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New pollution site uncovered

Scrap metal run-off polluted Inlet in '60s, '70s

By Bruce Estes and Jennie Daley
Journal Staff

ITHACA — Toxic chemicals now seeping down Ithaca's South Hill also drained into Cayuga Inlet, according to documents obtained by The Ithaca Journal.

Records from the Tompkins County Health Department describe thousands of gallons of industrial oils dripping from tons of scrap metal dumped from the late 1960s and early '70s at the now-defunct Wallace Steel Inc., 105 Cherry St., Ithaca. The heaps of metal — as much as 500,000 tons each year — were dumped directly onto the ground. Pools of hazardous wastes drained from the metal directly into the soil and also into nearby Cayuga Inlet, the main southern tributary to Cayuga Lake.

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The kinds of oils taken to Wallace Steel were reported as lubricating and cutting oils in the 40-year-old health department reports. However, the records say tons of scrap metal originated from the

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In the late 1960s and 1970s, the former Wallace Steel accepted scrap metal covered with lubricating oils and solvents at this facility on Cherry Street in Ithaca that stretches from Taber Street to Cecil A. Malone Drive. This view is the east side of the property looking south from Taber Street and is located close to several waterways.

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defunct Morse Chain Company, then located on Ithaca's South Hill. That plant dumped a variety of industrial chemicals — including trichloroethylene, or TCE — on its property where it operated from at least 1918 to 1983 when it was sold to Emerson Power Transmission. Whether chemicals such as TCE were included in the scrap metal and oil that went to Wallace is not

known. Studies have linked TCE to a variety of health issues, including cancer.

Years of dumping

The health department reports obtained by The Journal date back to 1968 and refer to lubricating oils and solvents polluting ground and surface water at Wallace Steel. TCE is not specifically mentioned in the documents. Records show that Wallace took scrap metal from several defunct industries that operated in Tompkins County, including:

- * Smith-Corona, a typewriter manufacturer with plants formerly based in Groton.
- * National Cash Register, a business machine manufacturer formerly located on South Hill in Ithaca.
- * Ithaca Gun, a weapons manufacturer in the Fall Creek section of Ithaca.
- * Morse Chain Company, a transmission chain manufacturer also formerly located on South Hill in Ithaca.

A July 30, 1968 county health department memo from Frank R. Liguori, a sanitary engineer with the health department, describes a scene filled with environmental hazards at Wallace Steel:

“I stated that Wallace Junk Yard already has a problem handling Smith-Corona and National Cash Register chippings, and that the material is simply

TCE in Ithaca

Pollution studies during the last two decades have shown that a firewater reservoir on the Morse Chain industrial property leaked water that is contaminated with TCE. A U.S. Environmental Protection Agency draft review awaiting approval on the dangers of TCE regards the solvent as “highly likely to produce cancer in humans.” TCE was used by Morse Chain to degrease metal until the 1970s and has since been determined to have harmful health effects in large doses. Its health impacts at lower doses are not well understood.

Pollution tests begun in 2004 have shown the TCE-laced water is seeping down South Hill. TCE vapors have been found in South Hill residences. Last week, test results showed low levels of TCE contamination at both the Ithaca Police Department and at two police department storage sheds. All of the buildings are located along East Clinton Street at the foot of South Hill. The city buildings are about 1,500 feet from the Emerson plant. They are at the farthest known perimeter from the polluted industrial site where TCE has been found. Another 25 areas of concern have been identified on the factory property, where hazardous waste may have been dumped.

File downloads:

- [TC_Health_Morse_02131969](#)
- [DEC to Wallace, Feb 13, 1974](#)
- [DEC to Wallace cleanup, April 24, 1974](#)
- [MacNeill Engineering report on Wallace, Feb. 28, 1973](#)
- [Aerial photo of Wallace Steel](#)
- [Wallace agreement to cleanup, Aug. 22, 1973](#)
- [TC Health Dept. Memo on Wallace pollution, Jan. 31, 1969](#)

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deposited on the ground creating oil pollution on the ground and occasionally reach Cayuga Inlet. ... Something approaching 500,000 tons of chippings and stampings are involved each year.”

Chippings and stampings noted in the health department document were scrap metal produced while manufacturing machine parts. Other health department documents from 1968 through '75 note that lubricating oils and solvents also used in manufacturing processes covered the metal scraps that were taken to Wallace Steel for recycling. The documents show that scrap metal taken to Wallace Steel was stored either in direct contact with the soil or sometimes in containers. Only some of the containers were sealed to prevent leakage of oils and solvents onto the ground at the junkyard, located less than 100 yards from Cayuga Inlet.

