

Chief Seattle's prophecy

By Ted Smith,
Executive Director, Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition

One hundred and thirty-five years ago, President Franklin Pierce offered to buy Indian land in Washington state. Chief Seattle, in a beautiful and profound response, replied in words which still haunt us today: "This shining water that moves in the streams and the rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred..." He then issued this prophecy: "The whites, too, shall pass, and perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste."

Twenty short years ago, when people throughout this country mobilized to protect the Earth on the first Earth Day, there was hope that we would take Chief Seattle's warning to heart. But this was before Love Canal revealed the bankruptcy of toxic waste disposal policy. Back then, there was still reason to believe that the high-tech revolution would be different than earlier waves of new technologies. The wide-spread discovery of groundwater pollution and toxic chemical contamination throughout Silicon Valley during the 1980s shattered the "clean industry" myth and made us realize that we had, indeed, contaminated our own bed. Our legacy is that we now have more toxic Superfund sites than any other county in the country.

How did this happen and is there still time to turn the tide? What can people do to make a difference? If Earth Day 1990 is to succeed beyond the media hype, there are questions that must be addressed throughout the country and around the world. The task at times seems overwhelming. Superfund sites continue to be discovered. Newly available data discloses that billions of pounds of contaminants are routinely dumped into the land, air and water each year by major corporations. The production of synthetic organic chemicals continues to skyrocket while the combined sales of the major chemical manufacturers exceeds \$171 billion. At the same time, incidence of childhood cancer has increased 22 percent since 1950. In the early 1980s, residents of Santa Clara County, California joined together to form the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition to try to prevent pollution, following the discovery of contaminated drinking water wells and a nearby cluster of birth defects. We helped to develop a series of local laws to protect residents — a community right-to-know law, a chemical storage law, and a toxic gas protection law.

Throughout the development of these new ordi-



Charles Halleck

Ted Smith

nances, we worked closely with the various cities throughout Santa Clara County. In particular, we worked with the Sunnyvale fire department, City Manager, and city attorney to develop these precedent-setting laws that have enacted state-of-the-art protection to residents of Sunnyvale and the other cities in the county.

It was appropriate that Sunnyvale provided key leadership in these efforts, since the city has some of the worst toxic pollution problems in the county. Five of the 29 sites in Santa Clara County that have been listed by the Environmental Protection Agency as "Superfund" sites are located in Sunnyvale. These are the sites that EPA considers to present the most serious toxic threats in the country. The California Regional Water Quality Control Board has identified 28 active groundwater contamination sites in Sunnyvale, the most of any city in the county (tied with Santa Clara). In addition, some of the largest air pollution sources are in Sunnyvale, as are a large number of companies that store and handle toxic gases.

Recently, we have begun to focus more on phasing out the use of the most dangerous hazards, rather than just trying to add more of the pipe pollution controls. We have started a campaign to promote the rapid phase out of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other chemicals that are rapidly destroying the ozone layer. (EPA has warned that we are facing 80 million new skin cancer cases over the next few decades if we don't stop discharging these chemicals.) Our focus on IBM — the area's largest CFC polluter — has prompted a recent commitment to entirely phase out the use of these solvents by 1993. Other companies are also beginning to announce ambitious phase out goals and timetables.

Our efforts, like those of literally thousands of other grass roots citizen groups around the country, are beginning to turn the toxics tide by identifying and defining the problems and by developing and implementing long-term solutions. By focusing on local problems and proposing solutions that can provide global impacts, the grass roots toxics movements is leading the effort to move beyond the NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) syndrome to the NOPE (Not on Planet Earth) philosophy.

Whereas the 1980s witnessed the wholesale retreat from environmental protection, the 1990s offer the hope that the new grass roots environmental movement will help to galvanize the nation to re-order our priorities and to spend the "peace dividend" in ways that will truly protect the planet. If we succeed, we may yet be able to save ourselves. Otherwise, we may well "suffocate in our own waste."

Valley Journal

355 W. Olive Ave. #204
(P.O. Box 60667)
Sunnyvale, CA 94086

Jim Beck, General Manager
Anne Chappell, Editor
Laura Wood, Matt Campbell, Reporters
Bill Moran, Display Advertising Manager
Kevin Fitzgerald, Liese Martin, Display Advertising
Marcia Montague, Art Director
Charles Halleck, Photographer
Susan Moore, Classified Advertising Manager
Bill Bacon, Controller