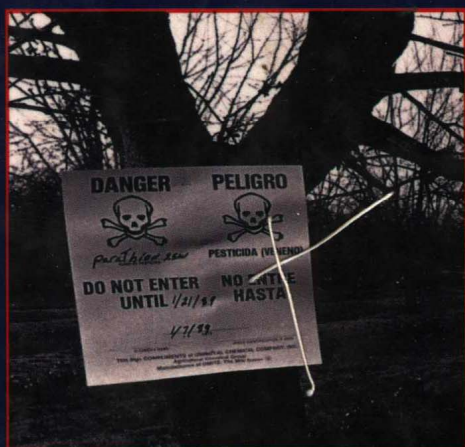


Toxic Nation

The Fight to
Save Our
Communities
from Chemical
Contamination



Fred Setterberg ■ Lonny Shavelson

TOXIC NATION

*The Fight to Save
Our Communities from
Chemical Contamination*

**FRED SETTERBERG
LONNY SHAVELSON**

**Photographs by
Lonny Shavelson**

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PROLOGUE

“People at the grassroots level feel it in their hearts. They see it. They hear the evidence. And they’re getting a little frustrated that many world political leaders just don’t see it.”

—Vice President Al Gore

One month before taking office, Vice President-elect Al Gore scored front-page headlines by offering a dramatic clue to the incoming administration’s environmental policies.

“Serious questions concerning the safety of an East Liverpool, Ohio, hazardous waste incinerator must be answered before the plant may begin operation,” Gore declared. Citing his concerns about “the safety and health of local residents,” America’s first environmental vice president promised there would be a full investigation by the General Accounting Office before the new administration would allow the test-burn and start-up of the toxic waste incinerator, scheduled for the following month.

Events in East Liverpool seemed to indicate a major shift in national environmental policies. But most reports completely missed the larger story taking place in this conservative small town.

For 11 long years before Gore had arrived on the scene, a small army of parents, teachers, physicians, nurses, steelworkers, factory hands, retirees, and other townspeople had successfully blocked the start-up of East Liverpool’s hazardous waste incinerator. While the press and public understandably focused on the new administration’s environmental policies, the 11-year battle that had already stopped the incinerator and led to the vice president’s dramatic statement remained untold.

Enraged by the prospect of lead, mercury, dioxins, and other toxic chemicals pouring into the air 1,100 feet from East Liverpool’s elementary school, citizens had climbed fences to stop the construction of the hazardous waste burner, blocked the entrance gates when toxic wastes arrived at the plant, fasted for 47 days in protest, and finally boarded a bus for Washington, D.C., to sit in at the office of then-EPA chief William Reilly—demanding an audience, until the police hauled them off to jail.

For 11 years, residents of the Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia corner of the Ohio River had formed study groups to learn about the dangers of dioxins and lead. They had researched the scientific basis of the incomplete burning process inherent to “state of the art” hazardous waste incinerators. They visited other communities

across the country where citizens claimed high rates of illness from toxic waste burners, and they used the Freedom of Information Act to secure access to confidential licensing files belonging to the EPA and the incinerator company. In the end, they went to court (paying for their legal costs with income from spaghetti dinners and garage sales) and obtained restraining orders against the incinerator company.

At one point, when their legal battle seemed finally to run aground, the people of East Liverpool simply hunkered down in front of the plant and said: *No*. On Monday, a group of grandparents gathered, linking arms, and blocked the incinerator's gateway. On Tuesday, it was the parents' turn. Wednesday, health professionals. Thursday, small business owners. Friday, steelworkers. On weekends, the groups joined forces, disrupting work at the plant until a new legal maneuver produced another restraining order, and once again stopped the plant's test-burn.

A local newspaper poll reported that an astounding 72 percent of residents surveyed approved of further civil disobedience to stop the storage and burning of hazardous chemical wastes at the facility. Many people in town recognized that they were desperately plugging up a leaky dike with their fingers—but for 11 years, their efforts made the dike hold.

