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The day a dike broke in 1943 flooding Lakeland with Solvay Process waste

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By



Enlarge

The Post-Standard

Towed by a bulldozer, a rowboat rescues the family of Boleslaw Pienkowski, marooned by Solvay Process dike's collapse on Thanksgiving Day 1943. Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

Solvay Dike Collapse in 1943 Flooded Parts of Lakeland with

Waste gallery (4 [photos](#))

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The story's been passed down through the generations of the Steingraber family.

About Albertina Schlicht Steingraber, who came to Syracuse from Germany in 1886 and owned several properties in the Solvay area. These properties included a boarding house at Lake View Point, on Onondaga Lake, about across modern State Fair .

She was at home in the boarding house (hotel) early on Thanksgiving Day, 1943, when a Solvay Process Co. dike gave way, flooding a two-mile area of Lakeland with waste from "The Process." In some places the chalky material was five feet deep.

Albertina, according to the family story, refused to leave her home, which housed jockies who raced at the fairground track. Some 50 [houses](#) were reported destroyed.

Her great grandson, Bob "Tank" Steingraber, a Syracuse actor and theater director, retells the story he's heard:

"The stubborn German woman" made her stand, he said.

"My father, an avid hunter and fisherman, put on his hip waders and waded through the ash and carried Albertina out over his shoulder. He later found holes burned through the rubber by the acidic ash."

Bob continues: "I believe as part of the cleanup, the ash from the fairgrounds and the street was moved and dumped

along the side where the houses were damaged beyond repair which created that mound along the lake. Somewhere under the mound (if anything is not eaten away now) lies Albertina's house along with her neighbors homes."

This is where the Solvay waste beds "white cliffs of Dover" rise along the lake today. Some of the property is used for the fairgrounds parking lots. And this is where Onondaga County plans to extend its "loop" trail around the lake, eventually reaching more than 11 miles.

The Solvay waste has hardened and solidified since that tragedy 69 years ago. Vegetation grows on the "mountain." (Retired State [University College](#) of Environmental Science and Forestry Prof. Norm Richards has proven that.) I've walked on the settled mound. You stomp on the ground and only kick up a bit of dust.

David Coburn, director of the county's environmental office, who studied the waste beds, found them stable. (We park our cars on them.) Are the waste beds a challenge as far as the trail is concerned? No, David says.

That Solvay waste has been a challenge for our community since 1884, when the Solvay company, founded by two brothers from Belgium named Solvay, started making soda ash from local limestone and salt brine. The aftermath of the Solvay Process created a waste no one knew what to do with. For a time, the waste was poured directly into Onondaga Lake. It leached salt along the shore, eventually helping make Onondaga one of America's most polluted lakes.

That's one reason Solvay's modern successor, [Honeywell](#), Corp., which merged with Allied Chemical, the company that took over Solvay, is engaged in a major dredging of the lake as we speak.

A footnote to creating the mountains of solid waste on the lake's western shoreline is the story of Albert Shenandoah, a member of the Oneida Nation, who claimed in the 1930s to have found a use for Solvay waste. He said he'd [invented](#) a process converting the white, chalk-like material into a hard, stone product for building. He said the product was five times lighter than brick.

Shenandoah said he'd applied for a patent. However, he died and the formula died with him.

The new trail extension will cross Nine Mile Creek, on its way around the lake. Oddly, when Onondaga Lake was ringed with resorts, this was the first spot, at what's still called Lake View Point, noted for its spectacular outlook.

In his 2002 book on the resorts, "The Golden Age of Onondaga Lake Resorts," Donald H. Thompson, a retired Clay school teacher, explains that Lake View was built up by one Fred Ganier, who ran a steamer packet boat from Clinton Square to the Point, starting in 1871. He raised his hotel in 1872 on the delta, built up on thousands of years of silt from Nine Mile Creek.

The resort got by for years as a jumping off point for fishermen (prowling the lake for white fish). In 1899, Frank Haberle, of the brewing family, bought the site but by 1916, according to Thompson, "Solvay Process waste dumps had encroached too close to Lake View Point and the park was closed.

And the dumping continued, well into our own era. Today, according to the book, "Lake View Point still has up to 80 feet of waste, mostly calcium carbonate, on top of its once swampy shoreline that once upon a time was Onondaga Lake's first resort."

The newest trail extension, which will provide as grand view of the lake, is scheduled to be finished in a year. It will extend the 10-foot wide paved trail two and a quarter miles. Long-range, the whole "loop" of the lake would be just over 11 miles. Parks Commissioner Bill Lansley said county officials have applied for grants to support a feasibility study of the last leg of the trail, which faces such challenges as railroad tracks, Onondaga Parkway and the I-81 interchange.

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