

“Small town woes on big screen”

The Daily Evergreen, November 5, 2004

by Kristin Moyle

### Documentary tells story of asbestos victims in Montana

Through death, lawsuits and battles with the Environmental Protection Agency, the tragic tale of asbestos-laden Libby, Montana, is told. Mixing old home movies, newsreels, and recent interviews, co-directors Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Haws-Davis of High Plains Films present Libby, Montana, a documentary about an ex-mining town of 4,500 residents. The film begins by showing the human side of Libby, with images of everyday Montana people in a setting that can equate any small-town community in the country. Miners, some who are now restricted to their lazy-boy chairs, give their account of the working conditions at the mine yard and the court proceedings that followed. There are also many personal stories revealing the men's horror upon realizing they have involuntarily transmitted asbestosis to their family members.

### When it started

In the 1920s, residents of Libby, an isolated city in the northwestern tip of Montana, discovered a highly useful material called vermiculite in the mountains. Once mined, this fire-retardant material was marketed as Zonolite. The material was used primarily for insulation, but its uses extended to soil conditioners, building projects and even cooking recipes. As shown in the film, the influence of Zonolite's economic success brought to the miners and residents of Libby shaded the fact that no one told the employees about the silent danger in the air they breathed. The mined vermiculite was contaminated with tremolite asbestos, a microscopic silicate mineral that, when inhaled, contracts the potentially fatal cancer asbestosis. Before long, 92 percent of Libby residents who were mine workers for more than 20 years were dead from lung disease.

### Fast forward.

In 2004, nearly 1,500 residents have been diagnosed with some form of asbestos-related lung disease. The U.S. Public Health Service estimated that one third of the population has some type of lung abnormality. Once these hazards were translated to J. Peter Grace, owner of W.R. Grace Co., the mine fell into bankruptcy. The investigation that ensued featured Earl Lovick, company executive, who tried to apply damage control tactics to reduce the saliency of the asbestos. EPA agent Paul Peronard was sent to Libby, but even he surrendered to corporate control and lack of funds. State help was sought for adequate health care and environmental protection for residents. Montana Gov. Judy Martz was persuaded to travel to Libby. After a face-to-face press conference with residents, she only offered her prayers to help in their struggle. After lack of higher intervention of what the EPA calls the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history, residents wonder if any help is coming.