

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

# CHARLOTTE SAGOFF

Community Member— W.R. Grace Acton Plant Site

**Interview Date: September 16, 2005**

**Location: Cambridge, Massachusetts**

EPA Interviewer: For the record, this is an interview with Mrs. Charlotte Sagoff. We're conducting the interview on September 16, 2005, for an oral history project in conjunction with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Superfund. Ms. Sagoff, you're a private citizen, not a government official?

Sagoff: Not at all.

EPA Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about how you came to be involved with the Superfund program?

Sagoff: My involvement was at the receiving end. I had been deeply involved with an organization called Acton Citizens for Environmental Safety [ACES] with regard to the contaminated wells in Acton, Massachusetts, where I lived. Our wells, we believe, had been contaminated by the W.R. Grace Corporation for a long time, since 1954. We wanted that contamination cleaned up. We wanted the EPA to come in and help us, because we weren't getting anywhere ourselves. Later on, when Concord, Mass, our abutting city, thought there was nuclear contamination, they came to us for advice, and I told them, "Go to the EPA." So that's how I started with EPA as a result of this contamination.

EPA Interviewer: You've been described as both an environmental activist and a community leader. How would you describe yourself with respect to all the work you've done over the years in this area?

Sagoff: Exactly those two. I can't think of anything more.

EPA Interviewer: Had you had any other experience with environmental issues prior to your involvement?

Sagoff: No. I had never given it any thought.

EPA Interviewer: And what was your background?

Sagoff: I had been a biology teacher at both a high school and college level. So I was aware. I understood the lingo. I was aware of what was going on in other places. The way the contamination was discovered is they were considering putting in a new well in Acton.

EPA Interviewer: A public drinking water well?

Sagoff: Yes, public drinking water well. And in going into the aquifer, the stench was enormous. Also, people were complaining about odors coming from over that way, not from the new well but from the old well. So the issue was in the air.

EPA Interviewer: Around what year was this? I think I had read, around the early 1970s.

Sagoff: 1979. Not early 1970s, late 1970s.

EPA Interviewer: Late 1970s.

Sagoff: Another reason was I was on the Board of Health. I had volunteered to be on that, so the issue came up there. Or I brought it to them. So I was thinking about it.

EPA Interviewer: To give some context to the listeners, could you give us some background on the...it was the Acton Superfund site? Is that the one we're referring to?

Sagoff: Yes, but that came in later.

EPA Interviewer: So this was a previous incident?

Sagoff: No, no. It was a follow-up. The whole thing moved very slowly. I seem to remember that in October 1980, Grace signed a consent decree with EPA indicating that they would clean up the site within 30 years. It's not quite 30 years yet, and it's not been done. So that was 1980. It was 1979 that I convinced the Board of Health that they needed to turn to EPA on this issue. And we started this organization, ACES, in 1979.

EPA Interviewer: So ACES did not exist prior to this whole thing? It was formed as a result?

Sagoff: Yes, of course. We were meeting, we were talking about the issue, but there was no group. We met, for instance, standing in the parking lot of the Town Hall after a Board of Health meeting. And I said, "Well, I live down the street." It was cold, it was October, so I said, "Why don't we continue this at my house?" And that's when we started, without a name or anything, just...

EPA Interviewer: A handful of citizens?

Sagoff: Right, a handful of citizens who had come to hear what was going on at the Board of Health meeting. Then we met several times after that, and then we formed a group.

EPA Interviewer: How did the item come to the Board of Health's attention? Was it as a result of your bringing it to them? Or they were going through a normal permitting process on the wells being approved?

Sagoff: There were two different—two distinct bodies—municipal bodies. There was a Water District, which was totally separate from the Board of Health. They never met until I raised the question at a town meeting—a big town meeting. It was on the warrant on the meeting, I got it on that, and said that I felt they had to meet together four times a year.

And of course it passed, and so that's how they got together finally. It was really an untended issue for a long time until I pushed a number of things. It was easy enough. As long as somebody did it, it got done.

