

BY GEOFF KELLY AND LOUIS RICCIUTI

TOM BROKAW'S DESK

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LAST SUNDAY, the *Buffalo News* reported that NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw's anthrax-plagued desk had come to its final resting place in Niagara County. Brokaw's desk and other office furnishings were treated and buried at Chemical Waste Management's waste disposal facility in Lewiston.

It was a short piece in the Sunday Niagara edition. The kicker was a dose of grim humor from local environmental activist Tim Henderson, who pointed out that just about every nasty substance ever generated by man can be found in dump sites in Niagara County. "...it makes sense the stuff would end up here," Henderson told the *Buffalo News*. "That doesn't mean we have to like it."

Morning radio had a field day. 103.3 The Edge's Shredd and Ragan reported the story as an oddity and were soon swamped by phone calls from residents. CWM workers, waste-hauling truck drivers and others who were horrified by the news. "It became a really big deal," said Ryan Patrick, the morning show's producer.

Shredd and Ragan continued coverage of the story the following day and plans to broadcast live from the gates of CWM on Friday, Nov. 30 to protest the landfill's acceptance of anthrax-contaminated waste.

In fact, Brokaw's desk and the other office furnishings that came to CWM with it are unlikely to pose a hazard. They were decontaminated before they were shipped to CWM and buried. The materials are not going to bleed anthrax into the surrounding countryside.

Still, the strong reaction of 103.3 The Edge listeners is not simply the product of hysteria or misinformation. CWM's disposal of the desk is evocative of all the dangerous waste that has been buried in the backyards of Niagara County residents over the past 75 years. It is a case of affront after affront, of insult added to injury.

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NBC News received two letters containing anthrax spores, one postmarked Sep. 18 and the other Sep. 20. The letters were discovered when one of Brokaw's assistants developed cutaneous anthrax, two weeks after handling one or both letters. When the infection was discovered, hun-

dreds of NBC employees were tested for anthrax and given a two-week supply of the antibiotic Cipro.

The NBC News office was painstakingly tested for anthrax spores, which are so small they are mentioned in microns. In the process, several emergency workers were also exposed to anthrax spores.

Those items in Brokaw's office that came into contact with anthrax spores were decontaminated and shipped to a landfill in Texas, according to CWM spokesman Scott Matter. Those items that did not test positive for anthrax, including Brokaw's desk, were decontaminated anyway—just in case.

Anthrax spores are especially dangerous

because they are so resilient. They can lay dormant for decades and then come back to life when exposed to air or water.

Sealed in plastic, Brokaw's desk and various other office furnishings were shipped cross-state by truck to CWM (past the front doors of Lewiston-Porter Schools), where the material was pulverized, and sealed in plastic bags inside plastic tubs. These tubs were then filled with concrete and buried.

Apparently, nobody at NBC or at CWM was prepared for this to become a public relations issue. Inquiries at NBC have gone unanswered. Local CWM personnel were unable to address questions. George Spira, CWM's community liaison and a Porter town boardmember, said he hadn't heard anything about the story and referred ARTVOICE to Dominic Maruca, the facility's manager. Maruca was out of town, so questions were directed to an engineer at the site who did not return phone calls.

Finally, Scott Matter was dispatched to answer questions by phone. Matter works 500 miles away in Manhattan.

WHY CWM?

Mike Basile, head of the EPA's field office in Niagara Falls, said he's not surprised that the desk went to CWM. "It's an enormous facility," said Basile. "And it's one of a very few places in the Northeast that can accept hazardous waste."

CWM is, in fact, the largest facility handling hazardous waste in the Northeast. According to Basile, when a contaminated site in the region is cleaned up, odds are the waste material is shipped to CWM. So it has the virtue of being open and having plenty of room. Scott Matter says the technology there is first-rate, as well. The facility was updated just a few years ago.

Matter was eager to point out that, while Brokaw's desk made a good headline, it wasn't much of a story. The office material was not hazardous and could have been buried legally in any dump in the state. But the anthrax scare has everyone on edge, so it's better to err on the side of overkill.

"Common sense dictates that additional and every precaution be taken," said Matter.

So Brokaw's desk, though it was clean, was to be treated as if it were contaminated. So it went to CWM. Which leads us back to the original question: Why CWM?

When asked if CWM had any special facilities for handling hazardous biological waste, George Spira said, "We're not allowed to accept any hazardous biological wastes." Spira emphasized that in his 30 years working on-site, there has never been a biological containment facility at CWM, and CWM has never accepted hazardous biological waste.

However, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers documents dated June 2000 say that there is a biological impoundment area on-site. Other sources have used the phrase "aggressive biological containment facility." Spira said he knows nothing about that. On the other hand, Scott Matter, CWM's spokesman in Manhattan, acknowledged the existence of a biological containment area and said he'd look into its dates of operation to determine if CWM had ever operated the biological containment facility or simply inherited it from one of its predecessors—SCA, Chem-Trol

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or the federal government. At deadline, he had not yet found that information.

