

## **A Neighborhood in Ruin: A Review of USA Today's *The City***

### How a Podcast Exposed Local Corruption

While Illinois is known for its corruption in both local and state government, as well as its former ties to the mafia and mob bosses of the Prohibition era, some people don't realize just how much corruption still occurs in our modern era. One major example of this is the infamous, six story tall mountain of waste, nicknamed "Mount Henry," in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. This West-side area was home to its fair share of corruption and government neglect in the '90s, and Mount Henry was the main cause. In USA Today's *The City*, WBEZ producer Robin Amer explores the truth and cover-ups of this era of Chicago history, and how it is being solved today. This 10-episode first season released in 2018 is a thrilling look at what it truly means for a neighborhood to come together to protect and support one another.

According to the podcast, the debris was created by the new construction projects of Mayor Daley in the early '90s, including the building of The Bean and Navy Pier, as well as renovating city roadways. The leftover debris from the torn-up parts had to be carted away, and a man named John Christopher took advantage of this need. He took over two large lots in the North Lawndale neighborhood and began to allow people to cheaply keep their materials there, charging only 1/10 of what government-owned landfills did. One of these lots was "as big as 13 football fields, or half the size of the Pentagon" (Amer) and was located across the street from a school. The other is what soon became "Mount Henry," as it filled with more and more debris over the course of a year and grew to six stories tall. He also employed a rock crusher on his sites, so that he could claim that he was recycling the material, even though very little of the

material was turned into gravel, or even *could* be. This allowed dust, grime, and rats to enter residents' homes, as well as rattling everyone constantly. One resident told Amer, "Whenever he operated the crusher, we all knew, because our buildings would be shaking, and you could hear the mortar falling through that sounded like the houses were about to carry them... Our mortar was falling out of the buildings to the point where we could see outside from inside the house." (Amer) Many residents tried to fight back, but Christopher kept a hand in the pockets of the local government, supposedly including Alderman Bill Henry, who gave Christopher the permits to the lots and of whom "Mount Henry" is named after. In his conviction, however, Christopher's lawyer argued: "we will object to the term waste when talking about these items." (Amer) This allowed Christopher to claim that everything on his lots was not waste, but rather soon-to-be recycled materials, and the judges agreed that he wasn't breaking any laws since said materials weren't "hazardous." It was corruption at its finest.

Amer does an impressive job of interviewing residents and those involved. While many involved in this case had passed away (such as John Christopher and Bill Henry), the journalists were able to interview five local residents (including Block Club President Woodsen), the environmental lawyer involved in prosecuting Christopher, Alderman Henry's son, an anonymous source that worked on Christopher's site, and Richard Barnett, Henry's political opponent. The sources are varied and carefully researched, and Amer asks thought-provoking questions that really steer the interviews in a positive direction. The most memorable part of the podcast was the reenactment of Christopher's court case in Episode 2, where actors read directly off of the court transcripts from Christopher's initial prosecution, which he actually won and led to his years long stay in those lots.

I think this podcast, like so many others in this medium, makes a massive effort to record people's real voices and allow them to speak in their own words. It increases accessibility of these stories and allows more people to feel connected to these large news stories without the pressure of TV news and newspapers. In addition, I often find podcasts an easier way to connect with old and new local happenings and news, especially with their easy storytelling and conversational format. *The City* in particular focuses on sectioning itself out into blocks while following the episode format, allowing the listener to follow along more easily.

Overall, *The City* is an excellent podcast that focuses well on its source material. Although it struggles a bit with its own repetitiveness, it succeeds in allowing the listener to hear all the details of this case and form their own conclusions. It is a great dissection of this period of Chicago corruption. I would highly recommend it, and I cannot wait to keep listening.