

# THE BLADE

Toledo, Ohio

## Legacy of Luckey

**Part 1 of two-part series**



The next several pages show how Part 1 appeared in print on April 27, 2025. Following those pages, the type has been reflowed for easy reading.

## FRANCIS' FUNERAL

Crowds bid farewell to Pope of the people

250,000 attend Mass at Vatican

ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY — World leaders and rank-and-file Catholic faithful bade farewell to Pope Francis in a funeral Saturday that highlighted his concern for people on the peripheries and reflected his wish to be remembered as a simple pastor.

Presidents and princes attended the Mass in St. Peter's Square, while prisoners and migrants welcomed Francis' coffin at his final resting place in a basilica across town.

According to Vatican estimates, 250,000 people flocked to the funeral Mass at the Vatican and 150,000 more lined the motorcade route through Rome to witness the first funeral procession for a pope in a century.



Francis

They clapped and cheered "Papa Francesco" as his simple wooden coffin traveled aboard a modified popemobile to St. Mary Major Basilica, about 3.5 miles away.

As bells tolled, the pallbearers took the coffin past several dozen migrants, prisoners, and homeless people holding white roses outside the basilica.

Once inside, the pallbearers stopped in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary that Francis loved. Four children deposited the roses at the foot of the altar before cardinals performed the burial rite at his tomb in a nearby niche.

"I'm so sorry that we've lost him," said Mohammed Abdallah, a 35-year-old migrant from Sudan who was one of the people who welcomed Francis to his final resting place. "Francis helped so many people, refugees like us, and many other people in the world."

Earlier, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re eulogized history's first Latin American Pontiff during the Vatican Mass as a Pope of the people, a pastor who knew how to communicate to the "least among us" with an informal, spontaneous style.

"He was a Pope among the people, with an open heart toward everyone," the 91-year-old dean of the College of Cardinals said.

He drew applause from the crowd when he recounted Francis' constant concern for migrants, exemplified by celebrating Mass at the U.S.-Mexico border and traveling to a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece, when he brought 12 migrants home with him.

The guiding thread of his mission was also the conviction

See POPE, Page A2

Toledo faithful make final visits to Francis. Page B3

## BLADE INVESTIGATION

## Legacy of Luckey



FOR THE BLADE/SID HASTINGS

Olivia Carr, a scientist with Eurofins Environment Testing, holds water samples. The Blade hired the lab to analyze the newspaper's samples.

## Novel testing by The Blade finds high levels of radioactivity in groundwater in Cold War town. In response, federal, state, and local authorities vow action.

By ALEXA YORK

BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — For decades, people living in the shadow of a massive Cold War weapons plant on the edge of town have wondered if there might be something harmful in the groundwater.

Now they know.

In one of the most comprehensive testing programs of its kind, The Blade has found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village.

Nineteen of the 39 samples collected by the newspaper from well water at homes, businesses, and public places showed radioactivity at least 10 times greater than what the federal government says is normal for the area.

One sample from a hallway drinking fountain at Eastwood Middle School showed radioactivity 10 times above normal background levels. Another sample from the Luckey Library was 45 times higher.

When a Blade reporter collected a sample from a water pump near athletic fields, lab results showed radioactivity 1,731 times greater than



The former Cold War site in Luckey, Ohio, shown here in 2018, was crucial to America's nuclear weapons program.

background.

The Blade testing was funded by the Pulitzer Center, a nonprofit organization offering investigative reporting grants. The newspaper hired Eurofins Environment Testing, an accredited lab in St. Louis, to analyze samples for radioactivity and other

contaminants.

In response to The Blade's findings, federal, state, and local authorities said they would conduct a coordinated testing plan to try to confirm the newspaper's results.

"We've got to get to the bottom of this," said Lt. Col. Robert Burnham,

commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Buffalo District office, which oversees the cleanup of the former weapons site.

The radioactivity The Blade detected was primarily bismuth-214, which decays from the radioactive gas radon-222. Radiation experts agree that high levels of bismuth-214 suggest high levels of radon are present, too. Radon exposure is the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers.

Blade testing also found low levels of radioactive cobalt-60, a man-made isotope, in two wells. Detecting cobalt-60 in water is extremely rare, experts said, though it has been found in isolated instances elsewhere near nuclear facilities and radioactive waste sites.

The newspaper shared its testing results with several experts in environmental radiation, who called for health authorities to act.

Taehyun Roh, a Texas A&M University scientist who specializes in environmental exposures, said in an email that regulators should conduct not just comprehensive water testing in Luckey, but also soil and air sampling to confirm the extent of contamination and identify the source.

See LUCKEY, Page A3

## INSIDE

## Great fluoride debate

Dentists agree that fluoride in our tap water is healthy, but politicians seek to ban it.

Health | Page H1

## Head in the game

The Foxy's 3-on-3 basketball tournament features live musical acts during the games.

Magazine | Page D6

## Now hiring

The Blade Job & Education Fair will feature vendors looking to fill positions at all levels, from entry-level jobs to tax accountants and psychologists.

Business | Page E1

**NEWS | A**  
Lottery | 3  
**SECOND NEWS | B**  
Adoptable Dogs | 2  
Obituaries | 4  
**SPORTS | C**  
Behind the News | D  
TV News Shows | 2  
Opinion | 4  
Magazine | 6

**BUSINESS | E**  
Markets | 3  
Welcome Home | 4  
Horoscope | 5  
Recruitment | 5  
**LIVING | F1**  
Travel | 3  
Arts | F7  
Books | 10  
Crossword | 11  
**HEALTH | H**

## 3 candidates seek position on ballot for Toledo's next mayor

By ALICE MOMANY

BLADE POLITICS WRITER

For the first time, Toledo residents will vote for mayor in a May primary, but they'll

see some familiar names on the ballot.

Toledo Mayor Wade

Kapszukiewicz is seeking

a third term for mayor made

possible after voters approved a charter amendment in No-

vember, 2024. If re-elected in November, 2025, Mr. Kapszukiewicz would be Toledo's first

mayor to serve three consecutive

terms, but he will have to

make it past the primary election first.

Toledo's primary was previously held in September, which changed after a charter amendment passed in 2021.

Mr. Kapszukiewicz will be joined on the ballot by West Toledo residents Roberto

two candidates with the most

votes will face off in Novem-

ber.

Mr. Harris, who is running as an independent, moved to Toledo with his family when he was 3 years old. He served 20 years in the U.S. Air Force and retired in 1994. In 2019,

Mr. Harris started taking to the streets with signs advocating for a variety of social justice issues, earning the

See MAYOR, Page A8

Weather

HI 65° LO 40°



Page B10

TO SUBSCRIBE CALL

419-724-6300 or 1-800-243-3317

Copyright © 2025 The Blade



3714813658  
Recycled and recyclable

# A reporter returns home: The story behind the story

By ALEXA YORK  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — One of my most vivid childhood memories was sitting in the back of my parents' car, looking out the window and seeing this large, hulking factory off the side of the road. Most of it appeared abandoned, but at night it would be brightly lit, and my twin and I would stare at it, mesmerized, as we drove by.

I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was unusual in our tiny farming community of Luckey, Ohio, where many people raised cows or grew corn and soybeans. Our family grew hay and had several horses and goats.

Years passed, and I went to the local high school, where I played trumpet in the marching, jazz, and pep bands. I eventually enrolled at nearby Bowling Green State University, where I studied classical trumpet, played in the concert and marching bands, and graduated with a degree in music. The Luckey factory was the furthest thing from my mind.

After college, I received a Fulbright grant to teach English in Germany. When I got the email assigning me to a town called Bitterfeld, I immediately looked it up online. I was hoping for a quaint German village with historic architecture and snow-capped mountains. Instead, the first

items that popped up on my screen were old headlines like "East Germany's Bitterfeld Grimest Town in Dirtiest Country" and "East German Town's Bitter Image."

I was stunned. Of all the places to be sent overseas for a year, why Bitterfeld?

When I left for Bitterfeld, I was hoping it would be better than it sounded. It turned out to be worse. My daily commute took me past Soviet-era dumps and through a sprawling chemical park where I once got lost while riding my bike. Still, I grew to appreciate the town for its inexpensive chocolates, Christmas markets, high-speed trains, and the fact that not once did I ever see a tourist.

After 10 months, I moved to Washington to start a legislative internship on Capitol Hill. Partly because of my experiences in Bitterfeld, I became interested in environmental policy — and that old, hulking plant in Luckey returned to my thoughts. In my spare time, I started going to the Library of Congress to pull records on the plant and learn more about how it had produced a strategic yet highly toxic metal called beryllium.

At one point, I opened a folder and saw a 1951 report (previously classified "secret") that said workers were being overexposed to beryllium dust. Yet the plant remained open in

the interest of national security. My neighborhood factory, I learned, had been involved in the Manhattan Project and had been a key nuclear weapons plant during the Cold War.

When my internship was over, I wanted to stay in Washington but couldn't find a job. So I moved back to Luckey and into my old childhood bedroom in my parents' house — not exactly my first choice. Against my better judgment, I continued digging up information on the beryllium plant instead of applying for jobs.

Over the next few weeks, I went to the Luckey Library, which had archived thousands of pages of documents related to the plant. Many were fascinating: transcripts from previously secret meetings, worker health reports, exposure data regarding dangerous chemicals. Some records dated to the 1940s, but others were relatively recent and suggested that even though the plant was now shut, health hazards remained.

All of it seemed intriguing. But now what?

I reached out to Sam Roe, a former Toledo Blade and Chicago Tribune reporter who had written extensively about the hazards of beryllium. He told me that what I was doing was essentially investigative journalism.

He introduced me to Blade Executive Editor Kim Bates, who was not only interested in my research but offered me an internship so that I could work on the topic full-time.



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS  
Blade reporter Alexa York, a Luckey native, has been researching the Cold War site for four years.

Executive Editor Kim Bates, who was not only interested in my research but offered me an internship so that I could work on the topic full-time.

That internship turned into a full-time job in June as a reporter at The Blade, with my first assignment completing the "Legacy of Luckey" project — an examination of the long and troubled environmental history of my hometown.

As part of my investigation, I applied for and received a

\$9,000 grant from the non-profit Pulitzer Center to test private drinking wells in and around Luckey for a variety of contaminants.

To find people for the testing program, I knocked on doors and hit up garage sales during the Luckey Fall Festival. On Monday mornings, I occasionally attended the "Shootin' the Bull" group at the Luckey Library — a dozen or so older men who debated everything from politics to roundabouts.

They were exceedingly nice to me, and sometimes I asked them questions pertaining to my investigation.

Through it all, I have been grateful for the opportunity to learn the true history of Luckey and answer questions some residents have had for literally decades.

I know it's rare for reporters to have a chance to make a difference in their hometown — especially one as tiny as Luckey.

## Luckey

Continued from Page A1

"Additionally," he wrote, "it is necessary to assess the health risks (e.g., lung cancer) for residents living nearby or using private wells. Since this area likely has high radon levels, testing for radon in both air and water is advisable.

A safe drinking water advisory should be issued, recommending the use of bottled water until further assessments and mitigation measures are in place."

The Army Corps of Engineers, which has been removing tons of contaminated soil from the Cold War site for the past seven years, has long maintained that pollution is not moving into residential areas and affecting the drinking water.

Despite The Blade's findings, Lt. Col. Burnham and other Army Corps officials said in an interview they still believe that to be true, citing thousands of their own soil samples taken at the site in recent years.

They would not speculate where the radiation was coming from but said the government's coordinated testing plan, announced in response to The Blade's findings, might answer that question. The Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health will lead the testing, though the scope and timing of the sampling remain unknown.

(On Friday, hours after this story was published online, the Ohio EPA issued a special "citizen advisory," saying the agency and the Ohio Department of Health would begin sampling in the community this coming week, including at Eastwood Local Schools and the Pemberville Public Library and its branches in Luckey and Stony Ridge.)

Ohio EPA spokesman Katie Boyer wrote in an email that though the newspaper's testing showed "some contaminant detections in the public drinking water, they are within acceptable drinking water standards."

Both the Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health denied requests by The Blade to interview the agencies' directors and did not answer numerous written questions.

The Ohio EPA did address planned testing at Eastwood Local Schools: Ms. Boyer said the agency and the state health department will work with the schools to test the air and drinking water at the high school, middle school, and elementary school.

"If the state's sampling finds any concerning results, the agencies would work closely with the schools and/or residents to address the issue," she wrote.

Eastwood Schools Superintendent Brent Welker said in an email that no one regularly checks the radon levels in the



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS  
Karina Hahn-Claydon washes dishes in her home. She called for more water, soil, and air testing.



The Blade collected water samples from April 2024, through January to test for radioactivity.

Things that happened generations ago are still affecting us," said Karina Hahn-Claydon, a 50-year-old Oregon schools teacher whose family lives less than a mile from the site. "And that's because the government didn't take care of it."

### Radioactivity risks for decades downplayed

In the spring of 1988, Wood County commissioners hired BGSU geologist Jay Parrish and dispatched him to the Luckey

residents of its testing results, some expressed concern.

## JOURNALISTS BEHIND THE INVESTIGATION

Alexa York, 26, has been a reporter at The Blade since March of 2024. She is a native of Luckey and graduated from Bowling Green State University with a degree in music education. Before joining The Blade, she taught in Germany through the Fulbright Program and completed two internships on Capitol Hill.

Sam Roe, 64, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist and four-time Pulitzer finalist. A Toledo native and Whitmer High School graduate, he was a reporter at The Blade from 1986 to 2000. He currently teaches journalism at Columbia College Chicago.

Kurt Steiss, 30, is a photojournalist at The Blade, and he has been in Toledo since the summer of 2017. Raised in Texas and educated at Oklahoma State University, he found a love for photography and storytelling and has been visually documenting a wide range of stories in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan.

**PROJECT TEAM:**  
Alexa York, reporter  
Sam Roe, editor  
Kurt Steiss, photojournalist  
Joe Landsberger, art director  
Noah Ripley, graphic designer  
Dylan Frazier, page designer  
Taylor Freyer, digital editor  
Mike Brice, managing editor  
Kim Bates, executive editor