EPA Interviewer: What did you all—this group of folks that were in the parking lot outside the meeting—the Water District meeting, right?

Sagoff: No, it was a town meeting, a town selectmen meeting.

EPA Interviewer: At the town meeting where the ACES group was formed, what did you guys initially see as the role of the group?

Sagoff: To get the contamination cleaned up!

EPA Interviewer: So you viewed yourselves as a temporary group of folks that was there to accomplish that mission and then go away. You didn't necessarily want to form an organization?

Sagoff: Oh, no. We never thought that anything would last of that. But it still does. Somebody much better than me is the leader now.

EPA Interviewer: You only recently stepped down as Chairperson, right?

Sagoff: That's right. I moved now to Cambridge, because I'm not well. So the person who took over from me is now the Chair. Her name is Mary Michelman.

EPA Interviewer: So has the role of the ACES group evolved over time? What did you all initially start out as doing?

Sagoff: Our initial concern was the wells and the water. I think, maybe now, the group is expanding into a few other things, but I'm not sure. They have an organization. They meet, they vote, and they decide what they want to do.

EPA Interviewer: Had the group grown since from that initial handful of people? Is it a large group now?

Sagoff: Oh yes, it's a large group. At one point, I thought we needed money to do some lab work on determining what the exact substances were. I asked people to send in \$10 fees—dues to ACES—and I got \$4,000.

EPA Interviewer: Wow!

Sagoff: So the people were interested. Then we used that money for various things that we did. So yes, people in Acton were all extremely sympathetic with ACES and helped whenever necessary. And that was a good town. The town was active.

EPA Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about Acton as a town. Is there a main industry there?

Sagoff: No, no. It is 30 miles from Boston, 25 miles from Cambridge. Many people work in Boston or Cambridge. Most of the people work—that is, they're professionals, semiprofessionals. It's an educated community. People moved to Acton because the schools are very good. It has a reputation for that. There are about 20,000 people that live in Acton. It was once, of course, a rural community but...

EPA Interviewer: There's not very much rural country left anymore, anywhere, is there?

Sagoff: There's still a big chicken farm there. It's fairly far north; it's sort of northwest of Boston.

EPA Interviewer: And you had mentioned W.R. Grace was the PRP at the site.

Sagoff: What is a PRP?

EPA Interviewer: I'm sorry, potentially responsible party. Was there an ongoing industrial facility there that led to this?

Sagoff: Right after the war, in 1945 I think, there had been a big chemical plant there, and W.R. Grace bought it in 1954. So they were in town since 1954. They were emptying their emissions from this chemical plant—were going into unlined lagoons. They said they didn't use vinyl chloride. They said they didn't make that, they didn't use it, and yet they had, outside their plant, vessels that carried it away. We even tried to follow them when they went away at night. They tried to hide from us, so we followed their trucks. We never did see where they just dumped it into the soil—someplace in New Hampshire.

EPA Interviewer: This was a midnight dumping situation?

Sagoff: Right.

EPA Interviewer: So in addition to playing the representatives of the community, your group also played some role in trying to gather evidence and evaluate technical information?

Sagoff: Oh yeah. We did whatever we could to find out where they were taking their contaminants, if they weren't leaving them with us.

EPA Interviewer: So Acton wasn't a company town of W.R. Grace or anything like that?

Sagoff: Not at all. But there were some people that worked there, and they were very unfriendly.

EPA Interviewer: Was the presence of a Superfund site, once it became a Superfund site, controversial? Was the fact of the site being listed as a Superfund site something that was controversial? Was it welcomed?

Sagoff: Well, people in real estate didn't like it just because they thought it would be difficult. Even though schools were good, the water was bad! But our Water District was immediately set to cleaning it. They had a stand with the water coming—being aerated. The aerated water

that came out of those standing pipes went into a sinking pond. The Water District and the Board of Health and the people who acted were very anxious to clean that water.

EPA Interviewer: So once the water contamination was discovered, the town Water District, the public water treatment provider, immediately began treating it?

Sagoff: Right.

