

TEACHING LOVE CANAL'S ENDURING LESSONS

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Love Canal began as a utopian dream. William T. Love arrived in Western New York with a plan to create a Model City “free from defiling vapors” (quoted in Jenks 2011, p. 44). According to Love’s plan for Model City, propelled by “the late wonderful advance in electricity and by the aid of our limitless water power, we can heat and light our city by electricity and operate our factories by water power, in an atmosphere of ideal purity” (quoted in Jenks 2011, p. 44). Love planned to dig a canal, five miles long, connecting the Upper and Lower Niagara River and bypassing the “legendary cataract” at Niagara Falls (Jenks 2011, p. 44). Love’s canal would feed an artificial waterfall carved into the Niagara Gorge, generating “immense quantities” of hydroelectric energy, powering the “industrial ‘megalopolis’ to the north called Model City, which Love convinced the New York State Legislature to charter as his own personal company town” (Jenks 2011, p. 44). “No skill, art or effort will be spared to make it the most beautiful city in the world,” Love proclaimed, “a monument to the progressive

spirit of the age—to the genius, goodness and greatness of the American people” (quoted in Jenks 2011, p. 44).

The company Love founded to bring his vision into reality, the Niagara Power and Development Corporation, began to dig the five-mile canal Love had envisioned, starting from the Upper Niagara River and moving north (Jenks 2011, p. 44). When the national economy fell into a depression in the late 1890s, Love’s venture collapsed (Jenks 2011, p. 44), and Love fled town ahead of his creditors (O’Brien 2022, pp. 29-30). Left behind was a partially dug canal 3,000 feet long, 60 to 80 feet wide, and 8 to 16 feet deep (United States v. Hooker Chemicals & Plastics Corp.).

The abandoned canal “was embedded in an area of orchards and farms, watered by [streams] and creeks stemming from the Niagara, in the pastoral village of LaSalle, to the east of the city of Niagara Falls” (Levine 1982, p. 9). Love’s canal filled with water, and for decades afterward residents “swam and fished in the canal during the summer and

skated on it in winter” (Jenks 2011, p. 44). In May 1927 the city of Niagara Falls annexed the village of LaSalle (Levine 1982, p. 10).

In the intervening years the burgeoning chemical industry had come to Niagara Falls, attracted by “cheap” and “abundant” electrical power (Levine 1982, p. 9). In 1905, Elon Huntington Hooker, an engineer from Rochester, founded the Hooker Electrochemical Company, which began operations in Niagara Falls, manufacturing chlorine and sodium hydroxide, also known as caustic soda or lye (Levine 1982, p. 9). Hooker Electrochemical Company was just one of the major chemical companies that built plants in Niagara Falls and the surrounding area: others included Carborundum, DuPont, Olin-Mathieson, and Union Carbide (Levine 1982, p. 10).

In 1942, Hooker began dumping chemical wastes into Love’s abandoned canal, a practice that it would continue for the next decade (Levine 1982, p. 10). “Hooker company officials considered the old canal an excellent dump site; it was large, lined with walls of thick, impermeable clay, and located in a thinly populated area where zoning regulations did not prevent waste disposal” (Levine 1982, p. 10). Between 1942 and 1952, Hooker dumped more than 21,000 tons—42 million pounds—of chemical wastes in the canal (Levine 1982, p. 10).

More than 200 distinct chemical compounds have been detected at Love Canal (Jenks 2011, p. 47). The toxic stew includes chemicals that are lethal in the event of acute exposure and highly carcinogenic even in minute concentrations. And these deadly chemicals are present in enormous quantities, including 13 million pounds of lindane, 4 million pounds of chlorobenzenes, and 400,000 pounds of dioxin (Jenks 2011, p. 47). Additionally, “[t]he U.S. Army contracted with numerous metallurgical companies in the area to produce chemical weapons and weapons-grade uranium for the Manhattan Project”—and hazardous wastes from production of these weapons, including radioactive materials, wound up in Love Canal (Jenks 2011, p. 47).

