



## History

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# The Love Canal Tragedy

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by Eckardt C. Beck

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Quite simply, Love Canal is one of the most appalling environmental tragedies in American history.

But that's not the most disturbing fact.

What is worse is that it cannot be regarded as an isolated event. It could happen again--anywhere in this country--unless we move expeditiously to prevent it.

It is a cruel irony that Love Canal was originally meant to be a dream community. That vision belonged to the man for whom the three-block tract of land on the eastern edge of Niagara Falls, New York, was named--William T. Love.

Love felt that by digging a short canal between the upper and lower Niagara Rivers, power could be generated cheaply to fuel the industry and homes of his would-be model city.

But despite considerable backing, Love's project was unable to endure the one-two punch of fluctuations in the economy and Nikola Tesla's discovery of how to economically transmit electricity over great distances by means of an alternating current.

By 1910, the dream was shattered. All that was left to commemorate Love's hope was a partial ditch where construction of the canal had begun.

In the 1920s the seeds of a genuine nightmare were planted. The canal was turned into a municipal and industrial chemical dumpsite.

Landfills can of course be an environmentally acceptable method of hazardous waste disposal, assuming they are properly sited, managed, and regulated. Love Canal will always remain a perfect historical example of how not to run such an operation.

In 1953, the Hooker Chemical Company, then the owners and operators of the property, covered the canal with earth and sold it to the city for one dollar.

It was a bad buy.

In the late '50s, about 100 homes and a school were built at the site. Perhaps it wasn't William T. Love's model city, but it was a solid, working-class community. For a while.

**If you get there before I do  
Tell 'em I'm a comin' too  
To see the things so wondrous true  
At Love's new Model City**

(From a turn-of-the-century advertising jingle promoting the development of Love Canal)

**Give me Liberty. I've Already Got Death.**

(From a sign displayed by a Love Canal resident, 1978)

On the first day of August, 1978, the lead paragraph of a front-page story in the New York Times read:

In an article prepared for the February, 1978 *EPA Journal*, I wrote, regarding chemical dumpsites in general, that "even though some of these landfills have been closed down, they may stand like ticking time bombs." Just months later, Love Canal exploded.

The explosion was triggered by a record amount of rainfall. Shortly thereafter, the leaching began.

I visited the canal area at that time. Corroding waste-disposal drums could be seen breaking up through the grounds of backyards. Trees and gardens were turning black and dying. One entire swimming pool had been had been popped up from its foundation, afloat now on a small sea of chemicals. Puddles of noxious substances were pointed out to me by the residents. Some of these puddles were in their yards, some were in their basements, others yet were on the school grounds. Everywhere the air had a faint, choking smell. Children returned from play with burns on their hands and faces.

And then there were the birth defects. The New York State Health Department is continuing an investigation into a disturbingly high rate of miscarriages, along with five birth-defect cases detected thus far in the area.

I recall talking with the father of one the children with birth defects. "I heard someone from the press saying that there were *only* five cases of birth defects here," he told me. "When you go back to your people at EPA, please don't use the phrase '*only* five cases.' People must realize that this is a tiny community. Five birth defect cases here is terrifying."

A large percentage of people in Love Canal are also being closely observed because of detected high white-blood-cell counts, a possible precursor of leukemia.

When the citizens of Love Canal were finally evacuated from their homes and their neighborhood, pregnant women and infants were deliberately among the first to be taken out.

"We knew they put chemicals into the canal and filled it over," said one woman, a long-time resident of the Canal area., "but we had no idea the chemicals would invade our homes. We're worried sick about the grandchildren and their children."

Two of this woman's four grandchildren have birth defects. The children were born and raised in the Love Canal community. A granddaughter was born deaf with a cleft palate, an extra row of teeth, and slight retardation. A grandson was born with an eye defect.

Of the chemicals which comprise the brew seeping through the ground and into homes at Love Canal, one of the most prevalent is benzene -- a known human carcinogen, and one detected in high concentrations. But the residents characterize things more simply.

***NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.--Twenty five years after the Hooker Chemical Company stopped using the Love Canal here as an industrial dump, 82 different compounds, 11 of them suspected carcinogens, have been percolating upward through the soil, their drum containers rotting and leaching their contents into the backyards and basements of 100 homes and a public school built on the banks of the canal.***

"I've got this slop everywhere," said another man who lives at Love Canal. His daughter also suffers from a congenital defect.

On August 7, New York Governor Hugh Carey announced to the residents of the Canal that the State Government would purchase the homes affected by chemicals.

On that same day, President Carter approved emergency financial aid for the Love Canal area (the first emergency funds ever to be approved for something other than a "natural" disaster), and the U.S. Senate approved a "sense of Congress" amendment saying that Federal aid should be forthcoming to relieve the serious environmental disaster which had occurred.

By the month's end, 98 families had already been evacuated. Another 46 had found temporary housing. Soon after, all families would be gone from the most contaminated areas -- a total of 221 families have moved or agreed to be moved.

State figures show more than 200 purchase offers for homes have been made, totaling nearly \$7 million.

A plan is being set in motion now to implement technical procedures designed to meet the seemingly impossible job of detoxifying the Canal area. The plan calls for a trench system to drain chemicals from the Canal. It is a difficult procedure, and we are keeping our fingers crossed that it will yield some degree of success.

I have been very pleased with the high degree of cooperation in this case among local, State, and Federal governments, and with the swiftness by which the Congress and the President have acted to make funds available.

But this is not really where the story ends.

Quite the contrary.

We suspect that there are hundreds of such chemical dumpsites across this Nation.

Unlike Love Canal, few are situated so close to human settlements. But without a doubt, many of these old dumpsites are time bombs with burning fuses -- their contents slowly leaching out. And the next victim could be a water supply, or a sensitive wetland.

The presence of various types of toxic substances in our environment has become increasingly widespread -- a fact that President Carter has called "one of the grimmest discoveries of the modern era."

Chemical sales in the United States now exceed a mind-boggling \$112 billion per year, with as many as 70,000 chemical substances in commerce.

Love Canal can now be added to a growing list of environmental disasters involving toxics, ranging from industrial workers stricken by nervous disorders and cancers to the discovery of toxic materials in the milk of nursing mothers.

Through the national environmental program it administers, the Environmental Protection Agency is attempting to draw a chain of Congressional acts around the toxics problem.

The Clean Air and Water Acts, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Pesticide Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act -- each is an essential link.

<http://www.epa.gov/history/topics/lovecanal/01.htm>  
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Under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, EPA is making grants available to States to help them establish programs to assure the safe handling and disposal of hazardous wastes. As guidance for such programs, we are working to make sure that State inventories of industrial waste disposal sites include full assessments of any potential dangers created by these sites.

Also, EPA recently proposed a system to ensure that the more than 35 million tons of hazardous wastes produced in the U.S. each year, including most chemical wastes, are disposed of safely. Hazardous wastes will be controlled from point of generation to their ultimate disposal, and dangerous practices now resulting in serious threats to health and environment will not be allowed.

Although we are taking these aggressive strides to make sure that hazardous waste is safely managed, there remains the question of liability regarding accidents occurring from wastes disposed of previously. This is a missing link. But no doubt this question will be addressed effectively in the future.

Regarding the missing link of liability, if health-related dangers are detected, what are we as people willing to spend to correct the situation? How much risk are we willing to accept? Who's going to pick up the tab?

One of the chief problems we are up against is that ownership of these sites frequently shifts over the years, making liability difficult to determine in cases of an accident. And no secure mechanisms are in effect for determining such liability.

It is within our power to exercise intelligent and effective controls designed to significantly cut such environmental risks. A tragedy, unfortunately, has now called upon us to decide on the overall level of commitment we desire for defusing future Love Canals. And it is not forgotten that no one has paid more dearly already than the residents of Love Canal.

Beck was Administrator of EPA Region 2, 1977-1979.