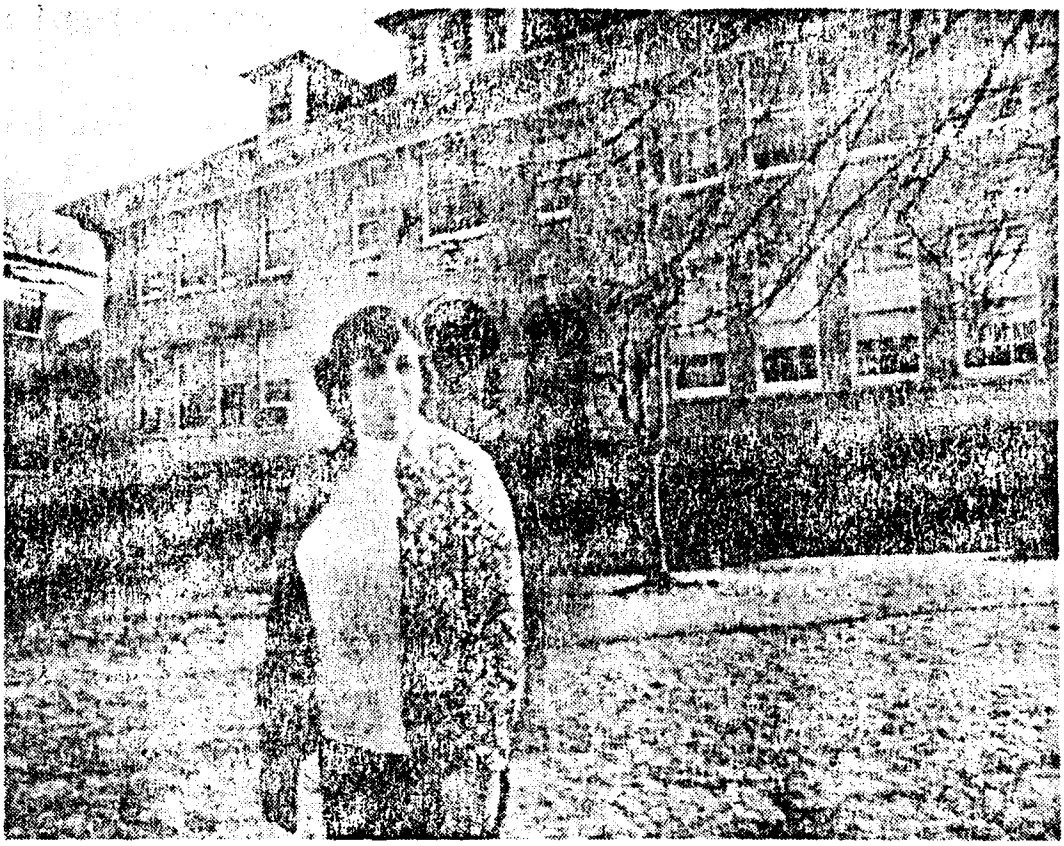
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Betsy Van Winkle stands at Pierrepont School in Rutherford, N. J. — (AP)

They live in fear in town where trees, children die

By MARY ANN KUHN
Washington Star

RUTHERFORD, N. J. — This town is full of hysteria. That and mystery.

Great old trees are dying. Thoroughbred race horses at a nearby track recently began bleeding in their lungs.

The town is baffled by these occurrences. But what is happening to its people is even more unnerving.

WHEN VIVIAN and Jim Cleffi's nine-year-old son, Jimmy, died of leukemia in 1976, nobody analyzed his death they way they do now.

When Dan and Betsy Van Winkle's 11-year-old son, Wesley, who lived around the corner, died of leukemia four months later on Jan. 28, 1977, this community of 20,000 was saddened and sympathetic, but not suspicious the way they are now.

In January, however, an eight-year-old girl was stricken with leukemia.

Five weeks ago, Jimmy Cleffi's babysitter also was stricken with leukemia.

Last week, another eight-year-old girl in the same neighborhood was given the same diagnosis — leukemia.

And Tuesday, two more cases, one leukemia, the other Hodgkin's disease, were reported.

SIXTEEN CASES of cancer have been reported here in the last three years. Eight were diagnosed in the last three months.

There were 11 reported cases of leukemia (blood cancer). The rest were Hodgkin's disease (lymph cancer) or lymphoma (tumor of the lymph nodes).

Most of the affected families live within a 10-

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block area of the town, which is 20 minutes from Newark International Airport and 30 minutes from New York City. It is near the heavily industrialized New Jersey Meadowlands.