EPA Interviewer: And at whose expense? Do you know?

Sagoff: Their own! Of course, they obviously, in trying to negotiate with Grace, we tried to get some funding—refunds for the expenses to the town.

EPA Interviewer: Do you know if that ever happened?

Sagoff: I don't.

EPA Interviewer: Were there differences of opinion about the risks posed by the site? By the particular wastes that were there? About liability or any of that?

Sagoff: Yeah, Grace had one opinion and we had a different one.

EPA Interviewer: You mentioned taking \$10 donations from community members in order to fund your own technical work. Did your group ever apply for a Technical Assistance Grant [TAG]?

Sagoff: As a matter of fact we did.

EPA Interviewer: What was that process like?

Sagoff: It was easy. At some meeting I heard about the grants from someone and I said, "Wow! That's for us!" And it was easy.

EPA Interviewer: Your experience with using the TAG grant was a positive one?

Sagoff: Oh yes, very useful.

EPA Interviewer: Did it help the community become more involved or understand better what the risks were and what was being told to them by various...

Sagoff: I imagine so, because one of my major techniques was to see to it that every issue of the weekly newspaper that came to Acton, called *The Beacon*, had stuff about the water and stuff about treating, looking, exploring, fighting with Grace. It was in there every week.

EPA Interviewer: So I'm assuming from what you're telling me that Acton's entire water supply was based on groundwater.

Sagoff: That's right. We had an aquifer with very good water. But the aquifers—especially those close to the wells into which Grace's waste water flowed—were damaged.

EPA Interviewer: So if I get the situation right, and I don't have a site map or anything in front of me, but my understanding of what you're telling me is the town had their wells.

Sagoff: We had three wells, and these were called Assabet wells—the Assabet River being the water that... Even now, they're talking about putting in another well. They still don't know whether that portion of the aquifer is still damaged, even though Grace isn't making it, doing it anymore...wasn't cleaned up enough.

EPA Interviewer: So I would imagine that what the issue is, is the Grace facility or abandoned facility had their lagoons, and the contamination migrated down to the aquifer, and the plume ended up touching up on the town wells. Is that the situation?

Sagoff: Oh absolutely.

EPA Interviewer: So was the EPA—I'm not familiar with the cleanup plan for this particular site—but the EPA cleanup focused on cleaning up the source of the contamination? Because it sounds like the town's program was just going to treat the water at the source as it came in.

Sagoff: Right.

EPA Interviewer: But the ultimate cleanup plan was to address the larger problem.

Sagoff: That's right. The ultimate plan was for Grace to do it.

EPA Interviewer: How about the soil? I guess it was to remove the contaminated soil so that there would no longer be a source?

Sagoff: Yes. I think they did that. They did finally get around to doing some of that. But that \$4,000 that we got, when I requested \$10, was for cleaning up the soil.

EPA Interviewer: So you actually raised money for the cleanup work?

Sagoff: Well, that's what we wanted to do, but then I don't think we needed to. But you know it's been a long time now, a lot of stuff has happened to me in my life.

EPA Interviewer: Actually your recall is fantastic. What was the relationship of your organization, ACES, with the other groups that took interest in the issue? For example, EPA or the press or community leaders or Grace itself?

Sagoff: Well, there was a connection between each of those groups. The Board of Health had to be interested, but they weren't very active. Nobody was active except ACES. That's why we were active. The selectmen would talk about it occasionally. I found out the way, for instance to get it to be known, since we couldn't get on every agenda of every selectmen's meeting. I realized if you stood up early on citizen matters...



So I would come and stand up. In the beginning, before it started, if they didn't call me, I would step forward to the microphone and talk about what the issue was that week. But always—every week—I brought it up, and therefore every week it was in the paper.

EPA Interviewer: So how did you figure out that this was the way that you needed to work the system?

Sagoff: I figured it out just by watching.

EPA Interviewer: Just by watching. So it is not like you had any prior experience or anything; you just made it up as you went along.

Sagoff: No, no, no. I went to the meetings. I saw how you could do it, and I did it.