How government, industry endangered a Cold War town

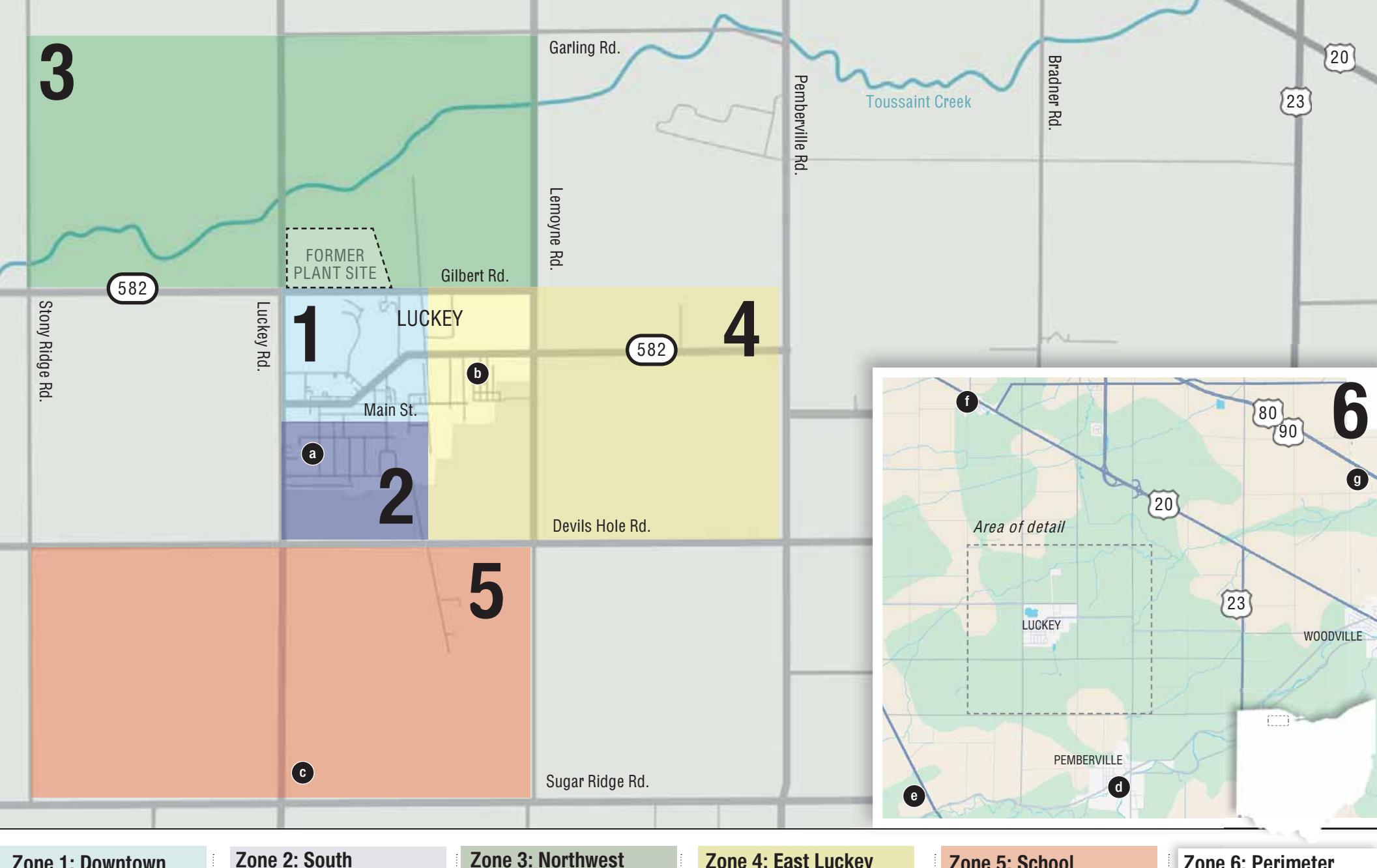
More coverage at toledoblade.com/luckey

- FAQs about the site and health concerns
- The methodology behind The Blade's testing
  - Coming this week: Hazards downplayed for decades

See LUCKEY, Page A4

# RESULTS OF THE BLADE'S TESTING

The newspaper tested 40 wells in and around Luckey. Results are split into zones to protect the privacy of residents who agreed to have their water sampled.



## Zone 1: Downtown

Seven locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 116 pCi/L (44 times over background) Radon estimate: 12,211 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: 93.3 pCi/L (50 times over background) Radon estimate: 12,713 pCi/L
3. Bismuth-214: 73.8 pCi/L (28 times over background) Radon estimate: 12,084 pCi/L
4. Bismuth-214: 69.6 pCi/L (26 times over background) Radon estimate: 9,472 pCi/L
5. Bismuth-214: 56 pCi/L (21 times over background) Radon estimate: 9,368 pCi/L
6. Non-detect
7. Non-detect

\*pCi/L = picocuries per liter

## Zone 2: South of Main Street

Eleven locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 119 pCi/L (45 times over background) Radon estimate: 2,224 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: 35.4 pCi/L (19 times over background) Radon estimate: 53,371 pCi/L
3. Bismuth-214: 32.3 pCi/L (12 times over background) Radon estimate: 5,254 pCi/L
4. Bismuth-214: 29.9 pCi/L (11 times over background) Radon estimate: 7,553 pCi/L
5. Non-detect
6. Non-detect
7. Non-detect
8. Non-detect
9. Non-detect
10. Non-detect
11. Non-detect

(a) Luckey Library

## Zone 3: Northwest

Six locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 49.4 pCi/L (26 times over background) Radon estimate: 4,872 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: 45.2 pCi/L (24 times over background) Radon estimate: 70,062 pCi/L
3. Bismuth-214: 42.8 pCi/L (23 times over background) Radon estimate: 4,719 pCi/L Cobalt-60: 10.1 pCi/L
4. Bismuth-214: 25.4 pCi/L (9 times over background) Radon estimate: 45,758 pCi/L
5. Non-detect
6. Non-detect



## Zone 4: East Luckey

Ten locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 3,220 pCi/L (1,731 times over background) Radon estimate: 72,434 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: 1,860 pCi/L (1,000 times over background) Radon estimate: 41,379 pCi/L
3. Bismuth-214: 51.7 pCi/L (19 times over background) Radon estimate: 7,331 pCi/L
4. Bismuth-214: 37.4 pCi/L (20 times over background) Radon estimate: 48,218 pCi/L
5. Bismuth-214: 33.3 pCi/L (12 times over background) Radon estimate: 59,710 pCi/L
6. Non-detect
7. Non-detect
8. Non-detect
9. Non-detect
10. Non-detect

(b) Troy Township Cemetery

## Zone 5: School

Two locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 37.1 pCi/L (14 times over background) Radon estimate: 157,983 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: 28.7 pCi/L (10 times over background) Radon estimate: 118,902 pCi/L

\* A significant amount of material was removed in the 1960s from the Cold War site and used as fill dirt at this location.

(c) Eastwood Middle School, near where the fill dirt was used.

## Zone 6: Perimeter

Four locations were sampled. The results:

1. Bismuth-214: 23.6 pCi/L (8 times over background) Radon estimate: 96,403 pCi/L
2. Bismuth-214: Non-detect Cobalt-60: 7.62 pCi/L
3. Non-detect
4. Non-detect
- (d) Pemberville Library
- (e) Webster Township Cemetery
- (f) Stony Ridge Library
- (g) Wyandot Service Plaza at Ohio Turnpike

• Shaded results show estimated radon over 40,000 pCi/L. About 10,000 pCi/L in water adds 1 pCi/L to air, so water above 40,000 pCi/L could exceed recommended air limits.

• Lab tests measured bismuth-214 in samples. No legal limit exists; Army Corps reports typical Luckey area levels at 2.63 pCi/L (filtered) and 1.86 pCi/L (unfiltered).

• At the request of The Blade, TaeHyun Roh, a Texas A&M environmental radiation expert, and Raymond Vaughan, a New York-based environmental scientist, estimated radon levels at collection time based on bismuth-214 readings and time between collection and analysis. No legal limit exists for radon in drinking water. A proposed EPA standard of 300 pCi/L was never enacted.

• Cobalt-60, a man-made, strictly regulated radioisotope, has a legal limit of 100 pCi/L. Any detection in water is rare and concerning.

SOURCES: Google Maps, Blade testing

THE BLADE/JOE LANDSBERGER

# Luckey

Continued from Page A3

The reason: "Rumors of some nasty things out there," Mr. Parrish told the Bowling Green Sentinel-Tribune at the time.

For several hours, he scoured the Luckey property with a Geiger counter.

"I just remember walking into a field and it started skyrocketing," recalled Mr. Parrish, now a 70-year-old retired Pennsylvania state geologist.

Results showed radiation six to seven times higher than background levels — the first time radioactive contamination at the site had become public knowledge.

But The Blade investigation found that defense and industry officials knew about a potential radioactivity problem for decades before Mr. Parrish came along. Records show that authorities concealed the risks from the public and denied radioactive material was handled at the site.

In 1949, when the Brush Beryllium Co., the site's primary tenant, moved its production operations to the property, Luckey residents speculated about the plant's potential health risks.