In 1953, with Love Canal nearly full, Hooker covered it with topsoil or clay and sold it to the Niagara Falls School Board as part of a 16-acre parcel for the token price of one dollar (Jenks 2011, p. 48; Levine 1982, p. 11). “Hooker’s lawyers inserted a clause in the deed that exempted the company from [liability for] any health damage resulting from use of the land and it warned the school district that the soil should not be disturbed,” although the reasons for this warning were left vague (Jenks 2011, pp. 48-49). “Seemingly oblivious to these warnings, the school district built a new school directly on top of the canal” (Jenks 2011, p. 49). The school district “then sold unused land to real-estate developers, who in

turn sold tracts for new housing” (Jenks 2011, p. 49). “As the years went by after the school was built, modest two- and three-bedroom homes went up, with backyards bordering the lands extending from both sides of the canal” (Levine 1982, p. 13).

Meanwhile, Hooker prospered, growing from \$19 million in sales in 1945 to \$75 million in 1955, and then to \$1.7 billion in 1978, employing 18,000 people worldwide, with its corporate headquarters and largest of 60 manufacturing plants in Niagara Falls (Levine 1982, p. 9). Hooker was later acquired by Occidental Petroleum Corporation (often referred to by its stock symbol, “Oxy”), the multinational, vertically integrated oil and petrochemical company, which today has a market capitalization of \$53 billion.

While legal, political, economic, and social forces combined to set the stage for disaster, geological, hydrological, and meteorological forces—environmental realities—ultimately brought the buried wastes to the surface. Residents of Love Canal discovered to their horror that they were living on top of a chemical waste dump, and the chemicals were leaching into their homes and yards and the fields surrounding the neighborhood school (O’Brien 2022). Thus Love’s canal became Love Canal—“the American dream turned into a suburban nightmare” (Jenks 2011, p. 45).

“The Love Canal story,” as Lois Gibbs wrote, “is about a thousand families who lived near the site of an abandoned toxic chemical waste dump” (Gibbs 2011, p. 19). But it is more than that. Love Canal is a story of technological hubris, environmental contamination, and the “perils of progress” (Jenks 2011). Love Canal is a story of how utopian dreams can descend into dystopian nightmares (Jenks 2011).

Love Canal led to the enactment of CERCLA, the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, better known as the “Superfund” law (Lazarus 2006, p. 108). And Love Canal would become the nation’s first Superfund site. So the story of Love Canal is a key chapter in the making of modern environmental law.

For those who lived it, Love Canal is also the story “of how we, ordinary citizens of the United States, can take control of our lives by insisting that we be heard” (Gibbs 2011, p. 19). Love Canal thus marks a turning point in the environmental movement in the United States and around the world.

The Love Canal story, we contend, remains relevant—indeed, essential—for understanding environmental issues, environmental law and policy, and environmental activism today. As educators, we have endeavored to teach the lessons of Love Canal. And our teaching has gone beyond the classroom, as we have taken students to Love Canal to walk the

abandoned streets, to see the so-called containment zone, and to hear Luella's story (Hinkley 2023, p. 48). We share part of Luella's story here, as an example of environmental activism through teaching.

Luella's Story

My world and the direction of my life changed dramatically in 1978. Up to that time, I felt that I had achieved my life's dream. I had a college degree, which I thought was an accomplishment for a woman in the 1950s. My family, career, and singing in a chorale were the center of my life.

The nightmare began in June 1978 when my seven-year-old son, Jon Allen, was diagnosed with minimal lesion nephrosis, an immune-response disease. The summer of 1978 went by with my son in the hospital and doctors' appointments when he was not in the hospital. I was told that Jon would outgrow the disease. He died on October 4, 1978.

Without warning I became a grieving mother trying to protect my family from the chemicals that were taking over my backyard, where my children played. My house was in Love Canal, the neighborhood in Niagara Falls where—unbeknownst to the residents—more than 21,000 tons of chemicals had been buried. The chemicals began to migrate through the residential neighborhood, seeping into our homes and

causing illnesses, miscarriages, birth defects, and deaths. Suddenly I was an environmental activist, along with many of my neighbors.