EPA Interviewer: Were the elected officials receptive to the group?

Sagoff: Well, they weren't all, of course. They weren't all. So [in] the next election, we told all the people who to vote for. So we got people who would be helpful, who would listen.

EPA Interviewer: So ACES communicated with its members how?

Sagoff: Through *The Beacon*, the newspaper.

EPA Interviewer: So basically, the newspaper would give you the kind of coverage you needed? You got your messages out?

Sagoff: Oh sure, we were very important to them. I would always sit down next to the reporter. [*Laughing*]

EPA Interviewer: That was smart! [*Laughing*] So you built relationships...

Sagoff: With the press. And I called them and I sent them letters. You could get a letter in the paper if you got it in by Tuesday morning, and there were various people in ACES who wrote letters, who called. That was my full-time job.

EPA Interviewer: It was your full-time job?

Sagoff: Well, I didn't make any money at it. [*Laughing*]

EPA Interviewer: I was going to say! But this work you did was in addition to whatever you did to survive money-wise, right? You were still a working person at that point, right?

Sagoff: No, I wasn't.

EPA Interviewer: You were retired at that point?

Sagoff: Well, a piece of it, yes. Because I then began—during that process—I began to work as a counselor, as a psychotherapist, at Simmons College.



EPA Interviewer: I guess maybe you've already answered this, but how did your group engage the larger community?

Sagoff: Through the press.

EPA Interviewer: Just through the press. And so as the story got out, people just naturally turned to your group as the leaders.

Sagoff: That's right.

EPA Interviewer: And the information providers and interpreters of the technical information.

Sagoff: Right. Going doing my marketing [i.e. grocery shopping], people would talk to me and ask me questions. It was obvious that I would answer any question. So people phoned, people saw me in the street, and saw me in the supermarket, and saw others who were on the committee. It wasn't just me.

EPA Interviewer: Was there a core group? How many people were your core group of people?

Sagoff: I can't remember.

EPA Interviewer: But it wasn't dozens?

Sagoff: As a matter of fact, initially people used to call and ask, "How many people are in ACES?"

And I would say, "Well, it's such a large portion of the town that I can't even tell you." Of course at that point there were very few but... *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: *[Laughing]* Wow.

Sagoff: So you have to fudge.

EPA Interviewer: What do you think were the most significant issues that you personally or the ACES group had to deal with in relationship to the cleanup of the Superfund site here? Any particular issues that you felt were groundbreaking or real watershed events for your particular site?

Sagoff: Well, whenever anything happened, we would talk about it in the press. There was also a little satellite radio station started in West Concord, and those people knew me and they asked me to talk. And other people talked on the water issues, especially when West Concord started to have a water problem.

EPA Interviewer: So I'm trying to understand [what] the particular role that your group played was, as information got out. You had opinions on what particular outcome you wanted to come from particular—either EPA actions, or cleanup strategies.

Sagoff: Or the Board of Health.

EPA Interviewer: Right, not just EPA obviously. Did the EPA Superfund program change in any ways that affected you as time went on?

Sagoff: No, we were very happy. It was one of the first few sites designated by the EPA—first Superfund sites. I think I even thought it was the first, though I could be wrong about that.

EPA Interviewer: When, for example, the Superfund law was amended, that didn't particularly have an impact on the way that things went at your site?

Sagoff: Not particularly. We always wanted more to happen. We actually never felt that the designation as a Superfund site made things go more swiftly.

EPA Interviewer: You didn't feel that it made things go more swiftly? From where you all were coming from, if you had been able to resolve your issues without having to have a federal involvement of any kind, that would have been OK with you?

Sagoff: Of course.

EPA Interviewer: All you wanted to do was get it done. What role, if any, have you observed the Superfund playing in the redevelopment of properties or areas?

Sagoff: I don't remember anything.

EPA Interviewer: Nothing. OK, because I guess that particular site is not completely...

