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Local News - Tuesday, December 14, 2004

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More South Hill toxins found Large barrels near Emerson site have labels indicating TCE

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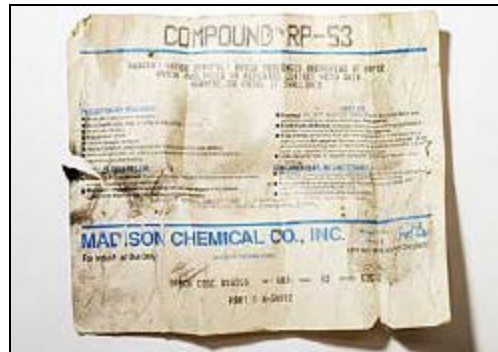
ITHACA -- Another possible source of contamination has been found on the site of the former Morse Chain plant.

Fifty-five-gallon drum barrels labeled as containers for methyl chloroform, a form of trichloroethane or TCE, are rusted out and littering the hillside below Emerson Power Transmission, which bought the property in 1983.

Ray Melvin, a 15-year resident of Morris Heights -- a residential road at the bottom of the hill below Emerson -- would occasionally scale the steep slope scrounging for scrap metal to use in wind chimes he made. Then one day, about seven years ago, he saw a label on a barrel.

"I'd worked with water pollution control systems. That's the only reason I bothered to pick this up," Melvin said, holding a copy of the label that reads "Danger! Vapor harmful!"

Melvin said he thought little of the label until recent reports of



Simon Wheeler/Journal Staff

Ray Melvin discovered this label about seven years ago on a 55-gallon barrel rusting on the hill behind his Morris Heights home. The Emerson Power Transmission plant, located on the former Morse Chain site, sits at the top of the hill. The label indicates that the contents of barrel once included methyl chloroform, a form of trichloroethane, which can adversely affect the central nervous system if large quantities are inhaled.

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air testing in nearby homes jogged his memory. TCE, one chemical on the label, is one of eight site-related compounds being tested for in homes north of Melvin's. He said he called various government departments to alert them of his finding but got the brush-off.



Walter Hang

Then, in late November, he contacted Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting, an Ithaca-based environmental agency.

"He really got things going," Melvin said.

A 55-gallon barrel that once contained methyl chloroform, a form of trichloroethane or TCE, is pictured last week on the hill behind Emerson Power Transmission.

Friday, the Department of Environmental Conservation walked the hillside below Emerson with representatives from the company, Hang and others.

By Monday about a dozen neon pink plastic ribbons tied to trees along the hillside indicated where barrels lay hidden among rubble and debris. Rusted out and often crushed, the metal containers were well camouflaged by leaves and rocks.

"They were very deteriorated," said Tom Suozzo, an environmental engineer with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, who saw the barrels Friday. "They'd been there from quite some time, tens of years."

Suozzo saw no evidence of material in the barrels from his cursory look at them Friday. He noted that the label Melvin found indicated that at least the one barrel from which it came was used for transporting product, not waste. The product was likely used to degrease chains produced at the plant.

David Baldrige, a spokesperson for Emerson, said the company first learned of the barrels on Friday.

"We are arranging to have the drums removed. The DEC asked us to take action right away. The important thing is getting the site cleaned up," Baldrige said. He added that a team was out surveying the site Monday.

Emerson will have to file a work plan with the DEC that includes removing the barrels, testing any material found in the barrels and testing the soil directly beneath each barrel. Suozzo noted that some are wedged so far into the ground they may not be able to be removed. The DEC will require testing of soil nonetheless.

"I expect to see action initiating the removal of the barrels by the end of this week," Suozzo said.

The discovery of these barrels will serve as another point in the case some are making to have the site reclassified by the DEC. It is now a Class 4,


which designates it as properly closed but requiring maintenance, though Lifton and Hang want a Class 2 designation -- "significant threat to the public health or environment -- action required."

"I'm appalled," Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-125, said. "This discovery undermines my confidence in these organizations. This site was identified as an environmental concern 17 years ago and it looks like no one ever did a complete walkover of the property. We don't know the full extent of the dumping or where it occurred."

She and Hang have both requested a reclassification and said they hope the discovery of these barrels spurs action.

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