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Residents are concerned about plans to expand this landfill located on the Lewiston-Porter town line in an area once used for Manhattan Project waste.

Atomic fallout, 60 years later

Manhattan Project's legacy of radioactive waste, concerns over ex-workers' health remain issues in WNY

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NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU

Sixty years ago, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War II.

Today, the dawn of the nuclear age may be little more than a historic footnote to much of the world. But in Western New York, fallout from the bomb-making process persists.

Much of the uranium ore that the top-secret Manhattan Project fashioned into

the first bombs was processed here, in a former Town of Tonawanda ceramics plant.

A sprawling Niagara County dynamite plant was turned into a radioactive dump in 1944 to store uranium waste and other nuclear garbage.

Much of it is still here. So are the questions, even though no atomic bomb was ever made, stored or exploded in the Buffalo Niagara region.

What should be done about the remaining radioactive waste? Has it hurt the health of people who live and work near-

by? Will it be part of the region forever?

There are no easy answers. But there are dedicated people working on the questions.

- In the Town of Tonawanda, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has overseen the removal of enough contaminated material from the Linde plant and other sites near the Grand Island bridge to fill a row of shipping containers that could stretch from Buffalo to Rochester.

The project has been under way since 1997, and there are at least two more years of work to clean up the lingering traces of processed uranium ore. The cost, so far: \$215 million.

- In recent years, the federal govern-

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Expanding hazardous waste landfill opposed

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ment has said it would pay former workers at Tonawanda's Linde plant, and other radioactive workplaces, if they or their survivors could prove sickness or death from their exposure. Widows, cancer-stricken workers and family members filed 496 cases from the area's Manhattan Project-related sites. Three have been paid, a total of \$450,000.

• In Niagara County, a large landfill that straddles the Lewiston-Porter town line probably will be full in a year or two. The landfill is in an area once used for Manhattan Project waste. Chemical Waste Management, its owner, wants to expand it, but concerned residents are fighting to stop the company's plans for the site.

Efforts also are under way to launch a comprehensive health study to establish whether the area — home to hazardous waste for six decades — has any measurable effect on the health of nearby residents.

• A mile to the south, in Lewiston, a small hill of radioactive waste and contaminated soil slumbers under a thick quilt of grass. The lovely lawn covers some of the most hazardous stuff the federal government dumped on the former dynamite factory site in the 1940s and 1950s. The Corps of Engineers is analyzing the site, including whether it makes more sense to move the waste or leave it alone for generations.

A reassuring monitor

Today, you can stand atop the Niagara Falls Storage Site's main bunker with a radiation monitor and the speaker clucks like a contented chicken, indicating normal background amounts of gamma particles.

"Ten thousand counts a minute," said U.S. Army Corps health physicist Thomas Papura, reading off the meter. "What's normal background? Ten thousand counts a minute."

The people in charge of the Manhattan Project residue say the worst of the radium waste, uranium ore and bits of plutonium have been cleaned up. The vast majority of the dangerous stuff has been carted off to sites in Texas and Utah, they say, or buried where it can't hurt people.

Representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Chemical Waste Management say that what's still here is well contained,

and they test air, water and soil to make sure it stays that way. The message: Neighbors have little to worry about.

Not all the neighbors find the expert assurances soothing. For decades, federal and state regulators have been declaring these sites cleaned up only to admit later that there was more material there that could hurt people. Stricter standards and better detection gear caused some of the flip-flopping.

Health officials say there's no proof that living in the shadows of the Manhattan Project waste sites can harm people. Yet some remain skeptical.

"Why should we believe them now?" asked former Lewiston Councilwoman Joan Gipp.

Gipp grew up during World War II, and served as an airplane spotter. She said a continuing concern was that an enemy might bomb the TNT plant.

The government told third-generation Niagara County farmers they had 30 days to get out, Gipp recalled, and took 7,500 acres of peach orchards and farmland to make the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works. Most of it was never used, and the dynamite plant only operated for nine months.

