

# At Landfill, Remains Gathered In Dignity

By Melanie Lefkowitz

STAFF WRITER

The "missing" posters are three months gone from the bus shelters and phone booths of Manhattan.

But photos of those lost on Sept. 11 still line the wood-paneled walls of the evidence trailer at the Fresh Kills landfill, where each day they remind 300 detectives sifting through World Trade Center debris of the importance of their task.

Items like jewelry, wallets, ID cards, passports and paperwork have passed from Ground Zero to barges to piles of debris to mechanical sifters to conveyor belts to this room, where they wait to be decontaminated and cross-referenced against a list of names.

"This is a special place," said Chief of Detectives William Allee. "We've created something where we can go through this process with dignity."

As of yesterday, 46 people had been identified through DNA analysis of remains found on the landfill site, with more identifications expected soon, Allee said. Nearly 1 million tons of debris have been processed to date.

The officials who run operations at the newly winterized landfill, shown to reporters yesterday, agree that their efficiency and pace so far have been extraordinary. "I think it's exceeded everybody's expectations," said Special Agent Richard Marx, the FBI's liaison to the site.

Thank the high level of morale among the detectives, who are rotated through for 12-hour shifts. Thank the successful collaboration between the NYPD, the FBI, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Secret Service and several other city, state and federal agencies.

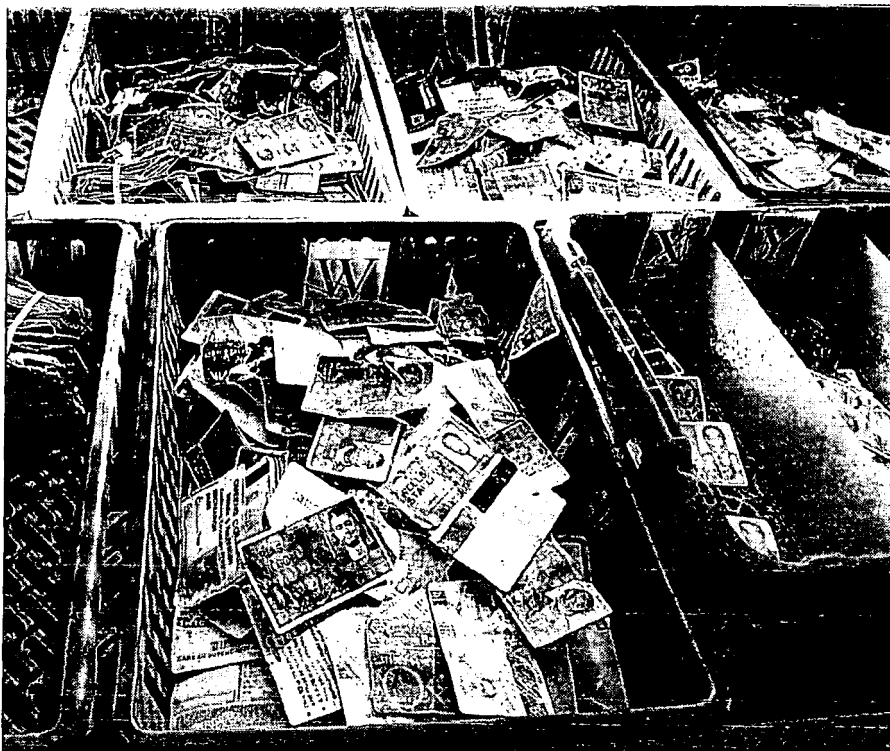
But perhaps most of all, thank the weather. "When it rains up here, it's awful. When the weather's good, production goes up," said Lt. Bruce Bovino, second-in-command at the site, which is run by Deputy Inspector James Luongo. "It's God. . . . Ask anybody who's been up here — the weather's been so good, we can only attribute it to God."

Right now, Bovino said, workers at the landfill are about three days behind those at Ground Zero. But assuming operations at Ground Zero slow down, cleanup and sifting could finish on the same day, he said.

Detectives, clad in Tyvek suits and respirators, work in shifts from 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. each day. During the four hours that work halts, Allee said, the equipment is cleaned and checked and the roads repaved.

Closed to city trash in March 2001, the landfill reopened Sept. 12 to deal with the debris.

"This is an area that was available to us, this is an area that we could secure, and as far as I'm concerned this is the best place," Allee said. "I'm tired of hearing about how people are coming to a dump. This isn't a dump. This is sacred ground."



Newsday Photo / Julia Grimes

ID cards found in the debris at Fresh Kills are sorted alphabetically. Workers have searched painstakingly for such items.

## Expert: Mercury Exposure Brief

By Graham Rayman

STAFF WRITER

An expert in mercury toxicity said the critical period for exposure to mercury vapor at Ground Zero occurred on Sept. 11 and in the first few days after the attacks.

Boyd Haley, a University of Kentucky chemistry professor, said the shattering of thousands of fluorescent light bulbs, light switches and computer screens in the World Trade Center complex would have released mercury vapor into the air from the sealed tubes.

"It would have been highest on Sept. 11, and then it would definitely decrease over time," said Haley, who has researched mercury toxicity for the past 14 years.

Last week, the Port Authority reassigned four police officers at Ground Zero because of elevated mercury levels in their blood.

A Port Authority police lieutenant and a building maintenance worker who labored at the command center on West and Warren streets also showed similar test results, a union official said.

It was not entirely clear that the exposure was from Ground Zero. A follow-up test on the first four officers later showed normal levels, a Port Authority spokesman said.

"It's still unclear what's causing it," said John McAusland, the counsel for the Port Authority Patrolmen's Benevolent Association. "The Port Authority is continuing to test the employees and has acted responsibly."

Haley said Ground Zero workers who labored at the site in the early days may want to consider having themselves tested. "If that was my son working down there, you can bet that I would have him tested," Haley said.

He said each fluorescent light bulb would have contained 25 to 65 milligrams of mercury. The heat of the fire and explosion on Sept. 11 would have accelerated the conversion to vapor.

The initial environmental tests for mercury began on Sept. 16, five days after the collapses. Bonnie Bellow, a spokeswoman for the Environmental Protection Agency, said air and dust samples taken on Sept. 16, 18, 26 and Oct. 8 showed "non-detectable levels" around Ground Zero.

Similarly, tests conducted by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration during the past 12 days showed no detection for mercury, except for one sample of 10 taken on Jan. 3, according to OSHA.

Newsday 1/15/02