Libby, Montana
A film by Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis
New York, June 2007

Dear Colleague,

When we began production of the film *Libby, Montana*, I called Les Skramstad to ask him to participate in the film. Our first conversation was awkward. In a hushed voice Les asked, “Are you from Grace?” I wasn’t entirely surprised by the question. The W. R. Grace Corporation had been in the news a lot lately, charged with exposing thousands of unwitting citizens in Libby to asbestos contamination. Les had been diagnosed with asbestosis and told by doctors that he had just a few years to live. But Les had other concerns. In the summer of 2001, Libby was a community in the midst of a major crisis, and everyone was affected by it. The conflict had pitted neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend — even families had been divided over the affair. Les had been labeled a “radical” and a “reactionary” by many townspeople, including several town leaders, who denied that there was a problem in Libby. They accused Les of needlessly stirring up trouble, and insisted that Grace was a charitable and loyal patron of the town.

One example of the atmosphere came to us early in filming. We were standing along a road in downtown Libby shooting an old Grace processing plant, when a car pulled up. A man rolled down the window and said simply, “Go home,” then drove off. It was an eerie thing to happen, but it confirmed to us the volatile disposition of the town. So Les was naturally wary about strangers calling and asking questions about asbestos, death and, most particularly, W. R. Grace.

Eventually Les agreed to be interviewed, and over the next few years he and his wife Norita welcomed us into their home on numerous occasions. Les never seemed overly concerned about his own health, but he was grief-stricken over the fact that his wife and children had also been diagnosed with asbestosis. After the first day of filming with Les, we were left feeling unsettled and saddened. His story was extraordinary, and were it not for the fact that hundreds of others in town had very similar stories, it would have been difficult to believe. When we asked Les what he hoped to accomplish by telling his story, he simply said, “I want justice. Justice for my family and my town.” Les wanted W. R. Grace to be held accountable for what had happened in Libby. He also wanted...
the U.S. government — which had been aware of asbestos contamination in Libby for decades — to be held accountable for ensuring that the town was cleaned up and that Libby residents would be safe from asbestos exposure.

This brought up some challenging questions for us as filmmakers: What was our role in telling this story? What responsibility did we have to our subjects? What was our ultimate objective in making the film? If we had any intention of keeping an emotional arm’s length from the subject, that idea was shattered in that first afternoon with Les. We, as much as anyone, found it nearly impossible not to be swept up in the drama of it all. This is not the best situation for a documentary filmmaker. Our role is to be in a position to tell an honest story from our own distinct point of view, which requires a certain amount of emotional distance from the subject.

We told Les that day that we couldn’t promise justice for him and his family. In fact, we couldn’t promise that this film would do anything to help his situation, or that of anyone in Libby. All we could do was report what happened in Libby and hope that this document could add something to the overall understanding of how it happened. Les seemed to be satisfied with this, and we left it at that.

Our goal in our films has always been to explore social, economic and environmental interrelationships in order to attempt to unravel the intricacies of how things happen. This is how we proceeded with the production of Libby, Montana. We began to uncover the events that led to the current situation, and then continued to cover the events as they unfolded. That process is ongoing and will continue to unfold for many years to come. In some ways when to finish the film felt like an arbitrary decision. But we attempted to tell as honest a story as we knew how, and to always keep in mind that what Les wanted was simply some justice. Why would anyone ask for anything less?

In late 2006, I called Les to let him know that the film would be broadcast on PBS as part of the “P.O.V.” series. Although he was very sick at the time (he had been diagnosed with late stage mesothelioma — a rare cancer associated with asbestos exposure), he seemed to be very pleased, and he thanked us for making the film. But even then, he didn’t let the opportunity go by to make a plea to us to continue working to get the word out about Libby. “We have a lot of work to do. The government isn’t doing their job, and W. R. Grace is in bankruptcy, and if we’re not careful, they’re going to get away with this thing without having to pay a dime.” Les was right. Libby is still suffering, and although there is a better understanding in the community itself about the weight of the problem, it will be years before the cleanup is complete, and doctors predict that people in Libby will be diagnosed with asbestos-related illnesses for years to come. If there is a silver lining in Libby, it will be that we as a society can learn from what happened here, and hopefully we won’t let it happen again.