Sagoff: Well, there's been a lot of discussion over what to do. For instance, what to do with the old building that Grace had used. One of the reasons—I'm remembering now—one of the reasons that the whole issue came up is they were trying to start a plant making batteries with paper in between. The town didn't want it, because it would fill up the landfill with all their garbage. But we listened and realized they weren't cleaning up the water, and they were just going on and making more water. In other words, pissing all over us! *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: Right, just as you were getting things cleaned up.

Sagoff: Yes, trying to, yes.

EPA Interviewer: So is anything on the property now? It's still a vacant property that they can't clean up?

Sagoff: It's still a vacant property. They're still trying to determine what to do with the old building. I remember it was there when I was there, and I've only been out of Acton maybe five years now. I was suggesting that it be used as a community college, use it for some educational purposes. Or use it for a youth center, which Acton didn't have and needed. And they still don't have and they still need it.

EPA Interviewer: But as of right now, you don't know that there are any discussions going on with a redevelopment bent on them?

Sagoff: Oh, yes there is.

EPA Interviewer: Oh, there are?

Sagoff: There is and the person to ask now about what ACES is doing about that is Mary Michelmen.

EPA Interviewer: Do you think that the community of Acton changed because of the presence of a Superfund site there—a Superfund program?

Sagoff: No.

EPA Interviewer: You don't think so? You think it was more that folks did what they need to do to...

Sagoff: No, if anything it would bring more people, because if they were worried about the water, knowing that it was a Superfund site and that EPA was thinking about it, would help people move in. It certainly would make a difference for me.

EPA Interviewer: But the fact that it was—you thought—that it was a Superfund site, would encourage people to move to the town?

Sagoff: Yes, I would think so.

EPA Interviewer: Really, why? Because it was cleaner?

Sagoff: No, because it had the attention of an agency that would do something.

EPA Interviewer: As opposed to just something that was languishing there that no one knew anything about?

Sagoff: Right.

EPA Interviewer: But how about the town itself? Do you think that people in the town or the way that town business was conducted or environmental consciousness in the town changed as a result of citizen activism and the fact that there was an issue that needed to be addressed collectively that way? Did that change the town at all?

Sagoff: Yes, I think it did. I think it made people more aware, and yes, I think it helped people to become conscious, aware, and maybe active. Who knows.

EPA Interviewer: What do you view as a high point of your involvement in this site and this process? The best thing about this whole history that you were personally involved with, something you feel very proud of.

Sagoff: I am very proud of all of it.

EPA Interviewer: Any stories you want to tell us about things you're particularly proud of having personally accomplished?

Sagoff: Well, I used to tell people that—they'd say, "What are you doing about this?"

And I'd say, "I'm just keeping my finger in the dike like that boy in Holland, keeping it from getting worse!" At that point, there were a couple of years where nothing was happening. I was the only one that was involved trying to hang on to the few people who were willing to consider themselves ACES. Trying to hang on to whatever help I could get from the Board of Health and the Water District and so on.

EPA Interviewer: To keep the issue alive when it was a low period?

Sagoff: While we were waiting for EPA to come in.

EPA Interviewer: And how long did you have to wait for things to happen?

Sagoff: Oh, it was a couple of years.

EPA Interviewer: So you're talking about the period of time from when the site was discovered and then there's a study period going on...

Sagoff: Well I would say it was closer to eight years. I can't remember exactly. You could call Mary Michelmen; she'd probably have that. She's more precise about the details.

EPA Interviewer: I think particularly your story as a community activist, there are lessons to be learned for other community activists, and there's inspiration for people who are trying to do something similar in their own communities. Just to hear....

Sagoff: I'm just thinking of how I first... I was asked to go to the selectmen's meeting at which the wells would be discussed and the water would be discussed. The people... When I got there, on the seats in the meeting hall, there were three or four sheets of paper. Somebody had taken the trouble to look up all the chemicals in the water that were contaminating and they had put them down—what they were, what they did. On every seat there was this little clipped bunch of papers.

EPA Interviewer: Wow.

Sagoff: I had no idea who did it—nobody said. There was no name connected, but I was very impressed, and that's what got me activated—when I really saw what was in it.

