



**Carmage Walls**  
**Commentary Prize**

**2019 Entry Form**

**Name of Author(s):** William H. (Dink) NeSmith Jr.

**Author's Title (editor, columnist, etc.):** Columnist/Owner

**Newspaper:** The Press-Sentinel

**Address:** 252 W. Walnut Street

**City:** Jesup

**State:** GA

**ZIP:** 31545

**Phone:** 912-427-3757

**Fax:** 912-427-4092

**E-Mail:** ericdenty@thepress-sentinel.com

**Submitted by:** Eric Denty

**Title of Person Submitting:** Publisher

**Phone Number:** 912-427-3757

**E-mail Address:** ericdenty@thepress-sentinel.com

**What is the subject/title of the entry?** Coal Ash

**Date(s) of publication?** Sept. 26, 2018; Nov. 14, 2018; Dec. 19, 2018; Jan. 9, 2019; March 20, 2019; and April 24, 2019

**Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation?** Yes

**Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)**

May 1, 2019

TO: SNPA's Carmage Walls Commentary Prize Committee

FROM: Eric Denty, publisher, *The Press-Sentinel*, Jesup, Georgia

The first edition of *The Jesup Sentinel* was published in 1865. That makes us the oldest business in Wayne County. While our circulation of 6,000 may be small by big-city standards, we believe our responsibilities are huge for our county of 33,000. So when our community came under challenge from a multibillion-dollar waste-management conglomerate, we knew what we would do. We stood up, ready for a fight. We didn't just say no; we said, "Hell no!"

At the outset—40 months ago—we were told, "There's nothing you can do." Local elected officials were ready to hoist a white flag. After all, the largest shareholder in Republic

Services Inc. is one of the world's richest men—Bill Gates. His company, with its proposed massive rail spur, aimed to make our community the largest depository of toxic coal ash in America. Coal ash is laden with a long list of dangerous heavy metals.

The furor started on Jan. 9, 2016, when *The Press-Sentinel* discovered that an unknown Republic subsidiary, Central Virginia Properties LLC, had filed a wetlands-destroying application with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The stealth move was to build four sets of railroad tracks—one mile long each—through 25 acres of wetlands.

The proposed rail spur would allow Republic to haul in 100 cars per day with an estimated 10,000 tons of toxic coal ash to dump in its Broadhurst Environmental Landfill. The rail spur would also open the community to becoming the East Coast's trash bin, stretching from Miami to New York.

In the discovery of the 2016 proposal, the newspaper learned that Republic—several years earlier—had quietly trucked in 800,000 tons of toxic coal ash from Florida. Already there had been an unknown-to-the-public leakage of poisonous beryllium at the landfill. It took a reporter digging through 1,000 pages in Atlanta to unearth that information.

We believe Carmage Walls would be proud of *The Press-Sentinel's* fearless campaign to stand up in a modern-day David-and-Goliath battle. The fight has been spearheaded by our principal owner and chairman of our board of directors, Dink NeSmith.

NeSmith said, "We threw our hearts into the battle, and our wallet followed."

NeSmith and the staff pounced into action. The first step was to sound the alarm: "Only 21 days left to file public comments to the Corps of Engineers." Within days, a team of environmental lawyers was hired by the newspaper. With the help of those attorneys, the 30-day deadline was stretched twice to 90 days, allowing time for more comments and for the newspaper to promote a town-hall meeting.

Here's a brief summary of some of what others thought could *not* be done:

- Got Republic Services Inc.'s attention
- *The Press-Sentinel* hired a team of environmental lawyers
- The newspaper poured ink and dollars (more than \$100,000 and increasing) into the campaign

- Raised more than \$1 million in private commitments to wage the legal fight
- Helped organize a grassroots organization of 600-plus citizens to fight toxic coal ash
- Engaged Earthjustice and other environmental groups
- Published *three* ad-free special educational editions
- Published more than 50 news articles
- Published more than 25 editorials
- Commissioned an artist for more than 100 editorial cartoons
- So far, NeSmith has written 98 columns on the issue
- Multiple letters and packages have been sent to Bill Gates and Republic's directors.
- Contacted President Jimmy Carter, who agreed to write to and talk with Gates.
- Traveled to Kentucky to get advice from author/environmentalist Wendell Berry.
- Met five times with a top executive of Republic Services Inc.
- Testified four times before Georgia's Environmental Protection Division
- Traveled to Arlington, Virginia, to testify at an EPA coal-ash rule hearing
- Interviewed by NPR several times
- National coverage, including the *Washington Post*, *InsideClimate News* and

*Huffington Post*

- Writing book—*Kicking Ash & Taking Names*—to inspire communities facing corporate giants

In the first meeting with Republic's area president in April 2016, he said, "We are

willing to negotiate.”

NeSmith asked, “Are you willing to withdraw the rail-spur application from the Corps?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you willing to withdraw the coal-ash permit application from the EPD?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you willing to renegotiate the egregious 50-year contract with the county?”

