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FERNALD LIVING HISTORY PROJECT
Transcript

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Tape: F-1

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Tape FEMP023489

00:00:13

From 00:00:13 to 06:16:20 interviewer and speaker are walking on property to the house. They are having conversation about dogs, early pioneers and the land itself.

06:16:20

Time rolling tape.

06:30:28

When did you first learn about the Fernald site?

06:26:15

I believe it was around 1984 when there was some information that came out about contaminated wells. So I attended a meeting, I believe Senator Tom Luken had called a meeting at Crosby School and I went up there to see what was happening. I was concerned. I wanted to see what it was about. We were planning on drilling a well when we moved here.

07:12:29

How long have you lived here?

07:19:12

We moved here about 1970, so uh, that was about 1984, 85.

07:19:10

And at that time you weren't aware that the site was there?

07:22:20

I the only way I new there was a site or plant there and it was understood to be that they made paint. It was called National Lead of Ohio and I automatically was thinking lead paint. And someone had told me that it was paint. Because when we first was thinking about moving down here, I went downtown to find out as much information as I could. I asked about the plant and they said it makes paint. I said I'm pretty sure they take care of their product and it's not going to harm the community that I move in to. So we brought the house. Not only because we like the view it had and the river but there was a yard big enough to have a garden.

08:31:12

When you learned about the site what did you first learn about it?

08:36:06

The first time we knew actually what the site was producing, it scared me at first. To realize that possibly they were contaminating the ground water. In this area we have a lot of private wells. I was

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concerned about the drinking water, bathing water, cooking water. I started attending the meetings that DOE was having for the public. I tried to gather as much information that I could about the plant.

09:39:06

Was this something your whole family was involved in or you took the lead on that?

09:43:16

No. Just myself. I took the lead on that because I ques-, my husband worked and even though I had a job too. I felt for my own satisfaction that I needed to hear more about the plant, after all I'm concerned about my family's health and safety. I attended a community group known as FRESH. They talked about not having an evacuation plan, not having a warning system if something went wrong. That scared me and knowing that the community only had a volunteer fire department. It was all the little things that kept mounting up that made me more and more concerned about the safety of my community and the safety of my home.

10:39:04

Tell us what FRESH stands for and how you became more involved in that group?

10:45:02

Fernald Residents for Environmental Safety and Health. I got involved in that mainly because of the environment. I am an outdoors person and again we like the river in our backyard where we thought we can fish, and we had the garden that would supplement our food. When you have children your grocery list is rather large, by this way we could supplement our food budget. So I started attending the meetings and hearing more about what the plant was doing and how it was possibly contaminating so I just got involved because I wanted to help correct the situation.

11:48:08

What has your involvement and how long has it been within the group?

11:56:19

It has been fourteen years now and about 1988, 89 I sort of took over the health issues site. I drew a map showing the radius of the site and some of the other FRESH members collected names, we started collecting pins representing the people's name we started placing them on a map. We started seeing a pattern of clusters. Well, clusters was our first observation and that made us want to get more info about other health around the site. So the FRESH meeting asked us to give information about family or friends and what health concerns they possibly may have caused by living near the Fernald site. And so we gathered up today out of a population 6000 which is a community surrounding the Fernald site of 397 pins and uh, about 20 that we call just cancers because some of the people did not know what type of cancer it was.

13:41:22

We have lung cancer, kidney cancer, bladder cancer, and then we have other diseases such as multiple miscarriage, male reproductive problems. The more you start hearing about this the more concerned you get. In the beginning I only was in FRESH for the environment reason and now I find that I am personally involved. Because my family possibly may have been affected because of living near this site. Two of them weren't raised here but one of them was and now they have come down with different illnesses that are not in our family.

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14:28:03

This is my concern now and seeing how many other possible other health affects in other families we have to get this problem solved.

14:46:04

What prompted your group to use a map?

14:59:11

Well, this is what we thought, well we were trying to reach out to the community. And to try to show them that there is a problem. So we started talking about the health concerns, so let's form something that can be a educational tool. So we thought about the map and trying to show a pattern possible of the people who were affected. If we could show clusters and what area being more impacted by Fernald. At that time we were not sure what impact Fernald had through the air, through the water, through the soil, but we had an idea that there was the contamination.

16:01:02

We thought we could use this as an educational tool and that people could see that there are health concerns, and if DOE could see that there are health problems here, and also we were trying to get health studies and get CDC even our public health department involved and that's where we developed the map that if people would start seeing this that they would start asking for help from these agencies.

16:37:11

Prior to the map, how did people react when you tried to talk to them about health concerns or Fernald issues?

