

Libby, Montana
By Milton Tabbot
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The small town of Libby, Montana is nestled in the shadow of the Northern Rockies, along the banks of the sparkling Kootenai River. A stone's throw from "Heaven's Gate" country, its location in the northwest corner of the state has contributed through its history to a sense of isolation from the rest of Montana and the country - a "comfort zone" in the words of one of its residents. From its earliest days it was a hardworking and self-reliant logging community, and the first half of the 20th century was for Libby a time when "we believed in everybody - a man's word was a man's word."

The last 50 years have been something else - a turn of events ("a horror story," "science fiction") in which the all too common confluence of corporate greed and government neglect resulted in a tragedy now affecting several generations. Beginning in 1924, a small mining operation eventually prospered by discovering a wealth of vermiculite, a "miracle mineral" that under the name "Zonolite" found use in home insulation, fertilizer, and building materials. By the 1950's Libby's economy was booming and mining was no longer a sideline operation. W.R. Grace Corporation purchased the mining concern in 1963 and operated it until 1990. What Grace and earlier mining officials kept secret from the workers and the community, however, was that there was a problem with the vermiculite - it contained trace amounts of tremolite, one of the most carcinogenic of asbestos fibers. By the 90s Libby had become what the EPA now calls "the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history."

LIBBY, MONTANA is a recounting of this sad history primarily through the voices of the townspeople and the direct observation of the community's coming to grips with the scope of the problem and options for the future. Whether one has heard of the Libby disaster or not (and filmmakers Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis start from the position that it's unknown to the viewer) one is subtly drawn into the portrait of this town not that different from many others ...and then into a gradually dawning horror. The film divides neatly into two halves - the first, the oral history of the town combined with personal stories that eventually converge at a similar realization of deceit and a call for action, and the second centered largely on Paul Peronard, the energetic and charismatic EPA official assigned to supervise Libby's cleanup. Eschewing rhetoric, hysteria, or commentary, the filmmakers employ a form of direct cinema that in its restraint and layering of details has a cumulative power. Still in the news - in February W.R. Grace received a federal indictment stemming from the Libby cover-up - this story is but a chapter in a much larger on-going tale of the uneasy balance between corporate self-interest, government control, and the health of a society.