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A little bit of crud

Expendable Americans

By Paul Brodeur. 274 pp. New York: The Viking Press. $8.95.

Muscle And Blood

By Rachel Scott. Illustrated. 306 pp. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. $8.95.

By ROBERT CONOT

"I think we are all willing to have a little bit of crud in our lungs and a full stomach rather than a whole lot of clean air and nothing to eat," the Texas legislator from Tyler says in a newspaper interview quoted in the epilogue of "Expendable Americans." "And I don't want a bunch of environmentalists and communists telling me what's good for my life and family."

The "little bit of crud" is asbestos fiber, a severely lung-scarring and highly carcinogenous agent. Of approximately 875 workers exposed at the Tyler asbestos plant of P.P.G. Industries, 260 are statistically expected to develop cancer during the next 20 or 30 years, and many others will be incapacitated by asbestiosis, a drastic reduction in lung capacity.

Once asbestos fibers are inhaled or ingested, they remain in the body. For decades it has been known that even secondary contact with asbestos over a period of years could cause cancer. Relatives of workers have become diseased simply by being exposed to the dust workers brought home on their clothes.

Years ago a New Jersey engineer who had developed an asbestos pipe covering died from mesothelioma, a previously rare type of cancer now associated with asbestos. His daughter also died from mesothelioma—and her only exposure had been to occasional samples of asbestos brought home by her father.

In Tyler, the seeds of cancer have been strewn far beyond the pod of the plant. Although P.P.G. Industries dismantled the factory in 1972, other workers in the industrial park in which it was located had been exposed for years. Waste material was trucked to huge open dumps. A half million burlap bags impregnated with asbestos dust were sold to a nursery, which used them for packaging plants.

Robert Conot is author of "American Odyssey," a history of Detroit and America.

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The magnitude of the disaster resulting from "the little bit of crud" won't be fully established in Tyler until the year 2000. In the meantime, workers and communities elsewhere in the nation continue to be subjected to the hazards of asbestos.

The Reserve Mining Company keeps dumping large amounts of waste containing asbestos in Lake Superior and contaminating the water supply of more than 100,000 people living in the Duluth area, even while it is appealing a desist order in the courts. In Ambler, Pa., a 10-block-long asbestos dump is used by kids as a playground.



The Johns-Manville Company exposure, even though four-fifths of the areas in its factories already meet those standards. The explanation, according to a labor union official, is that other firms using raw asbestos and asbestos products supplied by Johns-Manville might have difficulty meeting the standards and be forced to switch to substitutes or go out of business.

While in "Expendable Americans" Brodeur concentrates on asbestos, Rachel Scott, a 27-year-old reporter for The Baltimore Sun explores the whole spectrum of industrial hazards and occupational diseases in "Muscle and Blood."

In Hazleton, a town in the depressed coal-mining area of eastern Pennsylvania, beryllium has caused the same kind of havoc as asbestos in Tyler. In the steel mills, the mostly black coke oven workers, continually exposed to coal tars, have cancer rates three to ten times those of the general population.

In Idaho's Sunshine silver mine 91 men died because the evacuation order was delayed a half hour after smoke began billowing through the passageways—no foreman was willing to take responsibility for halting production in case the fire could be extinguished. At the Thiokol Chemical Corporation in Georgia slipshod safety regulations resulted in a devastating explosion that killed 29 workers and maimed many others. In the California fields farm workers labor among hazardous pesticides.

Miss Scott spent more than three years on the industrial combat front mills, and his ears with the clangor of the assembly lines. Her journeys into the homes of disabled workers are trips of depression and despair.

Both authors are angry, and their sympathies are clearly with the workers. Management will undoubtedly criticize the books as unbalanced. And so they are.

Factories, mines and construction projects are places of hazard, and a certain number of accidents are inevitable. But what is galling to any fair-minded person is the hypocrisy displayed by industry in recognizing the dangers, its foot-dragging in taking corrective measures, and its ofttimes treatment of employes as drones that can be discarded after their usefulness is over.

When the X-rays of one of the workers at the Tyler plant showed a spot on a lung, the manager called him in and told him he'd better stop smoking. The worker replied that he'd never smoked. Well then, the manager went on, you've also got calcium deposits on your lungs. You must be drinking too much milk.

Management has been abetted in this attitude by physicians whose studies are financed by industry, and by wishy-washy Federal and state enforcement of labor laws. Thousands of men have died while members of the "medical-industrial complex," as Brodeur calls it, have pigeonholed and placed slanted interpretations on their own studies, or simply not analyzed data they collected.

Many government officials are protective of industry. Studies financed by public funds are tucked away and are difficult to obtain, despite the Freedom of Information Act. At the current rate of funding, a Federal health and safety inspector would visit each business on the average of about once every 50 years.

Neither author suggests what might be done to get industry to clean its own house, except to have stricter and expanded implementation of current laws. But the enormous expansion of the Federal bureaucracy this would entail is certainly not the answer. Industry has been lackadaisical about safety and health because it has not been held responsible for its own shortcomings. A worker cannot sue his employer. The 15,000 workers who are killed on the job or the 100,000 who die from occupational diseases annually have no redress against their companies. Neither do the estimated 390,000 men who are disabled each year, and who must then support their families on the $3,000 to $4,000 a year they receive from workmen's compensation and welfare.

If new laws were enacted giving workers killed or disabled on the job benefits equivalent to their lifetime wages, industry would find it essential to take corrective measures. Managers would, of course, claim they could not afford such a cleanup, and that it would result in higher prices. Society, however, is today being tendered a huge bill in terms of lost manpower and deprived families.

So far as the safety of the public is concerned, it is clear that stringent measures are needed to test and monitor the tens of thousands of industrial chemicals that have come into use. It seems too much to ascribe to coincidence that the cancer rate has risen steeply during the same decades in which there has been an immense increase in the discovery and application of these chemicals.

Brodeur and Scott have broken important ground. Let us hope their books will stimulate Americans to demand that scientists and government officials go on and dig even deeper into the hazards and abuses. ■

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