

**To Forget Is Human; To  
Forgive, Tragic**

## To Forget Is Human; To Forgive, Tragic

By Alfie Kohn

"Meredith can breath[e] again" was how the local newspaper, the Meredith, N.H. News, put it in a front page editorial on March 1, 1951. "Meredith can indeed feel fortunate that an old established firm with an outstanding record of excellent working conditions chose this community." Meredith Linen Mills, the town's major employer, had sputtered to a close in the 1940s, so the town was understandably delighted when a firm called Keasbey & Mattison announced it would buy the plant. Thirty-five years later, however, it is hard to see the reference to breathing again without shuddering at the irony. The business that Keasbey & Mattison brought to Meredith was asbestos, and a lot of people are currently in the process of fighting for air – dying of lung cancer or asbestosis or mesothelioma – as a result of working in that mill.

Loretta Germain worked there in the late 1950s and recalls being covered every day with what appeared to be tinsel. "I looked like a Christmas tree coming out of work," she says. "Nobody ever said a word about anything that could happen. We never thought anything of it. It was a good-paying job." True, she was coughing constantly and experiencing a loss of appetite after a while, but "I just thought I was working too hard." Now Germain, who is 55, ticks off the name of her former colleagues at the plant who have died. As for herself, half of a cancerous left lung has been removed and she has been told she will require oxygen before too long. "God almighty, I've been in agony off and on for nine or ten years," she says.

Germain is hardly alone. A Pennsylvania-based company named Amatec bought the plant from Keasbey & Mattison in 1962 and continued operating it for 20 years. This means that workers will be dying excruciating deaths from their exposure to asbestos in Meredith until at least the year 2000. What's more, Amatec simply dumped its asbestos waste in town rather than burying it until 1976 – allowing the fibers to contaminate not only its employees but possibly everyone in town. It is, in short, a predicament that you might expect would provoke outrage in Meredith, would have them marching in the streets.

Anyone who imagines such a scenario has never been to towns like Meredith, New Hampshire. It is, as the old joke has it, a hotbed of social rest. Even low-paying, unskilled jobs are hard to come by here and people are grateful for whatever work is available, just as they were when Keasbey & Mattison arrived 35 years ago. Unions are as rare as Democrats. The people are hard-working, uneducated, conservative, and they ask no questions: The perfect place to open up (or buy) an asbestos plant. "It was probably the lack of a union and the feeling that there was an unsophisticated labor force that led [Amatec] to come here," says Jim Hopkins, a New Hampshire lawyer.

If this is, in fact, the way Amatec reasoned, the company's wage paid off. When news of the dangers of asbestos became known, people here "figured, 'What's the big deal?'" says Linda Brown, a hostess at Hart's Turkey Farms, the town's largest restaurant. "It's in the air everywhere." Stop anyone in town and he or she is likely to know a few people who worked at the mill and are now dead or dying. He or she is also likely to be unperturbed. "What's the sense of thinking about it? It's all in the past," says Kristen Eldridge, a realtor who has spent all her life in these parts.

And Rudy Van Veghten, the editor of the Meredith News: "A lot of people don't know what all the hubbub is all about." When Peter Swanson, a reporter for the *New Hampshire Sunday News*, wrote a two-part series on the plant last October, documenting misconduct on the parts of both Keasbey & Mattison and Amatec, residents were "shaking their heads, saying, 'Why are they digging that up again?'" recalls Van Veghten. He observes that Amatec did fall out of favor in the late 1970s – but only because the mill, located smack in the middle of town, was regarded as an eyesore. People wanted the facility hidden from view but kept in Meredith.

The people who don't understand the fuss include those who worked at the plant, those who could never quite wash all the asbestos out of their hair and clothes. Above Scott Pharmacy, in a tiny room that reeks of cigarette smoke and vibrates with applause from a TV game show, Maggie Cram remembers her years with Amatec. "They always knew when OSHA was coming [to inspect the plant]. They'd tell you to wear a mask while they were there, make believe we were wearing them all the time." Cram, who is 47, recalls watching the asbestos particles as they floated on shafts of sunlight. "They didn't specify to us that it was bad for our health. I never heard nothing from them [afterward]. This is the only thing I've ever gotten," she says, patting a letter received last January from the state health department. The letter announces a medical screening for former employees of the plant. Will she go? Probably not. "I try not to think about it. I don't really figure I'd been there long enough to get it bad." Maggie Cram worked at Amatec from 1976 to 1982.

Elmer Keniston is a big man who wears an even bigger green flannel shirt. He dominates the tiny gray box of a house he lives in, which is filled with photos and knick-knacks. "They never told us much of anything" about asbestos, he recalls. The foreman never wore a mask, said it wasn't necessary because his exposure to the stuff was limited. Now that foreman is dead. Keniston himself was an operator in the card room, where the concentration of asbestos fibers was highest. "It doesn't bother me much," he says, because his health is already pretty poor. He has had a kidney removed. As for Amatec's conduct, "I think they should've told us," he says mildly. Mary Hoyt, who put in seven years at the mill, will have no part of even such gentle criticism. "I liked my job there. I'd go back any time. I'd never say anything against it." As for the screening, forget it. "I just don't go to doctors," she says firmly.

Meredith, population 5,000, sits on the edge of Lake Winnepesaukee and is largely supported by the people who come up to swim or ski. Symbolic of the transformation from an industrial economy to one based on tourism is the mill itself. When Amatec closed it down in late 1982, a local developer turned it into a stylish shopping mall, Mill Falls Marketplace. The waterfall that once powered the mill is now a decorative addition to the Irish Tweed Shop, Nuage Ice Cream, the antique store, and all the rest of the red brick and white clapboard buildings. A visitor would have no idea what used to go on there – and a resident is unlikely to tell him.