Gore's highly visible intercession was widely regarded as the first sign of resurgent environmental activism at government's highest level. The Bush administration's environmental policies of evasion and equivocation were over. Even Reagan's strident opposition to almost any kind of environmental regulation now seemed chiefly a dim, if dismaying memory. The citizens of East Liverpool had sustained their efforts through the worst of times. Now that Gore and the new administration had come to power, couldn't they take a rest?

In fact, the opposite proved true.

As of February 1993, when the incinerator was scheduled to open, the new administration had not yet taken action. In desperation, local residents filed one more lawsuit. They obtained another restraining order, citing unresolved safety and licensing issues. And they reminded Vice President Gore of his promise to halt the toxic waste burn, pending the General Accounting Office's investigation.

"We were successful in delaying the test-burn," East Liverpool resident and nurse Terri Swearingen wrote to the vice president. "We carried the ball for you." Swearingen, who lived two miles downwind from the incinerator, had been arrested five times for blocking the operation's start-up. She had no intention of giving up now.

“Since the new Democratic administration came out with its statement that they’d stop this toxic waste burner,” she explained, “I’ve been busier than ever. You have to hold the politicians’ feet to the fire—otherwise, they may conveniently forget you. I really think Gore wouldn’t even have known about this place if law-abiding, God-fearing people weren’t spending time in jail—making a sacrifice now, so that our children aren’t sacrificed later.”

In thousands of towns across the country, a powerful grassroots anti-toxics rebellion like the one staged in East Liverpool had sprung up, hidden from the public eye. Faced with a new administration that might listen to their concerns about their families’ health and safety, the people who composed this burgeoning but largely invisible small-town anti-toxics movement were redoubling their efforts, demanding attention and action.

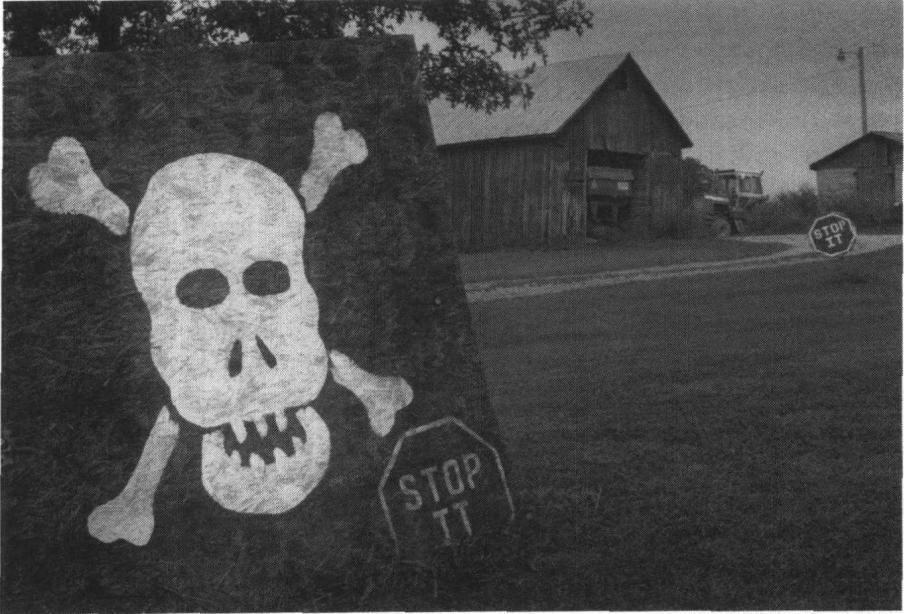
No matter who controlled the White House, they had learned to depend, first and foremost, on themselves. The 1990s, they hoped, would be their decade.

Fred Setterberg and Lonny Shavelson
March 1993

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Into the Heart of Toxic America



Nova, Ohio.

Mr. Keim seemed the model of Amish patience and propriety.

