



Toxic Drift: Pesticides and Health in the Post-World War II South (Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History)

Pete Daniel

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Following World War II, chemical companies and agricultural experts promoted the use of synthetic chemicals such as DDT, which had been developed to help the military fight typhoid and malaria abroad, as pesticides on weeds and insects. It was, Pete Daniel points out, a convenient way for companies to apply their wartime research to the domestic market. In *Toxic Drift*, Daniel documents the particularly disastrous effects this campaign had on the South's public health and environment, exposing the careless mentality that allowed pesticide application to swerve out of control over twenty-five years.

Millions of tons of highly toxic chemicals spread over the South, much of them from crop dusters. The quest to destroy pests, Daniel contends, unfortunately outran research on insect resistance, ignored environmental damage, and downplayed the dangers of residue accumulation and threats to fish, wildlife, domestic animals, and humans. He tells a story of bureaucratic perfidy, scientific hubris, and corporate irresponsibility as he relates specific cases of chemical exposure and poisoning—including fish kills in the Mississippi River, ducks falling dead from the sky, and farm animals destroyed by bungled, overzealous attempts to wipe out fire ants.

Daniel explains how the Agricultural Research Service, a Federal entity charged with regulating pesticides, allowed dangerous formulations to be sold and often failed to enforce proper labeling. Objections to the undisciplined use of synthetic pesticides from Rachel Carson, Clarence Cottam, and other critics went unheeded. The consequences for human health were staggering: death and severe debilitation.

Using legal sources, archival records, newspapers, and congressional hearings, Daniel constructs a moving, fact-filled account of the use, abuse, and regulation of pesticides from World War II until 1970. *Toxic Drift* recounts an important episode in ecological history as it cautions against not only the continued threat of pesticides but also the dangers surrounding newer issues such as "mad cow" disease and genetic engineering.

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