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CONTENTS

News of the Industry	29
Editorial: Intimidation in Labor Disputes ...	34
Reports Presented at A. S. T. M. Meeting..	36
Special Cement-Mill Section	37
Marquette Completes Part of Improve- ment Program	43
Closed-Circuit Grinding with Air Separators	53
Separators Improve Grinding Efficiency. 63	
Saving in Air-Compressor Applications... 67	
Cement as Engineering Material to Stay.. 71	
Bowl Mills and Recuperators Responsible for Power and Fuel Savings	73
The Autoclave—New Cement Soundless Test	77
Crusher Changes Affect Entire Plant.... 79	
Past, Present and Future of the Occupa- tional-Disease Situation	83
News and Views from the Capital	86
The Future of Labor Relations	89
Regulating Hours in the Aggregates Industry	91
Research in Industrial Sand Industry	93
Profitable New Products Section	97
A Product Easy to Enthuse About!	98
Steel Industry Uses Own Slag in Concrete	100
Truck-Mixer and Agitator Standards....	102



Men of the Industry	107
Personal Mention	108
Foreign Developments	109
Traffic News Digest	110
New Machinery and Supplies	112

Past, Present and Future of the Occupational-Disease Situation*

By C. O. SAPPINGTON, M. D.

Consulting Industrial Hygienist

YOU will recall in your high-school history courses that this study was divided into several parts, one pertaining to ancient history, one to medieval history and another to modern history. It will be rather convenient in presenting this review of the occupational disease situation to make comparisons between these kinds of history and the periods of evolution through which we have passed with regard to occupational-disease conceptions.

Our past experiences may well be compared to the period of ancient history and this period may also well be called the stage of guesswork and hysteria. Your interest and the interest of most people has been in the spectacular, and, in fact, this has been the basis for compensation laws in regard to mechanical injuries. There is nothing spectacular about occupational disease in the main and so your main interest has been in laws or in problems because people have continued to be crippled and killed by mechanical forces. There is no such direct appeal with regard to occupational disease. Then along came the depression with the effect of producing a number of spurious cases, which resulted in a great burden being placed upon industry in regard to the economic situation.

In addition to these factors there has been a lack of general knowledge and of trained men in the field of occupational-disease difficulties. All these factors have resulted in the production of bogies and unrest, hence the reason for applying the name of guesswork and hysteria to this period of evolution in occupational diseases as the stage.

Our present experience may well be likened to the period of medieval history. It is now believed that we have come somewhat past the bogey stage, with a swing to the factual and this stage may well be called the stage of reality. As evidence of the swing to the factual, last year occupational-disease compensation legislation was introduced in more than forty states and

as a result of this activity a number of states have actually passed laws, including Illinois.

In this stage, when emphasis will be placed upon factual evidence, plant surveys and studies have become more popular; examinations, including X-rays and clinical laboratory tests, have now come into use more widely. These devices will be used more and more to get facts in this stage of reality.

The future, which overlaps somewhat upon the present and includes developments in the immediate offing, may well be likened to the period of modern history. This may be called the stage of progress. I predict that compensation for occupational-disease disability will be general in the United States within the next five years, that physical examinations will become universal within the next ten years, and along with this will be an increased use of surveys and studies of industrial environment.

As a practical outline of important sources of difficulty relating to occupational diseases, let us merely mention the following:

1. Dust (silica and asbestos-containing dusts).
2. Metals (lead, cadmium, chromium, mercury, thallium).
3. Gases (carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide, arsine, the nitrous group, cyanogen compounds).
4. Vapors and solvents (benzol and its homologues, the chlorinated hydrocarbons, and others).
5. Skin irritants (soaps and cleansing powders, dyes, oils and greases, dusts and powders, solvents, agents of infection).

This is not in any way to be considered an exhaustive list, but a number of the "high points" of importance have been picked as the chief possibilities or probabilities relating to occupational disease and these have been mentioned.

