

Libby, Montana  
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by Tribe

“The inclination of public agencies to protect the worker at any expense (usually the employer’s) seems to be a firmly entrenched political phenomenon which should be considerable concern to us.”

I was telling an acquaintance about the documentary Libby, Montana when he stopped me and said, “wait a minute. Where did you say this happened?” I wondered if perhaps he hadn’t heard me say the title—but no, it wasn’t that; he just couldn’t align the idea that an ecological nightmare occurred and was covered up for decades in the state that many Americans consider a pristine paradise.

Libby, Montana begins with a casual mini tour through the small town of around 2600 residents. It looks like a nice place, and it’s certainly breathtakingly gorgeous. But there’s a horrifying story here—a tale of corporate greed and deceit that left a legacy of death and disease for Libby’s inhabitants.

Libby’s main industry was logging, and the mine was just a “sideline” when Vermiculite was first discovered. As the logging faded, a strip mining operation—the Zonolite Company—sprang up in town. In 1963, through an exchange of stock, the mining company merged into W.R. Grace and was the area’s major employer offering steady work for the town’s inhabitants. Libby became the provider of 80% of the country’s Vermiculite. 12-13 railroad cars a day were loaded with the stuff, at a rate of 200,000 pounds per car. Business was booming; dust filled the air and the lungs of the workers, their families and other town residents. But back when the mine officially began in 1919, no one really understood what they were dealing with. One interviewee explains that in the 50s and 60s Vermiculite was viewed as a miracle product; residents layered it on their gardens to improve the soil, and there were even attempts to bake cookies with it as an ingredient.

Well you can’t blame people for fooling about with asbestos before they knew just how deadly it was. Reminds me of the way people started drinking liquid radium back when they thought it was a miracle elixir.

But internal memos from W.R. Grace reveal that the company heads were fully aware of the deadly effects of Vermiculite, and that the workers were deliberately left in the dark about their deadly exposure to asbestos. The company required annual x-rays and even maintained charts of death and disease rates as they tracked just how many people died and what the chances were of plant workers dying of Asbestosis (92% if you worked there for 20 years). And even though the company heads were fully aware that Vermiculite was a deadly material as far back as 1956, they kept on working the mine, exposing their workers, polluting the community, and reaping huge profits for decades.

Footage includes some extremely painful interviews with various EPA employees and ex-W.R. Grace employees and their families. One worker recalls how he didn’t even know that Vermiculite was a form of asbestos. Another worker tells how he went to see a doctor who identified him as a resident of Libby by just the state of his lungs. There’s some fascinating archival footage of mine manager, Earl Lovick squirming when questioned about his knowledge of the health hazards: “some things shouldn’t need to be explained” he argues, “You don’t need to tell an employee not to touch a hot iron.” I don’t quite get Lovick’s analogy between not touching a hot iron and air-borne asbestos dust, but apparently the analogy worked for Lovick.

In the potent fusion of state and corporate interests, we also see how politics fits into the picture. The governor is pressured into visiting Libby to listen to the town residents both for and against naming Libby as a Superfund site. While she offers to pray for the residents, Ronald Reagan appoints J. Peter Grace (CEO of W.R. Grace) and the Grace Commission to conduct a report on Cost Control –an ‘investigation’ into waste and inefficiency in Federal government. (Grace was a member of the Council for National Policy—a Conservative ‘think tank’ which includes many other notable members such as Jack Abramoff, Jerry Falwell, Oliver North and Milton Friedman).

And of course, there’s always the question, who gets the bill for all this? The EPA wrestles budget problems, and the town’s residents wrestle one another. So the film follows the money trail as fingers are pointed and billions disappear. From directors Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis, the co-founders of Missoula-based High Plains Films.