

LOOW silo demolition revives fear

Residents gave up fighting radiation

By LISA AUG
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LEWISTON — In front of Betsy Oliphant's modern ranch house, a meter inside a silver metal box silently ticks off invisible particles of radiation.

From her front door, Mrs. Oliphant can look beyond the box to the concrete silo a quarter of a mile away, its plain gray mass offering no hint of the radioactive uranium it held for 40 years.

Now the uranium-embedded walls of the tower are falling, and Mrs. Oliphant watches the silo, and the box, with apprehension.

"It gives me an uneasy feeling," she says. "I wonder how much (radiation) is escaping."

Not enough to endanger the health of people living nearby, officials of the U.S. Department of Energy say. That assurance dates back to 1949, when the government admitted the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works was a dumping ground for radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project that created the atomic bomb.

But residents of the Lewiston and Porter farmland surrounding the site are not reassured when they look to their neighbors and themselves and see cancer.

"There is a lot of sickness, young people with leukemia," says Mary June Lavender, a Porter-Center Road resident.

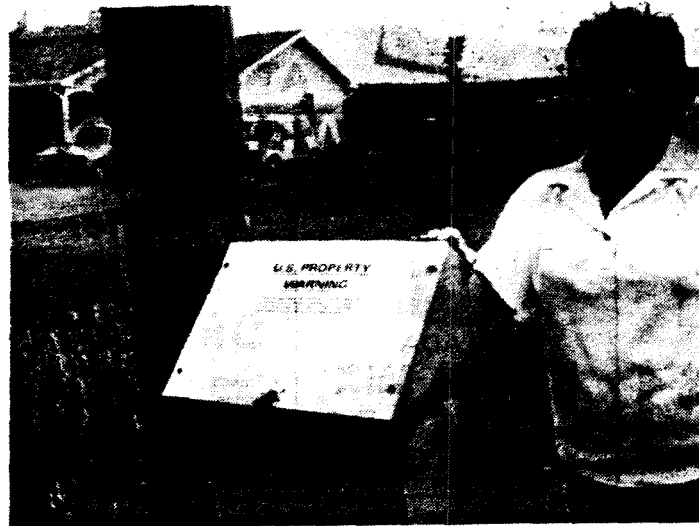
"It seems in every other house there are people with cancer."

A 1982 study by a State University of Buffalo researcher found cancer levels in the Lewiston-Porter area no higher than county, state or national norms. It did not make the two cancer operations and chemotherapy any easier for Mrs. Lavender to endure.

Lewiston Supervisor James J. Lombardi believes the site will be less dangerous once the tower and its contents are buried, but worries about an east wind last week that was blowing dust from the silo toward Lewiston.

Councilwoman Joan Gipp angrily denounces the tower demolition as endangering the community and advises town residents. "Don't breathe for two months."

Most of the few dozen families within a mile of the silo have lived there for many years. They moved in long before the silo's radioactive contents became common knowledge, long before Lewiston officials began



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Betsy Oliphant stands by the radiation monitor placed on her Swann Road property by the government. The neighbors have watched the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works silo fall to destruction in a dismantling project. The LOOW was the dumping ground for radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project.

complaining about the site in the mid-1970s.

Sam Jowdy lived on the LOOW property before the U.S. Army dialoged 150 families in 1942 to build a TNT plant on land covered with orchards.

After the war, the Army sold off most of the 7,500 acres it had acquired, and Sam Jowdy returned.

"Nobody at that time really knew what was over there," he says.

Later they found out the silo was just the most visible symbol of widespread radioactive contamination.

Radioactive liquid had been poured on the ground and waste buried over more than 1,100 acres. Contaminated soil had to be removed from SCA Chemical Services on Balmer Road, Modern Landfill on Pletcher Road, and the Town of Lewiston highway garage on Harold Road.

Almost all the LOOW site's radioactive material now lies in concrete foundations, covered by clay.

"It was supposed to be temporary stor-

age," Jowdy says. "They said they were going to remove it, and they didn't do it. What more can you say?"

His neighbors agree. They don't have much anger left, after fighting fruitlessly for nearly a decade.

"We tried for a while to get it out of there, but everybody gave up because there seemed to be nothing we could do," Jill Rose, who lives on Porter-Center Road, says. "Even though it bothers us and we're afraid of it."

Residents believe they've been double-whammied: north of the LOOW site lie the hazardous waste landfills of SCA, their toxic chemical contents causing as much concern as the energy department's waste.

"I don't think anybody likes having that stuff — any of this stuff — in our back yard," Mrs. Oliphant says. "I used to get pretty riled up about it, but after a while you kind of accept it."

"I'd like to see it all out," Jowdy says bitterly. "This was farm country, good food country at one time, and they ruined it."

LOOW history began with rush into WWII

EDITOR'S NOTE: These are some highlights from the 43-year history of the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works.

- Jan. 5, 1942: The U.S. government announces it will construct the \$32 million ordnance works for the production of TNT. Because of the nation's sudden entrance into World War II, 150 families in Lewiston and Porter are given three days to leave their homes on property to be purchased for the plant.

- Sept. 28, 1942: TNT production begins, only to end nine months later with the government's secret commitment to developing an atomic bomb in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

- 1944: The U.S. Army announces it will use the LOOW site, now covering 7,500 acres, to store munitions and chemicals.

- 1948: The Army transfers 1,511 acres to the Atomic Energy Commission and sells 5,000 acres to the public.

- August 1949: The federal government reveals for the first time that Manhattan Project radioactive waste had been shipped to the site since 1944, and flatly denies any health hazard from the waste storage.

- 1955-68: The government sells 1,298 acres of contaminated LOOW site property to private interests. Present owners include the Town of Lewiston, SCA Chemical Services, which operates hazardous waste landfills there, and Steven Washuta, who operates municipal landfills.

- June 1982: Bechtel National, the energy department's consultant, begins cleanup work at the site, primarily burying contaminated material in concrete foundations.

- November 1982: A study by a researcher at the State University of Buffalo finds cancer rates in Lewiston and Porter no higher than county, state and federal norms.

- July 1984: Workers begin pumping the residue from the tower to a storage area half-a-mile away.

- August 1984: In a preliminary environmental impact statement on the site, the energy department estimates moving the radioactive material to storage sites in Tennessee or Washington state would be dozens of times more expensive and several times more dangerous than maintaining the material in Lewiston.

- June 26, 1985: Demolition of the tower begins.

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