

“American Dream Gone Horribly Wrong”

by Steve Clark, Fall 2004, Life Lines

From 1920 to 1990, W.R. Grace and Co. mined and processed vermiculite in Libby, Montana. Indeed, for those seven decades the Libby mine supplied most of the world's vermiculite.

Vermiculite is a natural mineral that, when heated, expands into a puffy material, well-suited for insulating. Under the brand name Zonolite, this insulation was used in 35 million American homes.

To ensure good relations with the Libby townspeople, Grace insulated all their homes, free-of-charge. Also, because vermiculite, when mixed in soil, helps plant growth, it was given to the city for its parks and school playgrounds. Vermiculite is everywhere in Libby.

Unfortunately, the vermiculite mined in Libby was laced with asbestos – in particular, tremolite asbestos, the finest kind of asbestos and the chief cause of mesothelioma. The company knew it, but kept it a secret.

Today, the whole town is contaminated, declared a Superfund clean-up site. One in three people in the county has asbestosis, and the cost of care for each will run between \$300,000 – 500,000. Worldwide, more than 325,000 people have filed personal injury claims against Grace, and the company has filed for bankruptcy.

The whole story is captured in a riveting new documentary – LIBBY, MONTANA. It's all told through the words of people who live and work in town and a W.R. Grace official who, under oath in deposition, had to tell the truth.

As the trailer says, “LIBBY, MONTANA is a journey into the world of a hard-working, blue-collar community that exemplifies the American Dream gone horribly wrong.”