Reassuring residents, plant manager Henry Schaffner told a Blade reporter at the time: "There is no radioactive substance in our material. We are interested in atomic energy as related to power rather than bomb construction."

But that was not true, records show. Brush was making beryllium — a highly toxic metal — for nuclear weapons



FOR THE BLADE/SID HASTINGS

The Eurofins lab analyzes samples for radium, similar to The Blade's tests.

and other bombs; in fact, the company's only customer in the 1950s was the U.S. government. And less than a year after the plant manager told The Blade that there was "no radioactive substance in our material," the Atomic Energy Commission asked the company to produce radioactive beryllium-uraniium cores, according to a declassified shipping receipt.

It wasn't until 36 years later, when Mr. Parrish, the BGSU professor, surveyed the site, that the public learned of the radioactive contamination.

Sparked partly by the professor's work, U.S. Department of Energy investigators conducted the first radiological survey of the site in 1988, finding high levels of radiation across the property.

Four years later, in 1992, Energy officials placed the site on a special federal cleanup list called the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program,

no radioactive wastes at the site.

Eight months later, 90 tons of uranium from the Hanford plutonium production plant were shipped to the Luckey site for storage, according to a declassified shipping receipt.

It wasn't until 36 years later, when Mr. Parrish, the BGSU professor, surveyed the site, that the public learned of the radioactive contamination.

Sparked partly by the professor's work, U.S. Department of Energy investigators conducted the first radiological survey of the site in 1988, finding high levels of radiation across the property.

Four years later, in 1992, Energy officials placed the site on a special federal cleanup list called the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program,

or FUSRAP, citing radioactivity as one of the main reasons.

Radium-226 in the property's soil poses an "unacceptable" and "extremely high excess lifetime cancer risk," an Energy report stated, and the "widespread nature of the surface contamination may be indicative of potential off-site contamination."

Since then, the government has conducted virtually no testing in the community to determine whether radiation is moving off site.

The Army Corps, which is responsible for cleanup at the site, has never officially stated the cause of the radioactivity. Instead, it has given various explanations, some contradictory. Today, its website implies the radioactive contamination came from naturally occurring



Karina Hahn-Claydon sips coffee at her home.

beryl ore used in beryllium production.

The Brush Beryllium Co. is now Materion Corp., based in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. It remains a leading beryllium producer for defense and space applications. The company declined to answer questions about The Blade's testing.

Instead, it issued a statement, saying Materion or its predecessor company has not been involved in the site in more than 60 years.

## Setting out to answer a lingering question

The newspaper decided to test well water in Luckey because if any Cold War contamination was moving into the community, it might show up in the groundwater.

To test that theory, a Blade reporter collected three samples in the spring of 2024: one from a drinking fountain at the Luckey Library, one from a pump at the Troy Township Cemetery, and one from a pump near athletic fields. Following EPA-approved test methods, the reporter sealed the samples and shipped them to the Eurofins lab.

The Blade asked the lab to analyze the samples primarily for radiation because there had been little prior testing of Luckey's water for radioactivity.

When the results came back, all three samples showed levels of bismuth-214 far higher than what normally occurs in nature.

See LUCKEY, Page A5

# Luckey

Continued from Page A4

With these results in hand, The Blade applied for and received a \$9,490 grant from the Pulitzer Center to conduct 37 more tests in and around Luckey.

Over the next several months, the reporter knocked on doors, sent out emails, and worked sources to find residents willing to have their well water tested. If someone agreed, the reporter gathered a sample from a kitchen tap or outdoor spigot.

Lab results continued to show consistently high levels of bismuth-214 across the community. Of the 38 total samples tested for bismuth-214, 21 had elevated amounts. (Thirty-nine total samples were tested for radioactivity; one was sampled only for alpha radiation and radium-226, tests that don't detect bismuth-214.)

Nineteen of the 21 samples with elevated bismuth-214 had levels over 26 picocuries per liter — 10 times greater than what the Army Corps says is typical and naturally occurring in the Luckey area.

But how significant was that? After all, there was no legal limit for bismuth-214.

The reporter called experts in environmental radiation, who explained that bismuth-214 is part of the radon-222 decay chain and forms when radon gas breaks down in a series of rapid transformations. Bismuth-214 is known as a "daughter" of radon.

The experts agreed that if bismuth-214 was in the water, radon must have been, too.

This was important because radon in groundwater can enter homes as an odorless, invisible gas, damaging lung tissue and increasing cancer risk when inhaled. Ingesting radon can pose additional health risks, though inhalation is generally considered the greater hazard.

So the reporter returned to the pump near the athletic fields, took another sample, and sent it to the lab to be tested for radon only. But the results came back non-detect.

How could that be? A "daughter" without a "parent"?

Hydrogeologists explained: Testing for radioactivity in groundwater is tricky, with several variables. First, groundwater moves. A water sample collected on Monday might show different results than one collected on Friday. Seasonal variations matter, too, as fluctuations in temperature and water tables can affect radon levels.

It wasn't that radon wasn't in the groundwater; The Blade just didn't capture it in this one test.

So what about radium-226? As the parent of radon, radium would be expected in the samples at the same high levels as bismuth-214. But when radium was tested directly in several wells, results showed very little was present.

What first seemed to be a discrepancy turned into an important clue: It appeared that radon was entering the water from a nearby radium source, but the radium itself was not. Experts said that because radon is a gas, it is particularly mobile compared with other radionuclides in its decay chain, such as radium.

The experts suggested The Blade "back-calculate" the bismuth-214 levels to determine the radon amount when samples were collected. Back-calculating is a scientific method using mathematical equations based on radioactive decay rates. By analyzing bismuth-214 in the samples and applying these decay equations, scientists can estimate the original radon levels.

The Blade asked two experts on environmental radiation to do just that.

Working independently, Tae-hyun Roh, the Texas A&M University researcher, and Raymond Vaughan, a New York-based environmental scientist with decades of experience in nuclear waste issues, arrived at identical results: Ten of 21 samples with elevated bismuth-214 would have contained radon levels over 40,000 picocuries per liter — an amount that suggests risk.

Though there is no legal limit for radon in drinking water, the EPA recommends that homes be fixed if the radon air level is 4 pCi/L or more. Because 10,000 pCi/L in water



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

equals about 1 pCi/L in air, water with more than 40,000 pCi/L of radon could exceed the recommended 4 pCi/L air limit.

## 'Show transparency, show some concern'

Many residents were hesitant to have their water tested, saying if contaminants were found, their property values might go down. So The Blade promised not to disclose names, addresses, and individual test results.

But some residents agreed to discuss the overall findings and what authorities should do.

"I'm not worried," said retired plumber Dave Otte. "I'm 70 years old. We all got to die of something."

He said he thought wide-scale testing was a good idea, "but are you going to scare the hell out of everybody?"

Ms. Hahn-Claydon, the teacher, said she is a fifth-generation resident of the Luckey area. She, her husband, two children, cat, and four lambs live on five acres northeast of the site, along Toussaint Creek.

She called on regulators to test the water, soil, and several old dumps in the area. "Show transparency, show some concern for people," she said.

Enrique Miranda, a 30-year-old mental health technician, said he was cognizant of the old weapons plant even when he was a kid.

"I was always told it was a radioactive place that used to make bombs," he said. "When I went by on the school bus route, I was like, 'Oh, there's the bomb factory.'"

He said the results won't stop him from drinking Luckey's water, "but other people might not feel the same, and that's fair for them."

Frank Barrow, 58, retired from the military, called the old plant "a triple threat."

"One, it's the radioactive byproduct in waste that they buried back there," he said. "Two, it was the beryllium that they made there. And three, it was all the chemicals and stuff that they dumped in behind there that goes directly in the water table."

He said it's curious that workers at the site need to wear personal protection equipment, such as hazmat suits.

"How can you be safe on one side of the fence, and then right on the other you have to wear all this PPE?" he said.