The full-bearded patriarch of 11 children and 82 grandchildren sat upon a hard-plank, cushionless stool in the common room of his two-story wood-frame house in north-central rural Ohio. He smiled queerly—his front teeth were missing—and waved us closer to the fuming wood stove. He wore rough home-sewn laborer's garments; a plain grey stitched chemise blue denim trousers, handmade woolen socks, and heavy leather work boots. Mr. Keim's daily life, like that of the other 140 Amish farming families who had settled this region four decades earlier, revolved around the parochial concerns of commu-

nity, faith, and family bound together by a seventeenth-century doctrinal insistence "to be in this world, but not of it." Withdrawn from modern society, the Amish thrived in a manner largely unchanged over the past three hundred years. But now, Mr. Keim felt certain that the Amish way of life faced an unprecedented disruption.

International Technologies, the huge waste disposal company, wanted to construct a toxic waste incinerator in the countryside bordering the Amish farms. The fact that Mr. Keim's minister, the most powerful individual in the community, had selected him to usher into his home two reporters to explain the objections of the Amish indicated the gravity with which they regarded the matter.

"If you want to know how the Amish feel," urged Mr. Keim, his snowy hair bundled at the ears, setting off steel grey-blue eyes that seemed to glow as he told us his story, "*read this.*" We fitted ourselves into a pair of straight-back walnut chairs, scooted closer to the fire, and studied the inflammatory Greenpeace leaflet that had fluttered from Mr. Keim's outstretched hand on to the table. A more unlikely broadside could not have been found among the insular Amish.

"*We don't know what they were burning in their incinerator,*" read the flyer, quoting the anxious complaint of Mary McCastle, a black woman from Alsen, Louisiana, where another toxic waste incinerator had been built, "*but we know that it was making us sick. We know that we couldn't hardly have rest in our own homes. We couldn't have any more beautiful gardens. . . .*"

An immense cultural gulf separated black rural Louisiana from Amish Ohio. But Mr. Keim wasn't interested in the differences. He could see from the leaflet that the two communities had identical worries. The Amish feared that the fumes, smoke, residue, ash, or wind-borne particles of incinerated toxic wastes might flit across the skies to settle upon their farms and contaminate their lives. In Louisiana, Mary McCastle asserted that it had already happened to her people.

Was America really poisoning its own citizens?

Over the past three years, we had listened to hundreds of people confide, insist, rail, and worry that the unfettered proliferation of toxic wastes had devastated their lives. We had crisscrossed the country, traveling from California to Massachusetts, Pennsylvania to Mississippi, visiting more than two dozen states to talk with people in cities, small towns, and rural hamlets who believed that their families were imperiled by a pervasive menace that had been churned out into the environment by hazardous waste dumps, dioxin-spewing industrial chimneys, toxic waste incinerators, pesticide-spraying airplanes, home garden weed killers, apartment buildings saturated with for-

maldehyde, chemical food contaminants, leaking landfills, legal and illegal dumping, and industrial accidents. This confrontation with an invisible invader had reordered thousands of lives, turning ordinary citizens into a motley procession of victims, rebels, instant experts, and slow-boiling activists—heroes or hysterics, depending on your point of view. The popular vision of the post-World War II petrochemical miracle had blurred into a fractious portrait of resentment, betrayal, and rage.

But were the fears justified? Did the nation's mounting concern over toxic wastes have a rational basis? Or rather, did the toxics crisis constitute a vast national exaggeration that diverted time, attention, political will, and billions of dollars from far more urgent problems? Moreover, how had toxics affected the way Americans thought about their country, their future, their lives? What were the cultural implications of inhabiting a "poisoned" world?

These questions led us for three years across an American landscape that we never could have previously imagined. We began our journey in McFarland, California, a small farming community in the Central Valley where the cancer rate among children had soared 400 percent above the national average. Nobody knew why. Many local parents felt certain that the children's cancers—one child stricken on almost every block in town—came from exposure to the pesticides sprayed upon nearby fields, or some other unknown environmental contamination. Yet the state health department officials could find no evidence supporting these theories. In fact, health officials initially believed the McFarland cancer cluster might simply be a statistical fluke, an aggregation of bad luck.

And perhaps they were right. In time, McFarland might be classified as a medical mystery whose complex linkage of misfortune indicated no significance for the larger world. But if the official story turned out to be wrong—or incomplete, as growing numbers of people had come to believe—the entire nation would have to deal with the consequences.