For the next two years our lives were consumed with the campaign to convince the government to evacuate us. A group of ordinary citizens fought and succeeded in persuading the government to purchase these houses and we were evacuated. Our grassroots campaign inspired people around the world to demand environmental action. Forty-five years later I am still an environmental activist, and I continue to try to help other grassroots groups that are facing the same problems.

The morning of my son's funeral a front-page story in the *Buffalo Courier-Express* reported that the New York State Department of Health was going to investigate Jon's death because it was unusual for a seven-year-old to die from his illness. My husband and I were scientists, and we decided to research Jon's illness so that we would be knowledgeable to discuss the state's findings. Much to our dismay we found several articles in medical journals describing exposure to chemicals as a cause of minimal lesion nephrosis. After months of waiting to hear from the Department of Health I approached Dr. David Axelrod, New York State Health Commissioner, at a public meeting and asked him about the status of the investigation. He informed me that the department had

thoroughly investigated Jon's death and that I should contact his office so we could meet.

I finally met with Dr. Axelrod in June 1979. On the day of the meeting, he walked into the office and told me, "you have to stop flagellating yourself and go on with your life." He went on to say that the children of Love Canal did not have kidney disease, but instead ruptured their kidneys while playing football.

In preparation for my meeting with Health Commissioner Axelrod I read my son's autopsy report, a deeply painful experience for any mother, and learned that he had no thymus gland. Dr. Axelrod told me, "you don't need a thymus gland." I responded that the thymus gland was in fact needed for a seven year old to develop a healthy immune response. Clearly, Jon Allen, who was the only one of my children born at Love Canal, had no immune response. The Health Commissioner's cavalier attitude, together with the mountain of lies we were fed by officials at all levels of government, was what made me an environmental activist. The powers that be, who were supposed to be responsible for protecting the people of New York, simply did not care about helping the residents of Love Canal live in a safe environment.

Countless times state officials told me to move back into my house because it was safe. At the same time my husband's cardiologist warned that we should not be in that house because my husband's heart condition was deteriorating due to chemical exposure. For over a year and a half we were vagabonds, living at times in a hotel, or with my mother-in-law, or in military housing at the Niagara Falls Air Force Base. My house was burglarized six times. Thieves even took our regulation pool table; I still don't know how they got it out the door. At this point the only thing I valued was my family.

We were a group of mothers trying to protect our families. We were derided as "hysterical housewives." But we would shrug off the insults and endure any hardship in this fight for our lives. Along the way we were offered what I called "lollypops" intended to make us act like good little children and be quiet—or better yet, go away. I have always considered the so-called investigation into Jon's death one of those lollypops. We had one goal in mind and that was evacuation, and we would not settle for less.

Unexpectedly, I found myself swarmed by media and constantly being asked to tell my story in interviews. I was even the subject of a PBS documentary. I never knew when I would be home; frequently, I would get a phone call and I was off to Atlanta, New York City, or wherever else I was needed. The

whole world was interested: I gave interviews to Swedish and Japanese reporters and even spoke to the BBC. I received a letter from a friend in Japan saying he saw my name in the newspaper in Japanese characters.

In 1980 I was invited by the Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility to be one of the speakers for the corporate-responsibility resolution that was on the ballot at Occidental Petroleum's annual shareholders' meeting in Beverly Hills, California. Armand Hammer, Occidental's legendary CEO, controlled the meeting as he controlled everything and everybody. We sat for what seemed like hours watching home movies of Hammer greeting heads of state. Hammer always arranged for the shareholders' meeting to be held on his birthday, so that at the appointed time a squadron of little old ladies could run up to the dais, cake in hand, to wish him a happy birthday. He had very little time for the resolutions and simply brushed speakers off. The first speaker was able to read one paragraph before getting cut off. I went up next and was able to read my whole five-minute speech. Hammer then told me to "go back to Buffalo," not even realizing that Love Canal is in Niagara Falls, a thirty-minute drive from Buffalo. Hammer said that President Carter had just declared a federal emergency and Occidental "was not responsible" for what happened. Later, Occidental was found legally responsible in the many lawsuits that were filed, including

an action by the U.S. government to recover cleanup costs.