EPA Interviewer: And as a biology teacher...

Sagoff: Yes.

EPA Interviewer: ...having a very long chemical name wasn't intimidating for you, I would imagine.

Sagoff: Not at all. I had read about them and heard about them in various places.

EPA Interviewer: So you still don't really know who that even was?

Sagoff: No, nobody signed. And in those days, it was mimeographed! *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: That machine! I remember that machine. My mom was a teacher too, so I spent hours copying things at the mimeograph for her. I remember it very well. That's interesting.

So your first meeting, you just showed up just like anybody else? It was at that first meeting that you met other folks in the parking lot who were similarly concerned?

Sagoff: Well, it wasn't the first one. It was after several meetings. Every Monday night it was a continuation of the subject for a while. And there were always a number of the same people showed up. This is just an aside, but one of the people that would come each week was a woman I made friends with who was an immigrant for a couple of years—because her husband had a job here—from Australia. She became a member, and she was kind of a political type. She's back there now heading an environmental organization!

EPA Interviewer: So you had a worldwide impact?! That's great!

Sagoff: We correspond by e-mail.

EPA Interviewer: Isn't that great! With e-mail, you can network so much farther than you could have easily done before. If you could have changed one thing about the way the Superfund program was working, back when your involvement began, what do you think that would have been?

Sagoff: I would wind it up. Speed it up!

EPA Interviewer: Was there anything you felt really wasn't working well? Any particular thing that you felt, we really need to—if they could just fix this, things would really go much faster in the way the program was run?

Sagoff: No, I never thought about that. I knew that too many things could stop government work.

EPA Interviewer: So you just had more realistic expectations—or knowing how these things work. It doesn't work as fast as it should. Do you think that the Superfund program nationally has had an impact on environmental protection in America?

Sagoff: I hope so. I have no way of knowing.

EPA Interviewer: So you don't have any opinion on whether or not it's led to any differences in the way communities perceive environmental issues or the way companies act?

Sagoff: I can only refer to my own experience, so I don't know. I hope it has.

EPA Interviewer: How about the liability schemes? Are you familiar with Superfund's liability? Strict joint and several liability means that anyone that contributed waste to a site has to pay and is completely responsible for the whole share, even if they contributed a small share. And it's retroactive.

Sagoff: Yeah, I think that's great.

EPA Interviewer: Do you think it helped move progress along or impeded progress at your site?

Sagoff: I don't think so. I don't know if that was in the law yet—that portion of it. We were caught kind of early.

EPA Interviewer: Yes, your site was pre-Superfund.

Sagoff: I think... Well, weren't we Superfund?

EPA Interviewer: If your site started in the 1970s, it would be—Superfund was 1980, so your site really was in the first group.

Sagoff: Yeah, I remember there was a consent decree October 20, 1980. I may even still have it.

EPA Interviewer: So you were really in the first group. The statute was only in 1980. On the timeline that I have, the Superfund law was enacted in December of 1980. The first sites were funded in 1980 to 1983. I'm thinking back to the genesis of the Superfund program—sites like Love Canal and Valley of the Drums—were you familiar...?

Sagoff: I lived in Buffalo at the time of Love Canal.

EPA Interviewer: Oh, did you? So your consciousness was shaped by hearing about those types of sites.

Sagoff: Of course, of course, absolutely. But also, I was an environmentalist anyway.

EPA Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Sagoff: After all, I was interested in botany and did a lot of field work. I was very interested in protecting the earth.

EPA Interviewer: So this wasn't new—finding out the problem with your water supply wasn't the beginning of your interest in the environment?

Sagoff: Not at all.

EPA Interviewer: It was way beyond that.

Sagoff: Yes, and especially since I was so aware of Love Canal.



EPA Interviewer: Were there any issues about who was responsible for the contamination at your site or was it pretty clear cut—there was one potentially responsible...?

Sagoff: It was Grace, yes.

EPA Interviewer: That probably avoided a lot of problems.

