

Documenting an Environmental Disaster: The River Valley Collection at Marion Public Library

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Abstract

Marion Public Library (located in Marion, Ohio, 45 miles north of Columbus) serves as repository for a collection of documents produced in response to local concern about the incidence of leukemia and other ailments among the population. Former athletes at the River Valley High School, several miles east of town, were particularly at risk. Inquiries revealed that the school was built on a former WW II military site, and that the school's ballpark was above a dump site for noxious chemicals.

From being considered a relatively minor issue, local outrage grew until something was done. The school was relocated and the old buildings closed. Eventually the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and its contracting agency Montgomery Watson, cleaned up the site.

One consequence was the production of voluminous documentation, requiring the attention of a Documents Librarian and a Catalog Librarian. The resulting repository is of interest to scholars, and the library has received a surprising number of requests via interlibrary loan. Such requests, made possible via appropriate bibliographic description and access, demonstrate that a collection of primarily local interest can serve a wider community, provided that proper attention is given to its maintenance.

Of particular interest to scholars of grey literature is the issue that arose during the course of the documentation project of the partial transition from a paper-based paradigm to electronic resources. Initially, documentation was generated, in most cases using electronic technology, with a view to the paper version as end product. The realization that documentation in an electronic medium can serve as the objective happened during the course of the project, but was not fully realized. Indeed, the persons who generated the documentation are not known to have expressed the transition from paper to electronic version as a concept. As a consequence, further work entailing retrieval of the electronic originals where still available, and document scanning where not, remains a possibility. Such work will likely fall to librarians; it is unlikely that the original authors will assume responsibility.

The Social and Historical Context of the River Valley Collection

Surely no material is more obscure, more "grey," than what is classified as secret! Perhaps had secrecy not been a primary concern of the U.S. Government during and after World War II, Marion and its surrounding communities might have avoided the tragedy that ensued when the River Valley High and Middle Schools were constructed atop the dump site of the Formerly Used Defense Site known as Marion Engineer Depot (MED). Hindsight is easy, however. Another way of phrasing the question is, "Who could have known?" Even in 1988 with the publication of Charles Mosher's compilation² of anecdotes and newspaper cuttings from the local paper, the Marion Star, given the benefit of four decades of hindsight little was uncovered. The existence of the dump site was either unknown, ignored or disregarded during the process of acquiring the tainted land for educational purposes. And no mention of leukemia is found in Mosher's anthology.

Two formerly used defense sites are located in the Marion area: Scioto Ordnance Plant (SOP) and Marion Engineer Depot. Both of them are covered in the extensive documentation known as the River Valley Collection (RVC) at Marion Public Library (MPL), although only MED was implicated in the leukemia tragedies. The investigation and cleanup activities of the 1990s onwards took place - and continue - in both locations. SOP was by far the larger - and the more dangerous to work in during the war, for it produced explosives destined for use against enemy powers. SOP was constructed not long after Pearl Harbor and employed thousands of workers, however production stopped after just one year of operation. After VJ day the SOP site was deactivated and decontaminated, then parcels of land were sold off for agricultural and other uses, including a prison, an airport, and a housing subdivision. A historical marker at the airport documents the relocation of area residents as their land was expropriated via eminent domain.

Some buildings constructed during the war were converted to other uses. Other buildings from pre-war days had never been demolished and reverted to their previous usage. Notable is