Wallace Steel, which later became Wallace Industries, was sold in 2002 and became Reamer Recycling Services.

Bill Reamer, owner of the business, said oil runoffs like the ones described in the reports would be impossible during the 14 years he's been with the company because they only accept dry material.

“That stuff is washed before it's brought down here,” Reamer said. “It's pretty dry. There's not stuff running off it or anything. You can't ship anything wet.”

Reamer added that there has been a concrete pad lining the site “since long before I've been here.”

Maureen Wren, a spokesperson for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation said via e-mail that the “DEC will be examining any records we have related to historic releases at the site, and we will follow up to determine if the information provided from activities that may have taken place at Wallace continues to pose an environmental problem.”

Wren went on to say that if anyone knows of or has seen evidence of contamination or improper waste, they should contact the DEC.

Cayuga Inlet pollution

A Feb. 13, 1969 letter from Liguori to Richard Curran, then plant manager at Morse Chain, describes the then-recent improvements to the scrap collection procedures. Earlier procedures had resulted in the pollution of ground and surface water around the Wallace junkyard. Liguori, who died a few years ago,

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estimated in his letter that 1,500 gallons of oil each month were drained from the scrap metal taken to Wallace.

Four years after Liguori's letter, a Feb. 28, 1973 report to city, county and state agencies and Wallace Steel officials by John C. MacNeill on the oil pollution at Wallace criticized the oil reclamation plan. MacNeill, a Cortland consulting engineer hired by Wallace, wrote:

“The scrap (metal) is drained before being stockpiled; however, the drainage method is inefficient. Oil drains from the stored scrap onto the ground and is carried into Cayuga Inlet.”

MacNeill's report cited a Jan. 16, 1973 investigation of the Wallace junk yard by the Tompkins County Health Department. In that investigation, “a considerable amount of oil” was found on the ground at Wallace, MacNeill wrote.

“It appeared that the oil was draining off of the piles of metal wastes received from manufacturing operations such as Morse Chain, Ithaca Gun etc...” MacNeill's report read.

“Because there is no method of telling whether all of the oil has drained from the scrap, the scrap delivered to the stockpiles contains a varying amount of oil, most of which drains onto the ground surface before the scrap is shipped out to industrial users. Oil that is discharged to the ground surface is carried by storm water, in a series of natural and man-made drainage ditches, to a swale along the east side of the (Wallace) property. This swale discharges in the Cayuga Lake Inlet,” the report stated.

Following those studies, Wallace Steel signed an agreement in April 1973 with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to file a cleanup plan on its junkyard operations and begin construction of an on-site wastewater facility by Dec. 1, 1973.

Wallace had a state permit for a discharge pond near Brindley Street until 1988. The pond was used to catch oily wastes from Wallace operations. The DEC approved filling in the pond because Wallace had ceased operations that generated oil and grease. No documents could be found to show if the cleanup and wastewater facility resolved the pollution at the junkyard. However, at least three times since 1973, oil spills have been reported at Wallace. Those include:

* March 25, 1986. A DEC spill report shows 100 gallons of an unknown petroleum-affected surface water at Wallace Steel, 105 Cherry St., Ithaca.

* Oct. 19, 1998. A spill report notes petroleum-affected surface water at Wallace. The spill appeared to originate from a pipe at the northeast corner of the property.

* Nov. 13, 2003. A spill report notes petroleum-affected groundwater at Taber Street, the northwestern boundary of the junk yard.

The report of these spills and the ongoing question of contamination spurred Walter Hang, president of the local toxics-mapping firm Toxics Targeting, to ask the DEC for further investigation of the site. Hang addressed a letter to Alexander Grannis, the DEC commissioner, and requested that the site be investigated "without delay."

Of particular concern to Hang is the proximity of the site to the southern tributaries of Cayuga Lake, meaning it could "pose a continuing threat to water quality."

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can someone clean it up and get on w life?

Posted: Tue May 01, 2007 1:06 pm

For the concentration of Intelligence in a small city such as Ithaca, the naiveté is sometimes overwhelming. It is truly unfortunate that the Recycling business (and that's what it is; as in recycling items that have outlasted their usefulness and turning them into something useful without causing the waste that would come from ground up productions), is being subjugated to a "junk yard" status because of ignorance and 'fear profiteer' firms such as 'Toxics Targeting'.

It is a shame that such a worthwhile cause as preserving and improving the future of our environment is being spearheaded by watchdog groups that are unable to see the forest through the trees they claim to be protecting.

Posted: Tue May 01, 2007 9:52 am