Troy Township Trustee Kenneth Recker would not comment when told high levels of radioactivity were found at the township cemetery. But he said he would raise the issue at the next trustee meeting.

The Blade tested three libraries: ones in Luckey, Pemberville, and Stony Ridge. Results showed high levels of bismuth-214 at Luckey and Pemberville, but no radioactivity was detected at Stony Ridge.

Ariel Jacobs, director of the Pemberville Public Library System, which oversees the three libraries, said she could not comment until the results were investigated further.

## Man-made cobalt-60 presents a mystery

One mystery emerged from The Blade's testing results: Why was man-made cobalt-60 in two samples?

One sample was collected at



Joanna Latas, a scientist with Eurofins Environment Testing, analyzes water samples.

FOR THE BLADE/SID HASTINGS

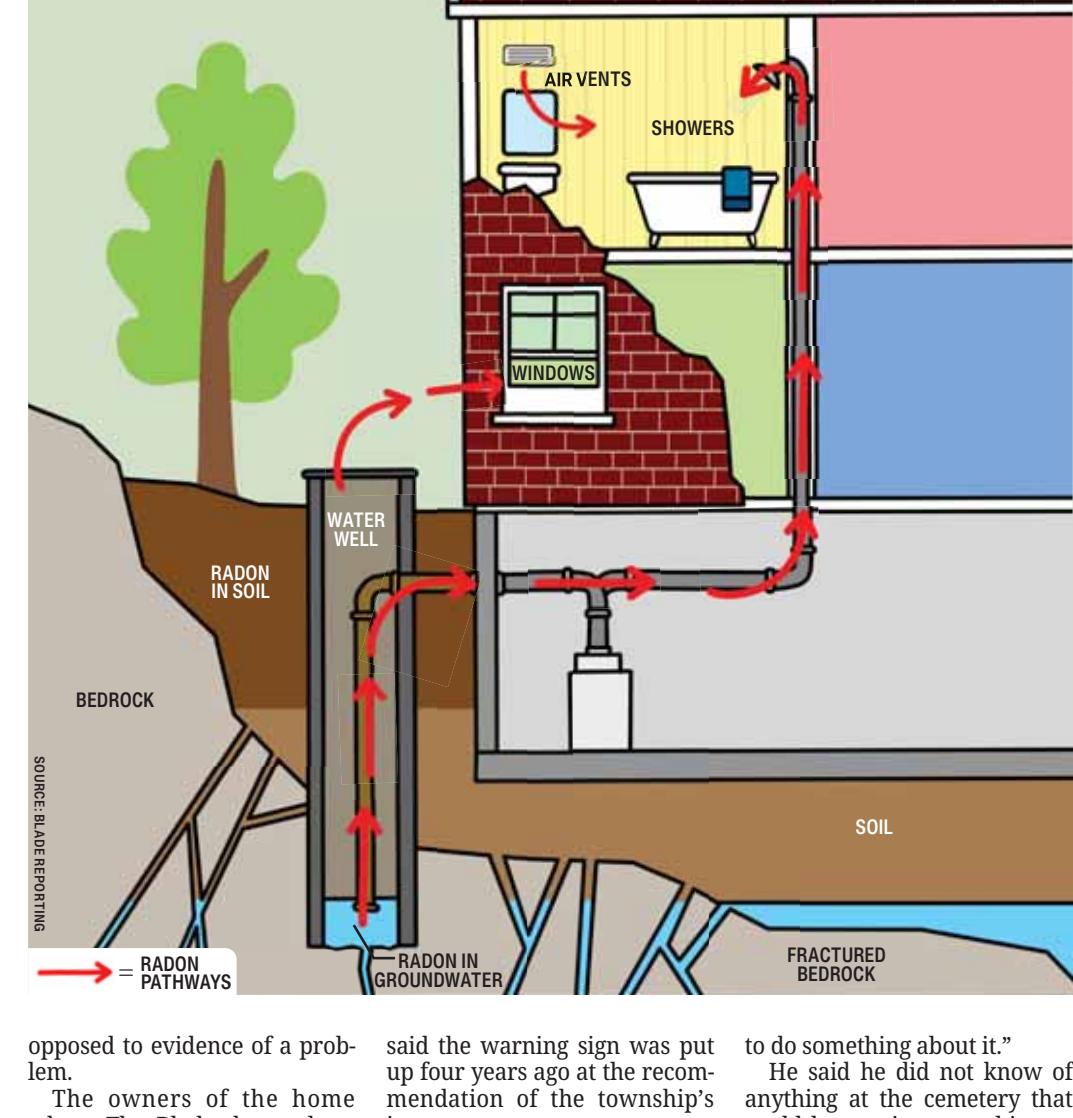
## THE RADON RISK

Blade testing of Luckey wells showed high levels of radioactive bismuth-214, a decay product within the uranium-238 decay chain. A decay chain is a sequence of radioactive elements transforming over time at their own rate, called half-lives. Scientists say high levels of bismuth-214 in groundwater indicate high levels of radon in the water as well.

### The decay chain



### Entering a home



opposed to evidence of a problem.

The owners of the home where The Blade detected cobalt-60 declined to comment but said to their knowledge, nothing on their property could be causing the contamination.

The Corps could not explain why it had detected cobalt-60 in either location. Mr. Miller said there is a lot of uncertainty in environmental sampling and characterized the Army Corps' positive cobalt-60 results as testing anomalies as

said the warning sign was put up four years ago at the recommendation of the township's insurance company.

"That was the only reason," he said. "We did not detect anything, find anything. We didn't even run tests."

"I've never used that pump up there other than for watering purposes," he said. "Flower pots and so forth. But if there were an issue with the water quality, I think we would have

to do something about it."

He said he did not know of anything at the cemetery that could be causing something as rare as cobalt-60 to appear in the groundwater.

"This has all kind of caught me off-guard," he said. "I really don't quite know what to make of it."

"I hope there's nothing more serious to it."

Contact Alexa York at [ayork@theblade.com](mailto:ayork@theblade.com)

**Part 1**

Published online April 25, 2025,  
and in print April 27, 2025

## BLADE INVESTIGATION

# Legacy of Luckey



FOR THE BLADE/SID HASTINGS

**Olivia Carr, a scientist with Eurofins Environment Testing, holds water samples. The Blade hired the lab to analyze the newspaper's samples.**

**Novel testing by The Blade finds high levels of radioactivity in groundwater in Cold War town. In response, federal, state, and local authorities vow action.**

**By ALEXA YORK**  
Blade Staff Writer

LUCKEY, Ohio — For decades, people living in the shadow of a massive Cold War weapons plant on the edge of town have wondered if there might be something harmful in the groundwater.

Now they know.

In one of the most comprehensive testing programs of its kind, The Blade has found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village.

Nineteen of the 39 samples collected by the newspaper from well water at homes, businesses, and public places showed radioactivity at least 10 times greater than what the federal government says is normal for the area.

One sample from a hallway drinking fountain at Eastwood Middle School showed radioactivity 10 times above normal background levels. Another sample from the Luckey Library was 45 times higher.

When a Blade reporter collected a sample from a water pump near athletic fields, lab results showed radioactivity 1,731 times greater than background.

The Blade testing was funded by the Pulitzer Center, a nonprofit organization offering investigative reporting grants. The newspaper hired Eurofins Environment Testing, an accredited lab in St. Louis, to analyze samples for radioactivity and other contaminants.

In response to The Blade's findings, federal, state, and local authorities said they would conduct a coordinated testing plan to try to confirm the newspaper's results.

“We've got to get to the bottom of this,” said Lt. Col. Robert Burnham, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Buffalo District office, which oversees the cleanup of the former weapons site.

The radioactivity The Blade detected was primarily bismuth-214, which decays from the radioactive gas radon-222. Radiation experts agree that

high levels of bismuth-214 suggest that high levels of radon are present, too. Radon exposure is the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers.