It is significant in this connection that when the U. S. Public Health Service made a cross-sectional survey of industries and published its results in the year 1934, it was discovered that in order of frequency the chief exposures

dusts, carbon monoxide, and lead. There are, of course, a number of others, but these are the chief types of exposure encountered in American industry and those which are likely to give difficulty. It is good to remember that this cross-sectional survey was made in ten different industries, embracing 615 plants and involving 28,000 employees.

It has been well said that the best criterion of an occupational-disease hazard is the occurrence of occupational disease; but none of us can afford to wait, I take it, for disease to occur. At this point it might be well to make a distinction between the two words *exposure* and *hazard*, simply because, as the U. S. Public Health Service has pointed out, if a man is exposed to lead, carbon monoxide or to inorganic dusts, it does not mean that he is exposed to a *hazard*. More must be known than the mere *fact of exposure*; we must know the quality and quantity of exposure and then, when compared with criteria which have already been established in the production of disease, we shall be able to say whether or not a *real hazard* exists. Remember that a hazard is always an exposure; an exposure is not always a hazard.

Here are some concrete suggestions which are boiled down to very brief expressions, but which contain the real essence of prevention of occupational disease:

1. Find out the *exposure* and the *hazard* in your plants.
2. Examine your men (before employment, during employment on hazardous jobs, and at the time of discontinuance of employment). The examinations will be different for different types of exposure; obviously an examination for a dust occupation will not suffice for a lead occupation.
3. Correlate cause and effect factors from the information gained by scientific study of the industrial environment and the medical data accruing from examinations and laboratory tests.
4. Control or eliminate the hazard, or furnish adequate protection for your men.

Another way of stating the above suggestions forcibly is as follows: *Management must know its men, materials, methods, and machines.*

In summary, the occupational-disease situation has become a national question; it involves socio-economic problems of tremendous significance; it presents difficulties no greater than any other industrial problem if the same amount of time, money and quality of brains are used, as have been applied in the past to similar industrial situations.

* Delivered before the Engineering Division, Greater Chicago Safety Council, Dec. 17, 1936.



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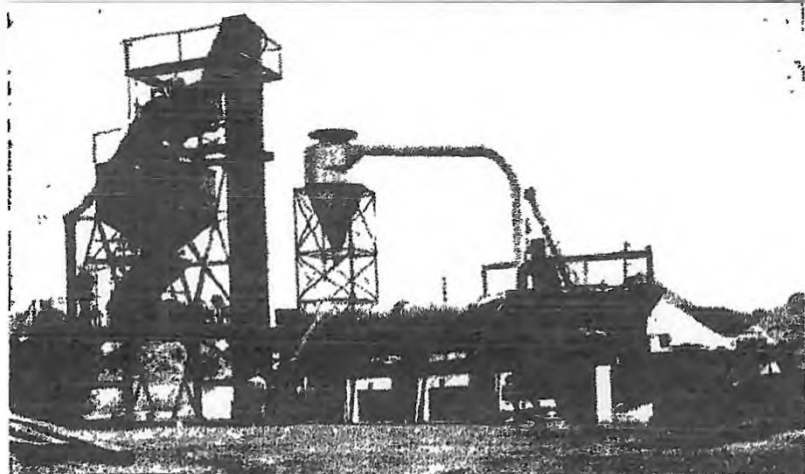
Index to Advertisers