On January 29, 2007, I attended Les Skramstad’s funeral. The day was cold, and just prior to the service a snowstorm had raged outside of the Libby Christian Church. But despite the weather, hundreds of Libby residents attended the funeral, and many others came from around the country. The number of people in attendance was a testament to how much had changed since we first began filming six years earlier. By that time, Les, who had once been ostracized by many in his town, was considered a hero to many for being willing to stand up and demand justice. Les’s death was the subject of several national news stories that week, and Senator Max Baucus eulogized him on the floor of the U.S. Senate. Les wasn’t a state or national dignitary, nor was he a corporate leader or a wealthy patron. He was a quiet, hardworking miner and timber worker from North Dakota who had moved to Libby as a young man in the 1950s. Why his death attracted so much local and national attention is in many ways the subject of our film.

Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis
Filmmakers, Libby, Montana

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Nestled below the rugged peaks of the Northern Rockies in Montana — as iconic a representation of America’s “purple mountain majesties” as one can find — lies the site of the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history. In the small town of Libby, where mines owned by W. R. Grace once produced most of the world’s vermiculite, many hundreds of people are sick or have already died from asbestos exposure.

Libby, Montana, a feature-length (83-minute) documentary takes viewers into a company town where the American Dream has exacted a terrible price. It tells a story of betrayal that blurs traditional political lines and raises alarming questions about the role of corporate power in American governance.

Libby is a picture-perfect example of the kind of American wilderness that environmentalists want to save. An archetypal backpacker’s, hunter’s and angler’s paradise, the town has a remoteness and economy of logging and mining that nurtured conservative, self-reliant family and community values.

Vermiculite mining provided the citizens of Libby with decades of good jobs. Assured by company officials that the mine’s inescapable dust was no more dangerous than field dust, residents not only mined the material but also showcased its use, insulating their homes with it and laying down sports fields, ice rinks and other community surfaces with the mine’s materials.

But internal memos show that the company knew that the mine dust was toxic asbestos. By the time this information had been widely shared, poisonous building products made from the mine’s vermiculite had been used in millions of buildings across the U.S., and hundreds of Libby residents were sick or had died. Accusations based on the company’s withholding of information now form the basis of criminal cases pending against W. R. Grace executives.

As an outreach tool, Libby, Montana challenges audiences to examine their own assumptions and think more deeply about what they define as core American values. As the film questions how a company could continue endangering people for so many years after harmful practices and products became public knowledge, it puts a human face on political debates over government regulation, federal budget cuts and corporate responsibility, providing a powerful springboard for discussion.
Libby

Located on the Kootenai River and by the Great Northern Railroad in the northwest corner of Montana, Libby was settled by miners, trappers and railroaders in 1892. Today Libby’s main industries are lumber, mining, tourism and recreation. Located in Lincoln County, which has a population of just over 19,000, the town itself has a population of approximately 2,800.

Sources:
2000 U.S. Census


The Dangers of Asbestos

The term “asbestos” describes several minerals made up of microscopic fibers that may become airborne when disturbed. Because it is extremely light and heat-resistant, asbestos is often used in the production of insulation, fireproofing and other building materials.

The particular mineral at the Libby mine was "tremolite," a form of asbestos that was naturally occurring in the vermiculite ore. Tremolite is recognized as one of the most dangerous class of asbestos fibers, considerably more toxic to human health than the more common “chrysotile” asbestos [the commercial form of asbestos].
Vermiculite is a shiny, mica-like mineral that can contain asbestos. When heated, it pops into accordion-shaped pieces. Because it is fire-resistant, odorless, absorbent and light, it is often used to make insulation, packing materials or garden products. It is estimated that thermal insulation made with Libby vermiculite may still be found in 35 million American homes. A December 2006 federal court ruling, however, found that this insulation does not pose "unreasonable risk of harm" even though it contains the toxic mineral. Libby is said to have produced 80 percent of the world's vermiculite.

When inhaled, the fibers in asbestos can irritate the lungs and cause scar tissue that inhibits breathing. Ultimately this damage can lead to:

- **asbestosis**, a non-cancer disease of the lungs that impedes breath and for which there is no treatment
- **lung cancer**, the most common symptoms of which are coughing, shortness of breath, chest pains and anemia
- **mesothelioma**, a rare form of cancer that is found in the membranes of the lungs, chest, abdomen and heart and is almost always linked to asbestos. This disease may not show up until years or even decades after asbestos exposure.