Sagoff: Grace of course tried to negate that, but... at one point—this is always a little amusing story to me—at the point at which I wanted to get some money so that we could chemically analyze the soil there, I went to the Grace office. I made an appointment and I went to ask for money from the Vice President of Grace. They were sitting in Lexington in a building off of Route 2. I wore a hat and white gloves, because he was a Southerner. When I came to see him, I said, “I want you to note that I’m aware of your culture, or where you come from.” And all I did was ask him did he think it was possible for them to give us \$4,000—that was the fee of the lab for taking the soil and so on.

He said, “Oh sure.” The next morning he called and said, “Our lawyers will not allow us to allow anybody to take soil.” So that was the end of that.

EPA Interviewer: At what point in the process was this? When the wells are contaminated already and the air strippers are in place and cleaning the water? Is that at the point where you started asking for money for sampling?

Sagoff: Well, we had been having articles in *The Beacon*, in the paper, every week against Grace—what they were doing, how they were not cleaning up and so on and so on. This was why we were in contention. I told them, “If you give me the money, of course you’ll get the benefit of the publicity that I’ll produce.”

EPA Interviewer: So they did not want to fund the taking of samples?

Sagoff: They were willing to fund it, but their lawyers said no.

EPA Interviewer: But in the end, they had to take samples, I’m sure.

Sagoff: Of course, they wanted to be in control.

EPA Interviewer: Rather than have you all do it.

Sagoff: Right.

EPA Interviewer: \$4,000 for sampling seems like a pretty reasonable price nowadays, doesn’t it?

Sagoff: Yes. [*Laughing*]

EPA Interviewer: So what’s your most memorable story? That’s a pretty memorable one. You’re saying you wore the hat and gloves?

Sagoff: Yes. I dressed for the occasion. It was summer.

EPA Interviewer: Was that the only kind of interaction you all had with W.R. Grace? Was it a very formal way of speaking with them? Or did you run into them at meetings and chat and try to reach agreements?

Sagoff: There was a man who became the President of ACES after I left, and we worked together. His name was Bob Eisengrein. After it was more or less settled—after Grace accepted certain situations, and I've forgotten exactly.... There used to be meetings every week with all kinds of—a government person, a Grace person, an ACES person—it was Bob Eisengrein—the Water District person, you know there'd be about 12 people around the table at the Grace place.

EPA Interviewer: So you met at the Grace offices?

Sagoff: Yes, in Lexington. And you know we had lots of doughnuts and buns and stuff. I didn't go to too many of them. I didn't want to waste my time but....

EPA Interviewer: Because my sense of geography in this area isn't what it should be, how far away is Lexington from Acton?

Sagoff: 20 minutes, door to door.

EPA Interviewer: So the whole community was invited to go to this? Or just a few...?

Sagoff: Oh no.

EPA Interviewer: OK, so it was just a couple... This was just to talk operational.

Sagoff: Well, as a matter of fact, ACES wasn't invited. We just came. *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: You weren't invited? You just went? So at what point of the process was this?

Sagoff: This was at the end.

EPA Interviewer: So this was at the end, when they were talking about operational issues, a weekly meeting.

Sagoff: The town's environmental engineer went, somebody from... I can't remember who all.

EPA Interviewer: So tell me—just switching back for a moment. Tell me about how ACES met? Did you have regular meetings? Did you meet in the town hall, in somebody's house? Were you very formal or very informal as a group?

Sagoff: Any group I'm in is informal. I remember exactly the first meeting was at [the home of] somebody who's an organic chemist who lived in Acton who was part of our group, ACES, who later dropped out because his company then later started doing some of the testing that needed to be done. That's John Swallow. He was a very competent man and benefited as a result because we hired him.

EPA Interviewer: So you all used to meet... You had a very informal group and met...

Sagoff: Well, the first time we met in John's house, because before he was our chemist. And then we met at my house for awhile. I don't know, various houses. And sometimes we met at Town Hall.

EPA Interviewer: And the meetings would be just this core group of people, or you would try to involve the larger community?

Sagoff: Well, we had the core group who were the persons who were interested in it. Anybody could come, obviously.

