

# Local

KA-6A2

California News • Editorials • Comments • Valley



H. Bruce Miller

## When the chips are down . . .

**T**HE PEOPLE — 70 or 80 of them — sat on metal folding chairs in a meeting room at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Sunnyvale, a high-ceilinged, barnlike space dominated by a huge, stark cross on one wall. There was no PA system; the acoustics were terrible, and it was hard to catch everything that was said from the floor.

"But you didn't have to hear all the words to know that these people were fighting mad. Their voices, their faces and the sharp, angry splatterings of applause told you."

These companies should be responsible for paying for people's bottled water," one woman said. "This is outrageous — they're getting away with murder." She sat down to loud applause.

"We gotta fine these companies heavily, and the people responsible oughta go to jail," said a stocky man with a beard and a green shirt. That drew even louder applause.

The meeting Tuesday night was arranged for residents of Sunnyvale and Mountain View, the latest losers in the fast-paced, exciting, never-ending Silicon Valley Leak-of-the-Week Sweepstakes.

About a week before, officials had discovered that 12 private wells near Tele-dyne Semiconductor in Mountain View were dangerously polluted with toxic chemicals. Then they announced that chemicals from another leak at an industrial site in Sunnyvale were creeping northward and threatening to get into residential drinking water.

**A**T THE START of the meeting, Dr. Jim Cone, chief of the occupational health clinic at San Francisco General Hospital, talked about the effects of trichloroethylene (TCE), a cleaning and degreasing agent that has turned up in Mountain View and Sunnyvale water. Lab tests have indicted it as a likely carcinogen, mutagen and teratogen. Cone said — in other words, it might cause cancer, mutations and deformities. Delightful stuff.

The people in the audience had the predictable questions: What can we do? Is it safe to take showers? What about my baby? What will the TCE and other chemicals do to us in five or 10 or 30 years? Cone couldn't give any solid answers, only probabilities and guesses.

Toxic leaks are not exactly a new phenomenon around here, of course; the number reported since January 1982 stands at 96 and counting. In only two known cases has the gunk gotten into public drinking water, but that could change fast. There are something like 10,000 old agricultural wells scattered around the county, and if poisons seep into one of them they could be funneled straight into underground water supplies.

After following this issue for 2½ years, I size it up like this: We don't know what's down there; we don't know where it will end up, and we don't know what it will do to us if we drink it. And neither our industrial leaders nor our public officials seem to feel any great anxiety about doing anything about it.

**I**N SUNNYVALE, for instance, the toxic leak was discovered more than two years ago, but the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board sat on its hands while three corporations — Signetics, Advanced Micro Devices and TRW Systems Group — wrangled over who was to blame and who should pay for the cleanup. Only last Friday did the water board get around to ordering all three firms to halt and contain the pollution.

Ted Smith, chairman of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, which arranged Tuesday night's meeting, said local and state watchdog agencies "just have not got the juice to make the companies clean up their mess" and suggested that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should get involved. But the EPA has the same pro-business bias as its state and local cousins, and it's far from certain that it would be any more vigorous in bringing polluters to book.

Indeed, a whole different set of rules and procedures seems to apply to corporate wrongdoers. If the police know somebody is going around mugging old ladies or robbing banks, they arrest him. Regulatory agencies prefer to let the corporate offender go on doing his thing for a couple of years, then politely tell him he'd better stop.

The line that got the longest and loudest applause Tuesday night came from Anita Zimmermann, a slim, black woman who used to work for AMD.

"Our health is worth more than anybody's profit margin and our children are worth more than anybody's chips," she said. "That's all there is to it."

Unfortunately, it apparently isn't.

Column by H. Bruce Miller appear Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday