

“Libby, Montana: A documentary film by Drury Gunn Carr & Doug Hawes-Davis”
<http://www.flickhead.com> August, 2004
by Ray Young

Equal parts mystery, horror film, black comedy, corporate indictment and human tragedy, Libby, Montana sheds what light it can on a menace once mined in that town, the asbestos contaminate vermiculite. Used primarily for the building insulation Zonolite, its pellets and dust have lined the attics of houses for decades, and anyone who inhales it runs the risk of contracting asbestosis or mesothelioma, a potentially fatal cancer. Libby’s population of 2600 has suffered the deaths of 200 miners, family members, and residents. Yet death, lawsuits, the high-profile involvement of the Environmental Protection Agency, and two books — Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation and An Air That Kills: How the Asbestos Poisoning of Libby, Montana, Uncovered a National Scandal — hasn’t been enough to secure the federal funding needed for a thorough cleanup, compensation for the survivors, and aid for contaminated neighboring areas.

The United States government feigns impotence when pitted against the interests of big business, and Ronald Reagan turned a blind eye when news of the tragedy leaked out during his term in office. (One of his cronies just happened to be J. Peter Grace, owner of the Libby mining company.) And with its smokescreen tactics, the current Bush Administration diminishes, avoids, or drapes a cover on the matter entirely. Michael Moore would seize the invitation to grandstand and thumb his nose, but Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis, the editors, producers and co-directors of Libby, Montana, opt not to editorialize. Instead, they watch as this political time bomb goes off on its own.

The film begins its incisive investigation with a brief history of Libby, the introduction and development of the vermiculite mine, and the plight of the sickly and mournful townsfolk against the two faces and forked tongues of bureaucracy. As the specter of lawsuits grew, the owner of the mine filed for bankruptcy, leaving the EPA and the government holding the bag. As she is faced with the surviving families of cancer victims, owners of asbestos-laden homes virtually void of resale value, all Governor Judy Martz initially offered were her ‘prayers.’

Alternating between old home movies and newsreels, to television reports and recent interviews, Libby, Montana is expertly compiled and genuinely compassionate when addressing the people involved. Retired miners recall an era of naïveté when ‘good Americans’ never questioned the status quo, believed in their employers and trusted their government. Charismatic to a fault, theatrical EPA agent Paul Peronard nearly becomes the film’s ‘hero’ until the hopes he inspired are dashed by higher-ups. And with a touch of bizarre poignancy, hardened corporate executive Earl Lovick attempts damage control under oath when it’s revealed that he, too, contracted asbestosis. As one person points out, the dust was everywhere and everyone was breathing it in. (Unfortunately, there are still those who don’t take the threat seriously at all.)

After a run of earthy documentaries — the wildlife films Varmints (1998) and Killing Coyote (2000), a portrait of Ozark naturalist Kent Bonar (The Naturalist, 2001), and This is Nowhere (2002), about nomadic retirees — Libby, Montana marks a significant advance for Montana-based High Plains Films. The film pulsates with urgency and commitment, and manages splendidly without the abrasive finger-pointing and knee-jerk aggression that has marred reportage in our age of so-called reality television. With any luck, the film may direct attention to areas in Michigan, Colorado, and Ohio, places still rich with the controversial product once shipped from Libby.

