

“Libby, Montana film about a small Town with a Big Problem”  
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By Cindy Stillwell

Missoula filmmakers, Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr, co-founders of Missoula based High Plains Films, have made an “incisive and unrelenting” film about the small Montana community we know as Libby. Their documentary, aptly titled, “Libby, Montana,” is described on their Web site as “a journey into the world of a hard-working, blue-collar community that exemplifies the American Dream gone horribly wrong.”

As most of us know about the Libby community, many hundreds of people are sick or have already died from asbestos exposure; the Environmental Protection Agency calls Libby the worst case of community-wide exposure to toxic substance in U.S. history. This documentary chronicles the events that led to that exposure and does it in such a thorough, cyclical structure that a horrific understanding slowly descends. We watch, stunned, as we see family members and friends contract deadly diseases while the company responsible for the toxic mess leaves town and declares bankruptcy.

A small, unlikely group of citizens comes together to fight for their town. They find themselves at odds with local politicians, the state governor, senators, and an International Corporation—even their own friends and neighbors. When a young charismatic federal bureaucrat arrives, in charge of the EPA cleanup, the film finds a character that we very much want to “win,” to make this slow series of terrible events “right.” However, we see him become pinched between the federal government’s budgetary promises for cleaning up the mess and the subsequent cuts they propose to the same promised budget. His experience in the clean-up starts to look a lot like the slow turn of events that led to the disaster in the first place.

Libby, Montana is slow burner of a movie; its pace unfolds the history of the Libby community elegantly, in slow spirals, adding new information at each pass, very true to human understanding as we make attempts to sift through our own past; as we revisit events, new facts, or even old ones looked at anew, often astound us, so relevant, yet so overlooked when we were involved so closely. Watching the film is not a comfortable experience, yet it becomes richly rewarding to see people make their choices and attempt to change their futures.

“Libby, Montana,” shows as part of the Bozeman Film Festival’s American Tapestry documentary film series at the Museum of the Rockies, Jan. 28, 7 p.m. Co-filmmaker Doug Hawes-Davis will be in town to introduce the film and take questions afterward. Hawes-Davis is also the co-director of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival held annually in Missoula.