

# PBS documentary *Poisoned Ground: The Tragedy at Love Canal*—an unanswerable indictment of US corporations and government

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American big business looks on the working class as prey. Profit first and always, socialist Eugene V. Debs commented about the industrial system in the US—“labor, life, love, liberty—all these must take second place.”

The PBS documentary *Poisoned Ground: The Tragedy at Love Canal* is a devastating, unanswerable film. In the late 1970s, residents of Love Canal, a working class neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, discovered that their homes, schools and playgrounds were built on top of a former chemical waste dump, which was leaking toxic substances and wreaking havoc on their health. The conditions killed Love Canal residents and led to innumerable illnesses. The toxic mess has never been removed.

Written, produced, and directed by Jamila Ephron, the documentary interviews residents along with historians and journalists, who weigh in on the horrors endured by the community in the face of pro-company politicians.

In 1890, Love Canal was created as a model planned community, but was only partially developed. In the 1920s, the canal became a landfill site for the city of Niagara Falls. During the 1940s, the canal was purchased by Hooker Chemical Company, which used the location until 1953—with government sanction—to dump thousands of tons of chemical byproducts from the manufacturing of dyes, perfumes and solvents for rubber and synthetic resins.

At the end of this period, the contents of the canal consisted of around 21,000 tons of toxic chemicals, including at least 12 that are known carcinogens

(halogenated organics, chlorobenzenes and dioxin among them). Hooker capped the 16-acre hazardous waste landfill in clay. In 1952, Hooker agreed to sell its property to the school board for \$1. The sale document signed on April 28, 1953 also released the company from any legal obligations should lawsuits occur in the future.

Historian Richard Newman argues that “Love Canal was the first chemical disaster to unfold before American eyes.” In an archival video, a reporter likewise comments: “The Love Canal is merely the tip of a dangerous and terrifying chemical iceberg.” Another asserts that there are “32,000 known chemical waste dumps in the United States. More than 800 now considered dangerous to public health.”

The chemical company has chronically denied that it has any legal liability associated with the Love Canal situation.

Lois Gibbs, one of the residents who became an organizer and activist, describes how she “found the house on 101st Street, the one in the Love Canal neighborhood. It was starter homes for the most part. And it was the perfect neighborhood from my perspective. It had the Niagara River to the south.”

“To the north,” Gibbs went on, “was a creek and the kids could go and walk along the creek and pick up pollywogs or, you know, it was just a cute little very shallow creek, good for children. We moved in with Michael, who was one years-old by then, a healthy little boy, and then we had our little girl. I really believed I achieved so much. I had this house and a husband who was gainfully employed and these beautiful children.

You know everything seemed to be fine.”

She continued: “Chemicals were a part of our life. You know, when we smelled chemicals, you smelled a good economy. You knew that you were going to be able to put food on a table, you’re going to be able to pay your mortgage, you’re going to be able to buy a new car someday.”

Another resident, Debbie Cerrillo Curry, pointed out that “Love Canal was government subsidized. My husband wasn’t making very much money and they made that a very tasty little deal to move into. We paid \$135 a month to live in a brand new home, which was really unusual. I wasn’t going to question it. And so we felt quite lucky that we fell in at the right time.”

Data showed unacceptable levels of toxic vapors associated with more than 80 compounds were emanating from the basements of numerous homes directly adjacent to the Love Canal. Ten of the most prevalent and most toxic compounds—including benzene, a known human carcinogen—were present. Even the mailman had to wear a gas mask.

In 1979, the EPA announced the result of blood tests that showed high white blood cell counts, a precursor to leukemia, and chromosome damage in Love Canal residents. Some 33 percent of the residents had undergone chromosomal damage. In a typical population, chromosomal damage affects 1 percent of people.

Throughout the ordeal, homeowners’ concerns were ignored and maligned not only by Hooker Chemical (now a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum), but also by indifferent, hostile government officials. These parties initially argued that the area residents’ severe health problems were unrelated to the toxic chemicals buried in the Canal. Since the residents could not prove the chemicals on their property had come from Hooker’s disposal site, they could not prove liability. Throughout the legal battle, residents were unable to sell their properties and relocate.

Occidental and 1,336 Love Canal residents eventually reached a \$20 million out-of-court settlement. The residents had originally sought \$15 billion.

Author Keith O’Brien reports on Hooker’s public relations offensive, reminding people of the jobs they provided, and of all the money they injected back into the city.

“When that doesn’t work and the complaints don’t

go away,” explains historian Newman, Hooker officials—when they testify before Congress—“say ‘Look, you all should know that we produce really toxic stuff. But we also produce miracles in American life. Everything that American industry and consumer life is based on depends on chemicals, and sometimes we have to recognize that chemicals are made from hazardous material.’”

Elsewhere in the documentary, Newman asserts that the summer of 1979 was “a real tipping point for the Love Canal crisis. In the last year, there have been two state health declarations and one federal emergency declaration. But the majority of families are still living in Love Canal. And with remediation and the summer dust and the summer heat, the smells are worse than ever.”

In 1994, Federal District Judge John Curtin ruled that Hooker/Occidental had been “negligent,” but not “reckless.”

In 2004, federal officials announced that the Superfund cleanup has ended, although cleanup had concluded years prior. The entire process occurred over 21 years and cost a total of \$400 million. About 260 homes north of the canal have been renovated and sold to new owners, and about 150 acres east of the canal have been sold to commercial developers for light industrial use.

“If you go to the Love Canal site today, you will not see the words Love Canal anywhere,” concludes Newman. “There’s no signage anywhere that says ‘the world’s most famous environmental disaster occurred here.’ But what you will see is a huge chain link fence. You will see a huge area of land inside the fenced-in zone that is off limits. You might not know there are nearly 22,000 tons of hazardous waste still underneath the ground.”

Love Canal is a well-known tragedy, but it should not be forgotten for an instant. In microcosm, it expresses the real state of social life in America and the predatory, essentially criminal character of the ruling class.



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