

TOXIC LEGACY: THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

Whatever their views, dump's neighbors want a voice

NEEDING TO KNOW: *The secrecy of the past must not be continued in the future, officials and residents agree.*

By Teresa H. Sharp
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LEWISTON — The impending dusk brings an unearthly hush to the far east end of Pletcher Road.

Small clusters of homes are interspersed with strips of open fields and woods. A KOA Campground on the south side of the road is the last human outpost before reaching a gray mailbox marking a long stone driveway on the north side.

The occupant is the U.S. Department of Energy's Niagara Falls Storage Site, where 22,000 tons of radioactive waste were dumped, beginning in 1944 with the Manhattan Project.

A barbed-wire fence encloses the property, but the gate has been swung open. A huge white, four-story building with a red roof, appearing like an enormous barn and hugged by three silos without tops, lies ahead. A few smaller white buildings dot the premises. Off to the immediate right, Modern Landfill rises from the landscape.

This is the neighborhood Jean Penzotti grew up in and the one she returned to seven years ago when she and her husband took over her parents' Pletcher Road homestead. The couple has three young daughters. John Penzotti, a Niagara Falls Bridge Commission employee, also has a small shop, Empire Shooters Supply, on the side of the house and the family sells Christmas trees from its side lot.

News that the DOE wants to permanently cap and keep the high-level radioactive waste just a short distance up the road from their home does not bother Penzotti.

"I don't really pay that much attention to it," he said. "I know it's there, but you don't hear much about it. My wife grew up here and has a sister and two brothers and everybody's physically healthy."

"I love it out here," he said. "I like the quietness. Nobody bothers me and I can do what I want."

"If given the choice, I'd rather them make what they have more secure than break the cap and haul it down the road — we could be in much more danger. I'd rather see them make it more permanently safe and secure," Penzotti said.

R. Nils Olsen Jr., a Youngstown resident and State University at Buffalo law professor, wants to make sure residents do have a choice — or at least a voice.

"There needs to be a thorough public process," Olsen said. "The towns and county need to thoroughly understand the situation and have input in the decisions."



Elisa Olderman/Niagara Gazette

FAMILY HOMESTEAD: John Penzotti, right, and his wife, Jean, left, check the status of some Christmas trees on their Pletcher Road property with their children, Jessica, 12, Angela, 5, and Maureen, 2. The family is not concerned about the Niagara Falls Storage Site, down the road from the farm where Jean was raised and they are now raising their children.

And the decisions should not be made in derogation of the other involved agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, state Department of Environmental Conservation or Health Department. Conflicts should be resolved, not ignored.

"It's the DOE's responsibility to safely manage the problem they created and have handled in a totally irresponsible manner in the past," he added.

"The public needs to know what the alternatives are: Are these steps being taken to save money? Is this a true environmental decision?" he asked. "My concerns here are: first, a lack of public process; second, a lack of accountability on the part of the DOE with the other agencies; and third, a lack of credibility on the part of the DOE."

"Any decision like this should be fully ventilated in public," Olsen said. "Anything short of this is totally unacceptable and outrageous. It leaves people distrustful, uninformed and angry."

Lewiston Town Supervisor Thomas E. Sharp said he had not been notified of the

energy department's plans for permanent capping.

"I'm not a technical person, but I felt the DOE has been very responsive in the past with my dealings with them," Sharp said. "They've seemed sincere in trying to protect the environment and the people. I believe they're doing the best they can with the technology they have."

"But," he quickly added, "there definitely should be the chance for public input and knowledge of what's going on."

Calvin C. Schultz, 67, worked for the Town of Lewiston for 34 years, serving as the town's superintendent of highways, water and drainage. He estimates he was on the site "500 or 600 times during the time I worked for the town."

He said he always assumed the waste would stay put "because of the volume of the material."

Schultz grew up less than a half-mile from the site, but recalled, "People never seemed to think much about it at the time."

ble radioactivity at the site after it was secured by the energy department helped convince him things had been taken care of properly by the DOE.

"I felt they had done an excellent job in capping. I felt good about that, because as we ever got were readings from the DOE but this was an independent one," Schultz said.

Still, Schultz discussed his family's troubled medical history, and remarked, "My mother died of lung cancer and never smoked; my wife had several miscarriages; I've had a kidney transplant. ..."

"How do you know?" he asked. "It (the proximity of the plant) may have been a contributing factor, but I don't think it was the sole factor. But I've always had this question mark in my mind."

Dr. John Vena, a University at Buffalo assistant professor in the Department of Social and Preventative Medicine, co-authored a one-year study, released in 1982, which examined cancer rates in the towns of Lewiston and Porter. The study compared the town rates to county, state and federal statistics.

"There was concern on the part of some of the people living in the area, and we looked at cancer rates around the site," Dr. Vena recalled. "Basically, we found that the rates were not out of the norm. But, of course, there were limitations to the study."

Lee Simonson, chairman of the Niagara County Legislature, said, "Our position was always that the site should have been excavated and the material put someplace else, in an area more suitable to this kind of storage. Our only consolation is that the site is in much better shape than it was many years ago."

"Obviously, Niagara County's position is that it (the site) should have been moved in the first place, but if we can't get that, we want the best possible containment for the protection of the environment and local residents," he added.

It was the late '50s before I got concerned."

He said an independent reading of possi-