Blade testing also found low levels of radioactive cobalt-60, a man-made isotope, in two wells. Detecting cobalt-60 in water is extremely rare, experts said, though it has been found in isolated instances elsewhere near nuclear facilities and radioactive waste sites.

The newspaper shared its testing results with several experts in environmental radiation, who called for health authorities to act.

Taehyun Roh, a Texas A&M University scientist who specializes in environmental exposures, said in an email that regulators should conduct not just comprehensive water testing in Luckey, but also soil and air sampling to confirm the extent of contamination and identify the source.

“Additionally,” he wrote, “it is necessary to assess the health risks (e.g., lung cancer) for residents living nearby or using private wells. Since this area likely has high radon levels, testing for radon in both air and water is advisable.

“A safe drinking water advisory should be issued, recommending the use of bottled water until further assessments and mitigation measures are in place.”



THE BLADE

The former Cold War site in Luckey, Ohio, shown here in 2018, was crucial to America's nuclear weapons program.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which has been removing tons of contaminated soil from the Cold War site for the past seven years, has long maintained that pollution is not moving into residential areas and affecting the drinking water.

Despite The Blade's findings, Lt. Col. Burnham and other Army Corps officials said in an interview they still believe that to be true, citing thousands of their own soil samples taken at the site in recent years.

They would not speculate where the radiation was coming from but said the government's coordinated testing plan, announced in response to The Blade's findings, might answer that question. The Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health will lead the testing, though the scope and timing of the sampling remain unknown.

Ohio EPA spokesman Katie Boyer wrote in an email that though the newspaper's testing showed "some contaminant detections in the public drinking water, they are within acceptable drinking water standards."

Both the Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health denied requests by The Blade to interview the agencies' directors and did not answer numerous written questions.

The Ohio EPA did address planned testing at Eastwood Local Schools: Ms. Boyer said the agency and the state health department will work with the schools to test the air and drinking water at the high school, middle school, and elementary school.

"If the state's sampling finds any concerning results, the agencies would work closely with the schools and/or residents to address the issue," she wrote.

Eastwood Schools Superintendent Brent Welker said in an email that no one regularly checks the radon levels in the school buildings. He said he welcomed the state's testing help.

"We fully expect the results to show that our water continues to meet all safe drinking water standards," he said.

For years, the Luckey site — 44 acres just north of the village, 22 miles south of Toledo — was crucial to America's nuclear weapons program. In the 1940s, open farmland was replaced by a sprawling defense plant that produced magnesium metal for the Manhattan Project. In the 1950s, the plant became the government's sole source of beryllium metal for nuclear bombs, conventional Cold War missiles, and parts for the Space Race, including a heat shield for Project Mercury.

Throughout those years, government and industry records show, little attention was paid to environmental issues inside and outside the plant.

The Blade's testing effort took place from April, 2024, through January and represents the largest sampling effort of residential and public wells in Luckey's long and troubled environmental history.

Unlike municipal water systems such as Toledo's, private drinking wells are not regulated. It's up to owners to test their wells, and officials are not required to act if problems arise.

Radioactivity has been linked to an increased risk of various cancers, including blood and thyroid cancers. In terms of radon, the EPA estimates 20,000 deaths each year from inhalation exposure, which can happen when individuals shower, wash dishes, or do laundry.



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

**Karina Hahn-Claydon washes dishes in her home. She called for more water, soil, and air testing.**

When The Blade told Luckey residents of its testing results, some expressed concern.

“Things that happened generations ago are still affecting us,” said Karina Hahn-Claydon, a 50-year-old Oregon schools teacher whose family lives less than a mile from the site. “And that’s because the government didn’t take care of it.”

## **Radioactivity risks downplayed for decades**

In the spring of 1988, Wood County commissioners hired BGSU geologist Jay Parrish and dispatched him to the Luckey site.

The reason: “Rumors of some nasty things out there,” Mr. Parrish told the Bowling Green Sentinel-Tribune at the time.

For several hours, he scoured the Luckey property with a Geiger counter.

“I just remember walking into a field and it started skyrocketing,” recalled Mr. Parrish, now a 70-year-old retired Pennsylvania state geologist.

Results showed radiation six to seven times higher than background levels — the first time radioactive contamination at the site had become public knowledge.

But The Blade investigation found that defense and industry officials knew about a potential radioactivity problem for decades before Mr. Parrish came along. Records show that authorities concealed the risks from the public and denied radioactive material was handled at the site.

In 1949, when the Brush Beryllium Co., the site’s primary tenant, moved its production operations to the property, Luckey residents speculated about the plant’s potential health risks.

Reassuring residents, plant manager Henry Schaffner told a Blade reporter at the time: “There is no radioactive substance in our material. We are interested in atomic energy as related to power rather than bomb construction.”

But that was not true, records show. Brush was making beryllium — a highly toxic metal — for nuclear weapons and other bombs; in fact, the company's only customer in the 1950s was the U.S. government. And less than a year after the plant manager told The Blade that there was "no radioactive substance in our material," the Atomic Energy Commission asked the company to produce radioactive beryllium-uranium cores, according to Brush shipping orders.

The following year, in 1951, 1,000 tons of radioactive scrap metal from a prototype nuclear reactor in upstate New York was shipped to Luckey and buried at the site, according to government records and media accounts.

Again, authorities misled the public: As the scrap metal shipments arrived by boxcar, an Atomic Energy Commission press release said there were no radioactive wastes at the site.

Eight months later, 90 tons of uranium from the Hanford plutonium production plant were shipped to the Luckey site for storage, according to a declassified shipping receipt.

It wasn't until 36 years later, when Mr. Parrish, the BGSU professor, surveyed the site, that the public learned of the radioactive contamination.

Sparked partly by the professor's work, U.S. Energy Department investigators conducted the first radiological survey of the site in 1988, finding high levels of radiation across the property.

Four years later, in 1992, Energy officials placed the site on a special federal cleanup list called the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program, or FUSRAP, citing radioactivity as one of the main reasons.

Radium-226 in the property's soil poses an "unacceptable" and "extremely high excess lifetime cancer risk," an Energy report stated, and the "widespread nature of the surface contamination may be indicative of potential off-site contamination."

Since then, the government has conducted virtually no testing in the community to determine whether radiation is moving off site.

The Army Corps, which is responsible for cleanup at the site, has never officially stated the cause of the radioactivity. Instead, it has given various explanations, some contradictory. Today, its website implies the radiation came from naturally occurring beryl ore used in beryllium production.

The Brush Beryllium Co. is now Materion Corp., based in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. It remains a leading beryllium producer for defense and space applications. The company declined to answer questions about The Blade's testing.

Instead, it issued a statement, saying Materion or its predecessor company has not been involved in the site in more than 60 years.

### **Setting out to answer a lingering question**

The newspaper decided to test wells in Luckey because if any Cold War contamination was moving into the community, it might show up in the groundwater.

To test that theory, a Blade reporter collected three samples in the spring of 2024: one from a drinking fountain at the Luckey Library, one from a pump at the Troy Township Cemetery, and one from a pump near athletic fields.

The Blade asked the Eurofins lab to analyze the samples primarily for radiation because there had been little prior testing of Luckey's water for radioactivity.

When the results came back, all three samples showed levels of bismuth-214 far higher than what normally occurs in nature.

With these results in hand, The Blade applied for and received a \$9,490 grant from the Pulitzer Center to conduct 37 more tests in and around Luckey.



FOR THE BLADE/SID HASTINGS

**The Eurofins lab analyzes samples for radium, similar to The Blade's tests.**

Over the next several months, the reporter knocked on doors, sent out emails, and worked sources to find residents willing to have their well water tested. If someone agreed, the reporter gathered a sample from a kitchen tap or outdoor spigot.