Lung cancer and other fatal lung disease has been found to be 40 to 60 times more prevalent in Libby than elsewhere in the U.S. Hundreds of miners have died and another 1,200 at least have been diagnosed with the ailments.

Asbestos continues to be an issue of concern, especially in and around New York, where experts believe hundreds of tons of the mineral were released into the air following the collapse of the World Trade Center, which contained vermiculite insulation, on September 11, 2001. Health officials fear an outbreak of mesothelioma in the area in coming years.

**Sources:**

EPA: www.epa.gov/asbestos


W. R. Grace Co.

William R. Grace founded the W. R. Grace Co., then a fertilizer dealer, in 1854. Over the years, Grace expanded into a worldwide conglomerate dealing principally in chemicals and packaging, but also in everything from fabric to machinery to sporting goods. In the middle of World War II, William Grace’s grandson J. Peter took over the business, and ran it until 1993. J. Peter is best known for leading the so-called Grace Commission under President Reagan, a group of leading businessmen who sought to eliminate waste and inefficiency from the federal government and whose findings and recommendations in the early 1980s are said to have saved the government at least hundreds of billions of dollars.

W. R. Grace’s Libby pollution and cover-up scandal is not the only black spot in its history. In the 1990s, it came to light that the company sickened families in the Massachusetts town of Woburn, first through the book A Civil Action by Jonathan Harr, and later in a film by the same name. It was revealed that Grace had dumped chemical solvents into the water table in Woburn, poisoning the town’s drinking water. Five children and one adult died of leukemia resulting from the spills, and others fell ill. The EPA found Grace and the Beatrice food company responsible for the spills, and Grace was later indicted by the Department of Justice for lying to the EPA about the amount of hazardous chemicals used at its Woburn packaging plant. The company paid a fine of $10,000 and settled a potential lawsuit with eight Woburn families out of court for $8 million.

Sources:


Superfund Sites

“Superfund” is the name given to the environmental program established to address abandoned hazardous waste sites. It is also the name of the fund established by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980, as amended (CERCLA statute, CERCLA overview). This law was enacted in the wake of the discovery of toxic waste dumps such as Love Canal and Times Beach in the 1970s. It allows the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to clean up such sites and to compel responsible parties to perform cleanups or reimburse the government for EPA-led cleanups. For more information on Superfund sites where you live, check out the Resources section in this guide.

Source:

EPA: www.epa.gov/superfund/about.htm

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Zonolite and W. R. Grace

1913 Vermiculite discovered in Libby; commercial mining begins in 1923.

1939 Zonolite begins mining, eventually supplying approximately 80 percent of the world’s supply of vermiculite.

1944 Montana State Board of Health finds the dust at the mine “nuisance dust” and not hazardous.

1956 Montana State Board of Health finds that the mine’s dust contains asbestos, but that abatement measures could reduce the hazard to “minimal.”

1959 Zonolite requests chest X-rays of all Libby employees. Of 130 mine workers, 48 show abnormalities.

1963 W. R. Grace purchases Zonolite, later claiming that at the time they were “unaware of the extent of the hazards of mining and milling vermiculite”; at its peak, the plant employed 1,900 people.

1964 W. R. Grace initiates annual X-rays for all Libby employees.

1967 Libby mine-workers union files first asbestos-related claim.

1969 W. R. Grace company memo indicates that 92 percent of 20-year employees are dying of “lung disease.”

1974 The first asbestos-related workers’ compensation claim is filed against the company.

1977 A Grace-commissioned study finds a link between asbestos and cancer.

1985 W. R. Grace requires workers to wear removable coveralls to prevent dust from traveling offsite with workers.

1990 Mining is halted.

1992 Processing is halted.

1999 The rate of mesothelioma in Libby is 1,000 times the national average; Earl Lovick, a Grace site manager featured in the film, dies. He suffered from lung disease.

2000 W. R. Grace offers free medical coverage to Libby residents diagnosed with asbestos-related illnesses and begins annual donation of $250,000 to St. John’s Lutheran Hospital to cover diagnosis and treatment of patients with asbestos-related diseases.

2001 After transferring several billion dollars to subsidiaries, W. R. Grace files for bankruptcy protection, a direct response to a spike in asbestos-related lawsuits; EPA begins screening Libby residents and finds that roughly one-quarter of the town’s population were found to have lung abnormalities associated with asbestos exposure — 10 times the national average. Rates of mesothelioma, a form of cancer caused only by exposure to asbestos, is found to be 1,000 times the national average.