Allen Sherman Hoff Co. Inside Front Cover	Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. 2	Owen Bucket Co. 128
*Allis-Chalmers Mfg. Co. 72	*Gruender Crusher & Pulv. Co. 50	*Parsons Engr. Co. 113
American Manganese Steel Co. 125	Hais Mfg. Co., Geo. 113	Page Engr. Co. 3-115
*American Pulverizer Co. 133	*Hardinge Co. 84	Pennsylvania Drilling Co. 138
Bacon, Inc., Earle C. 112	Hardy-Wooder Drill Co. 131	Philadelphia Hotel. 130
Baker & Greenberg 135	*Harnischfeger Corp. 64	*Pioneer Ginsel Equip. Mfg. Co. 17
Baldwin Locomotive Works 80	*Hazard Wire Rope Division of American Chain & Cable Co. Inside Back Cover	Productive Equipment Corp. 132
*Barber-Greene Co. 129	*Hendrick Mfg. Co. 133	Quinn Wire & Iron Works. 106
*Bartlett & Snow Co., C. O. 133	Hetherington & Berner, Inc. 140	Railway Accessories Co. 134
Birmingham Rail & Locomotive Co. 135	Hoffman Bros. Drilling Co. 138	*Raymond Pulverizer Div. of Combustion Engr. Co., Inc. 38
*Blaw-Knox Co. 105	Holmes, Reht, & Bros., Inc. 131	Rental Service Co. 137
Broadcast Section 135-139	Hove Seale Co. 116	Republic Rubber Co. 121
Broderick & Bascom Rope Co. 133	Hug Co. 8	*Robins Conveying Belt Co. 28
*Bucyrus-Erie Co. 92	Hummel-Riley Corp. 66	Rock Bit Sales & Service, Inc. 117
Buffalo Scale Co. 68	*Huron Industries Co. 132	*Roehling's Sons Co., John A. 10-15
Burnham, Royal E. 138	*Hyman-Michaels Co. 139	*Sauerman Bros., Inc. 128
Burrell Engr. & Const. Co. 82	Iowa Mfg. Co. 119	Schaffer Pedometer Co. 114
Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corp. 19	Independent Pneumatic Tool Co. 7	Simplicity Engr. Co. 111
Caterpillar Tractor Co. 4	Ingersoll-Rand Co. 52	SKF Industries, Inc. 25
Cement Mill Equip. Co. 58	*Jaeger Machine Co. Back Cover	*Smith & Co., F. L. 37
*Chain Belt Co. 105	*Jeffrey Mfg. Co. 125	Smith Co., S. Morgan. 127
Chicago Perforating Co. 118	*Kennedy-Van Saun Mfg. & Engr. Corp. 76	Smith Engr. Works 28
*Chicago Pneumatic Tool Co. 74	*Koehring Co. 118	Smith, Inc., L. B. 137
*Cincinnati Rubber Mfg. Co. 138	Lane Co., T. J. 135	Sprout, Waldron & Co. 128
Cleveland Rock Drill Co. 23	*Leschen & Sons Rope Co., A. 114	Stanhope, Inc., R. C. 137
Cleveland Wire Cloth & Mfg. Co. 128	Le Tourneau, Inc., R. G. 70	Stulz-Sickles Co. 140
*Consolidated Products Co. 139	Lewis, Harry C. 137	Sturtevant Mill Co. 42
*Delster Concentrator Co. 138	Lewiston Foundry & Machine Co. 130	Taylor Forge & Pipe Works. 110
Delster Machine Co. 129	*Lima Locomotive Works. 11	Thew Shovel Co. 9
DeWitt Hotels 132	*Link-Belt Co. 1-131	Tidewater Equip. & Machy Corp. 135
*Dixie Machy Mfg. Co. 82	Ludlow-Saylor Wire Co. 40	Timken Roller Bearing Co. 5
Diaceo Corp. 60	*Manitowee Engr. Works 62	*Tensley Engr. & Mfg. Co. 39
Dunn Mfg. Co., W. E. 106	Marletta Concrete Corp. 105	*Tyler Co., W. S. 130
*Eagle Iron Works. 124	McLanahan & Stone Corp. 132	Union Wire Rope Corp. 24
*Eugene-Bickford Co. 20	McLeod, Alex. T. 138	United States Steel. 19
Equipment Corporation of America. 134	Merrick Scale Mfg. Co. 78	Universal Concrete Pipe Co. 104
Erie Pump & Engine Works. 133	Michigan Power Shovel Co. 127	Universal Crusher Co. 14
Exelon Co. 130	*Morris Machine Works 80	Walsh Co., Richard P. 137
Flexible Steel Lacing Co. 181	Morse Bros. Machinery Co. 134	*Warren Bros. Roads Co. 106
Ring Switch & Mfg. Co. 108	National Industrial Invest. Corp. 139	Wellman Engr. Co. 130
*Fuller Co. 54	National Supply Co. 6	*Western Precipitation Corp. 56
Gardner-Denver Co. 123	National Wire Cloth Co. 117	Whitcomb Locomotive Co. 80
Gar Wood Industries, Inc. 123	New Holland Machine Co. 109	*Williams Patent Crusher & Pulverizer Co. 78
*General Electric Co. 12-13	*Nordberg Mfg. Co. 139	Williamsport Wire Rope Co. 16
General Motors Corp. 21	Northwest Engr. Co. 18	
*Good Roads Machy Corp. 132		

