

Love Canal residents campaign for clean environment, New York, USA, 1978-1980

- [local community or neighborhood-level campaign](#) [1]

Timing

May

1978

to:

May

1980

Location and Goals

Country:

United States

Location City/State/Province:

New York (upstate)

Location Description:

Love Canal neighborhood

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

The Love Canal Homeowners' Association had a three-part goal: "to press for some restitution for property losses, to insist on a clean up of the chemicals, and to work for the immediate closing of the school".

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 090. Revenue refusal › Refusal to pay taxes on houses near canal
- 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 173. Nonviolent occupation › 200 residents moved into Stella Niagara Education Park after being removed from area hotels

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support › LCHA refused to host meeting to discuss safety plan and refused to support the plan after it was edited
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › 100 residents blockaded a road

Segment Length:

4 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Environment

Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- Love Canal Residents

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Love Canal Homeowners' Association, Lois Gibbs

Partners:

Dr. Beverly Paigen, Sister Margeen Hoffmann, Karen Schroeder, Joann Hale, Luella Kenny, LaSalle Renters Association, 93rd Street Group, Love Canal Concerned Area Residents Group, Love Canal Renters Association, Love Canal Environmental Action Committee, Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier

External allies:

Michael Brown (The Niagara Gazette)

Involvement of social elites:

Actress Jane Fonda and activist husband Tom Hayden, scientists and researchers at Roswell Park Memorial Institute

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- 93rd St Group
- Dr. Beverly Paigen
- Joann Hale
- Karen Schroeder
- LaSalle Renters Association
- Lois Gibbs
- Love Canal Concerned Area Residents Group
- Love Canal Homeowners' Association
- Love Canal Renters Association
- Luella Kenny
- Sister Margeen Hoffmann

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier
- Love Canal Environmental Action Committee

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Actress Jane Fonda and activist husband Tom Hayden

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

4 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Hooker Chemical Company, a division of Occidental Petroleum Corporation

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

In 1894, William T. Love started construction on a power canal in an area outside of Niagara Falls in upstate New York. Although the canal was never completed, the neighborhood of Love Canal was born and soon became a locus of major chemical companies. In 1942, Hooker Chemical Company began dumping chemical waste into the abandoned canal. Through 1953, Hooker Chemical dumped 21,000 tons of chemical waste, including sludge, fly ash, and chlorinated hydrocarbon residues. Later studies would reveal the presence of more than 200 different types of chemicals and chemical compounds in the former canal. Typical of the time's awareness of the dangers of chemical contamination, the dumpsite was not lined and some of the chemical waste was not drummed in solid containers. In 1953, Hooker Chemical covered the dumpsite with a minimal amount of topsoil and sold the site to the Niagara Falls Board of Education for \$1. A public elementary school was built on a portion of the site in 1955 and numerous homes and apartments were built in the area. By 1978, there were approximately 800 single-family homes and 240 low-income apartments in the vicinity of the canal. Hooker Chemical, now a major chemical multinational, had recorded net sales of \$1.7 billion in 1978 and employed 18,000 people worldwide.

Although complaints were made about the site during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, these were generally either ignored or met with minimal concessions or changes, like an exposed drum simply being covered with more dirt. Residents complained of smells and strange substances in their basements and on the ground near

their homes and the school but the local and state government did not launch an investigation until the International Joint Commission released findings that traced the presence of the insecticide Mirex in Lake Ontario fish to the chemical waste at Love Canal. In 1976, the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC) collected air and soil samples from the area. Their findings, released in 1977, indicated that the air and soil had been contaminated by Hooker's chemical waste. Residents implored the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a more thorough investigation, which resulted in blood samples of residents and the establishment of a panel of physicians to determine if residents were in danger. During the fall of 1976, several articles were published in *The Niagara Gazette*, which reported on chemicals seeping into homes and residents complaining of increased illnesses and injuries to themselves, their pets, and their plant life. The *Niagara Gazette* also published the findings of the NYDEC's investigations, which indicated the presence of three toxic hydrocarbons as well as the discharge of toxic chemicals into the Niagara River. Michael Brown, the reporter responsible for the front-page piece on the chemical contamination at Love Canal, was an important ally in the early stages of the campaign as he helped to disseminate knowledge to residents and attract national attention to the environmental disaster.

Lois Gibbs was a Love Canal resident with a personal stake in the environmental disaster - her young son, who attended the 99th Street elementary school located on the former dump site, was sick and she blamed his illnesses on chemical exposure. Gibbs began her activist campaign by demanding that the Board of Education place her son in a school in a different location in 1978. When the Board refused, Gibbs began speaking with her neighbors, walking door-to-door to collect people's information and their stories. At the same time, angered residents formed a tax-and-mortgage protest group and organized a demonstration during which they collected mortgage statements and burned them because of their frustration at the depreciated value of their homes due to the presence of chemicals. Lois Gibbs' summer-long informal epidemiological study revealed certain "hot spots" of elevated disease rates and birth defects, which caught the attention of Dr. Beverly Paigen. Dr. Paigen, a cancer researcher at Roswell Park Memorial Institute in Buffalo, New York, conducted studies on the rates of birth defects and miscarriages of residents and determined that the elevated rates were a result of exposure to harmful chemicals that had been leached from the dumpsite. Gibbs and Paigen's campaigning on behalf of Love Canal's residents also informed State Health Commissioner Robert Whalen's decision to declare a State of Emergency in the area and to order the closing of the 99th Street School. These statements, made on August 2, 1978, were accompanied by an order for the relocation of residents who he deemed at "high-risk", including families of pregnant women and children under the age of two. Although Gibbs was pleased that the school was closed, the campaign against the dumpsite was just getting started.

