

“Libby, Montana”

filmcritic.com, October 13, 2004

by Christopher Null

This painful and tragic documentary tells the story of a sleepy mining town in Montana, a little place of 2,600 residents called Libby. Libby started out as a logging center, then when the trees were gone, they turned to the earth. What they found there would change their life, and it's the subject of this film.

Libby has a mountain that's rich in a fibrous material with amazing properties. The material doesn't burn easily, and when it does it expands in only one direction. Its discoverer called it vermiculite, and it soon found dozens of uses, sold under the name Zonolite. Primarily used as an insulation material thanks to its fire-retardant properties, Zonolite caused Libby's economy to begin to boom in the 1950s. Soon, 80 percent of all vermiculite was being mined in this little town.

Big business. Big problems: People started getting sick with lung problems. Before long, 200 people were dead. The Zonolite operation was eventually purchased by the notorious chemical company W.R. Grace, and years later, 92 percent of those people who worked for the mine more than 20 years would be dead from lung disease.

Zonolite is, of course, asbestos, and Libby, Montana somberly discusses the devastating impact asbestos mining has had on Libby for the last century. The mines are gone, but the memories remain. A scant few survivors—unable to get off the couch due to decreased lung capacity—remain to tell their tales. And what horrible tales they are. The film is mainly concerned with the fact that no one bothered to tell the workers about the dangers of asbestos. Management just shrugged it off. No one even wore respirators until the 1960s. Perhaps the most awful of all is the story of one woman whose mother died from asbestosis after her husband brought home the fibers on his clothes.

Zonolite's manufacturers had stumped for Zonolite to be used for everything: It wasn't just good for insulation, it was a great soil conditioner, it could be pressed into building materials, and there was even a recipe for making cookies out of it. Cookies!

Cookies aside, the problem with this is that even a decade after the plants had been shut down and razed, asbestos was everywhere in Libby. The latter half of the film involves the EPA's arrival in Libby in 1999, and the debate over whether to name Libby as a Superfund site or not. (Superfund = good for residents, terrible for business.) The bureaucratic wrangling that ensues is just as tragic as the medical problems the asbestos created.

Directors Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr primarily relies on current-day video footage with a smattering of archival film for their touching documentary. How many small towns like Libby are waiting to be discovered as deathtraps? Shudder.