* See also information in the 1937 Pit and Quarry HANDBOOK



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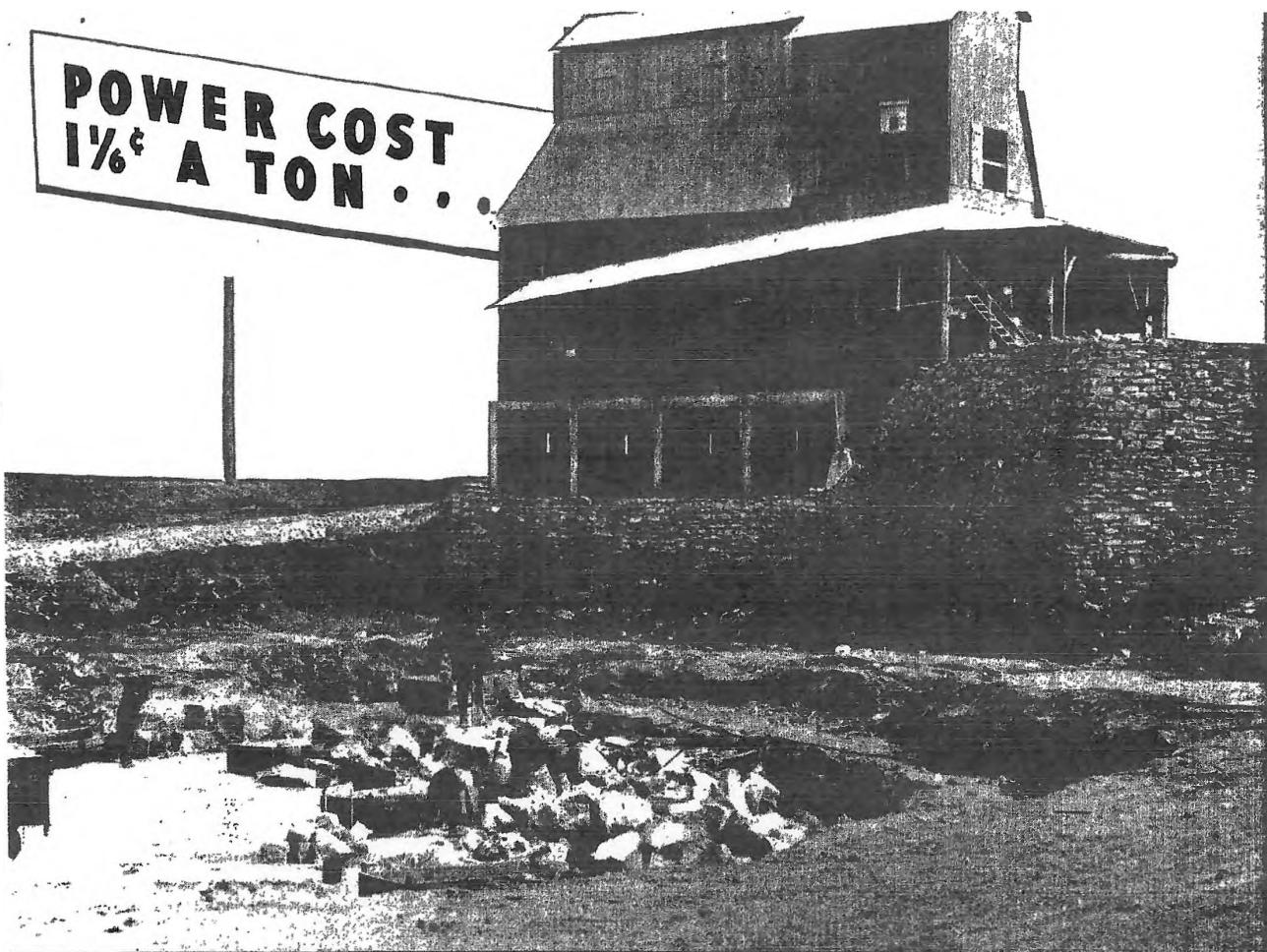
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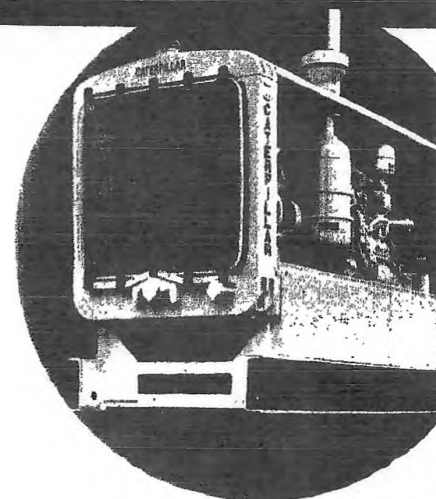
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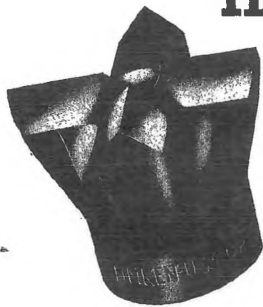


