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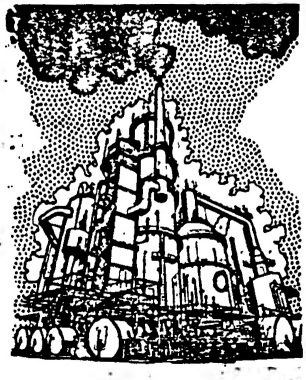
Asbestos processer finds itself center of attention

By TOM HORTON

For most of the 60 years since Fred Mett established the Powhatan Mining Company in what has become suburban Woodlawn, no one paid much attention to the cluster of old tin buildings where 20 to 40 tons of asbestos rock is crushed to a fine powder and bagged for shipment weekly.

But "almost everybody and their brother are telling us what to do now," says Frances Mett, who took over the operation in 1969 after her father died. To make her point, she produces a stack of about two dozen business cards left by state, federal and local health and environmental agencies.

There is ample reason for their interest. For more than four decades the medical evidence has mounted to an inescapable conclusion: Asbestos workers die at extraordinary rates from cancer and lung impairment, the results of inhaling minute fibers of the mineral.



Most frighteningly, it now seems clear that fatal damage occurs in some humans from only brief contact with asbestos dust and at extremely low levels of exposure. The symptoms usually do not show up until 20 to 40 years after first exposure. By the time they are detected, treatment is often useless.

Enough asbestos-related deaths and health effects have been documented among non-asbestos workers to lead the Environmental Protection Agency to study airborne asbestos limits for the general environment. No such limits currently exist.

But exposure limits for workers in places like Powhatan Mining have been in effect for several years now—and Powhatan has consistently violated them, according to Bureau of Mines records in Pittsburgh.

- In a "spot inspection" in 1972 the mines bureau's just-organized Mining Enforcement Safety Administration (MESA) found several workers at Powhatan overexposed to asbestos dust. Conditions in the mill were described as generally "dusty."

The only action taken was a suggestion by MESA that the company modify some of its equipment to keep the asbestos dust down.

- MESA inspectors made their first full-scale inspection more than two years later, in September, 1974, taking 21 samples of the air at work stations in the Powhatan mill.

Several samples showed asbestos levels in excess of the legal exposure limits. Some were recorded as having three to five times the allowable asbestos concentrations but, according to technical papers

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Asbestos firm focus of attention

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from MESA's Denver laboratory, actually showed amounts of asbestos fibers "too heavy to count."

• The plant was ordered in November, 1974, to close briefly (for about a day) to clean up excess asbestos dust.

• The files note that air samples taken in May, 1975, MESA's next inspection, found that the company still was exceeding worker exposure levels in several instances. The conditions for which Powhatan was closed down for a day in 1974 had been "abated," however, the inspector reported.

The only action noted after the May inspection was a one-month extension to Powhatan to bring its asbestos levels into line.

• In August, 1975, Powhatan was inspected by another regulatory agency, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. OSHA cited the company for "excessive exposure" of several workers to asbestos and fined Powhatan $1,370 for numerous health and safety violations.

In succeeding months, OSHA's authority to inspect Powhatan was challenged successfully in federal court by the Bureau of Mines, which argued that a crushing mill was an extension of the mining industry, which it has sole authority to regulate.

OSHA withdrew its fines. Maryland's occupational safety and health unit recently cited this withdrawal as the main reason it has never inspected Powhatan. "Our jurisdiction is roughly the same as federal OSHA's," said Oneil M. Banks, the head of the state unit.

• In its next full-scale inspection in November, 1975, MESA found continuing excessive levels of asbestos dust at the mill. The agency recommended that the company adjust its ventilation.

• The most recent inspection, one made by MESA in February, 1976, shows no violations of the current asbestos exposure standard.

However, efforts to clean up the plant are having difficulty keeping up with restrictions on asbestos exposure. Increasing evidence of the mineral's disease-causing potential is expected soon to result in MESA's more than halving the current exposure standard.

That will almost surely put Powhatan "back on the borderline," said Robert H. Dickey, a supervisory mining engineer with MESA.

During a walk through the Powhatan mill in late July (it was during the lunch break), the problems of limiting asbestos dust exposure were apparent:

The buildings are old, with cracked wooden flooring and exposed rafters and other skeletal members. The 80 per cent pure asbestos trucked in from mines in Georgia and North Carolina lies in piles, waiting to be shoveled by hand into an open conveyer. Its consistency ranges from chunks the size of a softball to a fine, sandy texture.

At one of the bagging stations the crushed asbestos comes down a pipe into the open mouth of a large vinyl shipping bag of around 80 pounds capacity. At this point the asbestos is almost like flour—if you grasp a fistful it "pools" from between your fingers.

The work force—it varies from six to a dozen men depending on orders—is required to wear respirators, simple masks with breathing filters to block out the asbestos. But everyone, including Miss Mett, admits that respirators are uncomfortable to work in and are not worn regularly.

Many health researchers now feel that zero exposure, or something aproximating it, is appropriate for any proven carcinogen (cancer causer). "If the trend toward lower exposure limits continues, I wouldn't be surprised to see outfits like Powhatan go down the drain," said Mr. Dickey.

"And probably unjustifiably," added Andrew J. Nawa, the MESA inspector who has dealt with Powhatan. Mr. Nawa, who formerly was head of operations for a Bethlehem Steel Corporation coal mine in Pennsylvania, says Miss Mett has "always been co-operative. They've got

[redacted]

They state emphatically that they will enforce whatever standards they are charged with. But they also make it clear that MESA does not want to be responsible for shutting down a company like Powhatan.

