
A Study of the 1890s' William T. Love's Canal in Niagara Fall

In the 1890s, William T. Love began digging a canal near Niagara Falls, New York. The canal was never finished, leaving a seemingly useless hole in the ground. But when industries starting flocking to the area in later years, this trench, Love Canal, was bound to find a use.

In the 1930s, various companies began dumping chemical waste into the canal. Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation purchased the land in 1942, and through 1953, they disposed an enormous amount of hazardous wastes into the canal. Instead of finding a proper place for the wastes, the company merely covered the canal over.

The Niagara Falls Board of Education acquired the land and constructed a playground and elementary school there, selling the rest of the land to real estate developers. Through the next two decades, chemicals that had been dumped in Love Canal began to leach through the soil and leak into peoples' basements, contaminate underground pipes and pollute the air. It was not until the 1970s, however, that the damaging capabilities of the chemical waste recognized.

The first tests on the area were undertaken by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation in 1976. In 1977, results were disclosed; according to NYDEC, groundwater was contaminated, as was air and soil. Local citizens pointed out these results to their U.S. Representatives, who called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA).

In March 1978, New York's Health Commissioner saw the USEPA report, and he decided human testing would be necessary. Blood samples were drawn from Love Canal residents. A panel of physicians was assembled to evaluate the results of the tests, and they recommended drastic measures. As a result, the governor of New York declared a state health emergency. The elementary school on the Love Canal site was immediately closed and some families were relocated.

The main ethical issue running through this event is the willingness of the government to allow companies dispose of such chemicals into the ground. They should have researched the area and done tests before allowing people to occupy the area. Many government officials should have been aware of the disposal, and made the information aware to the public.

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