

“Profits Over People: The small town of Libby, Montana is devastated when a company mines a chemical that releases asbestos and hides it from the residents”

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By Katy Holsten

Nestled in between the Rockies and nearly epitomizing purple mountain majesty, Libby, Montana sits quietly, steeped in small town, Rockwell-like Americana so thick that it seems to remain the same as it was years ago. This peaceful, simple town holds decades of secrets, kept by a company from its employees. Things went well until people started dying - first a few here and there, and then hundreds. In their documentary, Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis (*Killing Coyote*, *The Naturalist*) detail the gradual realization of a community lied to for years by its largest benefactor and the aftermath still occurring today.

After the discovery of vast strains of vermiculite, a mineral containing a high amount of asbestos, in the mountains around Libby, the W.R. Grace company began mining heavily, hiding the negative effects of asbestos dust from the miners and their families for decades until it was far too late for their lungs to survive. This deliberate withholding of information from workers led to asbestos contamination in three generations of Libby residents.

Through Carr and Davis' cleanly executed, objective camera lenses, the stories of individuals affected by Grace's negligence and greed come to light slowly, through individual testimony, newspaper clippings and footage of W.R. Grace's eventual trial. The heartbreaking tale of 220 dead and over a thousand suffering from asbestosis and other lung ailments is told with poise and dignity, showing the effects of an unfair exploitation of a normal American town. Even the eventual assistance of the government through EPA cleanup is portrayed accurately - far from being an easy way out, the EPA involvement moves slowly, steeped in political argument and bureaucratic stalls.

The beautiful Rocky Mountain scenery creates an ironic canvas for the Libby drama - wildlife and the flowing Kootenai River form a stunning backdrop between shots cataloguing the town's sickened state. An original soundtrack, both folksy and modern, also highlights the very American town struggling to breathe and survive as it is constantly choked from all sides. However strong the message, Libby, Montana never slips into didactic territory, instead showing the events and testimonies impartially, allowing the audience to realize the horror of the events though unfiltered, raw words from those who experienced it first hand.