

Sierra club book is riddled with errors, omissions

The Sierra Club will soon publish Carol Van Strum's anti-pesticide masterpiece, *A Bitter Fog*. Van Strum and husband Paul Merrell — a well-known Agent Orange activist — live in rural western Oregon, working closely with Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP). A leak in the Sierra Club's publicity system gave me a set of page proofs, so here's a preview of the latest version of *Silent Spring*.

Sensitive and highly readable, *A Bitter Fog* chronicles a stream of health horror stories attributed to herbicide 2,4,5-T and its trace contaminant, the dioxin known as 2,3,7,8-TCDD. A 30-page bibliography of news stories, scientific studies and EPA memoranda obtained using the Freedom of Information Act adds credibility to the text, which weaves technical detail into its emotional crusade against pesticides.

Van Strum's book gains impact by focusing on the small Oregon area where she lives. She writes glowing prose of the forest's beauty, and perceptive personality sketches that intimately bond the reader to her subjects. She uses cunningly the technique of the storyteller to dash the lives of her "just folks" activists with grisly accounts of illness and death among friends, and of deformity among wildlife and domestic animals, all attributed to use of 2,4,5-T in nearby forests for brush control.

We even have Issaquah-based scientist Ruth Shearer, a paid anti-pesticide advocate, holding a friend's tiny baby while telling the parents about alleged diseases from herbicides, cancer, hemorrhages, fetal deaths. The innocent child coos at Dr.

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Shearer. After a dozen of these transparent setups, even the most gullible will resent this subtle-as-a-sledge-hammer sympathy grabbing.

The heart of Van Strum's opus is the tale of Bonnie Hill, Alsea, Ore., schoolteacher who led the crusade that forced EPA to ban 2,4,5-T by gaining national attention for an "epidemic" of miscarriages in Alsea. Van Strum tells how Hill and seven other women wrote a letter to EPA in 1978, charting the coincidence over several years between miscarriages and forestry 2,4,5-T spraying. EPA sent a team of scientists to Alsea, took soil samples and administered an exhaustive health questionnaire to the women, seeking routes of exposure to 2,4,5-T and other potential causes of their miscarriages.

Van Strum omits what happened next, but I tracked it down in 1980 through a maze of Carter-EPA stonewalling. The original Alsea scientific findings were sent to 10 highly qualified university epidemiologists. They all said, "No miscarriage

epidemic, and no causal connection between 2,4,5-T and the Alsea miscarriages." Why they said so was never revealed, but EPA released their conclusions and closed the case.

Instantly, NCAP and Friends of the Earth raised hell with political pressure, claiming "whitewash," and forced EPA to reopen the case. EPA's "Alsea II" study did not seek physical evidence or examine parents or fetuses. It only sought a "statistical correlation" between spray times and miscarriages, and claimed to find one, in a single month of a single year out of six years under study. EPA then used this flimsy evidence to ban a herbicide that had given farmers huge benefits and had an excellent 30-year safety record. More than 20 scientific institutions denounced EPA's "Alsea II" as flatly erroneous and politically motivated.

But why had the original scientists said 2,4,5-T was innocent? The Carter-EPA refused to say. But when Dow Chemical took EPA to court to clear its product's good name, the truth came out. No soil sample showed 2,4,5-T or dioxin. More than a dozen other probable causes of the Alsea's women's miscarriages were found, which does not belittle their loss — my wife suffered a miscarriage and I sympathize with anyone who does. But seeking a culprit for personal tragedy should not outweigh the truth in making public policy.

Here are the facts: All the Alsea women got their drinking water from surface streams or wells easily contaminated by bacteria. Many drank raw unpasteurized milk from local cows, raising the specter of brucellosis. The 10 doctors suspected the presence of tularemia, listeriosis, toxoplasmosis and other

rural diseases. Among other factors were: Cigarette smoking during pregnancy, use of various contraceptives, use of household pesticides, heavy drinking in one case, chronic kidney disease and a fall prior to miscarriage in another. Many other potential causes of the Alsea miscarriages were revealed during the EPA trial by respected epidemiologist Steven Lamm.

But the most glaring error in *A Bitter Fog* is the cover up by Van Strum and the Carter-EPA of this admission in the Alsea women's health questionnaires: Some smoked marijuana. Scientists have confirmed that THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana, has miscarriage-causing powers like dioxin.

And the marijuana connection has other implications: Anti-pesticide leader Paula Downing was arrested near Grants Pass, Oregon, in 1978 for transporting 77 marijuana transplants to a forest site according to Josephine County Sheriff's Office. Many feel a significant part of anti-pesticide activism is to protect marijuana crops from herbicide kill.

A Bitter Fog never mentions the lifesaving side of pesticides, their power to kill disease-bearing pests and to increase food and fiber supplies. It is riddled with many such omissions and errors of fact, but the timing of its publication is most interesting: EPA will soon decide if 2,4,5-T should return to the market, since the trial failed to connect it to health problems. Is *A Bitter Fog* the script for a new media circus to warp public opinion? Perhaps the Sierra Club should be more honest and retitling it *A Bitter Smokescreen*.