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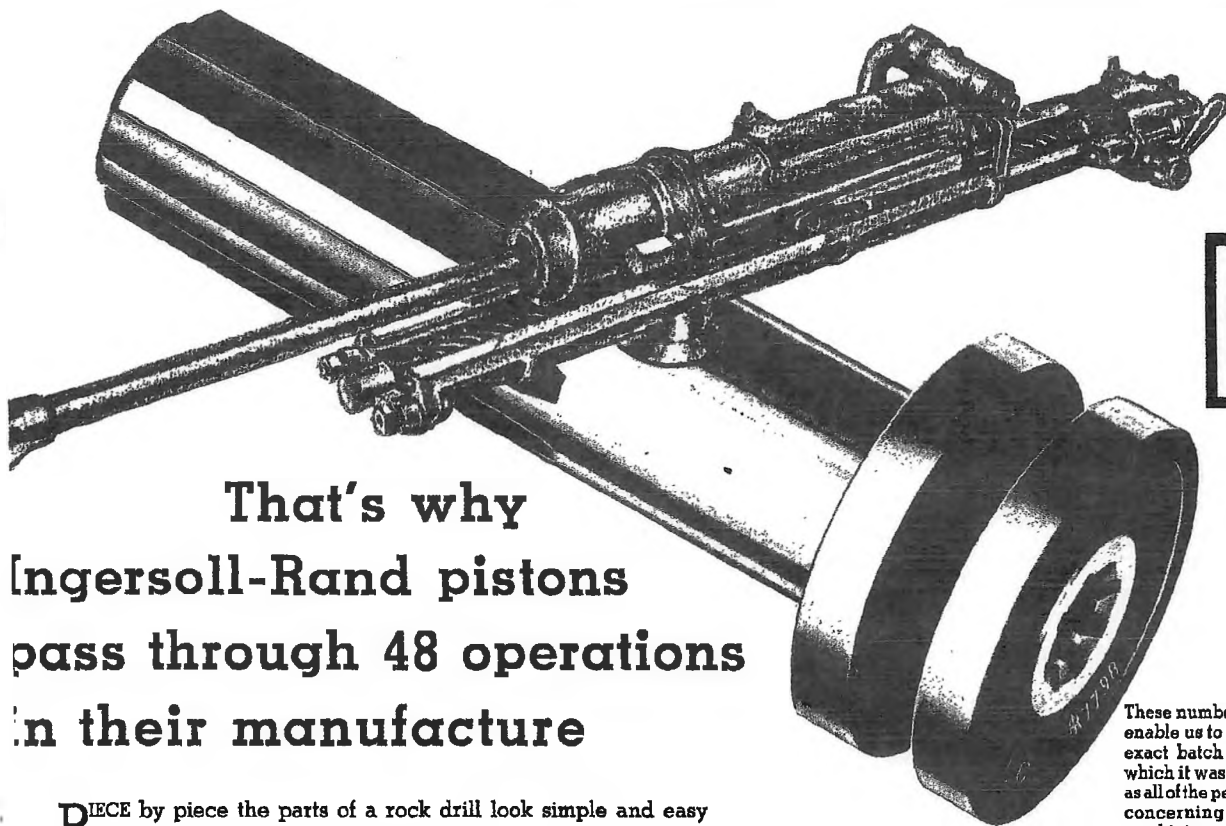
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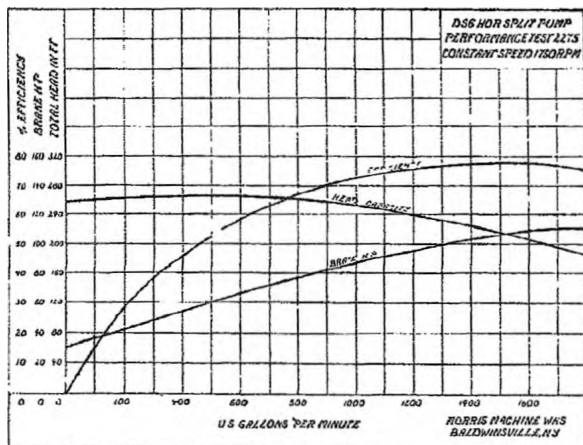
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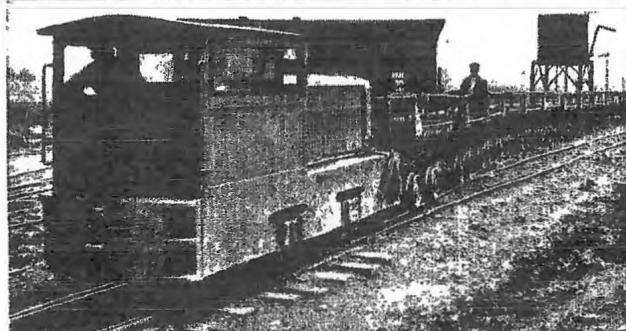