Lab results continued to show consistently high levels of bismuth-214 across the community. Of the 38 total samples tested for bismuth-214, 21 had elevated amounts. (Thirty-nine total samples were tested for radioactivity; one was sampled only for alpha radiation and radium-226, tests that don't detect bismuth-214.)

Nineteen of the 21 elevated bismuth-214 results had levels over 26 picocuries per liter — 10 times greater than what the Army Corps says is typical and naturally occurring in the Luckey area.

But how significant was that? After all, there was no legal limit for bismuth-214.

The reporter called experts in environmental radiation, who explained that bismuth-214 is part of the radon-222 decay chain and forms when radon gas breaks down in a series of rapid transformations. Bismuth-214 is known as a “daughter” of radon.

The experts agreed that if bismuth-214 was in the water, radon must have been, too.

This was important because radon in groundwater can enter homes as an odorless, invisible gas, damaging lung tissue and increasing cancer risk when inhaled. Ingesting radon can pose additional health risks, though inhalation is generally considered the greater hazard.

So the reporter returned to the pump near the athletic fields, took another sample, and sent it to the lab to be tested for radon only. But the results came back non-detect.

How could that be? A “daughter” without a “parent”?

Hydrogeologists explained: Testing for radioactivity in groundwater is tricky, with several variables. First, groundwater moves. A water sample collected on Monday might show different results than one collected on Friday. Seasonal variations matter, too, as fluctuations in temperature and water tables can affect radon levels.

It wasn’t that radon wasn’t in the groundwater; The Blade just didn’t capture it in this one test.

So what about radium-226? As the parent of radon, radium would be expected in the samples at the same high levels as bismuth-214. But when radium was tested directly in several wells, results showed very little was present.

What first seemed to be a discrepancy turned into an important clue: It appeared that radon was entering the water from a nearby radium source, but the radium itself was not. Experts said that because radon is a gas, it is particularly mobile compared with other radionuclides in its decay chain, such as radium.

The experts suggested The Blade "back-calculate" the bismuth-214 results to determine what the initial radon levels were when the samples were collected. Back-calculating is a scientific method that uses mathematical equations based on radioactive decay rates. By analyzing bismuth-214 in the samples and applying these decay equations, scientists can estimate the original radon levels.

The Blade asked two experts on environmental radiation to do just that.

Working independently, Taehyun Roh, the Texas A&M University researcher, and Raymond Vaughan, a New York-based environmental scientist with decades of experience in nuclear waste issues, arrived at identical results: 10 of the 21 samples with elevated bismuth-214 would have contained radon levels over 40,000 picocuries per liter -- an amount that suggests risk.

Though there is no legal limit for radon in drinking water, the EPA recommends that homes be fixed if the radon air level is 4 pCi/L or more. Because 10,000 pCi/L in water equals about 1 pCi/L in air, water with more than 40,000 pCi/L of radon could exceed the recommended 4 pCi/L air limit.

### **‘Show transparency, show some concern’**

Many residents were hesitant to have their water tested, saying if contaminants were found, their property values might go down. So The Blade promised not to disclose names, addresses, and individual test results.

But some residents agreed to discuss the overall findings and what authorities should do.

“I’m not worried,” said retired plumber Dave Otte. “I’m 70 years old. We all got to die of something.”

He said he thought wide-scale testing was a good idea, “but are you going to scare the hell out of everybody?”

Ms. Hahn-Claydon, the teacher, said she is a fifth-generation resident of the Luckey area. She, her husband, two children, cat, and four lambs live on five acres northeast of the site, along Toussaint Creek.

She called on regulators to test the water, soil, and several old dumps in the area. “Show transparency, show some concern for people,” she said.

Enrique Miranda, a 30-year-old mental health technician, said he was cognizant of the old weapons plant since he was a kid.

“I was always told it was a radioactive place that used to make bombs,” he said. “When I went by on the school bus route, I was like, ‘Oh, there’s the bomb factory.’”

He said the results won't stop him from drinking Luckey's water, "but other people might not feel the same, and that's fair for them."

Frank Barrow, 58, retired from the military, called the old plant "a triple threat."

"One, it's the radioactive byproduct in waste that they buried back there," he said. "Two, it was the beryllium that they made there. And three, it was all the chemicals and stuff that they dumped in behind there that goes directly in the water table."

He said it's curious that workers at the site need to wear personal protection equipment, such as hazmat suits.

"How can you be safe on one side of the fence, and then right on the other you have to wear all this PPE?" he said.

Troy Township Trustee Kenneth Recker would not comment when told high levels of radioactivity were found at the township cemetery. But he said he would raise the issue at the next trustee meeting.

The Blade tested three libraries: ones in Luckey, Pemberville, and Stony Ridge. Results showed high levels of bismuth-214 at Luckey and Pemberville, but no radioactivity was detected at Stony Ridge.

Ariel Jacobs, director of the Pemberville Public Library System, which oversees the three libraries, said she could not comment until the results were investigated further.

### **Man-made radioactivity presents a mystery**

One mystery emerged from The Blade's testing results: Why was man-made cobalt-60 in two samples?

One sample was collected at the Webster Township Cemetery, four miles southwest of the Luckey site, from a pump with a large sign nearby warning "Non-potable water, do not drink."

The other came from a patio spigot at a private residence a mile from the site. (A retest five months later showed no detectable cobalt-60.)

Both positive lab results showed cobalt-60 far below the legal limit of 100 picocuries per liter: 10.1 pCi/L at the residence and 7.6 pCi/L at the cemetery — levels, radiation experts said, that would not pose a health risk.

But the experts said the fact that any cobalt-60 was detected, even at tiny amounts, was puzzling — and concerning.

Cobalt-60 is strictly regulated, in part due to its strong gamma radiation and potential for misuse, such as in dirty bombs. It is primarily associated with nuclear reactors, where the radioactive isotope is created under controlled conditions for medical and industrial purposes.

“I haven’t heard of cobalt-60 in well water,” said John Hageman, a retired health physicist from the Southwest Research Institute in Texas. “Cobalt-60 does not occur in nature, and there normally shouldn’t be any in well water.”

Mr. Hageman said that because cobalt-60 has a distinct radiation fingerprint, it was unlikely The Blade’s positive lab results were in error.

Army Corps officials said in an interview they were certain cobalt-60 was not coming from the Luckey site.



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

**John Thierry, resident engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers, shows the Luckey site.**

Neil Miller, environmental chief of the Army Corps’ Buffalo District, said that since 2017, about 3,000 soil samples have been taken throughout the site, “and none of them detected cobalt-60.”

A Blade review of Army Corps testing data showed that cobalt-60 had been detected years ago in two off-site samples: once in 1998 at an agency monitoring well 300 yards north of the property, and another time in 2000 in the soil of a home containing fill material from the site.

The Corps could not explain why it had detected cobalt-60 in either location. Mr. Miller said there is a lot of uncertainty in environmental sampling and characterized the Army Corps' positive cobalt-60 results as testing anomalies as opposed to evidence of a problem.

The owners of the home where The Blade detected cobalt-60 declined to comment but said to their knowledge, nothing on their property could be causing the contamination.

Mark Bushman, a 66-year-old corn farmer and trustee for Webster Township, which oversees the cemetery where The Blade detected cobalt-60, said the "non-potable" warning sign was put up four years ago at the recommendation of the township's insurance company.

"That was the only reason," he said. "We did not detect anything, find anything. We didn't even run tests."

He said he did not know of anything at the cemetery that could be causing something as rare as cobalt-60 to appear in the groundwater.

"I really don't quite know what to make of it," he said. "I hope there's nothing more serious to it."

# THE BLADE

Toledo, Ohio

## Legacy of Luckey

### Part 1 sidebar



(The next page shows how the sidebar appeared in print on April 27, 2025. Following that page, the type has been reflowed for easy reading.)