2003 EPA had identified more than 1,200 asbestos-contaminated homes in Libby as well as large-scale contamination in nearby Troy.

2004 1,200 Libby residents had been diagnosed with lung abnormalities — in addition to at least 218 known deaths.

2005 Seven W. R. Grace executives were criminally indicted for knowingly endangering Libby residents and concealing information about health effects of its operation.

2006 After court appeals fail, W. R. Grace is ordered to pay $54 million to the EPA for the Libby cleanup.

Today The U.S. EPA estimates that as many as 35 million homes in the U.S. may contain Zonolite insulation. The criminal case is scheduled to go to trial in the 9th Circuit in September 2007. Since the original indictment in 2005 some charges have been dismissed, but decisions on appeals of the dismissals are still pending. One of the defendants, Alan Stringer, died in February 2007. Stringer was one of two W. R. Grace managers that appeared in the film Libby, Montana.

Sources:
Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov
W. R. Grace: www.grace.com

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Selected People Featured in Libby, Montana

**Gayla Benfield** — Advocate for Libby asbestos victims. She lost 30 members of her own family to asbestos-related disease.

**Bob Wilkins** — Former mine worker. He died in 2002 of asbestosis.

**Les Skramstad** — Former mine worker. He was the first to win a jury award against W. R. Grace. He died of mesothelioma in January 2007.

**Mike Powers** — Current owner of the home of Edward Alley, the man who originally developed Zonolite.
Selected People Featured in **Libby, Montana**

**Richard Weeks** — Preaches on the streets of Libby to anyone who will listen. His sign, "Jesus or Scuba," refers to his belief that the Biblical End of Days described in the Book of Revelations will begin with the breaking of a dam just north of Libby and the flooding of the town.

**Paul Peronard** — EPA official in charge of the Libby cleanup

**Earl Lovick** — Former W. R. Grace manager
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you may want to pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can’t engage until they have had a break, don’t encourage people to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won’t lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask them?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you tell them?
- Did anything in this film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?
- What insights or inspiration did you gain from this film? What did you learn about the film’s subjects and/or about yourself?
Corporate Responsibility

- At one point, an attorney asks former Zonolite executive Earl Lovick if the company had a moral obligation to tell workers about their exposure to asbestos. In your view, what were W. R. Grace’s responsibilities to its employees? In what ways did their legal responsibilities differ from their moral responsibilities? Should companies be legally required to act morally? Why or why not?
- EPA official Paul Peronard says, “You have to go places like third-world countries to see this type of exposure around a mine or a processing operation. It just hasn’t happened in the United States before like this.” How did the situation in Libby happen? What factors were at play?
- Residents recall that managers from W. R. Grace owned the bank, served on school and hospital boards, were involved in church, etc. How did this kind of community involvement benefit and harm Libby?
- W. R. Grace provided workers with respirators and regular medical exams. Should this exempt them from financial responsibility for the workers’ asbestosis? Why or why not?
- Libby resident Neil Bauer says, “I spent ten years investigating homicides and rapes and crimes in Lincoln County. I should have been investigating the crimes that were occurring up on the hill. W. R. Grace committed homicide.” Do you agree that W. R. Grace committed “homicide”? If so, how should a corporation be held accountable for that kind of crime? Whom would you arrest and prosecute?
- What benefits did Zonolite and W. R. Grace bring to Libby? Is asbestos contamination a reasonable trade-off for those benefits? How might the company have prospered and also mitigated the damage to the town and its people?

Asbestos-laden vermiculite was used all over town for many different uses, including as a running surface for the Libby High School track. The high school track quickly became a priority clean-up site.

Photo Chad Harder
Public Policy

• In your view, who should pay for the cleanup? Should a corporation be required to pay for previous environmental or health damage if doing so would mean forcing the company into bankruptcy? Why or why not?

• The film notes the irony of Peter Grace heading President Reagan’s commission on downsizing government. Who benefits from government downsizing and in what ways? How did downsizing (e.g., cuts to the EPA budget) affect Libby? What might policy-makers do to balance support for economic development, limited government and the responsibility to ensure basic health and safety?

• What are the benefits and drawbacks of declaring Libby to be a Superfund site? If you had been on the governor’s staff, what would you have advised her to do?

