



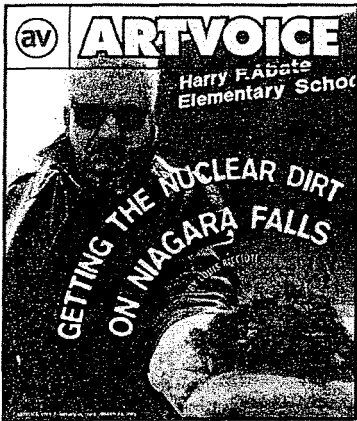
# ARTVOICE

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## GETTING THE NUCLEAR DIRT ON NIAGARA FALLS

BY LOUIS RICCIUTI

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# GETTING THE NUCLEAR DIRT ON NIAGARA FALLS

The solution to pollution is still dilution in Niagara County

## The Bomb that Fell on Niagara Part 9

BY LOUIS RICCIUTI

On Monday, December 17, 2002, Senator Charles E. Schumer held a press conference in Niagara Falls, NY. Using a boarded-up chemical factory on Buffalo Avenue as a backdrop, the news from Senator Schumer's office was grim.

To date, only six local atomic workers or their surviving family members have been paid through the federal Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Act.

In October 2000, the U.S. Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, legislation to provide health care and compensation to nuclear weapons workers injured from exposure to radiation and other hazardous substances during the Manhattan A-bomb Project and the Cold War era arms race. The sum of \$150,000, the maximum benefit the legislation provides, is supposed to be lifelong compensation for various debilities, including cancer.

That is, if the money ever gets paid out. It was December 2, 1942, over sixty years ago, when Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard used graphite and uranium metal produced in Niagara Falls to create the world's first manmade atomic reaction. Surely, Uncle Sam must realize that the clock is ticking for the last of the Niagara Falls workers. Their age today would range from between 77 and 119 years old.

The official number of early atomic facilities that qualify for this compensation program here in Western New York stands at 13. The actual number of facilities located in Western New York, and concentrated in Niagara Falls, that manufactured, handled, stored, processed or disposed of nuclear material is probably closer to double that figure. A list of these contaminated military-industrial locations has yet to be fully discovered or admitted to by the Department of Defense. Local officials are taking no steps and appear to be in no hurry to expand the scope of investigations into the possibility that these facilities and neighborhoods are still contaminated. No one wants to add to the already incredibly long list of contaminated sites.

### WORKING-AGE STIFFS

That only six people have been paid claims reflects how much dangerous ionizing radiation atomic factory employees and the factory's neighbors, were exposed to. Ionizing radiation includes harmful alpha, beta and gamma radiation. In

Niagara Falls, some 2,800 workers performed tasks at the world's largest uranium metal production facilities, the city-wide Union Carbide and Carbon Company works. Locals used to refer to working at any number of U.C.C. factories in Niagara Falls—National Carbon, National Lead, Electrometallurgical, Titanium Alloys Manufacturing—as having worked at "Carbide" or "National."

Hundreds of former employees in the Niagara Falls area should have been expected to apply for compensation—that is, if they were still alive. But Niagara cemeteries are littered with the epitaphs of men who died far too young after the Big War, and a simple scan of death records between 1942 and 1962 show an incredible number of youthful deaths not associated with any war.

Children and infants also take an inordinately high number of marker stones during the period of atomic production in Niagara Falls.

Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Takoma Park, Maryland, states that doses of radiation received by workers at the Union Carbide Electrometallurgical Works on 47th Street were the equivalent of death sentences. Radiation is measured in two forms; one is the physical material that is often hazardous, and the other is the measurement of radiation's effect on the human body, called rem. Current commercial and government radiation regulations dictate exposures of no more than five rem per year. Some workers at the Niagara Falls facility were often exposed to well over 6,000 rem.

Most of the workers were blue-collar, patriotic, regular neighborhood guys. Some were recruited from the Southern states, having heard that the high-paying jobs in Niagara would be just the ticket out of the abject poverty encountered in the mid-century South. Unwittingly, these men were performing routine factory duties in extraordinarily dangerous and often deadly situations. For instance, many came into close proximity to highly radioactive materials just outside the factory furnace. And life outside the factory wasn't much better. Some would have lived in company-provided housing and been paid in company script—virtual indentured servants, who were sacrificed in this country's race to become the world's pre-eminent nuclear superpower.