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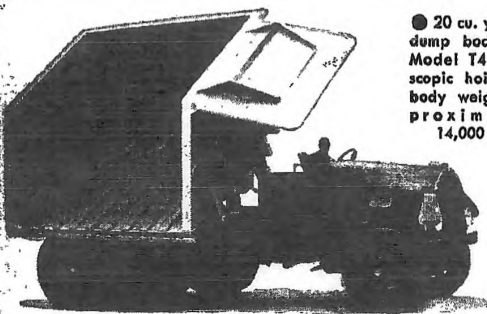
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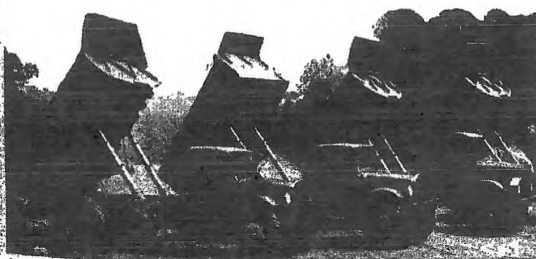
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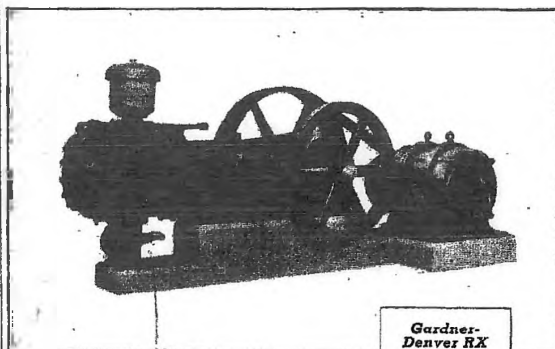
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