• Traditionally, towns like Libby that are built around logging and mining have not been particularly sympathetic to environmentalists or government regulators. How do the events in Libby reshape traditional alliances? In your view, who is working in the best interests of the people of Libby? If you lived in Libby, whom would you trust most and why?

Impact

• In the film, residents describe Libby as “typical small-town” America. What does that mean? What core values do Libby residents embrace (e.g., trusting a man’s word, hard work is rewarded, family is priority, etc.)? How did events challenge those core values?

• Beyond the direct health effects, what was the impact of asbestosis on the personal lives of the people featured in the film?

• Norita Skramstad, the wife of a former miner, summarizes, “I just hope everybody can learn from what happened, and don’t let it happen again.” What did you learn from what happened in Libby? What might you do to ensure that it does not happen again?
• Identify the most significant sources of pollution in your community and convene a task force of stakeholders (citizens, health professionals, business owners, legislators, etc.) to craft a cleanup plan.

• Investigate current bankruptcy laws and the rights afforded to former employees to collect back wages, pension funds, health insurance or damages. Suggest revisions to the law that would protect the interests of workers and local communities.

• Identify local homes with Zonolite insulation and raise funds to pay for abatement.

• Use what you know about W. R. Grace in Libby to create a policy describing a company’s obligations to its employees and to the community. Publicize your policy statement and ask local employers to endorse it.

• Create a health-fair booth that provides information on employer responsibilities regarding health and safety protections for workers.
FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.’s Libby, Montana Web site
www.pbs.org/pov/libbymontana
The Libby, Montana companion Web site offers a streaming video trailer of the film, an interview with filmmakers Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis [video, podcast and text]; a list of related Web sites, organizations and books; a discussion guide and classroom activity; and the following special feature:

ADDITIONAL SCENES: AROUND LIBBY

The dangers of exposure to asbestos affected Libby residents rich and poor, young and old. Watch these additional scenes to find out more about the heartbreak of life in Libby, Montana.

FIRST PERSON: BREAKING THE STORY OF LIBBY’S “DIRTY LITTLE SECRET”

In 1999, journalist Andrew Schneider heard a tip about a small Montana town where people were dying by the dozens. He broke the story of asbestos poisoning in Libby on the pages of The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, bringing nationwide attention to the threat. Hear him talk about how he pursued the story, how he found out that W.R. Grace and the government knew about the dangers in Libby and what happened after the story ran.

LIBBY

LIBBY, MONTANA WEB SITE
www.highplainsfilms.org/fp_libby_resources.html
The Web site for the film includes extended interviews with key players.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION: LIBBY, MONTANA
www.libbymt.com/community/
This visitor’s guide to Libby includes general information about the town and its surroundings.

What’s Your P.O.V.?

P.O.V.’s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about Libby, Montana.

Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768.
www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback.html

W. R. GRACE
www.grace.com/About/EHS/Libby/Default.aspx
W. R. Grace’s Web site includes a detailed explanation of events in Libby from the company’s perspective, including official denials of wrongdoing. The company has posted additional information at www.libbyissues.com.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
www.epa.gov/region8/superfund/libby/
This Environmental Protection Agency Web site provides information on current cleanup efforts in Libby as well as general information on asbestos and vermiculite. For information on Superfund sites in your area, go to: www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/index.htm

ASBESTOS

ASBESTOS DISEASE AWARENESS ORGANIZATION
www.asbestosdiseaseawareness.org
The Web site of the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization features advocacy and education materials related to asbestos exposure, as well as services available to asbestos victims and their families.

CDC: NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH
www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/asbestos/
The Web site of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health includes official government policy documents and reports of scientific research related to asbestos and exposure prevention. Additional information is available from the CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) – search for “asbestos” at: www.atsdr.cdc.gov.
How to Buy the Film

To order *Libby, Montana*,
go to www.highplainsfilms.org/fp_libby.html

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.’s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public-television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.’s films.

P.O.V. Interactive

[www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.’s award-winning Web department produces a Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.’s Borders. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov) houses our unique Talking Back feature, filmmaker interviews, viewer resources and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

American Documentary, Inc.

[www.americandocumentary.org](http://www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

Front cover: Tape warns of asbestos contamination on one of the many priority clean-up sites in Libby, Montana in 2000.

Photo courtesy of “Libby, Montana”