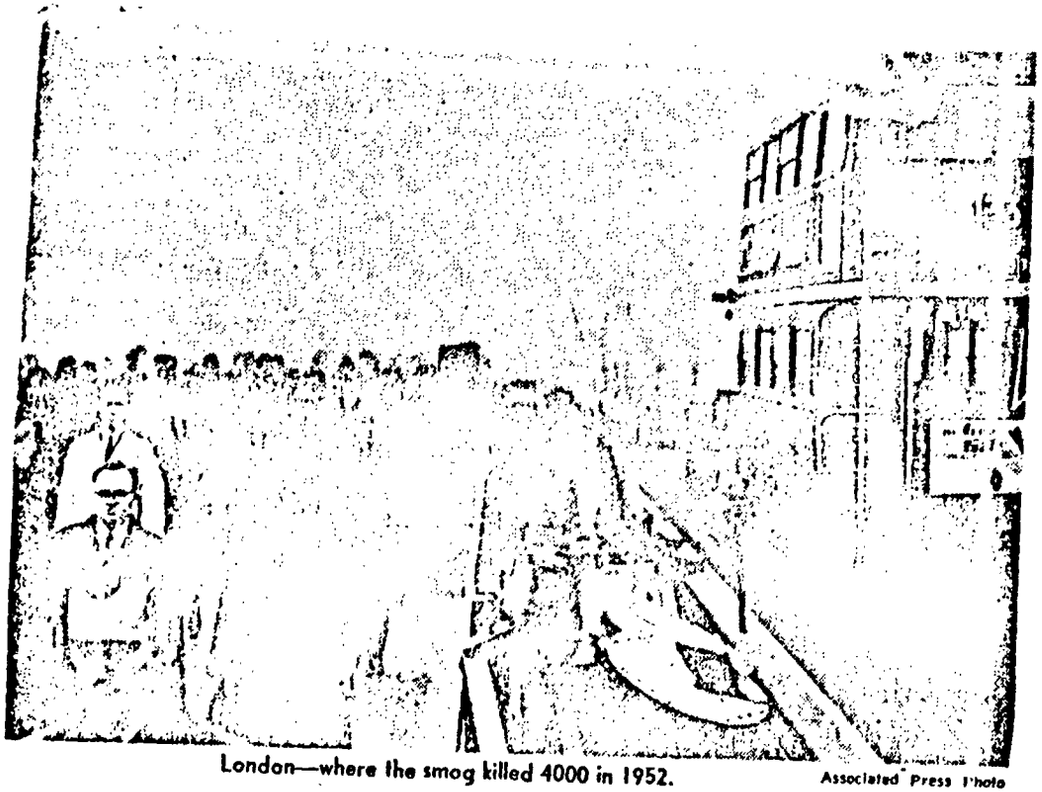

London—where the smog killed 4000 in 1952. Associated Press Photo

Our Polluted Air

ARTICLE IV: Waking Up.

By HOPE MacLEOD

EXPERTS TALK of the possibility of an air-pollution disaster killing as many as 10,000 or even 100,000 people. Vulnerable cities they say, include London, Hamburg, Santiago, Los Angeles . . . and New York.

New York City's Environmental Control Administrator Merril Eisenbud says he believes it could no longer happen here. To which skeptical Eldon Clingan, one City Council member who on Jan. 1 will retire as executive director of Citizens for Clean Air, retorts: "I only hope to God it's true."

Last spring, the New York Scientists' Committee for Public Information told a state Joint Legislative Committee on Transportation: "The air over New York has become a soup of toxic gases so vile that people are dying during severe air-pollution episodes for lack of clean air."

The industrial revolution accelerated it, but air pollution is *nothing* new.

Four hundred years before Christ the Greek physician Hippocrates already had associated the city with air pollution and advised that "when one comes to a city to which he is a stranger, he ought to consider its situation, how it lies as to the winds and the rising of the sun . . ."

Vitruvius, a Roman architect in the reign of Augustus, designed buildings for proper ventilation and recommended tree-lined streets to keep the city's air fresh.

The first smoke-abatement law, in 1273 during the reign of Edward I, forbade the use of soft coal in London as detrimental to health. In 1309 an Englishman who broke the law was hanged.

Shakespeare may have described contemporary conditions in the words of Hamlet: "The most excellent canopy, the air—why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."

Studies of air pollution started in England, France and Germany in the 19th Century.

In this country the city of Brooklyn was among the first to enact legislation against air-pollution with an 1895 ordinance which provided in part: "No factory, engine room or electric station shall use what is known as soft coal for fuel . . . within the radius of four miles of the City Hall," under penalty of a fine of up to $100.

It was not until 1930, however, that any urban programs for smoke control were set up. That was the year of the first documented air-pollution "episode" of modern times in the industrial Meuse Valley of Belgium. An inversion, in which foul air is trapped for days under another air mass above, took 60 lives.

The tragedy stirred awareness throughout the world of the dangers that might befall any industrial area. The first New York City program made smoke control a responsibility of the Health Dept. and consisted of 11 sanitary inspectors to investigate complaints. The special unit, which Mayor Jimmy Walker brought into being with much flourish, was abolished in 1934 for economy reasons, and smoke control became simply one of the regular functions of the Health Dept. engineers.

It was an air-pollution "incident" at Donora, Pa., in 1948, when an inversion killed 20 of the town's 14,000 residents and made half of them ill, that finally scared this country's public-health agencies into action. Since then, programs have been started by the federal government, most states, and many municipal agencies.

Four years after Donora a "killer smog" in London lasted five days and took 4000 lives.

Dr. Leonard Greenburg, New York City's first Air Pollution Control Commissioner and now professor of preventive medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, made studies of local air-pollution incidents. He has calculated that there were approximately 220 excess deaths here from air pollution in 1953, 300-350 in 1963, 186 in 1966.

New York has fairly brisk winds that produce what Manhattan College biologist Dr. Tom Stonier refers to as "scouring action," saving us from incidents we might otherwise have.

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JM 83

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