



Moisture seeps through thin cracks in the outer glass of a double-pane window in Cotton Johnson's house east of Hudson, a reminder of a night nearly 30 years ago that still clings to Johnson's memory.

Late one evening in 1990, an explosion sounded from half a mile away so powerful and loud that it shattered windows in Johnson's house.

Thick fog limited what he could see that night, but Johnson knew what had happened. It was a moment he knew was coming: The nearby Caldwell Systems Inc. hazardous-waste incinerator — which he, close friend L.C. Coonse and other activists had fought for years to close — exploded.

Johnson ran to neighbors' doors, warning them to "get the hell out of there" because of the possibility of a toxic cloud.



1975, when the incinerator was first proposed, Coonse and Johnson did their best to stop it



When it opened, they did soil and water contamination testing on their own, formed an activism group and lobbied government officials to close it. In 1991, after the incinerator closed and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency finally stepped in to clean up the site, they kept a close eye on the project. In 1997 it finally seemed to be done — a settlement reached, remediation started and the incinerator building torn down. Johnson and Coonse settled back into their peaceful lives, left with piles and piles of documents on the site stuffed in their spare rooms and basements.

Then last year, news came that still, 20 years after the plan was put in place to clean the site, a required study on groundwater contamination had not been completed. Again, Coonse and Johnson felt called to action, and they were two of just three members of the public to attend a public hearing state officials held.

"It's hard to imagine the involvement it takes to accomplish something like that (closing the incinerator)," Coonse said. So I was really kind of glad to be done. ... But 29 years later and

we're still having problems with it."

The years the pair spent fighting to close the incinerator seem distant now, like another lifetime, Coonse said, but they remember the details with clarity. Coonse, a Hudson native, now white-haired with wide, wire-rim glasses, laughs at his naivety in 1975, when he first saw the plans for the waste incinerator on top of what was then a county landfill and thought he'd easily be able to put a stop to it.

"When I started I thought it was the simple matter of informing the right people," he said. "I was so wrong."

The incinerator was intended as a way to manage the county's furniture-waste disposal problem, and Coonse and Johnson agree it could have worked had it been used correctly. At first it was — only waste from the then-booming furniture industry in Caldwell County was burned — but then other things started going in, Coonse said.

"You could tell by the color of the flame what chemicals were being burned," said Coonse, who was a high school chemistry teacher.

< Smoke from the incinerator left a thick coating of soot on trees in the area, including at Johnson's house, and Coone suspected it to be toxic. >

That's when Coonse, Johnson and other concerned citizens -- most of whom since have moved or passed away -- started their own investigation. They raised money to test soil and water in the area, took samples of the soot and befriended landfill workers, who told them stories of just what was going into the incinerator — EPA hazardous waste, torpedo fuel, medical waste and barrels of chemicals they couldn't identify.

They their concerns to the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners, state officials and the EPA, but those few who listened, Johnson said, were later taken off the job. Johnson and Coonse tell of a biologist who looked at the trees to prove the dire health effects the incinerator but who was reassigned when he filed a report. An agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation followed up on the case, then was transferred to a quiet desk job, Johnson said.

"Can you see why we were a little paranoid?" Johnson said.

Many of the stories they tell may sound outlandish now — small explosions from torpedos in the incinerator, stillborn animals at nearby farms, and landfill workers wading knee deep in toxic chemicals — but a health study and EPA contamination studies years later support them.

Johnson and Coonse still hang on to documents from their years fighting. While Coonse lost some of the papers in a house fire, he still has maps from a health survey, copies of court settlements, and test results of groundwater and soil contamination.

In Johnson's basement, he and his wife have piles of blue, red and black plastic binders filled with the newspaper clippings. Some document Johnson's court case against CSI seeking money for the broken window, others cover the community meetings he and Coonse held about the incinerator, and still more tell the stories of CSI's missteps. A pile of videocassette tapes tell those stories through TV news reports.

One TV reporter asked Johnson to show him the incinerator to get footage of its flames. The group drove up Drag Strip Road toward the landfill in the dead of night, parked the car and waited. When the incinerator finally went on, the flames licked the sky, Johnson said.

< looked like a blowtorch turned on its side," he said.

When the site was shut down in 1991, it came as a shock to Johnson and Coonse, who thought it might never close. Thinking back, Coonse wasn't sure they'd ever be able to stop the incinerator churning away in his hometown's backyard.

"It's kind of surprising to look back now. The way we did it was tell the truth. We caught them in lie after lie," Coonse said.

Through the '90s, they watched as a project they'd spent years on wrapped up, and they thought that chapter of their lives were over — until last year.

In 2017, Mary Siedlecki, a project manager with the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality, took over the case and realized a groundwater study, to decide what should be done to make sure the site is clean of contaminants, that was supposed to be conducted eight years ago hadn't been done. The study was completed this summer, and it determined that the site's

contaminants are dispersing naturally. It recommended continued monitoring but no further cleanup.

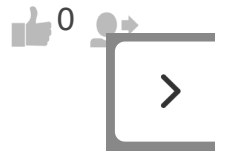
The result was not one Johnson expected.

“They’re in the preliminary stages of doing nothing,” he said, astonished.

Coonse and Johnson both wonder why the study came up again, skeptical of a study to decide to do nothing. It’s in their nature to question everything about the incinerator. There are still unknowns about the incinerator and what went on there, but one thing Johnson is sure about is the effect of citizens' efforts had.

“If we had remained silent," he said, "there is no doubt in my mind that this would have continued indefinitely."

Reporter Virginia Annable can be reached at 828-610-8724.



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