16:46:03

Well, some of the people would say, I'm healthy as a horse, there's nothing wrong with me or with my family. That's when we tried to tell them with low level radiation it doesn't affect until twenty years down the road and it may not show up now but in a generation later. By FRESH we bring in speakers to show people and to explain to people and when we did have speakers, we would get more information for our health map. And finally ATSCR came in and we asked for a consultation especially for our vegetables grown here and monitoring the water. We asked EPA to get involved. And so soon they were here, especially the health agencies, we need to get their attention more. We did have Dr. John Till's Dose Reconstruction Report and that confirmed that the readmission was the largest problem cause by Fernald. But it didn't exactly point out health problems or anything like that. It showed ah concerns for possible health affects. The map brought the people in.

18:30:03

Did you see a big change in community awareness or understanding of the issues from the time you started trying to get the word out until now?

18:38:29

It really hasn't changed that much. Uh, I know that we do now have CDC help form a Fernald Health Subcommittee. That has brought more people in that sit on that board in the 5-mile surrounding area. Colerain and Cincinnati and also has brought in some doctors.

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19:18:00

From that panel union members, residents, I'm trying to think of some more. We have EPA as ex-officio and by having this board we work the health problems and try to see which ones need more attention, too. Especially with the physicians. We have a doctor now on the board- she has stated that knowing this about Fernald, it can help manage her patients better. Who possibly worked or lived in the Fernald area.

20:15:01

What is your connection to this board?

20:21:11

I am a member. I represent FRESH on this board. Then too, I tell people what is going on. A lot of our members who live out of the 2-mile area really don't think they have been affected. Everyone has been affected by Fernald in some way.

20:45:24

How long have you been a part of that board and do you feel like they have been making progress?

20:51:15

It's been about three years now and we are making progress. The members of the Board have been brought up to date. They have learned a lot and have even said they have learned a lot. Their concern is a lot greater than what it was in the beginning.

21:32:21

It sounds like several wards, community groups have become involved in the issues. How would you characterize relationships with DOE, site contractors and those community groups?

21:39:21

In the Fernald area, I think it has grown quite well and that we have all gained respect for each other, it has been, we have learned from each other, we have taught DOE a lot, how to respect the general public's opinion. We can make decent decisions, I understand sometime I go off in another area and don't address an issue, I learned that from DOE that way (she laughs).

22:41:18

It sounds like community boards and community groups have developed within the area. How would you characterize interaction with those groups and site contractors?

22:50:00

I would say it's great. It took a while for all of us to get together but public participation has helped us get to know one another, respect one another, especially for the DOE and the contractors to realize that we can make decisions and we are not always on the opposite side. And by working together and sitting down at the table we have gotten respect for each other. And I think this was the biggest, oh gosh I can't think of the right word (she laughs). Biggest achievement or improvement. In one way it's achievement but not exactly. A step forward (they laugh). So this was the biggest step forward, gaining respect for each other.

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24:22:03

How have you seen your involvement in the community affect your family life?

24:34:00

Yes, you do spend a lot of time, more time than you realize. Even though I don't work, we do have members that do work. It does take up a lot of time from the family. Sometimes you wonder if it's all worth it. You look back and see that it is, but you always need more help than what is really out there.

25:00:22

My kids would get upset because I would attend meetings three and four times a week. The very beginning, FRESH would average two to three a week for the month but I don't know if DOE was challenging this (she laughs).

25:30:28

If they thought they could win by beating us down, by having all these meetings in the beginning. Whenever FRESH would ask for a meeting we would have them. And they thought we would get tired after the first 5 years, but we didn't.

25:52:12

We're sticking there, and we have educated ourselves. That's another reason to go back away. We're educating ourselves also. DOE and the contractor realized that and have given us respect that way also.

26:21:23

Is it a small group that's attending the meetings or is it a large percentage?

26:33:12

Well, like we have the CAB, Citizen's Advisory Board that makes a lot of decisions. That is made up of the community members. They follow the Fernald site's cleanup projects real close. You have the CRO, which is the land use economic group. Then you have FRESH. I'm trying to think. Then you have the Health Effects Subcommittee. That's the group that we have now here. I would say on the average there're probably about 50 people. If you want to count all of the organizations and the people who attend them. I would say there is probably 50 to 75 people who have committed themselves to prove and help restore Fernald back to what would you say a clean site.

27:48:27

How are those groups perceived by the larger community? Is it appreciation? What's the relationship between those groups to the larger communities?

