

Chalk River Nuclear Waste

In 1943, the year I was born, plans were made to build a nuclear plant at Chalk River. As my parents and grandparents marveled in the hope and joy of birth, Canada joined the arms race. Little did they know that a radioactive isotope made at Chalk River would be needed to treat me.

In 1947 we travelled to Canada on the Cunard ocean liner, Queen Mary, and settled in Ottawa, near the magnificent Ottawa River. In 1952, the year of the biggest nuclear accident in Canadian history, we were invited to camp on a beach at the foot of Downey's Bay near a friend's cottage. We could see the Chalk River plant and its smoke stacks from there. We fished for catfish, bass and pike and drank water straight from the river. Our neighbor said the water was pristine in the spring and it tasted pure. Every morning early, we walked up a hill to [REDACTED] farm for fresh cow's milk.

A year later we built our own cabin, three miles downriver from the plant and spent all our summers there. One stormy night I went for a sleepover next-door. As wind lashed, and lightning flashed, two bedraggled and shivering canoeists knocked on the door for shelter. They dried their life jackets, cameras and jackets by the fireplace.

I steered my friend's older sister into the kitchen and whispered, "They have a Russian accent and act Russian". She quietly went into the back room and phoned the RCMP. On the CBC News in the morning we heard that two Russian spies had been apprehended downriver in Pembroke with rolls of film of the Nuclear Plant. We knew that picture taking wasn't allowed. Every time we paddled past the plant in our canoe, we saw the sign: No Pictures. No cameras.

When my three sons were small, I noticed a hard lump in the front of my neck. The Dr. said it was thyroid cancer and in women was easily treated and I would be fine. It took me a year to bounce back from the largest allowable dose of radiation to destroy my thyroid gland. And life was never quite the same, on a fixed dose of thyroid hormone. A normal gland produces thyroxin according to need; mine was removed.

Along our 5 kilometers of shoreline there were few cottages in the early days and cottagers came from the US and various locations in Ontario and Quebec. No statistics are available for cancers or other diseases. Within a half kilometer of our cabin, three of my beach neighbors developed thyroid cancer, one ovarian as well as thyroid cancer. The friend who invited us to Downey's Bay died of kidney cancer. My oldest friend next door had four unrelated types of cancer: bone, leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and a brain tumor. Now there are many others.

Cottagers know that the earth moves on the Upper Ottawa. I remember waking up to dishes rattling on a number of occasions and feeling the ground move under my tent. We also feel the ground shaken by blasts from Petawawa Military Base. Training flights roar overhead and guns sound. In the past, windows have cracked. Why would anyone build a nuclear reactor or an above

ground mega-dump mound for nuclear waste in an earthquake zone, on a fault line, by a military base, below Des Joachim Dam or beside a major river?

When I was sixteen a hurricane created seven-foot waves on the river and stray boats bobbed all over. Trees crisscrossed the road like matchsticks. All the cottagers got together to cut themselves out with hand saws. Water rose half way up our 60 ft. bank. I am sure there was unusually contaminated water that day.

Why would anyone build a permanent mega-dump that may eventually be abandoned and could be easily damaged? Why would a mega-dump for nuclear waste from Chalk River, Quebec, Manitoba, other sites in Ontario, industry and from medical facilities, be built by our vulnerable Ottawa River? Why would anyone build a mega-dump seven stories high and the size of 400 Olympic swimming pools, when waste from accidents and uses of the past is still buried in sand and still leaching into the river. Isn't cleanup a priority while a more permanent and safe solution is figured out?

Shouldn't priority be given to safe long-term storage of nuclear waste and cleanup of waste from the past? Shouldn't the creation of non-nuclear waste producing technologies have priority? Obviously, this is not the goal of nuclear industry interested in short-term profit. In order to avoid catastrophic impact on unsuspecting individuals and large communities, our government must listen to unbiased science and direct industry for the good of us all.

Why would anyone endanger the health of Canadians further when there has been so much devastating damage done already?