# A reporter returns home: The story behind the story

By ALEXA YORK  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — One of my most vivid childhood memories was sitting in the back of my parents' car, looking out the window and seeing this large, hulking factory off the side of the road. Most of it appeared abandoned, but at night it would be brightly lit, and my twin and I would stare at it, mesmerized, as we drove by.

I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was unusual in our tiny farming community of Luckey, Ohio, where many people raised cows or grew corn and soybeans. Our family grew hay and had several horses and goats.

Years passed, and I went to the local high school, where I played trumpet in the marching, jazz, and pep bands. I eventually enrolled at nearby Bowling Green State University, where I studied classical trumpet, played in the concert and marching bands, and graduated with a degree in music. The Luckey factory was the furthest thing from my mind.

After college, I received a Fulbright grant to teach English in Germany. When I got the email assigning me to a town called Bitterfeld, I immediately looked it up online. I was hoping for a quaint German village with historic architecture and snow-capped mountains. Instead, the first

items that popped up on my screen were old headlines like "East Germany's Bitterfeld Grimiest Town in Dirtiest Country" and "East German Town's Bitter Image."

I was stunned. Of all the places to be sent overseas for a year, why Bitterfeld?

When I left for Bitterfeld, I was hoping it would be better than it sounded. It turned out to be worse. My daily commute took me past Soviet-era dumps and through a sprawling chemical park where I once got lost while riding my bike. Still, I grew to appreciate the town for its inexpensive chocolates, Christmas markets, high-speed trains, and the fact that not once did I ever see a tourist.

After 10 months, I moved to Washington to start a legislative internship on Capitol Hill. Partly because of my experiences in Bitterfeld, I became interested in environmental policy — and that old, hulking plant in Luckey returned to my thoughts. In my spare time, I started going to the Library of Congress to pull records on the 1940s, but others were relatively recent and suggested that even though the plant was now shut, health hazards remained.

All of it seemed intriguing. But now what?

I reached out to Sam Roe, a former Toledo Blade and Chicago Tribune reporter who had written extensively about the hazards of beryllium. He told me that what I was doing was essentially investigative journalism. Yet the plant remained open in

the interest of national security. My neighborhood factory, I learned, had been involved in the Manhattan Project and had been a key nuclear weapons plant during the Cold War.

When my internship was over, I wanted to stay in Washington but couldn't find a job. So I moved back to Luckey and into my old childhood bedroom in my parents' house — not exactly my first choice. Against my better judgment, I continued digging up information on the beryllium plant instead of applying for jobs.

Over the next few weeks, I went to the Luckey Library, which had archived thousands of pages of documents related to the plant. Many were fascinating: transcripts from previously secret meetings, worker health reports, exposure data regarding dangerous chemicals. Some records dated to the 1940s, but others were relatively recent and suggested that even though the plant was now shut, health hazards remained.

All of it seemed intriguing. But now what?



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

**Blade reporter Alexa York, a Luckey native, has been researching the Cold War site for four years.**

Executive Editor Kim Bates, who was not only interested in my research but offered me an internship so that I could work on the topic full-time.

That internship turned into a full-time job in June as a reporter at The Blade, with my first assignment completing the "Legacy of Luckey" project — an examination of the long and troubled environmental history of my hometown.

As part of my investigation, I applied for and received a

\$9,000 grant from the non-profit Pulitzer Center to test private drinking wells in and around Luckey for a variety of contaminants.

To find people for the testing program, I knocked on doors and hit up garage sales during the Luckey Fall Festival. On Monday mornings, I occasionally attended the "Shootin' the Bull" group at the Luckey Library — a dozen or so older men who debated everything from politics to roundabouts.

They were exceedingly nice to me, and sometimes I asked them questions pertaining to my investigation.

Through it all, I have been grateful for the opportunity to learn the true history of Luckey and answer questions some residents have had for literally decades.

I know it's rare for reporters to have a chance to make a difference in their hometown — especially one as tiny as Luckey.

**Part 1 sidebar**

Published online Aug. 25, 2025,  
and in print Aug. 27, 2025

# A reporter returns home: The story behind the story



THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

**Blade reporter Alexa York, a Luckey native, has been researching the Cold War site for four years.**

**By ALEXA YORK**  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — One of my most vivid childhood memories was sitting in the back of my parents' car, looking out the window and seeing this large, hulking factory off the side of the road. Most of it appeared abandoned, but at night it would be brightly lit, and my twin and I would stare at it, mesmerized, as we drove by.

I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was unusual in our tiny farming community of Luckey, Ohio, where many people raised cows or grew corn and soybeans. Our family grew hay and had several horses and goats.

Years passed, and I went to the local high school, where I played trumpet in the marching, jazz, and pep bands. I eventually enrolled at nearby Bowling Green State University, where I studied classical trumpet, played in the concert and marching bands, and graduated with a degree in music. The Luckey factory was the furthest thing from my mind.

After college, I received a Fulbright grant to teach English in Germany. When I got the email assigning me to a town called Bitterfeld, I immediately looked it up online. I was hoping for a quaint German village with historic architecture and snow-capped mountains. Instead, the first items that popped up on my screen were old headlines like "East Germany's Bitterfeld Grimest Town in Dirtiest Country" and "East German Town's Bitter Image."

I was stunned. Of all the places to be sent overseas for a year, why Bitterfeld?

When I left for Bitterfeld, I was hoping it would be better than it sounded. It turned out to be worse. My daily commute took me past Soviet-era dumps and through a sprawling chemical park where I once got lost while riding my bike. Still, I grew to appreciate the town for its inexpensive chocolates, Christmas markets, high-speed trains, and the fact that not once did I ever see a tourist.

After 10 months, I moved to Washington to start a legislative internship on Capitol Hill. Partly because of my experiences in Bitterfeld, I became interested in environmental policy — and that old, hulking plant in Luckey returned to my thoughts. In my spare time, I started going to the Library of Congress to pull records on the plant and learn more about how it had produced a strategic yet highly toxic metal called beryllium.

At one point, I opened a folder and saw a 1951 report (previously classified "secret") that said workers were being overexposed to beryllium dust. Yet the plant remained open in the interest of national security. My neighborhood factory, I learned, had been involved in the Manhattan Project and had been a key nuclear weapons plant during the Cold War.

When my internship was over, I wanted to stay in Washington but couldn't find a job. So I moved back to Luckey and into my old childhood bedroom in my parents' house — not exactly my first choice. Against my better judgment, I continued digging up information on the beryllium plant instead of applying for jobs.

Over the next few weeks, I went to the Luckey Library, which had archived thousands of pages of documents related to the plant. Many were fascinating: transcripts from previously secret meetings, worker health reports, exposure data regarding dangerous chemicals. Some records dated to the 1940s, but others were relatively recent and suggested that even though the plant was now shut, health hazards remained.

All of it seemed intriguing. But now what?

I reached out to Sam Roe, a former Toledo Blade and Chicago Tribune reporter who had written extensively about the hazards of beryllium. He told me that what I was doing was essentially investigative journalism.

He introduced me to Blade Executive Editor Kim Bates, who was not only interested in my research but offered me an internship so that I could work on the topic full-time.

That internship turned into a full-time job in June as a reporter at The Blade, with my first assignment completing the "Legacy of Luckey" project — an examination of the long and troubled environmental history of my hometown.

As part of my investigation, I applied for and received a \$9,000 grant from the nonprofit Pulitzer Center to test private drinking wells in and around Luckey for a variety of contaminants.

To find people for the testing program, I knocked on doors and hit up garage sales during the Luckey Fall Festival. On Monday mornings, I occasionally attended the "Shootin' the Bull" group at the Luckey Library -- a dozen or so older men who debated everything from politics to roundabouts. They were exceedingly nice to me, and sometimes I asked them questions pertaining to my investigation.

Through it all, I have been grateful for the opportunity to learn the true history of Luckey and answer questions some residents have had for literally decades. I know it's rare for reporters to have a chance to make a difference in their hometown — especially one as tiny as Luckey.