

Love Canal's barricades come down

City fathers say emergency over but homeowners say 'it's sick'

By Joanne Omang Washington Post

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. — Little more than a year ago, a national emergency was declared in the Love Canal area. Streets were barricaded and houses abandoned, turning it into a stark symbol of lives ruined by toxic chemical wastes.

Today, \$80 million in funding later, the city fathers have declared the emergency over. They want people to move back into the old neighborhood.

But this has stunned local residents who are outraged over health tests that haven't happened, bills that were never paid and government promises that were never kept.

Love Canal, where Hooker Chemical Co. dumped tons of chemical wastes during the 1940s and 1950s, is now a prison-like compound of decaying houses, a ghost town inside a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

The school building that may have started the problem by breaking the old canal's clay lid stands empty on the grassy mound that covers the canal, its playground overgrown.

Family of pheasants

Everywhere are boarded-up windows and doors that flap wetly into dark, vandalized buildings. A family of pheasants has taken up residence in lawns and shrubs gone wild and bushy.

"It's sick," Jo Ann Kott, who runs the Love Canal Homeowners Association, said when told about the push to get the people to move back.

She left the Love Canal with her husband and five children, and remains bitter about the episode, citing delayed payments and ongoing hassles with the city over old bills and grievances.

But a few folks are moving back. Some never left. To them, the episode was an overblown media event that created hysteria where there should have been simple concern. Most of the lawsuits are not settled.

Most people have been excluded since 1979 from these 235 small, one-storey houses that make up the "inner ring" and "second ring" of homes next to and across the street from the old canal.

Only state officials come and go to a squat brick building near the school, where machines hum around the clock, percolating groundwater through charcoal filters to get the chemicals out.

The current problems lie just outside the fence, where more boarded-up houses are interspersed with homes where ordinary families continue their lives. This is the so-called "third ring," the 550 homes and housing-project buildings two or more streets away from the canal.

It is a wrecked community, and along its looping suburban avenues there is only one issue: How much leakage from Love Canal crossed under the fence?

Washington and New York state spent \$15 million to buy the homes of about 400 families who were convinced their illnesses and smelly basements proved that a lot of chemicals made the trip. The families moved out.

But Richard Morris moved in. After using some persuasion on his wife and two teenage daughters, he moved the family July 1 to a three-



