NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

WALL STREET JOURNAL, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2001

A Landfill That Tells Eight Million Stories Now Has One More

* * *

Fresh Kills Is Reopened to Hold Remains of the Twin Towers; Raking Through the Rubble

By MARK SCHOOFS
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y.—In a round-the-clock procession, trucks bearing the remains of the World Trade Center leave Manhattan by the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and make their way across the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Barges with debris pass through New York Harbor, skirting the New Jersey shore, then up Arthur Kill inlet. They come together on Staten Island to form the last chapter of a storied place that has housed the cast-offs of New York City for half a century: the 3,000-acre Fresh Kills Landfill.

Opened in the 1940s and cursed by Staten Islanders since, the landfill is the world's biggest dump, at its peak taking in 29,000 tons of trash a day. Archeologists have drilled through its layers for insights into modern American culture. Anthropologists use it as a case study in man's relationship to his possessions. One legend holds that Jimmy Hoffa was buried here. After decades of promises by politicians to the locals, who feared it was toxic and disliked the smell, the landfill was closed just six months ago.

Now Fresh Kills has been transformed into a huge open-air crime lab. Most of the estimated 1.25 million tons of debris are heading for the top of Sections 1 and 9, grass-covered hills composed of compacted trash. The wreckage has been examined once at ground zero. But here, on a wide flat plateau surrounded by a high fence and tightly patrolled by police, the rubble is dumped into large mechanical shakers which separate out the bigger pieces of debris. About 100 federal and local law-enforcement agents rake the finer material along the ground and pick through it by hand. The labor-intensive effort, says Chief Thomas Fahey of the New York City Police Department, is equivalent to "building the Pyramids. But we're going to do it."

Investigators aren't sure what they'll find, but the prize would be the black boxes—actually colored orange—and they have not yet been recovered. The search for evidence is also focusing on documents that might have been carried by the hijackers, says Jim Margolin, a spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While that might seem quixotic, the passport of one of the hijackers has already been found because it was blown out in the explosion and landed a few blocks from the towers.

It isn't the first time that people have scoured heaps of garbage at Fresh Kills. One man came looking for a soap box that his wife had thrown away, recalls Arthur Fama, now retired from his post as Fresh Kills' director of operations. Unbeknownst to his wife, the man had used the box as a hiding place for several thousand dollars in cash. By tracing the truck that picked up trash from the man's address, then tracing the barge that carried that truck's load, sanitation workers were able to limit their search to a few tons of garbage, which they spread out on the dockside at Fresh Kills. The man first found mail from neighbors and, finally, the soap box. Every dollar was still inside.

Others came to retrieve their own valuables. "There were a number of lost engagement rings," recalls Mr. Fama. "I don't know why." At least one, he says, was found.

In addition to evidence, the World

Please Turn to Page A10, Column 1

CITY_21MC100_011830297

NYC-WTC_000412875

NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

WALL STREET JOURNAL, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2001

Storied New York Landfill Lives to Tell One More Tale

Continued From First Page

Trade Center investigators are looking for human remains. Even the steel girders are inspected carefully for biological material.

The only parts of the World Trade Center that don't go to Fresh Kills are the heavy structural girders—which are sent directly to two recycling companies in New Jersey—and the jagged exoskeleton of the building that many New Yorkers want to preserve as a monument. For the time being, that much-photographed section has to be removed to facilitate the clean-up, and workers have been trying for two days to bring it down, says Kenneth Holden, commissioner of the New York City Department of Design and Construction, which is supervising the demolition and debris removal. When it is finally carted away, says Mr. Holden, either it will join similar sections of the building's husk in a Department of Transportation yard on 158th Street in Manhattan, or it will go to Fresh Kills.

The landfill was conceived by Robert Moses as part of his plan for the Verrazano Bridge.

Not as Bad as It Sounds

New Yorkers have sent trash here since 1948, when the Fresh Kills dump opened. Its eerie name has nothing to do with death or garbage. *Kil* is an old Dutch word for waterway, and the name actually harks back to the once beautiful marshland where Mr. Fama played as a boy, camping on the drier spots and skinny dipping in the water holes.

Like so many other monumental structures in New York, the landfill was the creation of Robert Moses, the powerful city planner. The dump "was a central piece on his chess board," says Benjamin Miller, author of "Fat of the Land: Garbage in New York, the Last Two Hundred Years." As part of his plan to build the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, the graceful suspension span that connects Staten Island with Brooklyn, Mr. Moses also had to build a highway to reach it. The marshy land around Fresh Kills stood in the way. Transforming it into a dump was the easiest way to firm up the land for a road. Now, that road passes through a cleft, the manmade hills of the landfill rising on both sides. On top are crushed fire trucks hauled from ground zero, and even a damaged silver vending truck.

A New Vantage Point

Robin Nagle, an anthropologist at New York University, teaches a course called Garbage in Gotham: The Anthropology of Trash. For years, she has taken her students on a tour of Fresh Kills, ending at a vantage point where the skyline of Manhattan seems pencilled against the horizon. She says she wanted her students to "understand that the city was the source of the landfill and all the trash in it." That view, she says, "was a kind of reckoning, and it was the Trade Towers that marked the moment."

Fresh Kills may be the best archeological record of postwar America, containing everything from LPs to DVDs, typewriters to laptops, and newspapers that can still be read, even after 40 years. William Rathje, a research professor at the Stanford Archeology Center at Stanford University in California, has excavated parts of the landfill, boring 21 wells down as far as 100 feet into the garbage. Computers didn't usher in a paperless society, he found. To the contrary, the amount of paper deposited in the landfill in the 1980s was 10% higher higher than in the 1970s, he found.



Investigators sift through the World Trade Center debris at the Fresh Kills landfill.

That's true for the other 20 dumps Mr. Rathje has studied, but Fresh Kills has some unique features. The number and volume of foreign-language newspapers, written in everything from Russian to Arabic, have increased over the years, reflecting the city's expanding diversity. And Fresh Kills has a far greater amount of textiles than any other landfill Mr. Rathje has researched. That might reflect the city's garment district, he says, or it might mean that New Yorkers are more fashion conscious and "don't want to wear the same thing again and again."

Final Resting Place?

Now, the landfill will almost certainly house the World Trade Center. The New York City Department of Sanitation insists that no decision has been made as to the final resting place of the towers, but the expense of moving the debris a second time would be huge. If the ruins stay there, it will only add to the mystique of a place already enveloped in legend. Was Jimmy Hoffa buried there? No one knows. But Raymond Ragusa, a tractor operator for the Sanitation Department, recalls police horses and even an elephant being buried in the landfill. "It was wrapped in something like Glad bags, only bigger," he says, "but you could tell it was an elephant." Is he kidding? "I swear on a Bible," he says.

"Like New York itself, Fresh Kills is a symbol on which people project what they want," says Steven Corey, an associate professor of urban studies at Worcester State College in Massachusetts, who studies the politics of waste. He cites the report that Fresh Kills is so big that it can be seen from space with the naked eye. "I've seen that repeated so many times," says Mr. Corey, "but I have not verified that."

True, says Kamlesh Lulla, a scientist at NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston. As proof, he sends photos, unmagnified, that he says are the equivalent of "snapshots" taken about 250 nautical miles above the earth.

CITY_21MC100_011830298

NYC-WTC_000412876