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In the mid-1990s, I had taken an interest in the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. The official organization behind this religion is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc. and Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of NY, Inc., along with other various corporate entities. The Watchtower Society's literature publishing operations are entirely supported by full-time volunteer members of the religion who live on site and are completely provided for during their tenure.

In 1995, the headquarters of the Watchtower organization was located in Brooklyn, NY; however, I was invited to volunteer to work at their Walkill facility in upstate New York. This is a large printing operation and distribution facility covering 2000 acres that supports their other national and international facilities.

Soon after arriving at Walkill I was asked to work in the "Regulatory Services Department" which works with State and Federal regulatory bodies that Watchtower deals with as a result of their operations. My assignment encompassed operations of their water treatment plants as well as oversight of various regulatory compliance issues that emerged from construction activities. This typically related to their NPDES permit, water-quality reports, OSHA compliance and "Quality Control" oversight of construction.

In 1998, during the course of construction of new residence buildings, a few old barrels of waste were unearthed by excavation crews. While digging foundations the machinery (excavators, backhoes) encountered buried barrels with unidentified contents. Some of these barrels were broken as a result of their decay and contact with the machinery. My department was notified and we began to investigate. We found what appeared to be a buried cluster of barrels containing inks and by-product wastes from earlier printing operations.

Construction was halted in this vicinity for, I recall, a day or two. Supervisors in the Walkill Regulatory Services Department sought advice from the facility's director on how to proceed. A plan was devised to recover the unearthed barrels with spilled contents and consolidate them away from the construction area. I along with three others were assigned to delicately remove all barrels in the open trenches and surrounding areas and recaptured visibly contaminated soils in the area. These were loaded onto two dump trucks and parked in an enclosed building away from onlookers.

Shortly after our initial find the tone surrounding this issue changed dramatically. The discovery was reported to their headquarters in Brooklyn. Thereafter, special emphasis was made to us regarding secrecy - from non involved parties in an effort to keep those knowledgeable of these events to a minimum.

Four persons (one of them me) were assigned to be on call if/when further barrels were discovered during the course of additional excavation. We were instructed to maintain strict confidentiality about the matter.

Our group was to report directly to the facility director regarding this matter. Construction workers were to be reassigned to other activities away from this area if more barrels were unearthed. If people asked about the issue we were told to be nonspecific with our answers and direct them to Administration staff. We made a limited effort to find other barrels before they were encountered by using metal detectors in the vicinity of the planned excavation. All totaled, about ten to fifteen barrels were unearthed and two dump truck's worth of visibly contaminated soil was recovered and consolidated in an enclosed warehouse.

From this I came to understand the origin of these buried barrels. The Watchtower has been printing religious literature for approximately the last 80 years at their Brooklyn and Walkill facilities. Apparently, for some unspecified period in Watchtower's past, they were in the practice of burying their own wastes at this upstate location, instead of shipping it to a disposal facility. It was told to me that these barrels were just one of many old dump-sites scattered in various locations around the complex. I was informed that many of these "dump cells" remained in the ground at various locations on Watchtower property and what we found was merely the "tip of the iceberg". Some of these burial sites were pointed out to me during my involvement with this issue. This, I was told, was the reason for the emphasis on secrecy and concealment. Should this issue "get out", they believed it would be a "public relations nightmare" that could damage their public image and threaten ongoing projects recently approved by community leaders.

These waste barrels were old and damaged from decay. My immediate supervisor informed me that someone within the department researched "barrels" and discovered that these did not conform to a modern standard for barrels - a "UN standard" as I recall. This apparently meant that these barrels predated later container requirements meaning they were quite old. It was feared that a DEC regulator might notice this and inquire as to the origin of these antiquated barrels and perhaps want to investigate further.

The amount of waste that was unearthed also presented a problem for Watchtower. Initially, as I understand it, Watchtower sought to conceal the find by including it in with their normal haz-waste shipments. However, the amount of buried waste we discovered apparently greatly exceeded the hazardous waste shipment allowance their permits allowed them to generate during normal operations. There was no way (apparently the option was explored) to include this additional amount in with their regularly generated hazardous wastes - it's quantity was too much. Further, the presence of ink in the wastes could not be easily disguised if added to landfill wastes. The recovered barrels and dump trucks of soil sat for a few days until a plan was formulated to deal with this matter.

Thereafter, the following actions were taken:

- The recovered contaminated soil, occupying two dump trucks was taken to a field and spread into the soil using farm machinery. I was instructed to assist three others in spreading this soil. Though visibly contaminated with ink, no detailed analysis was done before spreading this material and no regulatory approvals were sought that I am aware of.

- The old recovered barrels were cut into pieces, their contents removed and then repackaged entirely into new conforming barrels. I and one other (my supervisor) was assigned to this repackaging effort on a weekend when most volunteers were off site.
- I was informed Watchtower filed a report with the NY-DEC claiming that there had been a minor spill affecting a small amount of soil that was subsequently recaptured and contained, but would require an additional waste shipment. Apparently some were nervous that a DEC regulator might want to come out and investigate the problem in person. There was a collective sigh of relief when the DEC representative simply gave instructions over the phone as to how to proceed with the matter. A DEC report was generated and Watchtower was issued some sort of number identifying the event and allowing an additional waste shipment.
- A few days after these events I was directed to sample a small stream that ran near one of the larger dump cell locations. This stream showed signs of contaminated runoff and there was concern that this might be contaminating the water. I was not privy to these sample results, although I understand that they were analyzed at their Waste water Treatment lab. I don't think they really knew what they were looking for, nor had the appropriate equipment.

No other actions were taken that I am aware of.

I was privy to discussions on how Watchtower would handle this issue going forward. Apparently it was feared that if revealed, the issue would damage Watchtower's reputation in the media, community leaders and the public in general. Further I had the sense that the problem that remains is very large, spanning many years. Apparently a recovery effort would be large, costly and highly conspicuous.

I eventually left my volunteer position and unofficially backed away from the religion as a whole due to this matter.

So I feel compelled to report this matter now, some 7-8 years later. The severity of my "confidentiality" regarding this matter was repeatedly emphasized to me by Watchtower staff. This religion enforces an expulsion policy toward members who speak out against it. It is incumbent upon other members of the religion to shun those who have been expelled in this manner – even if they are fellow family members. Since my family members remain in the religion, I have until now been reluctant to report the matter for the sake of maintaining my family ties.

My direct knowledge only involves ten to fifteen barrels of waste, improperly handled and falsely reported. However, what I subsequently came to understand points to a much larger issue that would require additional investigation to reveal its true scale.

On the advise of a legal professional I have decided to come forward. I am willing to cooperate in whatever capacity deemed appropriate. I am also willing to provide the names of those persons involved, the locations where these events transpired and any other relevant information required.

Your website contains the following message:

"You can call or email us regarding an environmental violation. Cash rewards are made available to callers whose information leads to an arrest, and your identity is kept confidential." I am interested in both of these provisions to the extent practical.

Sincerely,