“Absolutely not.”

With the third no, NeSmith leaned over and said, “*Then, we are at war.*”

Fast-forward a year, and in April 2017, Republic did three things:

1. Withdrew the rail-spur application with the Corps
2. Withdrew the coal-ash application with the EPD
3. Agreed to renegotiate the lopsided contract with the county

As they say, the devil is in the details. Another round of negotiations is set for May 2, 2019. There is an air of optimism, because the same Republic official—now a company vice president with responsibilities over its 42-state footprint—has told NeSmith, “It would be political suicide to bring more coal ash into Wayne County.” And NeSmith said, “Put that in writing.”

With the dumping of toxic coal ash halted in Wayne County, NeSmith and the newspaper have kept the pressure on Republic to “do the right thing.” In the meantime, editorial focus has expanded to include Georgia’s General Assembly. Lawmakers have “played footsie” with Georgia Power, one of the largest producers of toxic coal ash in the country, by failing to strengthen the state’s regulations. *The Press-Sentinel* and NeSmith’s unrelenting commentary have helped to raise public awareness across the state. More and more citizens are demanding safer handling and disposal of the dangerous waste.

Submitted as entries in 2019’s Carmage Walls Commentary Prize contest are six (6) of Dink NeSmith’s 98 columns in the David-and-Goliath Battle, circa 2016. NeSmith believes that if you can’t stand up for the people and places you love, you ought to turn off your press. Standing up for Wayne County has paid off. Since the fight began in 2016, not one inch of the proposed rail spur has been built, and not one additional ounce of toxic coal ash has been dumped in the community’s environment.

NeSmith summarizes the past 40 months as: “We’re just doing what newspapers are supposed to do.”

Thanks for your consideration of his entries.













# Every day should be Earth Day

By Dink NeSmith

Early-morning rituals are usually identical. High on the list is to get the dogs outside. That's where I was Monday, watching the sunrise on my left and seeing the waning moon on my right. The dogs were sniffing when I felt a vibration in my pocket.

A friend was sending me his Earth Day devotional reading. The scripture was Psalm 24:1 (NRSV): "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

By this time, the dogs had wandered back and were sitting at my feet. Impulsively, I slipped out of my shoes. I wanted to feel the earth. My eyes were already open, but the cool, wet grass opened my ears, too. A chorus of birds was busy making sounds, and the neighbor's Black Angus cattle were mooing across the way.

Back inside, I felt another vibration. A mutual friend joined the three-way conversation. The early riser said, "I would like to leave this earth that God gave us the stewardship of as a better place for my children and grandchildren than I found it." Unfortunately, all God's children don't say "Amen!" to that ambition.

The truth is that every day should be Earth Day. As we live our lives, we need to remember that we are just passing through. Don't future generations deserve "a better place" than we found it?

That is the reason you and I are alarmed by the nonchalant attitude of so many of our leaders when it comes to the handling and disposing of toxic coal ash. Granted, we have benefited from coal-generated electricity, but we cannot ignore the dangerous downside.

There's an effort to move away from coal. That's the good news. But follow what's been going on across America, and you'll learn of the perilous consequences

of irresponsible handling of toxic coal ash. Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas are among the states with horror stories.

The Carolinas and Florida have decided what to do with their unwanted coal ash: *Dump as much as they can in Georgia*. While I was standing on the wet grass—less than 40 miles away—a convoy of side-dumping trucks was making its way out of the Carolinas into Georgia on I-85 South, destination Banks County. This stream of waste—laden with lead, beryllium, arsenic, cobalt, radium, boron and assorted bad stuff—is being stockpiled in our Peach State.

And what are our lawmakers doing about that? *Nothing*.

They say that interstate-commerce laws prevent Georgia from stopping the out-of-state dumping. What they don't tell you is that the General Assembly's catering to our own toxic-coal-ash producer—Georgia Power—has rolled out the welcome mat to other states.

Regular solid municipal waste—by law—is charged \$2.50 per ton. But for coal ash to be dumped, in approved landfills, the fee is a nominal \$1 per

ton. Neighbors are jumping on the bargain—disposing what they don't want polluting their states.

Meanwhile, our leaders continue playing footsie with industrial lobbyists. Repeated efforts to strengthen toxic-coal-ash handling are squashed. As a result, Georgians and our environment suffer the disastrous consequences.

I repeat: *Every day should be Earth Day*.

It's past time for our lawmakers to accept their roles as responsible stewards of Georgia earth, air and water. Maybe they should take a walk—barefoot—on the wet grass and wake up to the irreplaceable natural resources which God has bestowed upon us.

But first, they must pull their heads out of the sand.  
**dnsmith@cninewspapers.com**  
 (For more commentaries visit [www.dinknesmith.com](http://www.dinknesmith.com))