The 713-acre Model City facility, as CWM refers to the landfill, has been receiving waste for 30 years as a commercial enterprise, and for another 30 years as a government-owned property. CWM took over the site from SCA. SCA acquired the site from Chem-Trol, which bought the property from private holders who in turn bought the property from the federal government. The U.S. Army was the first to use the site as a dump back when it was part of the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, a 7500-acre parcel the Army bought in 1942 that displaced hundreds of local farmers, some against their will. The LOOW has seen many uses—a TNT factory, experimental jet and rocket fuel labs, training facilities, incendiary and chemical weapons depot. Most prominently, it has been used as a dump site for chemical, radioactive and biological wastes generated by the military and private industry working on military contracts. Local industries and academic institutions worked on a wide variety of government projects, including germ warfare.

Since the early 1970s, government agencies—including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense—have been studying the former LOOW in order to determine what sort of cleanup the site might require. Because CWM sits on former LOOW property, the Corps wants to examine parts of the CWM as well. The CWM facility sits on several legacy burial sites. These sites may contain toxic radioactive, chemical and biological wastes. One of these is the Rochester Burial Site, which contains waste from plutonium experiments conducted on humans and animals at the University of Rochester.

CWM did not initiate and may not even know about some of the dump sites, but they may have buried them under tons of hazardous industrial waste, or covered them with chemical lagoons, making them nearly impossible to investigate. Previous attempts to clean up the former LOOW site have hit an impasse at the CWM site, where cleanup crews were uncertain where to look for waste and either unable or unwilling to dig indiscriminately among the piles of deadly toxins in search of even more deadly toxins.

CWM recently requested permission to expand its landfill. The proposed expansion would mean CWM would cover over more legacy landfills—places containing dangerous wastes that have not yet been assessed or remediated. The Town of Porter (for which CWM spokesman George Spira is a town boardmember) agreed to the expansion, despite public opposition. The Town of Lewiston has not given CWM its okay.

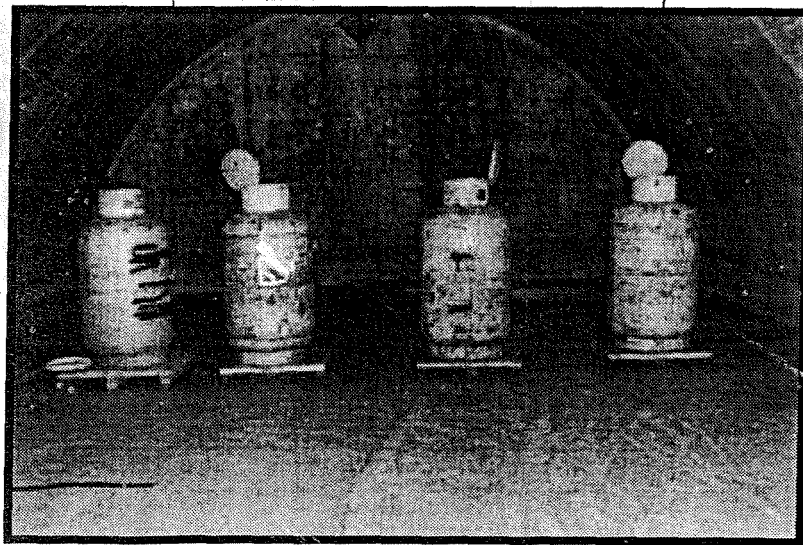
"WELCOME TO NIAGARA FALLS!"

"Home of Tom Brokaw's anthrax-riddled desk."

Of course it's not true—Brokaw's desk, or what remains of it, is not riddled with anthrax. But, then, the weather around here isn't as bad as it's perceived to be, and that's a rap we'll never shake.

If the rest of the country learns to think of Niagara County as a toxic cesspool—and that image is already there, thanks to Love Canal—the rest of the country won't be wrong. CWM is at least a supervised, controlled disposal site. As far as uncontrolled sites, Love Canal was just the tip of the iceberg. Within a couple miles of CWM's Model City landfill, there are dozens of undocumented or under-documented toxic waste dumps.

The ground and water have been compromised by decades of haphazard and cavalier disposal of radioactive, chemical and biological wastes. Economic development has been stalled by a tacit understanding that the region's environmental liabilities jeopardize any investment. More importantly, people have become sick and died. If Niagara County wants to overcome the image problem created by Tom Brokaw's desk and Love Canal, its people will have to force private industry and government bodies at all levels to be forthright about the legacy of pollution and the substantial problems it continues to cause—the human, environmental and economic health of the region.



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