Meanwhile, the uranium refining secretly under way in Tonawanda produced radioactive sludge that started arriving at the ordnance works site in 1944, after part of the former dynamite reservation became a chemical warfare depot. Radioactive waste was trucked in from other states and plutonium-related University of Rochester animal experiments.

Only later, Gipp said, did townspeople learn about chemical companies pouring toxic waste into drainage lines that emptied into the Niagara River.

Benefits cited

In recent decades, several clean-ups removed much of the most radioactive materials, collecting the rest on the Niagara Falls Storage Site, which takes up about 3 percent of the original site. After passing through several owners, Chemical Waste Management (CWM) has taken over 750 acres directly north of the storage site.

Company spokesman Richard Sturges says the commercial waste disposal operation benefits the community in several ways. It pays towns and school districts more than \$3 million a year, and most of its 85 employees live in Niagara County, he said.



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

Stu Pryce, left, and James Thigpen check excavation at Praxair site as part of remediation of radiation-contaminated soil.

Lasting legacy

Fallout continues in Western New York from the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb. Nuclear waste left behind includes uranium, radium and thorium. Sites involved in the cleanup are:

- **Niagara Falls Storage Site, Lewiston** — 191 acres; capped waste cell awaits plan for future.
- **Ashland 1, Tonawanda** — 10 acres; cleanup complete.
- **Seaway, Tonawanda** — 100 acres; cleanup plan in the works.
- **Ashland 2/Rattlesnake Creek, Tonawanda** — 20 acres; cleanup complete in Ashland 2, ongoing in Rattlesnake Creek.
- **Former Linde plant, Tonawanda** — 135 acres; now Praxair plant; cleanup likely completion in 2007.
- **Chemical Waste Management, towns of Lewiston and Porter** — 350 of 710 acres in use; hazardous waste landfill includes toxic chemicals; 50-acre expansion proposed.
- **Tonawanda Landfill** — 170 acres; area tested, no cleanup found necessary.

The hazardous waste is in multiple-layered containment cells and monitored to ensure chemicals aren't escaping, Sturges said.

At its present rate of operation, its current landfill space will be used up in about two years, so the company wants to expand into 50 acres of unused land.

Ann Roberts, a former chemist who has extensively studied the site's documentation record, said that state health officials cited concerns about lingering contamination last year when CWM wanted a 1972 no-dig order lifted.

To quell concerns, CWM has worked with state regulators to put additional monitoring in place, including measures not explicitly required in state regulations, Sturges said.

In Tonawanda, the U.S. Army Corps took on the task of digging out traces of a former uranium refinery around the operations of Praxair, an industrial gases company that bought the site.

Since 1997, the corps has done its job with "minimum impairment" of the 1,300-worker plant, said Dennis Conroy, Praxair's site manager.

Almost every original Linde building has been torn out for contamination of varying types and degrees. Soil and other material has been excavated from the Praxair property and four other Tonawanda sites where radioactive material was dumped, stored, or distributed by runoff.

The digging probably will take another two years, said Ray Pilon, the corps' Linde site manager. Then there's the monitoring of the site's groundwater, necessary

mainly because of 55 million gallons of uranium waste injected into wells there during the 1940s.

With \$215 million spent so far, the Tonawanda cleanup is still tens of millions of dollars short of finishing.

No payments made

Meanwhile, another Linde group is having a tougher time getting money: workers who say radiation there made them sick.

In 2000, the federal government said it would compensate atomic workers who got cancer or died because of workplace exposure. It offered a payment of \$150,000 for approved cases.

So far, 201 cases have been filed by former Linde Ceramics workers, according to the federal program's Web site. Two have obtained final approval; none has been paid.

That's partially because the government is requiring the workers to prove how much radiation they were exposed to decades ago — a task most find impossible, said Ralph Krieger, former president of Local 8-215 of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union.

"I'm a little upset," Krieger said. "You know why? Because I count the bodies. The people are dying every year."

So many people see World War II and the struggle to make the bomb as history now, but not the men and families touched by its aftereffects. The war, Krieger said, "never ended for those guys."

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Roberts doesn't inject ideology, law collection