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# Articles probe messy legacy of production

By Scott Leffler  
Lockport Journal

SDUHP

The abandoned Simonds Saw and Steel Co. plant in Lockport is the focus of the first in a three-day series of USA Today articles on nuclear contamination nationwide.

The Lockport articles, appearing in Wednesday's edition of USA Today, carried the headline, "Toxic exposure kept secret." On Thursday, the series featured a Cleveland site. Friday's installment features Canonsburg, Pa., and Joliet, Ill., and there will be mention of contaminated sites in Tonawanda.

From 1948 to 1956, Simonds, under contract with the federal government, manufactured billets for nuclear reactor fuel rods. Workers say that they were never told directly that the material was radioactive but that they surmised as much because the company periodically required medical testing of the workers.

The fact that the plant site, abandoned decades ago, contains radioactive waste has been common knowledge for at least the past 20 years.

The USA Today series began with the Lockport stories because "Lockport was the most compelling (story)," the writer, Peter Eisler, said in a phone interview Thursday.

The entire series, called "Poisoned Workers and Poisoned Places," details dozens of communities nationwide that had contamination from nuclear projects the U.S. government commissioned.

Eisler said the cities he looked at had either people who were sick and possibly dying because of the nuclear work, or they had environmental concerns because the site wasn't cleaned up.

He said, "Simonds had both."

Eisler continued, "What happened at Simonds exemplified a lot of the problems that we found at a lot of these sites."

Eisler spent 10 months on the project, examined more than 100,000 pages of documents, visited sites in New York and nine other states and filed six federal Freedom of Information Act requests for documents.

He and other reporters interviewed "dozens of people who had worked at such plants or are relatives of such workers," according to USA Today.

Eisler created what he called "the most comprehensive database that we know of to date" of former or present nuclear contaminated sites in the United States.

USA Today commissioned the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research to create a report based on documents from Simonds, Electro-Metallurgical Co., of Tonawanda and the Harsco Chemical Co., of Cleveland.

Eisler said that although his story is meant to bring to light some facts people don't know or talk about, it isn't designed to strike fear into the hearts of Lockport residents or residents in other cities cited in the series.

He said, "There is no way to know and we will probably never know how many of

these guys are sick from the work they did at Simonds."

But the Simonds story compelled him to feature Lockport first.

Eisler said, "I knew it was going to be one of the sites that I was going to feature, but I didn't decide (to lead with Lockport) until I sat down and began writing the stories."