

# Libby, Montana

Premiere Date: August 28, 2007

## Film Description

**Libby, Montana** is first of all the story of an ideal American community in what early explorers called "the land of the shining mountains." Nestled below the rugged peaks of the Northern Rockies along the crystal-clear Kootenai River, Libby is the archetypal backpacker's, hunter's and angler's paradise, as well as a picture-perfect example of the American wilderness that environmentalists want to save. At the same time, the town's remoteness and its logging and mining economy nurtured conservative, self-reliant family and community values.

But **Libby, Montana** is also the story of an ideal betrayed in a way that crosses political lines and raises alarming questions about the role of corporate power in American politics and the environmental pollution that extracts its highest costs from ordinary citizens. In Libby, 70 years of strip-mining an ore called "vermiculite" and marketed as the wonder material "Zonolite" exposed workers, their families and thousands of residents to a toxic form of asbestos, creating what the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has called the worst case of industrial poisoning of a whole community in American history. That this poisoning continued for more than 30 years after W. R. Grace knew of the dangers — as charged in criminal indictments going to trial this fall — is made patent by the film even as the company raises a curious no-denial defense. But don't weep only for Libby; an estimated 35 million homes in the U.S. contain Zonolite insulation.

For the citizens of Libby, mining vermiculite provided decades of good jobs and national attention as the source of 80 percent of the world's vermiculite production. The mineral was first extracted and developed into the multi-use material Zonolite by a local mining engineer in 1919. In 1963, industrial giant W. R. Grace acquired the Zonolite Company, and the mining went into high gear, as did the marketing of Zonolite as a wonder material, especially for insulation. Yet within two years of acquiring the mine, Grace's internal memos show the company discussing the mine dust's extreme toxicity — information never given to employees. As far back as the mid-1950s, the Montana State Board of Health had warned of the dangers of asbestos dust and listed "tremolite" (a form of asbestos that was naturally occurring in the vermiculite ore) as one of the most dangerous class of asbestos fibers. Tremolite, in fact, is considerably more toxic to human health than the more common "chrysotile" asbestos (the commercial form of asbestos).

In Libby, the mining jobs brought an inescapable dust that choked the men at work and, proving impossible to wash off, was tracked into every home in town. The citizens of Libby not only mined the material but also showcased its use, insulating their homes with it and laying down sports fields, ice rinks and other community surfaces with the mine's materials. Mineworkers say they were told the dust was no more dangerous than field dust and felt relieved they weren't mining notoriously toxic asbestos. Even as respiratory problems in the town mounted, often misdiagnosed as heart or other unrelated ailments, the true scale of the health crisis, especially the degree to which it had crept into the lungs even of Libby's children, remained hidden just below the surface.

State and federal inspections repeatedly cited the mine in the 1960s and '70s for its toxic dust cloud and the inadequacy of the company's response. (Miners found that the respirator masks the company provided clogged within minutes and had to be discarded.) The company produced an internal study in 1969 demonstrating how deaths from unspecified "lung disease" rose steadily with years of employment, topping out at an astounding 92 percent for 20-year employees. Still the company said nothing publicly. In some of the film's most remarkable archival sequences, a visibly shaken Earl Lovick, the mine's former head manager, explains in a legal deposition the company's logic. Sick himself from "lung disease," Lovick points to the respirators as proof the company took the hazard seriously — and to "common knowledge" as sufficient for informing workers of the dust's hazards. Many onsite managers were dying in the 1990s; Lovick died in 1999.



Three EPA agents in respirators and orange vests conducting a cleanup in Libby

But the people of Libby, as one dying former employee bitterly complains, are working people, not engineers or scientists; they trusted the company. By the time the EPA began screening Libby residents in 2001, over 1,200 of those tested, or roughly one-quarter of the town's population, were found to have lung abnormalities associated with asbestos exposure — 10 times the national average. Mesothelioma, a form of cancer caused only by exposure to asbestos, was found to be 1,000 times the national average. And because of the long latency period for asbestosis — as much as 30 years or more — the future for Libby's residents is clouded by the specter of disease and early death, however successful current efforts to clean up the town have been.

In examining the politics behind the cleanup, as well as behind Grace's historic ability to disregard worker health, Libby, Montana raises its most troubling questions. How could Grace go on operating the mine for another 20 years after the environmental toxicity became public knowledge? (It was finally closed in 1990.) Even in pro-business Montana, how could state officials continue to cover for a company that declared bankruptcy to avoid liability claims as it allegedly spirited away billions of dollars? By what final cruel twist does the National Priorities Superfund designation sought by townspeople as the only means to fund the cleanup — and opposed by Grace and local business interests — become the very means by which Grace finally abandons the town to taxpayers?

The directors of Libby, Montana use archival footage, news reports and the words of a range of participants in Libby's tragedy — from ex-miners and mine managers and their families to Earl Lovick to EPA field workers to the state's then-governor, Judy Martz, and then-EPA chief Christie Todd Whitman. One demand of Libby's beleaguered citizens has been belatedly met, in good part because of this film, according to many commentators. In 2005, seven Grace executives were criminally indicted for knowingly endangering the residents of Libby — a case due to go to trial this fall. Says co-director Drury Gunn Carr: "Even as we documented the history of the town and the cleanup efforts, the story of Libby took on a larger life as Congress was forced to consider what to do about the millions of homes and other buildings in the U.S. filled with vermiculite from Libby."

Adds co-director Doug Hawes-Davis: "Libby is a hardworking, blue-collar community that personifies the American Dream, but the story we had to tell was about the dream gone horribly wrong. Industrialists, politicians, workers and ordinary citizens all play a role in this American tragedy."



A mine operation in the mountains in Libby, Montana



Libby football field



One of the new s articles appearing in Libby, Montana

Like 16

Tweet 1

36

◀ ▶

### Buy the Film

For home use  
[High Plains Films](#)