The mystery tire pile off of Hyde Park Blvd., Niagara Falls, NY.

photo: Geoff Kelly

Many newly hired workers would be transferred around the Northeast from plant to plant, location to location. Remaining records are sketchy, but one wonders if the transfers were not a way to further cloud the ill effects of working at any one factory location, or to make it impossible to reconstruct radiation doses.

Many surviving family members believe that shuffling of workers was intended to avoid legal liability later on. In fact, internal documents and correspondence between Niagara Falls Union Carbide, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Atomic Energy Commission and the head of the Human Radiation Experimentation projects discuss ways and means of avoiding future legal responsibility to these workers, their family members and the neighborhoods hosting the factories. One callous document suggests that the way to avoid high human costs was to use low-cost humans. In other words, expendable folks.

### THE RULES OF THE GAME

The Niagara Falls home of Union Carbide industrialist James Marshall, located on a tree-lined street named Park Place, was recently recreated as a posh bed-and-breakfast. But, according to a declassified Department of Energy document, back in the winter of 1942 a visit to Marshall's house by General Leslie R. Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, and his chief of security, Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, led to a macabre discussion of human radiation exposure, its human health and economic repercussions and the distribution of information to the public. These conversations, in the name of national security

and science, ended with military officers commissions for Marshall and Dr. Stafford Warren, who became the head of all medical programs in the Manhattan Project. Warren would later institute a program of experimental injections of plutonium and other radionuclides in unwitting human subjects in Rochester, New York and across the nation.

Groves, Marshall, Nichols and Warren certainly knew that these Niagara area workers, and perhaps the neighborhoods where they lived, were doomed. Unfortunately for the workers, and later for the radiation injection test subjects and their families, no one else knew what was being done to them.

In another early Manhattan Project-era document discussing secrecy and security, Dr. Warren stated that caution should be exercised at city facilities so as not to alert local residents about radiation contamination in the neighborhood and associated, radiation-related sicknesses. Dr. Warren claimed this was necessary to avoid the impact that the untimely revelation of this information might have on future atomic weapons and reactor projects. Secrecy at all costs, human and otherwise, the doctor advocated. Damn the neighbors and pass the ammunition.

Dr. Warren was speaking of the slow contamination of the Niagara area by these early atomic industries. A known, monitored and studied accident. A slow-motion Chernobyl or Three Mile Island, so to speak. In some ways, the experiment continues. In Niagara Falls and Niagara County there are 10 areas that have a rate

for certain forms of cancer 100 percent higher than the nationally expected incidence. If ever there were a candidate for a bioinformatics, human health and a genetics center, Western New York is certainly it.

Most hazardous contaminants are self-evident; in high enough concentrations they can be detected by the human senses. Chemicals stink. They irritate your eyes and nose. We all know that yellow is not a good color for water or snow. Certain hazardous materials can be taste. If you ate a spoonful of unsymmetrical di-methylhydrazine hypergolic rocket fuel, for example, you might notice an awful taste before you violently succumbed. Certain poisonous gases are described as smelling of fruits or nuts.

The same is not true of radiation. It cannot be detected at any level without sophisticated instrumentation.

#### SPREADING THE WEALTH

The solution to pollution still seems to be dilution in Niagara County. According to several concerned Lewiston residents, just in this past year, a massive amount of soils were dug, trucked, shipped or moved around. Not all of this activity was associated with new building developments or casinos. Some spoiled soil appeared to be moved willy-nilly; some was even moved at night.

Until recently, there was a pile of tires at the end of a one-block, dead-end street just off Hyde Park Boulevard in Niagara Falls. The property where this pile was located is behind a building owned by Henry Sloma, a former NFTA commissioner and prominent Niagara County businessman. The pile was 15 feet high, and the tires were of various types and sizes, mostly from heavy machinery—the kind you would find on a crane, payloador or earth hauler. All big. These tires, some of which have been there for so long that they had to be dug out from underneath the soil, were “suddenly discovered” a few months ago by Niagara Falls officials—as if they had been dumped in the middle of the night.