Unlike OSHA, MESA does not have the power to levy fines for violations, although it can go to court to shut a company down. To his knowledge, it has never done so, Mr. Dickey said.

Most of the workers at Powhatan declined interviews with a reporter. Two who did talk asked that they not be identified in any way for fear of repercussions on the job. Another who talked retired some time ago, but still did not want to be identified.

Generally, they felt that Powhatan was trying hard to keep the dust down and had made definite improvements—"It used to be so you couldn't see the opposite wall," one recalled. None of the men, in lengthy questioning, exhibit-

Does she feel she has been running a dangerous workplace? Definitely not, Miss Mett replied in a recent interview.

She said that chest X-rays and pulmonary function tests the company now runs on workers show "no problems" with any of the present work force.

That is not quite the case, according to Dr. Herman Brecher, a Woodlawn physician who has been Powhatan's examining physician for about six years.

Dr. Brecher said he has found "lung abnormalities" in most of the five or six employees who have spent several years in the mill.

"Almost everyone there is a heavy smoker, so their problems are most likely a combination of the dust and cigarettes," Dr. Brecher said. He added he has found no lung tumors in any of the workers.

Only three current employees in the mill have worked there more than 10 years, and only one has been there more than 15 years, which health experts say is about the minimum time in which disease from asbestos exposure manifests itself.

Dr. Brecher saids he forwards results of his examinations to Powhatan, but has "never been asked" for any suggestions. He said he did not know whether the company shows the tests to workers.

He does routinely discuss the results of each examination with the workers, and points out the vastly increased danger to smokers from asbestos, Dr. Brecher said.

"Their reaction is unreal," the physician said, "they just don't seem to care. They say it's dusty up there and then they say they don't even wear their respirators."

Dr. Brecher said he had no health records for employees before he started regular physical exams. Miss Mett said there has been so much turnover of employees during the life of the company, which is non-union, that it would be impossible to keep track of former employees.

The hazards associated with asbestos were becoming known by the late 1930's, according to most literature on the subject. But it was "sometime in the 1950's," Miss Mett recalled, "before anyone at Powhatan was aware of it."

From then until the MESA inspections began in 1972, she said, about the only formal worker health safety program consisted of periodic chest X-rays and having respirators around.

"It's like with anything else, there's always room for improvement, but what really disturbs me are the people who come in here from the agencies and say this must be done and you have to have it done PDQ.

"I can't understand why," she continued, "it wouldn't be possible to live with the [worker exposure] standards we have right now... I can't see why this is not what I call livable, good air.

"The second reason," Miss Mett added, "is we just can't afford to [make extensive modifications] in a little industry such as Powhatan."

"If this company closes, an important product will be lost," Harry W. Ferkler, Miss Mett's attorney and an officer of the company, pointed out during the interview.

Powhatan, according to Mr. Ferkler, is the only company remaining in the United States that processes its particular variety of asbestos—anthophyllite, as opposed to the chrysotile asbestos widely used in insulation and brake linings.

(Federal exposure limits apply equally to anthophyllite, chrysotile and the other four types of asbestos fibers. There is no evidence to show any is more or less dangerous than the others.)

The bulk of Powhatan's product goes to big chemical companies like Allied Chemical for use as filler in plastic products. But it also manufactures, using asbestos imported from Africa, the highly specialized Gooch filters used in most of the world's chemistry laboratories. The process was invented by Miss Mett's father and a Dr. Robert Gooch.

Mr. Dickey and Mr. Nawa of MESA say that Powhatan is the only purely asbestos operation within their multistate jurisdiction; and they admit that s[illegible] years ago when their newly geared up agency began i[illegible]spections, they were mostly mine-safety oriented and knew little about the health end of the job.

"It's [asbestos] not as bad as people think, in my opinion," one worker said. "It's [Powhatan] just another mill," he said, adding, "the farther away from me the government stays, the better. It's easy for them to put a padlock on the door, but better jobs are hard to find right now."

"You can do things yourself to keep the dust down," another man said:

"Like when you shovel the asbestos, you just remember to handle the shovel easy-like, then you don't raise the dust."

There is no apparent exposure of residents in Woodlawn to asbestos dust from Powhatan. The nearest resident, other than Miss Mett, who lives on the grounds, is several hundred yards away. The mineral comes in in covered trucks and leaves in sealed bags. There are no visible emissions from the buildings into the air.

However, in a shed behind the plant a 3-foot deep pile of asbestos wastes is piling higher each day. Powhatan used to dispose of it on a farmer's land, but is prohibited from that by the state now.

"Where am I going to get rid of it?" Miss Mett says. "You tell me."

Frank Swoboda and Peter Behr, Sun staffers, also took part in the preparation of this article, the fifth in a series.

TOMORROW: Maryland begins the hard task of matching cause and effect.

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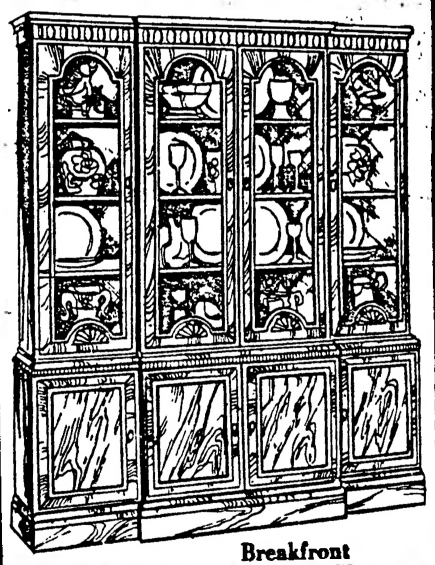

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