

Review: *Love Canal: The Story Continues*

By Lois Gibbs

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Gibbs, Lois. *Love Canal: The Story Continues*. Stony Creek, Connecticut: New Society Publishers, 1998. 223 pp. US \$16.95 paper ISBN 0-8657-382-0. Recycled acid-free paper.

The Love Canal -- probably the country's a most notorious and infamous hazardous waste site. It was not the first, it was not the worst, but it did grab headlines, draw attention, and stimulated scientists, industrial leaders, politicians, government officials, and grassroots activists. August 2, 1998 marks the 20th anniversary of the first evacuation of residents of the Love Canal neighborhood. Lois Gibbs provides a descriptive account of the activities leading up to the evacuation, and describes the events that have taken place since then, including the re-habitation of the Love Canal neighborhood.

The Love Canal neighborhood is in the southeast section of the La Salle area of Niagara Falls, New York. William T. Love, an 1890s visionary and entrepreneur, sought to develop a planned industrial community, Model City. Waters from the Niagara River were to be routed around the Niagara escarpment (the other famous attraction of the region, Niagara Falls) to produce cheap hydroelectric power. Model City never happened, but work on the canal did. In 1942, Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corporation (now Occidental Chemical) purchased the uncompleted canal site, and between 1942 and 1953 disposed of about 22,000 tons of mixed chemical wastes into the Love Canal. Shortly after Hooker ceased use of the site, the land was sold to the Niagara Falls School Board for a price of \$1.00. In 1955, the 99th Street Elementary School was constructed on the Love Canal property and opened its doors to students. Subsequent development of the area would see nine hundred families take up residence in the suburban neighborhood of the Love Canal.

Unusually heavy rain and snowfalls in 1975 and 1976 provided high ground-water levels in the Love Canal area. Portions of the Hooker landfill subsided, 55-gallon drums surfaced, ponds and other surface water area became contaminated, basements began to ooze an oily

residue, noxious chemical odors permeated the area, and physical evidence of chemical corrosion of sump pumps and infiltration of basement, cinder-block walls was apparent. In April of 1978 the New York Department of Health Commissioner, Robert Whalen, declared the Love Canal area a threat to human health and ordered the fencing of the area near the actual old landfill site. In August, the Health Commissioner declared a health emergency at the Love Canal, closed the 99th Street School, and recommended temporary evacuation of pregnant women and young children from the first two rings of houses around the site. Within a week, Governor Hugh Carey announced the intended purchase of all Ring 1 Houses (later expanded to 238 houses in Rings 1 and 2). President Jimmy Carter simultaneously announced the enabling of federal funds and the Federal Disaster Assistance Agency to assist the City of Niagara Falls to remedy the Love Canal site.

Amid this setting, Lois Gibbs, a 27-year old housewife, became concerned about the actual chemical contamination and the impact on the health of her family and that of her neighbors. She was also worried about the level of scientific uncertainty, the political and corporate bureaucratic chaos, the media manipulations, and the paucity of available information that she and her neighborhood coalition faced in trying to answer the simple question, "Is it safe?"

Love Canal: The Story Continues provides a blow-by-blow account of the legacy of the Love Canal and how the saga unfolds over more than six decades. The victories and defeats, the controversies are described, not by a person who merely "survived" the Love Canal, but by an individual who helped to mobilize community activism to its present levels, who helped to lay the basis for new legislative models for dealing with Environmental catastrophes and who were unwittingly put into the position of leading the charge for grassroots environmental activism and environmental justice.

This book is a revision of Gibbs' earlier work, *Love Canal: My Story*. Murray Levine's introduction to the book remains intact. A new foreword by Ralph Nader places in the perspective of 1998 the significance of Gibb's efforts in leading government agencies and corporations to manage their use and regulation of chemical and industrial wastes. Gibbs' prologue and afterword provide the setting for the ongoing need for public awareness about the environmental problems we face today, including the chronology of events leading to the re-opening of the Love Canal for human habitation. Gibbs has served as the often lone voice advocating for blue-collar workers, farmers, low-income families, and people of color, and she has seen how the environmental issues they

face in the 1990s require new strategies and tactics for resolution. The original concepts that Gibbs used to found the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste in 1981 and its re-naming to the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice are reiterated in a poignant delivery of Gibbs message of empowerment and hope for grassroots activism in the 21st Century.

Readers will find this book a chilling account of one of the country's first major environmental disasters played out on the front pages of local and national newspapers and news broadcasts. The environmental historian, risk communication specialist, environmental activist, the environmental manager, and student of environmental studies will all find the saga of the Love Canal a compelling addition to their shelf list. Libraries serving students, faculties, and publics where the issues of chemical contamination, hazardous waste cleanup, and environmental justice exist will want to add this book to their collection.

The Center for Health, Environment, and Justice (P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040-6806; 703/237-2249 voice, 703/237-8389 fax, CCHW@essential.org; <http://www.sustain.org/hewh>, was founded in 1981 as the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, by community activist Lois Marie Gibbs. Through scientific understanding and community organizing, CHEJ provides information and referral services to individuals, organizations, and communities to eliminate exposure to hazardous chemicals. The Stop Dioxin Exposure Campaign is one of their largest community action programs. The Center provides a variety of internship possibilities in scientific, policy, library, and media areas. The following publications are also produced and published by the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice:

Dioxin Digest: This quarterly newsletter serves as a digest of information and resources for community activists and others seeking information to stop dioxin exposure. Each issue contains information and strategies for neighborhood and community groups, local officials and agency staff, and citizens seeking ways to reduce or eliminate exposure to dioxins. Coverage is international and a calendar of events is provided.

Environmental Health Monthly: This newsletter has been designed for health care professionals, community leaders, local officials, and others seeking information about environmental health issues and concerns at the community level. EHM reviewers select original, technical articles from the environmental health and medicine literature (often reprinted in Environmental Health Monthly) and then provide lengthy descriptive reviews and summaries of the articles' content, results, and conclusions

in non-technical terms.

Everyone's Backyard: This magazine is devoted to the strategies, achievements, and events of environmental health activists and advocates. Each issue contains feature articles that describe specific issues, concerns, and achievements. Columns provide resources, strategies, and news related to the technical, scientific, legal, policy, and advocacy perspectives associated with environmental health and medicine, emergency preparedness, community response, and other local concerns about toxic, chemical, and hazardous wastes.

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