28:00:00

I believe the larger community says people who attend those let them do the work. Let it all up to them you know. They are doing fine. A couple of times I have been out at the store and someone recognizes us or if we mention FRESH. Someone will say, you guys are doing a good job. Keep up the good work.

28:26:03

It's those 50 people that work hard at trying to correct the situation.

28:32:13

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And how would you characterize that as changing over time when you first moved here to when people learned about the issues to now. How has the community perception of the activist element changed over time?

28:51:16

The community residents, I think they still have that impression that we as the FRESH group are activists where the CAB and the CRO are more community oriented than what FRESH is. I question, some people said "I don't think activist is that word." The way it used to be thought of 10 or 15 years ago.

29:26:22

I don't like the word activist. I'm just a concerned citizen. I'm concerned about my family's health and safety. And I wanted their health and safety to be secure. And then, too, if my community's health and safety isn't well, my family's health and safety isn't well. I only want my family to have a better quality of life.

29:59:01

How do you think those larger community's perception of those who've been more involved in issues, how do you think that has changed over time?

30:23:09

Well, when we first start meeting I remember one of the meetings I was attending, we were just forming FRESH, handing out flyers to the community. A man came up to us and told us to go home and put our aprons back on and take care of our family. That we were not accomplishing anything.

30:55:10

That always stuck with us at FRESH. But now people do come up to us and say keep up the good work. Sometimes I say, we need your help. That's how it has changed since then and where it is now. Then the health agencies and DOE is paying more attention. We have developed organizations. It has changed.

31:38:18

When you interact with other sites and think back on this site or other communities do you see similarities or see us as unique.

31:54:09

Right now we're kind of unique. We've sort of been a pilot program I guess you would say out of respect for one another we have gotten further along in our cleanup progress maybe then some of the other sites have because when talking to other groups, they seem to not have that relationship with EPA, DOE and our contractors. And I think we're very unique in that respect.

32:33:24

Can you describe a memory that sticks out in your mind when everyone learned what the site did and what health environmental consequence would be there?

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32:46:18

Well, I remember the water. The groundwater. Because this community is mostly private wells, our water supply is the ground water, when realized the private wells had been contaminated, FRESH started researching and asking questions about it. How it became contaminated. And then realize that we had the main source sitting right over the production plant. Possibly all the health concerns we have heard of and wondering if it was coming from the ground contaminated water. One of the projects we focused on was keeping the questions coming at DOE about the groundwater.

33:51:01

And soon we came in contact with the information about the south plume being contaminated. Then we found out about the flow of the plume and that it was going into other people's private wells. That's when we asked for a public water system from DOE. At first they said they could only give us an alternative water supply. And to them an alternative water supply was bottled water or a public water system. The community wanted a public water system, but their water system was bottled water.

34:34:02

For the next six or seven years they supplied the contaminated area with bottled water. Now have you ever taken a bath in bottled water? It's not very easy (she laughs).

34:49:09

How did they think that bottled water was going to correct the situation? You bathe in contaminated water, your children can get a cut and that can get in their system. You're taking a shower and from that water you're breathing in. That bottled water wasn't helping the situation at all.

35:14:11

So we continued to work and get in communication with headquarters, DOE and constantly push for a water system. Finally DOE did supply a public water system. I believe it was in 1996 we received our water system. That was a great accomplishment.

35:46:23

We did it by sitting at the table, too. Sitting at meetings and help designing the public water system. The ground was contaminated also. We made sure the pipes were certain kind of pipes formed. We made decisions in that area also. So again, we all worked together.

36:19:11

Can you describe one moment of discouragement or despair? This isn't getting me anywhere. Then one moment where you said, wow this is working and making a difference?

36:33:09

Well, it goes back to community support. You go to meetings and you got to try to make decisions. You're not getting support from the communities. Especially the on site disposal. FRESH educated themselves on this. Attended many meetings, asked DOE to have meetings in areas we were not sure of. So there was always about five or six of us at these meetings. As FRESH we did not want our waste to be put in someone else's back yard. We had to figure out a way to do it.

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37:34:14

Because when you work with other DOE sites and they have similar problems, and they don't need any more waste in their yard, we wouldn't want anybody to bring more waste in our yard. And so we would sit down and gather as much information as we could and we would ask questions and we new this decisions was important. And also the CAB advisory board. They were working on the same project. So when we was sitting down at the table again with DOE, we thought we would go with the balanced approach. The balanced approach is almost 90 percent of waste that is not highly contaminated but low level and that 10 percent would go off site and that is more hazardous that with our weather we have here in the community the humidity. That waste needed to be taken off site.

39:10:24

We set a waste criteria level which had to meet that to be put in the on site disposal. This was a balanced approach that we had to go with.