3. 'Third ring'
Niagara Falls urging people to
move back into 550 homes

Rising again?
the street from
houses in the "1

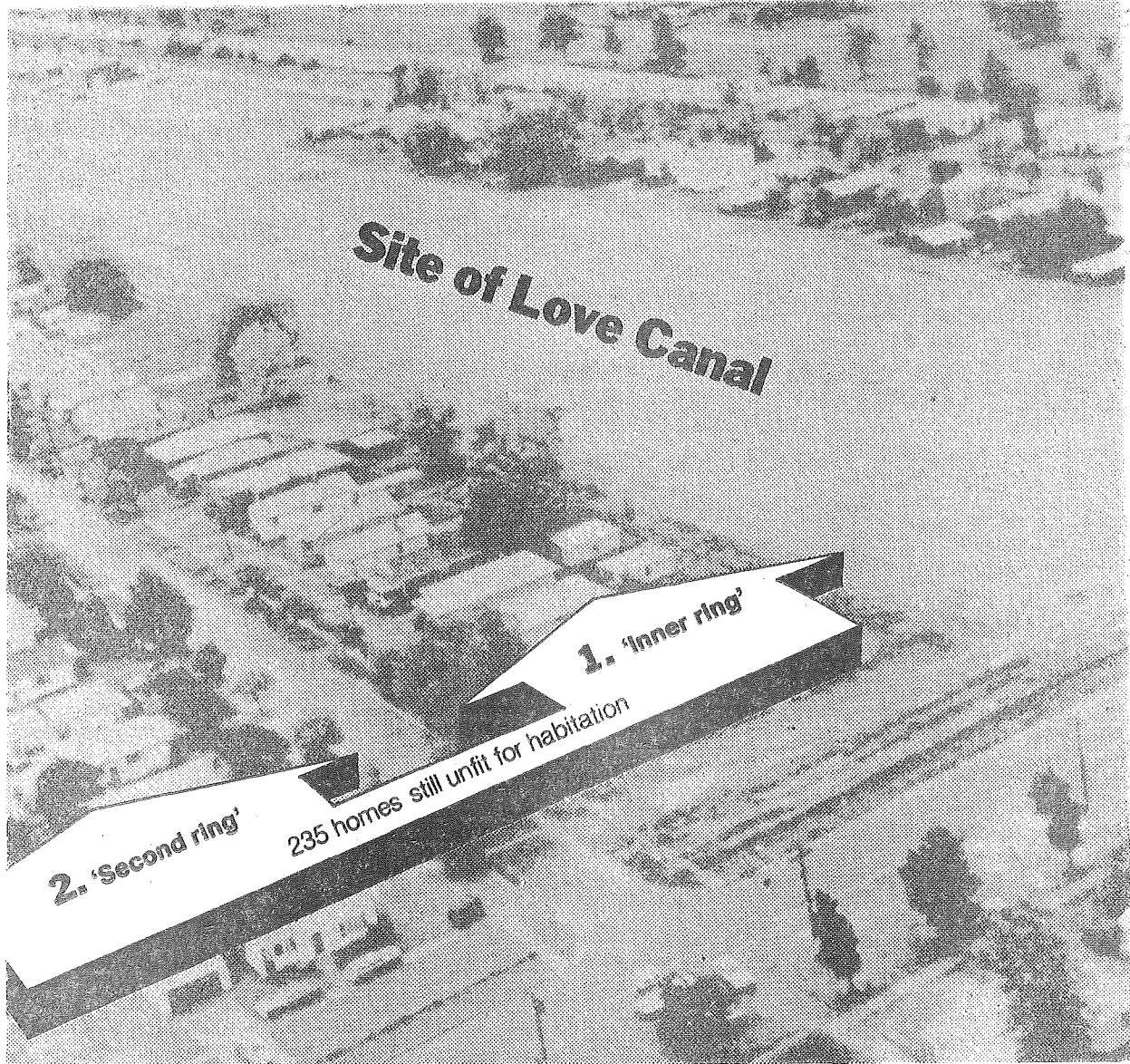
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Morris is director of the Love Canal Revitalization Agency, which runs the state-federal program that has bought 398 of the houses in the third ring. Those are the boarded-up homes. An additional 160 houses remain, and 50 of those owners have refused to move, Morris said.

His goal is to move other people back in, and he moved here to set an example, he said.

"We took a house with two-foot grass in front and boarded-up windows and brought it back to where it's a perfectly liveable and saleable property," Morris said. "If someone will say finally that it's safe to market these homes, it's in our interest

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Most people have been excluded from the "inner ring" and "second ring" of homes next to and across the old Love Canal since 1979. But now the push is on to get people to move back to boarded-up third ring."

them back on the tax rolls." Kott and many others are hopeful that the verdict will come from the Environmental Protection Agency, overdue since June, of the highest chemical levels in these areas.

It will come with an explanation from the Department of Health and Human Services on whether the chemicals are bad for people, and another from the National Bureau of Standards as to whether the study is sound.

It is clearly taking no chances in waiting what one employee called the "Picciano fiasco" of last year.

The study by Dr. Dante Picciano of Amoco Chemicals Corp. in Houston triggered national attention when it found damaged chromosomes in some of 36

people he studied from the third ring.

Former president Jimmy Carter then declared the national emergency.

Later, some critics said the study was severely flawed in its technique and, although equally reputable scientists defended it, the results have been under a cloud ever since.

So EPA spent \$5.5 million taking chemical readings in the third ring and now plans to release its report "in a few weeks," according to John Deegan, who heads the agency's Love Canal project.

But Jo Ann Kott is so suspicious of government now, that she has refused to take part in a repeat by the Centers for Disease Control of the disputed Picciano genetic study. The CDC plans to retest the same 36 people in order to answer finally the

question of chromosome damage.

After the first test, Kott said, she was told by EPA that she had "a little damage but nothing to be concerned about."

Chemicals have always been a fact of life in Niagara Falls, the mainstay of the economy after dairy products and before the falls themselves.

But just as Love Canal raised the nation's consciousness about chemical waste, it galvanized local people as well. A recent report by the New York Public Interest Research Group, a Ralph Nader offshoot, found after three years of checking that the Niagara River receives half a million gallons of poorly treated chemical waste every day from the "chemical row" of companies in Niagara Falls, sewage plants and old buried waste dumps in the region other than Love Canal.

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