On August 4, the Love Canal Homeowners' Association (LCHA) was formed to represent the concerns of those affected by exposure to chemicals at Love Canal. Lois Gibbs established the association as a follow-up to her original Love Canal Parents Movement, which focused on the concerns of parents whose children attended the 99th Street School. Once the school was closed and the order was made for initial relocations of affected persons, Gibbs and the LCHA continued to advocate on behalf of the relocation of others living in the area. Residents protested at the doors of the closed school and in December seven members of the LCHA were arrested, although charges were later dropped, while protesting the state's refusal to relocate fifty-four families who lived on the outskirts of the contaminated area. Because of the high cost of relocation and the uncertainty in regards to the reach of the contamination, state agencies were hesitant in providing funding for other citizens who wanted to move, which angered residents.

During the fall of 1978 and the early months of 1979, residents protested the state's reluctance to fund wider relocations with street protests, prayer vigils and a march to the state capital while carrying empty children's coffins on Mother's Day to represent birth defects and miscarriages from toxic exposure. Additionally, the residents picketed near the canal everyday for weeks during the cold winter months. This greatly increased the

national attention given to the actionists' fight in local and national media outlets. Residents used powerful language to create slogans, blaming Hooker Chemical for poisoning their children and soil and lamenting the inaction by state officials and agencies. The LCHA also continued Gibbs' preliminary epidemiological studies by interviewing residents about their health histories and their perceptions of the conditions at Love Canal, despite the state's insistence that they would conduct their own investigations. From these studies, the LCHA determined that clusters of elevated disease rates followed the paths of old streambeds that had been built over and filled in. This evidence was shared through newspaper articles and interviews and brought more pressure upon the state government to expand the relocation to include more families. When other residents heard about these findings, they supported the LCHA by writing letters to the Governor, state legislators and even to President Carter. Prominent scientists and cancer researchers (as well as actress Jane Fonda and her activist husband Tom Hayden!) also voiced their support for the residents' complaints and encouraged further government action and increased evacuation of affected residents.

Discussions continued between the LCHA and various government officials as Governor Carey unveiled a safety plan for the remaining residents during the reconstruction and clean up of the dumpsite. Lois Gibbs and the LCHA board of directors refused to hold a meeting of the LCHA in August 1979 because they were unsatisfied with the safety plan. The LCHA believed that the plan would not protect those who were not granted relocation funding from potential explosions and the noise and air pollution from construction work. This tactic caused Governor Carey to hastily make some edits to the plan, although Gibbs and the LCHA never gave their full backing to the safety plan. In September 1979, over 200 Love Canal residents took up residence in Stella Niagara Education Park, refusing to return to their homes in Love Canal after they were removed from area hotels. During September-December 1979, various legal actions were taken, including the filing of a lawsuit against Hooker Chemical by a New York attorney who was acting on behalf of LCHA.

In May 1980, residents detained two EPA officials for six hours at the LCHA's offices, which were located in the 99th Street School building. They demanded immediate evacuation for the rest of Love Canal's residents. President Carter responded to their requests by declaring a National Emergency at Love Canal two days later. This declaration granted the state enough funding to purchase 700 additional homes, allowing families in the outermost ring of exposure to relocate. The government also agreed to clean up the site and later lawsuits would find Hooker Chemical financially responsible for the clean up of toxic waste at Love Canal.

Research Notes

Influences:

The actions of the Love Canal Homeowners' Association and Lois Gibbs influenced numerous other campaigns against contamination from toxic chemical waste. Lois Gibbs, now a successful environmental activist, continues to lend her support to various anti-chemical waste campaigns around the country through the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. (2)

Sources:

Beck, Eckardt. "The Love Canal Tragedy". EPA Journal. Washington: Environmental Protection Agency, January 1979. <<http://www.epa.gov/history/topics/lovecanal/01.html>>

Fletcher, Thomas H. From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canada-U.S. Border. New York: broadview press, 2003.

Levine, Adeline G. Love Canal: Science, Politics, and People. Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1982.

"Love Canal: A Special Report to the Governor and Legislature: April 1981." Department of Health, New York State. <http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/investigations/love_canal/lcreport.htm>

"Love Canal Collections." University of Buffalo. <<http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal>>

"Love Canal Factpack." Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. <http://www.chej.org/documents/love_canal_factpack.pdf>

Zaremba, Mark A. "Love Canal: An Introduction." Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science, 2004. <<http://temp.onlineethics.org/environment/lcanal/index.html>>

Additional Notes:

The environmental disaster at Love Canal was a major contributor to the passing of the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation, and Liability Act into law in 1980. More commonly known as "Superfund", this act allocated billions of aid dollars to cleaning up environmental disaster areas in the United States.

A video documentary, titled "In Our Own Backyard: The First Love Canal" was produced in 1983 by Lynn Corcoran, chronicling the Love Canal disaster and the response from citizens and local, state and federal government. Lois Gibbs also published a personal memoir in 1982 on the Love Canal disaster and her work as an environmental activist, titled The Love Canal: My Story.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Nathalie Schils, 22/06/2011

[Back to top](#)

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.

[Creative Commons License](#)

Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#) .

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu> .

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

Source URL (retrieved on 09/26/2020 - 20:39): <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/love-canal-residents-campaign-clean-environment-new-york-usa-1978-1980>

Links:

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/local-community-or-neighborhood-level-campaign>