39:26:28

When you do a history of the Fernald plant, why would you explain the importance of that?

39:38:13

So that it won't happen again. If our environment is healthy, the human race is healthy. Then developing the atomic bomb at that time, the very people the government was trying to protect, here at home they were destroying them. So I mean, it didn't balance out right.

40:05:26

I mean that is the way I feel about it, some people may feel differently.

40:11:28

So why then history as Fernald as one of these sites?

40:20:23

Cut for a minute (woman laughs).

40:24:26

I will follow up with how is this unique in traditional history?

40:37:00

O.K. (woman laughs).

40:41:26

What's the difference between regular history and a living history?

40:57:24

Do you feel you have fully gotten to answer about why things needed to be done?

41:01:22

Um. Yeah, let's go on that again. Let me clear my head (they all laugh).

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41:37:04

Why do you think it's important to do a history of Fernald Site?

41:38:12

Because Fernald was the first DOE site to start its cleanup process. Or either early stages of public participation. That was the first step. Then came the cleanup. It involved the EPA, the health agencies, the contractors and DOE headquarters. And the people who worked at Fernald, I call them Fernald DOE.

42:25:19

And public participation. We were first in that I believe. And then, too, it's about the atomic bomb. I think maybe that era is over. We need to show people, even though there was patriotism there, it also destroys back to where people they were trying to protect in foreign lands, they were destroying in their homelands.

43:12:16

Through lack of waste management or even thorough planning of how to protect the people surrounding the production plant. Not realizing the consequences of what they were doing generations later.

43:34:06

As far as just throwing their waste anywhere, contaminating the environment.

43:51:27

Why is it important to do a living history rather than a traditional history?

43:57:00

A living history is people, myself telling, actually being involved with the situation and how the community tried to correct the situation or make their lives better. How they were affected. By reading out of books it's not as personal. That's why I like the living history project.

44:41:04

When you're older, and you have your grandchildren on your lap, and your telling them about this time period of your life, what would you say shaped you the most?

44:56:06

Just being concerned about their mother and father, their health and safety, we only have our families to really rely on. Just having children and wanting to protect them. Being a mother and wanting to make sure your environment is safe for everyone. For your family especially. And then you start seeing how other families are being affected.

45:41:17

(She laughs) Maybe that's my purpose on this earth. I never realized in my earlier days that I would be doing this. So maybe this was my purpose, too.

46:03:27

I want to see if there is something you wanted to say that I haven't pulled out?

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46:27:21

Not really. Like I said before. Things that we have done that's over with and gone. There are things that you wouldn't be familiar with. When FRESH started in the beginning.

47:32:06

We had goals and that's how we stayed focused. First was the firing system. The evacuation plan, which probably some people would say there wouldn't be any reason if it exploded. Possibly it would have just been a spill or something. There still had to be an evacuation plan.

48:15:19

The secrecy. Fernald, there wasn't so much secrecy later on as there was in the beginning. It was those small accomplishments that gave us the energy to go on to the bigger ones. And that would be the water system and the on site disposal.

48:48:11

Is there anything you guys want to know (Discussion)?

49:34:07

You might describe how it felt.

49:47:26

It was a strange feeling. I question you could say that you finally said this is proof that this is actually happening.

49:58:07

Are you ready (woman laughs)?

50:09:06

You ask?

50:15:23

What things stick out in your mind as far as the Fernald site?

50:20:16

I remember once it was plant implosion. It didn't go off well at first but when it did go down it just sent a funny feeling. We did it at last. The site was starting to be cleaned up. It was just such a, it almost brought tears to your eyes.

51:00:24

Relate to me what the people thought the plant to be in the early days?

51:07:15

Well I thought it to be a paint industry. In FRESH when we started talking to people they thought it to be a feed plant that made feed for animals. There were cows walking around the surrounding land and the sign out there said feed production. And also it had a checkerboard water tower. Anyone from the Cincinnati area thought it was a feed plant for the animals.

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52:03:29

Feed production was where it would make nuclear rods that would feed nuclear submarines. So that was fascinating the different perceptions people had about that site.

52:18:10

What were the people's feelings, their shock or dismay when they found out the meaning of the word feed?

52:28:25

They were shocked. It even shocked the newspaper because when the reporters in the 1980's when all this came out into the news, the reporters was fascinated about how the name implicated something different then what everybody else thought.

52:54:23

The news reporters, the people who wrote books, the Fernald site, that was one of the main things that they would always point out.

53:19:17

End of interview.

53:20:23

Edwa in front of map explaining what they did.

58:31:27

End of tape.