As we began to look beyond McFarland to other communities throughout the nation with similar problems, another possibility ineluctably took shape. Rather than a mere fluke, the sad fate of McFarland's children might possibly signal a larger, far more menacing health hazard. To better understand what was happening throughout the country, we focused our attention on the small towns and cities where growing numbers of people were increasingly convinced a toxic world had made them ill.

We wanted to learn why so many people believed that their lives and communities were now poisoned, what living in a "toxic environ-

ment'' actually meant to them—and finally, most importantly, did our nation now face a growing health threat triggered by massive chemical contamination?

One thing was certain: America's toxics overload had spread far beyond the narrow boundaries presumed by most citizens.

The U.S. government estimates that over sixteen thousand active landfills have been sopped with industrial and agricultural hazardous wastes. Most are located near small towns and farming communities—and the contents of all of them, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), will eventually breach their linings and penetrate the soil, as many already have done. Underground chemical and petroleum storage tanks scattered throughout cities, suburbs, and rural America number between three and five million; 30 percent already leak. Pesticides have contaminated water supplies in 23 states, leaching into aquifers and washing into streams and rivers where they end up in the water we drink and the fish we eat. According to industry's own reports, 22 billion pounds of toxic chemicals are spewed into the air, water, and soil each year—about 85 pounds of toxic waste for every American. The Congressional Office of Technology Assessment estimates the real figure to be vastly higher.

The full extent of the nation's toxic contamination may not be understood for decades to come. EPA officials have identified 32,000 sites throughout the country that require monitoring to determine whether their threat to living creatures warrants upgrading to Superfund status, the program charged with cleaning up the most severe hazardous waste hot spots. And yet, according to the General Accounting Office, the EPA "does not know if it has identified 90 percent of the potentially hazardous waste sites or only 10 percent." There may be as many as three hundred thousand toxic waste sites spread throughout the nation—one for every nine hundred Americans. Millions of people live near, next to, or even on top of these sites, but the present and future effects of spending years within proximity to their contents remain uncertain.

Given the limits of science, nobody can accurately predict which sites, if any, will increase cancer rates, depress immune systems, spawn chemically induced learning disorders among children—or simply transform the life of the community by the dread and uncertainty the sites produce in vast and immeasurable quantities. Given the limits of government oversight and political conviction, few people in power have been willing to squarely confront the unbridled culture of consumption that makes inevitable the incessant overflow of dangerous wastes.

That is why we now found ourselves in Amish Ohio, seated around the crackling wood stove in the common room of Mr. Keim's house.

"When Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden," explained Mr. Keim genially, continuing his lecture without rancor or agitation, "they were supposed to farm the earth and live from it. They had, as we do, some problems to contend with. But if they polluted the earth to the extent where they couldn't farm, well, that would be. . . ."

Mr. Keim trailed off into an ellipsis of the obvious, his cupped hands opening upon his knee as though releasing a small bird. It would be, he was indicating, an abomination. The chemical contamination of the region's rich farmland would mean economic catastrophe and the devastation of a way of life.

The Amish were not alone in their fears.

Other farmers working the land nearby, who were long accustomed to using modern chemical fertilizers and pesticides, shared the Amish skepticism about the incinerator's safety. They put aside any misgivings they may have had about Amish eccentricities in dress and custom, and requested that their neighbors join the larger community in urging the government to block International Technologies' bid to build its incinerator.

Of course, the farmers knew that public action by the unworldly Amish seemed unlikely. But when Ohio senator Howard Metzenbaum arrived to weigh his constituents' arguments against the incinerator, the local farmers chauffeured the senator into the countryside to inspect its proposed location—and the entire party encountered an astounding sight. As they drove along the two-lane country road, the senator's car passed rows of Amish men sitting on the hillsides in respectful silence upon the bedboards of their horse-drawn wagons. They didn't hold signs or banners, or even speak to the senator. But it was clear why they had assembled. The Amish presence along the road was read as an unmistakable sign that passions over the incinerator could not be ignored. If the reclusive sect had been incited to act, there would certainly be wider political consequences throughout the region.

