

## “Libby in Context”

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By Joe Nickell

Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr began filming their documentary on the asbestos problem in Libby in 2001 and are about to show prerelease screenings. Their film shows a rural Montana town gripped by diseases and deaths caused by the W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine.

Filmmakers look to add depth to story of town's health disaster

The public health disaster that has gripped Libby in recent decades has already been chronicled in two books, countless newspaper and magazine stories, and one documentary film, titled “Dust to Dust.”

But according to Doug Hawes-Davis, the story just hasn't hit home in the right way.

“In those kinds of stories, you can tell the meat of the story, the big issue - the death and dying as a result of this unfortunate situation,” says Hawes-Davis. “But you can't really provide a context of what this town is about, who the people really are, and what they've dealt with since the disaster was revealed.”

So in 2001, Hawes-Davis and his nonprofit production company, High Plains Films of Missoula, decided to take on the story of Libby, its people and their long and ultimately disastrous relationship with the local W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine.

Libby, Montana is the fourth and most ambitious feature-length documentary for High Plains, which Hawes-Davis co-founded with filmmaker Drury Gunn Carr in 1992. The company has also produced several short educational films, and was the force behind the recent Big Sky Documentary Film Festival.

High Plains is probably best known around the country for its offbeat documentary, “This Is Nowhere,” which documented the peculiar subculture of people who travel the country in RVs, setting up camp each night in Wal-Mart parking lots with the blessings of the giant retailer.

But High Plains' main focus over the past dozen years has been on documentaries that chronicle environmental destruction and wildlife issues around the country. Two of the company's three previous feature films focused on the rampant and government-sanctioned killing of coyotes and prairie dogs and many of the company's short educational films focus on logging and mining issues around the country.

Thus the story of Libby and its mine was a natural for Hawes-Davis and Carr.

“This film (‘Libby, Montana’) is more what we're trying to move toward now,” says Hawes-Davis. “We're looking at doing films that are large enough in scope that they're of interest to people outside Montana, or people who aren't directly involved in the specific issue we're looking at.”

By the time Hawes-Davis and Carr began filming in 2001, Libby was already a devastated and divided community, ravaged by both the asbestos contamination caused by the mine, and the lingering economic impacts caused by the mine's closing.

Nevertheless, the two (who shared directing credits for the film) managed to pull together extensive historical footage - much of it Super-8 home movies and old newsreel - to re-create a portrait of the community as it developed around the mine during the 20th century.

They also began interviewing locals and attending press conferences and public meetings, compiling what ultimately became the core of the film: its intimate portraits of the town's residents and their local culture.

Indeed, as the film begins, it's hardly evident that this is anything more than a portrait of a rural town in Montana. Aside from a short and as-yet-unrevealing opening scene, in which town residents are seen pulling white crosses out of a truck bed, it's not until 22 minutes into the film that the first hint of trouble emerges, and even that hint seems rather innocuous: The film jumps briefly to taped testimony about the history of the vermiculite mine, given by Earl Lovick, a former plant manager at the mine.

To call this two-hour film a sprawling and ambitious documentary is an understatement and despite its length (the film) rarely feels bloated and ultimately proves emotionally gut-wrenching.

When, at the end of the film, town residents gather to erect a field of small, white crosses in honor of the victims of asbestosis, one can hardly avoid feeling like two hours isn't long enough to devote to these people who gave their lives to the company mine, only to be left to die in pain.

Sneak previews of "Libby, Montana," will be held at the Dome Theater in Libby on Wednesday, March 3, and at the Wilma Theatre in Missoula on Thursday, March 4, at 7 p.m. Tickets for the Missoula screening are \$8 at the door; the Libby screening is free.