

Government's haste brought waste here

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Where fine fruit orchards once covered the land, radioactive residue lies buried in a shallow grave.

It's been there for nearly 50 years. The Department of Energy would like it to stay there permanently.

How it got there is the story of how the U.S. government's haste to make an atomic bomb left pastoral Lewiston full of radioactive waste.

It started a month after the start of World War II, when the U.S. Army bought a 7,500-acre tract of land on Pletcher Road in Lewiston. The Army gave the 150 families living there on the farmland three days to move.

The Army built a TNT plant there to assist in the war effort. The plant was camouflaged in groups of buildings that resembled a farm, to disguise its purpose. But the new Lake Ontario Ordnance works produced TNT for only nine months.

In 1944, the ordnance works site became a dumping ground for radioactive waste from the Manhattan Project, the government's secret push to create an atomic bomb.

Some of the uranium ore for the project was processed at Linde Air Products, a division of Union Carbide in Tonawanda, according to a 1985 story in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle. The nearby Lewiston site was handy for depositing the low-level radioactive waste from Linde.

But waste was also transported to

Lewiston from out of state. Liquid radioactive waste that came in railroad tank cars from Oak Ridge, Tenn., was poured onto the farmlands, and waste was buried over more than 1,100 acres. After World War II, more radioactive residue was taken there.

In particular, 4,000 cubic yards of high-level uranium residue filled a concrete water tower on the site, a 165-foot silo that later became a grim symbol of what was there.

In 1949, the federal government revealed for the first time that Manhattan Project waste had been stored at the site for five years. It denied any health hazard.

By then, the Army had sold 5,000 acres of the ordnance site to local residents and transferred the remaining 1,500 acres to the new Atomic Energy Commission, now the U.S. Department of Energy. Between 1955 and 1968, the government sold all but 191 acres.

In June 1981, Rep. John LaFalce, D-Tonawanda, fought for funding for an energy department plan to reinforce and seal buildings storing the greatest quantities of radioactive materials, retrieve 30,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials that escaped from the site through drainage ditches and construct proper storage facilities for radioactive materials piled outside.

The energy department began temporary cleanup and storage work in 1983, moving the material to a central storage area and covering it with contaminated dirt and a layer of clean dirt and clay. The cleanup was completed by 1986.