And yet, once we had left Mr. Keim's plain and simple home and abandoned the warmth of his potbelly wood stove, it occurred to us that Amish involvement in the toxics controversy might cut two ways.

To some people, the gathering of Amish farmers dressed in their formal black suits and full beards must have seemed like a visitation from the pre-industrial past, a ghostly warning from a safer, saner world regarding the excesses of modernity and the dangers of rampant progress.

To other observers, the Amish presence would have appeared a masterpiece of ignorance. The archaic sect's stubborn unworldliness might stand as the most extreme example of the modern Luddites whose intransigence only muddled the best efforts of science and government to solve the toxics dilemma. Did it really make sense to read wisdom into the actions of a community that also saw the use of transistor radios or electric fans as a breach of their heavenly covenant? Who could we believe when it came to answering the question of whether toxic contamination was undermining the nation's health? And if fear of toxics had penetrated the well-armored Amish community, how much deeper and wider had its impact spread, in various ways, throughout the rest of American culture?

"Do you really think you'll be able to win your fight?" one of us asked Mr. Keim, as we stood at his doorstep shaking hands goodbye.

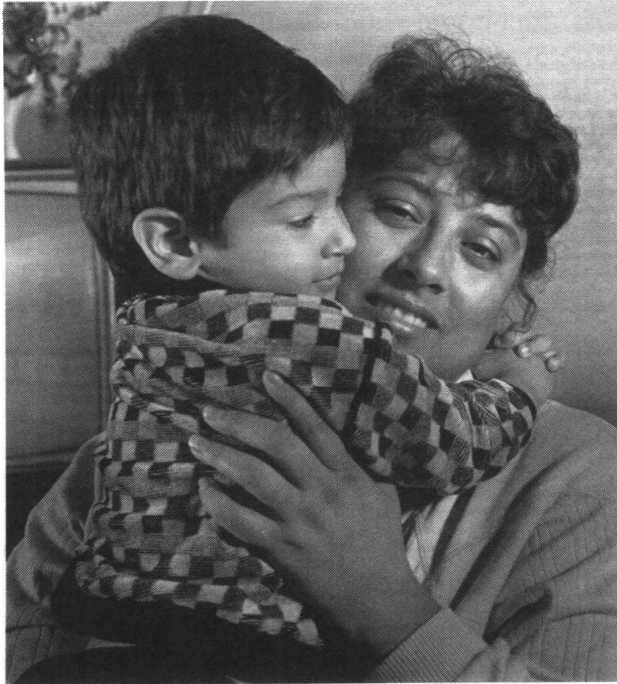
"Sometimes with a lot of power and authority," he whispered, "the Lord will turn people around."

This book is the story of people whose lives have been turned around decisively by their belief that our nation is now being engulfed by its own poisonous excess. Our task has been to understand how their apocalyptic vision originated and then quickly spread—and what it now means for the rest of us.

But this narrative is not simply a chronicle of environmental neglect and potential health hazard. Rather, our exploration of toxic America inadvertently provided a view of our society as it struggles with the profound divisions that arise whenever we confront grave questions about the future. Over time, the psychological, social, and political implications of the nation's expanding roster of "contaminated communities" have become as important to us as the medical and scientific mysteries around which their identities are formed. This book isn't exclusively about poisoned people; ultimately, it deals with how our nation contends with its most fundamental problems.

“The Whole Neighborhood Was Stunned”

—*McFarland, Fall 1987*



McFarland, California. Tina Bravo and her son.

Tino Bravo could not see anything beyond the front porch of her home.

The dense tule fog had descended upon California's Central Valley, enshrouding the entire community of McFarland in a thick, slate-grey haze. During the long dark mornings and bright blinding winter afternoons, the cars speeding along U.S. Highway 99 sometimes failed to anticipate the hazards of the low-lying fog—and as a result, disaster ensued. Passenger cars mashed their brakes and then skidded into slow-moving pickup trucks; buses scrambled on top of the lumbering produce vans and U-Hauls.

