Land of the Shining Mountains"
Cast: Les Skramstd, Gayla Benefield, Paul Peronard
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It's a very difficult thing to have the entity that provided employment and everything for the town turn out to have wronged the community so much.
—Doug Hawes-Davis, co-Director

I'm in Libby 'cause I'm led by the spirit. Many people will know exactly what that means when they hear it.
—Richard Weeks, Libby resident

A proud, hardworking, and isolated community, the citizens of Libby, Montana (pop. 2,400) hardly considered themselves rebels or troublemakers. "The people of Libby," offers one, "knew who they were and they knew where they were going." As the patient, perceptive Libby, Montana opens, the town seems set off in a nostalgic haze, a natural splendor indicated by snowy vistas, gamboling dogs, and big blues skies, as a circa-'50s promotional reel proclaims, "Early settlers referred to it as the land of the shining mountains."

Even if the lumber industry was dangerous ("Men went out every day and took the risk of being hurt or maimed or injured or killed"), men understood their roles, and women supported them. In a town where taxidermy, town fairs (featuring boxing contests that set opponents on top of giant logs), and dragging the main served as businesses or entertainments, most residents trusted in their employers to look out for them. Then came the mine, at first a secondary business, eventually earning its owners so much money that it became Libby's primary employer. The primary product was vermiculite, brand named Zonolite and sold as insulation and soil conditioner and even, at one point during the boomtime '60s, promoted for use in cookies. In 1963, the Zonolite Company merged with W.R. Grace, "production really took off," and calamity was just around the corner.

Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr's film traces the story of Libby through a compelling combination of archival footage, talking heads, and—strangely effective—newspaper headlines. Within five short decades, the early excitement and enthusiasm about the mining gives way to horror, as workers and their families learn the deleterious effects of Zonolite, namely, asbestosis and other lung disorders.

According to a deposition by Earl Lovick, the mine's former head manager, the company knew about the possible harmful effects long before the workers found out. A 1956 report commissioned by the W.R. Grace indicates the company knew, as the questioner outs it to Lovick, "there was asbestos in the dust." Lovick, himself a victim—he had chest surgery in 1971, to remove plural plaque, and died in 1999—shifts in his seat and shuffles through papers, appearing as ignorant of causes and effects as the company pretended to be.

The filmmakers traipse along with Paul Peronard, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on-scene coordinator in Libby, as he and his team inspect homes and barns, inhabitants showing the dust that affected not only miners but also their families. Les Skramstad, who died shortly after filming in January 2007, declares his affection for Libby (he arrived, his car froze, and he stayed, he says: "I always like Libby. It was a place that I felt that I could live here, if I couldn't live anywheres else"). And while he worked in the mine, he remained unaware of the risks concerning the dust: "Christ, I was covered in this stuff. It wasn't that I

was being sloppy, you know, I just couldn't get it off." And when he came home from work and his wife or children would hug him, they too were soon "covered in this stuff."

While Skramstad and Bob Wilkins, for examples, are visibly weakened in their interviews, other subjects don't show symptoms. Young Clint Meadows, who sits on a backyard swing with his mother, who smiles wanly, describes his evolving sense of self in relation to Libby. "I like Libby," he says, good-naturedly, but the people in Libby, I don't like 'em. Everybody's just so dang uptight. They been living this year for 50 years and their grandpa did it." He complains of the police needing something better to do than "messing with teenagers," resenting the fact that everyone know everyone else's business. "I just don't like that," he says, his jaw set. "I like to keep to myself and be mysterious." Still, Clint is angry that the company now refuses to pay for his treatment.

A similar sensibility characterizes many of the interviewees, who assume a certain independence, but are increasingly frustrated by the company's refusal to acknowledge what's gone wrong. The bulk of LIBBY, MONTANA follows efforts to hold the company, and eventually, the state, accountable for wrongs committed in order to ensure profits. "Hindsight is always so good, you know, looking back," observes Skramstad, relentlessly eloquent. Gayla Benefield recalls her parents' struggles, arriving in the area around 1945, and eventually both succumbing to illness (by the time the mine closed in 1990, lung abnormalities associated with asbestos exposure in Libby were 10 times the national average). Benefield says, "His logic was, 'The company's looking out for me.'"

As grim as such personal stories surely are, the numbers are also alarming. As Peronard charts it, based on Grace's own 1969 internal study, "92% of their 20-year employees were dying of lung disease." Standing in a hard hat near the mine, he goes on to paint the picture more vividly:

In terms of the numbers of people who are sick or who have measurable signs of being exposed to or harmed by this material, this place is unprecedented. You'd have to go to places like Turkey or third world countries to see this type of exposure around a mine or a processing operation.

While the fundamental story—the victims' devastation, employers' willful ignorance, and then the EPA's efforts to avoid responsibility for cleanup and medical treatment—is stunning, LIBBY, MONTANA assembles these many pieces into a narrative that resonates across time, and far beyond Libby's borders. Not only do an estimated 35 million homes in the U.S. contain Zonolite insulation, but the process of changing the status quo—what Clint Meadows refers to as people being "so dang uptight"—is daunting.

The citizens try to get money for improvements and health care based on having Libby deemed a Superfund site. But when then-Montana Governor Judy Martz—who had the power to make such a designation unilaterally—was finally shamed into visiting Libby (she was accused of being a "lapdog" to W.R. Grace), her platitudes are far from comforting. She promised she was "praying for" the folks in Libby, but told them they need to stop complaining. "Laying blame will get us nowhere," she says during a town meeting. But, of course, assessing blame and responsibility is key to getting funding for assistance.

Though it tracks a horrific and extended saga, LIBBY, MONTANA maintains a sense of intimacy. In part this is a function of its own low budget, but it also constitutes a particular form of activist documentary-making, with focus on diurnal details and conceptual ambiguities, probing questions rather than reductionist oppositions of good and evil. As the camera looks

out on a memorial display of 218 crosses, Richard Weeks says, “I’m a very simple person, I truly am. But my thoughts lately are complicated.”