Following our prepared speeches, we scrambled for microphones. Another speaker tried to warn shareholders that Love Canal was only the tip of the iceberg, and that Occidental had other toxic waste sites in and around Niagara Falls. He was physically dragged out of the meeting hall. I was in the rear of the room, and Hammer didn't recognize me at first, but as soon as I said a few words he yelled, "you are determined for publicity." Before he cut off my microphone, I was able to shout back, "I am determined that no other child will die because of corporate irresponsibility." Hammer then said, "you're lucky you're not a man or I would have you thrown out too." I said, "go ahead and do it, I'm not going to stop speaking as I'm dragged out." I've never stopped speaking about Love Canal and the dangers of corporate irresponsibility.

The EPA hostage-taking (1), President Carter's emergency declaration, and the Occidental shareholders' meeting were all happening at the same time. Reporters from national and international news organizations descended on Niagara Falls. And the next day my family was scheduled to go to New York City for the Polish Singers' Convention. My husband and I sang in choral groups for many years, and I maintain that singing was the best therapy for stress and an indispensable source of

comfort during this chaotic time. As we checked into the hotel I found that there were many notes from media waiting for me, requesting interviews. While my family was watching the show at Radio City Music Hall, I was giving an interview on the phone in the lobby. While people were dancing at the Convention's ball, I was back in the hotel room doing another interview.

Our goal to be evacuated from Love Canal was finally achieved in early 1981. But I had adopted the mantra that I was determined that no other child would die because of corporate irresponsibility. This is my mission in life, and it has sustained me for the last forty-five years as I continue to speak out about the dangers of exposure to toxic chemicals and to give tours of Love Canal. I have talked to students from elementary school to college and graduate school, and to church groups, environmental groups, and book clubs. Speaking to students is especially important to me. They are our future, and they need to know that exposure to chemicals will destroy future generations. Children in Flint, Michigan, and across the United States suffer from lifelong intellectual disabilities because of lead in their drinking water. Untold numbers of children are born with severe birth defects because they were exposed to chemicals in utero. The U.S. Supreme Court either doesn't understand these tragic realities or doesn't care as it renders decisions preventing the EPA from

regulating clean air and water. So much for respect for life.

In addition to teaching and mentoring students, I have visited grassroots groups across the country to help them navigate the bureaucracy, and I have marched with them in protest. I have served on two environmental boards, written innumerable letters, served on a mock court, and given numerous interviews to all forms of media. I have kept fighting.

Love Canal is still there—the 21,000 tons of chemicals are still there—surrounded by a chain-link fence with a sign indicating only that it is “private property.” The Love Canal Superfund site is covered by a clay cap and is monitored by a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum: the proverbial fox guarding the henhouse. There are no signs or warnings referencing Love Canal—the world's most notorious toxic waste dump. The surrounding neighborhood has been renamed “Black Creek Village” and a playground has been erected just yards from the fence surrounding the Superfund site. Unknowingly or unbelievably, mothers bring their children to play on the playground in the shadow of Love Canal. While leading tours I've seen pregnant women and young children at the playground, and I shudder knowing that pregnant women (and fetuses) and young children are the most vulnerable to chemical exposure.

In the 1990s one section of the area formerly known as Love Canal was declared habitable, and many homes were resold. The remaining section was declared uninhabitable. And while a handful of holdouts chose to stay in the uninhabitable zone, their homes were never to be resold. Recently, however, several of these homes have been resold without disclosing that they are in Love Canal (McKinley 2023). History repeats itself and the fight goes on.

Several years ago, I was on a panel for an EPA conference. During a preparatory session I was told by the EPA representative on the panel that I was discussing history and there was no time for history. I replied, that attitude is the reason we keep making the same mistakes. I still have hope, and I see the pendulum swinging in the right direction.

My advice to the next generation of activists is just this: never give up and continue to fight. It's not easy, but it is so rewarding. I can't bring Jon back and the ache in my heart is always present, but I can save other children from the same fate.

Notes:

1. After the release of an EPA study showing high rates of chromosomal damage among residents of Love Canal, members of the Love Canal Homeowners Association took drastic action, holding two EPA officials as "hostages" for several hours.

References:

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