Eventually some enormous interstate-bound eighteen-wheeler would scream up blindly from behind, flattening the entire procession into an accordion wreck of screeching metal. Road accidents involving 15, 25, 30 vehicles were not uncommon. Winter fatalities peaked around March, before the warmer temperatures offered a brief respite until the descent of the thinner, but equally lethal, summer fog. You couldn't see, the drivers always explained, you couldn't see where you were or where you were going.

U.S. Highway 99 bisects McFarland, dividing the town into two flaps of stucco tract-home subdivisions. Tina Bravo owned a three-bedroom home on the eastern flap, the newer side of town built in the late 1970s with the aid of federal subsidies for low-income residential developments. They were modest homes, the kind found in thousands of other blue-collar communities throughout the country. Like most of her neighbors, Bravo felt lucky to own something so solid, serviceable, and new.

On this particular Sunday morning, February 16, 1987, Tina Bravo stood at her front door, arms folded, her face taut and strained from squinting into the dense grey mist; she was attempting to puzzle out the identities of the figures passing in front of her house.

Bravo had lived in McFarland since 1980, and she knew the town well. McFarland is located about 160 miles northwest of Los Angeles in the San Joaquin Valley section of California's Central Valley—one of the world's richest farm belts. About 35 miles south of McFarland—still Kern County—lies the town of Weed Patch, the site of the fictional migrant camp that housed the Joad family in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Delano, only five miles north, is the birthplace of Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union, which successfully organized field laborers in the 1960s.

McFarland's dozen or so blocks of tract homes are bordered on all sides by fields of cotton, almonds, kiwi fruit, and grapes. The majority of the six thousand two hundred people who live in McFarland are Mexican-American. Most of the families descend from farm laborers. Even today, almost all of the town's residents earn their livelihood from occupations financially tied to the valley's extraordinarily productive soil. The highway billboard on the outskirts of town proudly proclaims: "McFarland: The Heartbeat of Agriculture."

Although McFarland's residents have always shared the small town concern for privacy, Tina Bravo thought she understood her neighbors at their most basic level. She particularly knew what bothered, delighted, inspired, and frightened McFarland's parents. And on this Sunday morning in February, after the newspaper hit McFarland's porches and word had spread throughout the commu-

nity, Tina Bravo knew that practically every parent in town was shaken by the same thought: Thank God it wasn't *my* kids.

McFarland's children were dying.

They were dying unnaturally, inexplicably. They were dying in a series of events and mishaps that seemed to some people in McFarland to resemble a curse.

"The number of deaths we've had in this community is just humongous," said McFarland police chief Vito Giuntoli. "A lot of people would call it bad luck, but I think the course of events is just plain eerie. These are kids who used to sit on my lap."

On the previous Saturday night, February 15, 1987, the day after Valentine's Day, six teenagers from McFarland and nearby Delano were killed in a head-on collision between a Chevrolet Malibu and a pickup truck.

The wreck on the highway had been an awful, avoidable, pointless episode in the midst of a tragic season.

Some months earlier, two girls from the McFarland High School track team had been hit and killed by a truck while they were out on a training run. The school's popular football coach died of a heart attack at the age of 43. Another student had drowned during the previous summer vacation.

"Logic tells us that all of these bad events over the last year are not connected," said Betty Wickersham, a McFarland High School counselor. "We have to focus on that."

The unrelated accidents, culminating in the day-after-St. Valentine's-Day deaths, elevated parental anxieties to a state of frenzy because they seemed to highlight another mounting concern. Over the past four years, McFarland's children had been suffering from a remarkable constellation of serious illnesses. Most alarming was the high rate of childhood cancers—already more than 300 percent above the normal rate expected for a town of 6,200.

The children with cancer ranged in age from a 3½-year-old toddler to a teenage football player. No doctor, scientist, or public health official could explain why so many had taken ill. Neither could anybody affirm with absolute certainty that McFarland's stricken families weren't simply experiencing some of life's unpredictable misfortunes—albeit in unnerving proximity to one another. Given the 260,000,000 people living in the United States, it was entirely possible that a lethal, but otherwise meaningless, concentration of childhood cancers could have gathered in McFarland by sheer chance. The laws of probability function with brutal impartiality; the children's tragic deaths might indicate nothing more than a statistical blip.