Libby, MT 2,700 Residents and One Asbestos Scare

By ACSH Staff — May 31, 2002

A college acquaintance of mine comes from Libby, Montana population 2,700 and isn't accustomed to seeing her tiny hometown on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, but that's where Libby found itself on May 13 because of the ongoing hysteria over asbestos.

It's true that lung problems were caused decades ago by asbestos breathed in extremely high quantities by workers in ship-building facilities especially ones who smoked. Few scientists, however, think that intact asbestos in building walls poses a health risk, and most recognize that tearing the asbestos out of buildings may actually put more asbestos particles in the air, meaning that "asbestos abatement" may be unnecessary, expensive, and counter-productive.

Nonetheless, the EPA wants to tear asbestos out of hundreds of Libby homes. My college acquaintance's mother still lives in Libby, and she sees the asbestos furor as part of an ongoing pattern of government silliness in her state.

I got a taste of Libby and the complaints of Mrs. C, as I'll call her eleven years ago, fresh out of college, when Mrs. C was kind enough to put a friend and me up for the evening during our cross-country road trip. Mrs. C was then employed as the town's sole newspaper delivery person, and she noted that shortly before our visit, her daily delivery had been suspended due to a moose wandering the town's one major road. Since wildlife can be a nuisance in Libby, Mrs. C was peeved that the government appeared to be siding with some of the most menacing animals against the inhabitants of Libby, flying grizzly bears into the area by helicopter to relieve what government environmental experts viewed as a bear shortage in that part of the state. When you're living in the wilderness and know that even a goofy-looking moose can be dangerous, it's hard to see a grizzly bear shortage as a serious problem.

My traveling companion and I left Libby the next day and headed to the bigger and hipper city of Seattle, which was quite a contrast. Instead of moose and bear worries, Seattle in the fall of 1991 saw the release of the first Top 40 hit by Nirvana, the presence of David Lynch's film crews for the movie Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, and a computer industry-fueled job boom in the midst of a national recession. In Seattle, we stayed with a friend whose coffee table held magazines about a burgeoning cyberpunk movement including inventions called virtual reality and the Internet and about a rising 60s/70s revival in dance clubs. Indeed, that trip was something of a pop culture preview for me of the rest of the 1990s. Seattle and Libby seemed worlds apart, but the kind of environmental extremism that Seattle produces, in its polite and gentle way, affects urbanites and rural-dwellers alike. When bad science ideas spread among the elites in our big cities, the consequences for tiny towns like Libby can be as drastic as an imperial power throwing its weight around in developing countries.

Mrs. C now writes to tell me that the asbestos scare is being blown out of proportion in Libby, and
in predictable ways. Despite a variety of longstanding reasons for respiratory ailments among some people in Libby smoking, ordinary air pollution, pollen from the coniferous forests, widespread use of wood stoves the race is on to attribute all problems to the presence of asbestos. "It's not pretty," says Mrs. C. She points to one woman who reportedly died from asbestos-induced mesothelioma but was also a heavy smoker, a fact downplayed in local and official talk about her case. Mrs. C decided not to go in for one of the "free" (tax-funded) medical screenings now being offered in Libby because she has a slight breathing problem from chronic bronchitis and other causes predating her time in Libby and she feared she’d be added to the skewed statistics about lung problems in the town.

She also reports hearing government scientists there rejoicing over the fact that policy for Libby has already been set and now they'll have another year and half's work to do in accumulating the data to justify the policy.

There’s a tendency for us big city dwellers to think we export enlightenment and high culture to small-town America. We should remember that sometimes we also export nonsense.