**The Love Canal Tragedy**

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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 *(acting or done with speed)* 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.

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.

1. How is Love Canal an example of irresponsible dumping of hazardous waste?

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 (*process by which inorganic or organic contaminants are released from the solid phase into the water phase)* began.

I visited the canal area at that time. Corroding *(eat or wear away as if by gnawing)* 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 (*harmful, poisonous or very unpleasant)* 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.

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.

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.

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 cold 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.

1. Why do you think the Love Canal case caused such an uproar in the community?

Love Canal Video Notes:

1. What were some of the health effects of living near love canal?
2. Why do you think the government evacuated some community members but not others?

3) What was the purpose of Superfund legislation?

Challenge Question:

4) How do you think superfund sites relate to the tragedy of the commons?