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### SLUDGE'S BOUNTIFUL HARVEST

In these days of recycling to improve the environment, few experiments are more interesting than the Chicago Sanitary District's "Prairie Plan" in Fulton County, some 150 miles southwest of the metropolis. This is the locale of Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology," but years of strip mining for coal have left much of the land ravaged and scarred — offensive to the eye and incapable of sustaining crops.

But in co-operation with the Fulton County Board, the Sanitary District has converted 800 of the 28,000 mutilated acres into highly profitable farmland. This is but a small demonstration project, and the elixir that wrought the miracle is "liquid fertilizer" — the watery residue of the district's sewage treatment process. More often called sludge, it consists of human and industrial wastes that have been separated, treated and stabilized — freed of harmful bacteria and other offensive properties.

Feed corn planted in the infertile mined-out strips and laced with generous applications of the nutrientrich sludge produced huge stalks, with ears nearly three times the size of those grown on untreated land. District President John P. Egan has just finished totting up last year's harvest — 44,800 bushels of corn that fetched \$52,241 for the district on the open market. In the growing season this year, the district will plant most of the 11,000 acres it owns, not only in corn but in soybeans and other feed crops. And there will be sludge for the asking for farmers who want to join in the experiment

The fastidious may have some qualms about sludge, but Milwaukee has been drying out its own for years and selling it profitably to home gardeners throughout the country under the trade name of Milorganite. The Sanitary District's liquid fertilizer is simply Chicorgonite that hasn't been put through the wringer.

If it takes hold in Fulton County, it offers a logical recycling solution for the quick ecological restoration of more than 150,000 acres of strip mining land in Illinois. And in Spoon River country it could be that the descendants of Masters' Lucinda Matlock may ramble again as she once did "over fields where sang the lark," gathering "many a flower and medicinal weed — Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys."

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