EPA Interviewer: Did you try to memorialize these meetings in meeting notes or anything like that?

Sagoff: We had notes, we had Carole Holley... I just had an e-mail from her this morning. I'm still associated with many of these people, although I'm not involved in ACES anymore. We met in people's houses, and we met in the Town Hall. There was a church across from Town Hall and a couple of times we met there at the Congregational Church.

EPA Interviewer: So did you have regular meetings, or did you try to catch each other after an event and say, "OK, we need to meet and strategize?"

Sagoff: No, we had regular meetings and also catch each other—both ways.

EPA Interviewer: And how did you guys divide the labor about who was going to do what to follow up on whatever you had decided to accomplish that week or month?

Sagoff: Well, I was the boss. *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: That's a good strategy!

Sagoff: I told people often what to do. I asked them if they were willing to do something. I followed up on them.

EPA Interviewer: So you were really coordinating the activities.

Sagoff: I was retired from my... See, I'm 91 now. I was retired from my job, my work by that time. And I had the time and interest.

EPA Interviewer: And the expertise.

Sagoff: Well, not really until I got it—doing it! *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: It's really difficult to try to get groups like that to try and focus on different things when people have so many different things going on in their lives. How did you keep people interested and motivated to stay? Did the issue itself keep people that way?

Sagoff: I think so—that it was their water that they were drinking.

EPA Interviewer: Yes, well, there's nothing more fundamental than your water supply. What do you think is the greatest challenge facing the Superfund program today?

Sagoff: Funding! Funding, with the Republicans in power. I'm sure Lois Gibbs' organization must have names of hundreds of towns in this glorious United States that have problems—environmental problems. We need the Superfund for that. Definitely tell Mr. Superfund he has to stay on the job. *[Laughing]*

EPA Interviewer: I hope you're right. The way the Superfund was originally funded is a dual funding method. One was a tax on chemical feed stocks, which created a fund to clean up the abandoned sites. The rest of the sites were to be paid by the polluter. Do you think that that was a wise way to fund things?

Sagoff: Oh, absolutely.

EPA Interviewer: And now that the tax has expired, what do you think the future holds?

Sagoff: Why can't it be put on again?

EPA Interviewer: Do you think that the tax is a wise idea to reinstate? It's not in place right now.

Sagoff: Yeah. I think it's a desirable way to be in touch with those facilities, to get some funding from those facilities—after all, that's how they're making money. Why shouldn't we get the benefit from some of it?

EPA Interviewer: Right now, it's funded out of general revenue, because the tax expired a number of years ago.

Sagoff: It should be taxed.

EPA Interviewer: So you're in favor of the tax reinstatement?

Sagoff: Absolutely.

EPA Interviewer: Do you see a day when all hazardous waste sites are going to be cleaned up and you don't need Superfund anymore?

Sagoff: Well, not in a hundred years, no. But they should be. That should be a prominent, important function.

EPA Interviewer: Are there any other issues that you would like to discuss that I haven't raised? We've jumped all over the place.

Sagoff: Having been ill lately, I just haven't been too connected with the subject.

EPA Interviewer: I think the thing that's really interesting about your story is the way you so capably got your job done while dealing with an area that was pretty new to you. Just jumping right in and handling it that way is really inspirational.

Sagoff: But what was inspirational was people stopping me in the street—and as I started to tell you before—and supermarkets and saying, “You’re my role model.” Appreciating what was going on.

EPA Interviewer: Did you have a family at this time?

Sagoff: Yeah, I had a husband and two adult children that didn’t live with us anymore.

EPA Interviewer: So was everybody OK with all these people in your house and having meetings?

Sagoff: Oh my husband loved it.

EPA Interviewer: That’s great.

Sagoff: And he was very helpful.

EPA Interviewer: I think that would conclude what I would ask you, based on the questions that I have. I really appreciate your meeting with me.

Sagoff: I enjoyed it.

EPA Interviewer: It’s been a pleasure interviewing you and a privilege to meet you.