One exception to the pattern of local indifference is Loretta Germain. "I think they're a bunch of assholes," she says of the corporation that she holds responsible for her cancer – and she is not a woman who uses such language lightly. This is a brand-new conclusion, though, because for years Germain never thought to associate her illness with the fact that she was exposed to asbestos every day. Not until last fall, in fact, when her husband, Thomas, attended a meeting for former employees of the plant, did the pieces fall into place. With growing fury, Thomas listened to a state public health official detail the consequences of asbestos exposure – a precise description of his wife's condition.

That meeting, and another one in nearby Plymouth, represent one of the few successes in a desperate campaign now being waged to find the plant's employees and get them tested for asbestos-related diseases. The two men behind the campaign are Dr. Eugene Schwartz and Rep. Wayne King. Neither understood what was happening until quite recently.

Schwartz was hired two years ago as the state's first epidemiologist specializing in chronic diseases. He promptly set about to determine whether New England's unusually high rate of cancer deaths from 1950 through 1970 had continued through the 1970s. It had. He then began to investigate exactly what people were dying from and where, and he found a large number of deaths from asbestosis (scarring of the lungs) and mesothelioma (a tumor on the lining of the lungs or abdomen) – both of which are essentially confined to people exposed to asbestos – and he found a cluster of deaths in the Meredith area.

At the time, Schwartz didn't know that Keasbey & Mattison – and then Amatec – had manufactured asbestos cloth there. When he discovered this, he asked the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for details. They sent him the results of some tests they had conducted there. In 1966, workers at the Amatec plant were being exposed to as many as 163 fibers of asbestos per cubic centimeter. The current standard for maximum exposure is two fibers per cc., and the Environmental Protection Agency, in finally moving to ban the substance altogether, declared in late January that any exposure may well be hazardous.

Schwartz's report was released last spring but nothing came of it until August. Two days after Peter Swanson published his first article on the plant, the Public Health Service sent out a health advisory to former employees, urging them to be tested and to stop smoking. (Cigarettes multiply the risk of lung cancer for someone exposed to asbestos by a factor of ten.) The advisory confirmed what state representative Wayne King had suspected. In an area this scarcely populated, you notice when people get sick and die – and you know where people used to work. King, a Democrat in a district where 6 percent of the voters share that distinction, set up the two public meetings to notify workers. That done, he is now at a loss to come up with anything else to do. "We're going to have to initiate something," he says. His tone is plaintive and his voice sounds hopeless.

Just what can be done for the hundreds of employees – no one, or at least no one who is talking, seems to know exactly how many worked there – who breathed in the deadly dust? On behalf of the relatives of several dead workers, attorney Jim Nocas decided to bring legal action. Keasbey & Mattison no longer exists, but Amatec is still in business, with one plant down the road in Laconia, a second in Pennsylvania, and a third, which still makes asbestos cloth, in Mexico. Nocas filed suit in 1982 and Amatec promptly dove for cover under the Chapter 11 bankruptcy law – exactly as the asbestos giant, Johns Manville, had done less than three months before.

Now Nocas and other local attorneys are looking around for others to sue. The corporations that mined the asbestos in South Africa and Canada and supplied it to Amatec are high on the list. The insurers that provided workmen's compensation coverage despite their apparent knowledge of what asbestos does are also candidates. Meanwhile, no one has collected a nickel.

At least the workers can be found and notified – or so Schwartz and King assumed. But Amatec refuses to release its list of the plant's 300-plus former employees, although it did forward that letter from the state health department – the one Maggie Cram received – to those employees. Last August, NIOSH told the department that it had a list of 140 employees, as well as their health records (including 140 x-rays taken at the plant in 1972), and it might pass along that information. Three months later, the agency admitted it actually had files on 300 workers but added it was "still in the process of deciding how to proceed regarding the individual notification of workers." Wayne King shakes his head over this. "Here's a governmental agency that's supposed to be concerned about worker safety and they're dragging their feet and helping the corporation," he says.

The problems don't stop there. Even if more Amatec workers can be painstakingly tracked down, what is to be done for them? A local hospital has agreed to set up a one-day screening for former employees this spring and a local bank will throw in some money. Better than nothing, says Dr. Schwartz, but these diseases don't show up until 10 or 20 or 30 years after exposure. Who will see to it that these people – many of them struggling financially – are tested periodically throughout their lives? And who will care for them if they get sick? New Hampshire has not a single public hospital, and Social Security will not help the likes of Loretta Germain: She's not sick enough.

Three hundred fifty miles away, in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Jack Rainey, the former manager of the plant, now sits behind the president's desk at Amatec's headquarters. He agrees to talk to me by telephone if his lawyer can review the questions in advance, if two lawyers can be part of the conversation, and if the call is not tape recorded. I ask him when he first learned what asbestos does to people and he says he heard of asbestosis in the 1960s but didn't understand the "seriousness of the disease" until 1972. I ask about OSHA's 1980 citations of his company for "willful" violation of regulations, for failing to provide adequate medical surveillance of employees and failing to inform those who were overexposed to asbestos. "I'd have to go back and look at those citations," he says. "I don't remember." I offer him an opportunity to speak his mind about the whole affair, the deaths and lawsuits and allegations that Amatec has recklessly killed people in New Hampshire and may now be killing people in Mexico. He pauses and consults with one of his lawyers. "I don't know what I would say," he finally replies.

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