

Margherita Howe's Legacy: Operation Clean Niagara and the Niagara River Cleanup

By Emily Haus

We declare our hope for the future.

*We affirm people over property;
community over privatism.*

We choose struggle over indifference.

*We choose to be friends of the earth and
one another rather than exploiters.*

We choose citizens rather than subjects.

*We choose a world free of chemical pollution,
and we will settle for nothing less.*

—Operation Clean Niagara Manifesto, 1980.

For more than 100 years, Canada and the United States have shared the struggle of cleaning up the chemicals and industrial pollution in the Niagara River.

Beginning in the early 1800s, an industrial boom occurred in the Niagara region, thanks to the natural waterpower available and later the First Welland Canal that was constructed in 1829. This sequence of events attracted thousands of industries to the shores of the Niagara River where it consequently became the dumping ground for toxic chemicals and industrial waste.

As early as 1899, it was recorded that refuse and lime were being dumped into the river by Union Carbide forming acetylene gas that was killing off hundreds of fish. Fast forward to the mid-1900s and it was reported that seven million gallons of raw sewage and industrial waste a day were being dumped into the river.



Photo courtesy Brock University Library Archives and Special Collections

However, it was the ferocious spirit and unwavering commitment of one Niagara-on-the-Lake woman who not only forced governments to address pollution in the Niagara River but created lasting change in not only the quality of life for Niagara residents but for the entire Great Lakes ecosystem.

Margherita Richardson was born in Toronto on July 9, 1921. She attended Toronto's Parkdale Collegiate where she met her future husband Norm Howe. Soon after this however, Norm enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force at the age of 19. Margherita soon followed suit and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) where she transported German prisoners of war between Christie Street Veterans Hospital and Chorley Park Military Hospital. Norm returned to Toronto after the war and the two were married and went on to have four children.

In the late 1950s, the family chose to settle in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake where Margherita ran an antique store, Howe's Antiques, while Norm built his insurance business. In 1979, a woman came into Howe's Antiques asking Margherita to sign a petition started by "Operation Clean," a New York-based group whose goal was to clean up chemical waste that was being dumped into the Niagara River by industries.

That lit a spark inside Howe and for the next decade she became chief spokesperson and chair for the new Operation Clean Niagara, formed in 1979. The group focused on the S.C.A Chemical Waste Services Inc. and its plans to construct a pipeline from its waste disposal site in Porter N.Y to the Niagara River. This would mean that for 20 years a new source of chemicals and industrial pollution would be introduced to the river at the rate of millions of gallons per year. It would have devastating impacts on the air, water, wildlife and health on both sides of the border. Additionally, the Great Lakes served (and still serves) as the primary source of drinking water for over 37 million people and the proposed SCA pipeline's outlet would be located just two miles downstream of Niagara-on-the-Lake's drinking water intake.

Operation Clean was involved in over 100 hearings in Youngstown, N.Y. because of SCA's proposed pipeline, and a monumental agreement was signed in June 1982. One of the conditions of this new

agreement was the formation of a citizen review board to monitor the company's discharge while dozens of environmental tests were to be conducted. Although Operation Clean could never condone industrial dumping in the river, it saw this agreement as a stepping stone to real change since it was the first time industry and environmentalists successfully negotiated their disagreements.

This agreement would indeed pave the way for a binational agreement signed in 1987—the first workplan of its kind to greatly reduce the flow of toxic chemicals to the Niagara River and Lake Ontario, calling for the reduction of chemicals by at least half, by 1996.

Howe and Operation Clean Niagara later became involved with other dump sites along the Niagara River like the Hooker Chemical Company Hyde Park site and the Niagara Falls, NY sewage treatment plant.

Howe went on to co-found the Niagara-on-the-Lake Conservancy, dedicated to preserving the heritage of the town while educating and challenging developers and residents alike in matters that would threaten the environment or town heritage. She was awarded the Order of Canada in 1983 for her efforts in making both Canadians and Americans more aware of the dangers of industrial dumping in the Great Lakes.

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