At city and state taxpayer expense, these tires were supposedly disposed of in a hazardous waste facility. After the offending tires were removed, the tiny street was then dug to a depth of four to six feet, refilled and then paved over in only hours. Again, at taxpayer expense. Could these tires have been used on equipment and trucks associated with atomic waste materials or previous cleanup attempts, and therefore been troublesome to dispose of legally or cost-effectively? Perhaps these tires presented a hazardous legacy of their own that required the deep soils removal. If so, we're asking why the tires were left out in the open, behind Henry Sloma's building?

Within the last month, a small Town of Lewiston dump truck was observed being loaded with dirt from a former Atomic Energy Commission property on Harold Road; the dirt was then delivered to a house in the town, where it was spread out on the front lawn by town workers with shovels. The homeowner likely had no idea of where the new top soil and fill had

just come from.

In another case, dirt from a location that was deemed contaminated last year by the Army Corps of Engineers turned up on top of the new children's soccer fields that are being constructed on the plateau above Art Park in Lewiston, New York. When asked for the results of soils testing, town officials said simply “that the soils are clean enough for their current use.” Lewiston Mayor Richard Soluri would not, or could not, produce the actual soils sampling results, and activists are fuming over the nearly yearlong delay.

Last summer, Tim Henderson, a Town of Lewiston water worker and president of Residents Organized for Lewiston's Environment, assured other activists that he had seen the testing results and that everything was fine. He even offered to search his files for the report. Several

those at the former Chemical and Biological Weapons Storage Depot.

Soils close to the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, Niagara Falls radiological Storage Site and other potentially dangerous locations around Niagara County have been disturbed, distributed, mixed, turned and tilled, and potential contaminants, both chemical and radiological, may have been dispersed to a point that all areas of the city, town and village would now have elevated background readings.

One reason for the spread of untested and highly suspicious soils from potentially contaminated locales might be to mitigate hazards and reduce potential liability heaped on these properties. Lacking community-monitored soils testing throughout the cities, towns and villages of Niagara County—especially tests that eschew locally determined “background” comparisons in favor of a more pristine standard of cleanliness—residents cannot know whether chemically and radiologically contaminated dirt is poisoning their yards and driveways.

Take a drive down Harold or Creek Roads, near the Lewiston Porter Schools, and ask yourself how healthy is the mud and dirt on the roads and in the woods and fields, remembering that the dirt has a history. Then ask yourself

**One callous document suggests that the way to avoid high human costs was to use low-cost humans. In other words, expendable folks.**



Air Force Plant 68, on the site of the former BRETS school. The plant once produced nerve gas as a by-product of its boron production activities.

photo: Louis Ricciuti

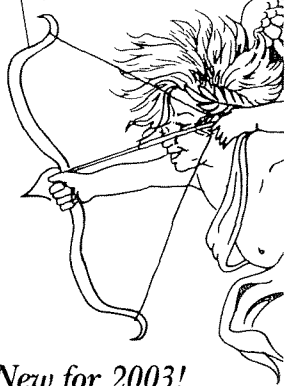
weeks later, after stating that he was unsuccessful at finding his copy of the report, Henderson asked those inquiring if an empty envelope would be sufficient evidence of testing. A newspaper report two weeks later disclosed that the spoken of testing had never happened.

The bottom line is that there appears to be an irresponsible strategy to “spread” contamination around Niagara county instead of ensuring its proper disposal. It's no wonder that when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cites “acceptable background levels” of radiation and chemicals, they claim that the Niagara Falls radiological Storage Site is just as safe as your own backyard; or that the Lewiston Porter Schools' background levels are similar to

about that dump truck full of “clean” fill, destined for your yard, a local playground or the new casino.

This is the ninth in a series of articles examining the history and impact of chemical, biological and radioactive waste on the Niagara frontier. The author can be contacted by email at [NiagaraNet@aol.com](mailto:NiagaraNet@aol.com). The first seven parts of this series are available at [http://www.ask.ne.jp/~hankaku/english/niagara\\_fall.html](http://www.ask.ne.jp/~hankaku/english/niagara_fall.html), a website hosted by the Tokyo Physicians for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (TPENW), an association of Japanese physicians and scientists dedicated to stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Articles eight and nine can be found at the ARTVOICE website: <http://www.artvoice.com>.

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