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Railroads' Occupational Health and Safety Practices

The investigation has begun with goals of searching published literature and incidentally observing aspects to follow in legal discovery. Paid assistants will be going through about eight railroad trade journals for articles about dust/safety/silicosis/asbestosis/industrial hygiene/etc. for the years 1928-1960. In addition, I am discussing worker protection practices with the librarian of the Association of American Railroads, Mrs. Helen Rowland (202-835-9387).

AAR's library in Washington is much reduced, and a lot of material was discarded. Mrs. Rowland was able to locate only issues of the proceedings of the Medical Section of the AAR, from 1966-1969. These, however, show that this group had been meeting since around 1913 starting as the Association of Railway Chief Surgeons. The proceedings were over 200 pages in some years, and I was not able to copy everything in them. I have read them through and noted what was there, along with copying selected parts of interest. There was nothing else of importance at the trade association's library.

1966 As with all of these, it opens with names and addresses of the members of the various medical committees. For example, the chair of the Medical-legal Committee was Isadore Kaplan with B & O here in Baltimore, and he is now listed in the phone book at 301-486-4252. Dr. RR Beard gave a talk about the need for industrial hygiene services to protect workers' health and safety, (16-24) noting the lack of publications in the USA on the health of railroad employees versus a dozen a year in the USSR (20). Unfortunately, Beard did not mention among his examples asbestos, and he was not much experienced in the area of possible railroad hygiene problems. The session chair asked whether the presence of the industrial hygienist in the plant would provoke claims (25), and Beard told them about a hospital's discovery of allergic sensitization in the redwood lumber industry. The chair: "Judging by the show of hands, it was quite obvious that industrial hygienists are not in great use in the railroad industry." (27)
Dr. H.C. Minshaw introduced as attending physician of the Southern Pacific Railroad, (27-28) and editor of Diseases of the Chest. His passing mention of asbestosis has a typo ("a care" should be "a case" on 35). The list of all in attendance is at the end (188-191) and Johnstone and Miller's book was boosted on 59.

1967 historical review of the medical section of the AAR (9-22)

1968 nothing of interest but names of attendees, committee assignments

1969 Goodfellow, President of AAR, slips in some serious criticism of the docs for not having sold management on the idea of preventive care in the railroad industry (20): "There hasn't been any widespread program of preventive medicine in our industry." Some good jokes, too. Dr. E. Ratzer talked about cancer management and suggested that they look for occupational cancer hazards of railroad workers (33). The AAR Medical Section's specific recommendations on periodic physical/medical exams are on 97. Dr. Fretter of Union Railroad blamed "most of the managements" of the railroads for being blind "in not looking forward enough and anticipating some of the problems" -- he cites hearing, vision, and periodic exams. He denounces the managements as having no interest in making improvements because they fear claims. (100)

Dr. H.C. Hinshaw acknowledges that company doctors face conflicts of interest in determining disability of employees (104) and presents the management view of the worker as a machine (105).

Note: To the extent that some of these companies took chest X-rays as part of employee medical exams, they may have documented the evidence that certain employees had pneumoconiosis from the time they started taking chest X-rays. Perhaps the medical records, with names removed, could be examined for the purpose of obtaining such findings and films.

In the next week, I will try to locate other copies of proceedings of the meetings of the AAR Medical Section. The librarian will ask longtime lobbyist and industry trade group attorney (?) John Risendal (202-835-9286) who attended some of these medical meetings. The Association also has offices in Chicago, where it was headquartered until the late 1960's. I don't think this medical proceedings material is at the Library of Congress, but will double-check there and at I.C.C. library.

(Joe Rice at Blatt & Fales reports discovery proceeding against National Safety Council, which had a railroad section long ago. Legal cases have been searched but "not by computer" -- one pneumoconiosis case came up in a boiler worker in 1952. Interrogatories and depositions also targeting other such claims filed and settled in any way. Some railroads present at Seventh Saranac Symposium in 1952: Erie Railroad reps, also some from American Locomotive)

Note: Railroads should be asked for the old medical proceedings and about their medical libraries, including early editions of Hinshaw's text on chest disease.

Rice interested in Max P. Rogers, M.D. formerly w/Southern Railway System. (301-628-4460)