Five of the youngsters who contracted leukemia, including the two boys who died, attended Pierrepont Elementary School, a yellow brick building in a residential section of the town. One child who has leukemia is still a student there. Four of the 16 cancer victims are adults.

Local, state and federal officials are asking themselves: Is this a statistical quirk? A coincidence? Are these cases related by one common link?

They're trying to find those answers.

WITH EACH new reported case of cancer, the townspeople grow more afraid. Many of them note that this highly industrialized state — which has a $4-billion-a-year chemical industry — has the highest cancer death rate in the nation.

Tutty Giordano, a mother of two children who attend Pierrepont, cannot look outside her front window without a constant reminder of what has been happening to her town.

"My son's best friend died of leukemia. He lived around the corner," she said. "The little boy up the street there died from it. My next door neighbor's daughter is being treated for leukemia at Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York."

AS THE FEAR mounts, so do the theories on the cause of the cancer. The residents most often speak of airborne chemicals, or "something" in the water, or "something" at Pierrepont.

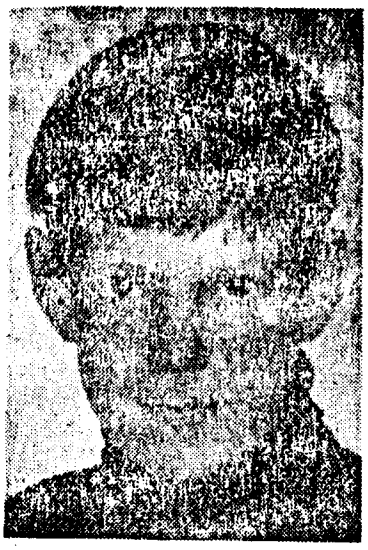
Sally Blank, who along with her husband runs the candy store-soda fountain called the Addison Shop, has her own theory.

"I say you have to go back and see what pediatricians the kids went to and what gynecologists the mothers went to — what drugs they took during pregnancy," she said. "This town is mostly generations of people. It's a small town. How many gynecologists do you have? How many pediatricians?"

MANY CHILDREN have been asking: Can I drink this water? Can I breathe this air?

These are the questions Pierrepont principal Anna Amorelli hears. She does not have the answers.

"Is it the environment?" she asked. "What do we know about leukemia? I sometimes think, how



Wesley Van Winkle

come my school, my kids? Then I say, Anna, this is one of the largest elementary schools in Rutherford — 776 students. I have to put things in perspective myself."

STATE AND LOCAL health officials say they are investigating whether it is a coincidence or whether these cases are somehow linked.

They are beginning to run tests on the air and water to see if something in the environment is causing the cancer.

Steve Papenberg, an inspector with the Rutherford health department, stood on the sidewalk outside Pierrepont Elementary Tuesday testing the air every hour to determine if benzene and styrene were present.

"These are two chemicals associated with chemical industries . . . These are common chemicals that cause cancer," he said.

The tests were negative. Papenberg said he will continue performing them until the State Department of Environmental Protection brings its "more sophisticated" equipment to do more thorough tests.

OFFICIALS at the cancer branch of the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta say the cancer cases could be a statistical quirk, but one official said: "You are forced to look at it to see if there is another cause."

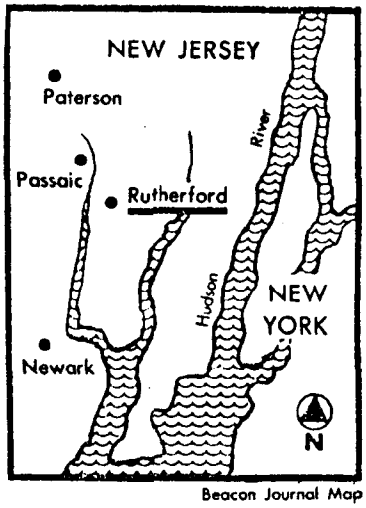
"There is mass hysteria in this town," said Dan Van Winkle, who is an insurance salesman and part owner of a real estate firm.

His wife, Betsy, recalled a phone conversation she had two days ago: "One mother called me and said she was upset that a leukemia child was seen in a public place. She said she was afraid the child would spread her germs."

SEVERAL parents said they do not allow their children to drink tap water. They send them to school with distilled or spring water. One parent said he is thinking of moving.

The cluster of 16 cases might have gone unnoticed had it not been for Vivian Cleffi.

"My son was the first child



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stricken with leukemia on June 13, 1975," she said. "His came from chemicals. The doctors said it was the rarest type of leukemia. He lived for 14 months.

"After my son came Wesley Van Winkle, who died. Sure enough, I'd learn about another child who was stricken with leukemia, then another. I started writing down names, children's ages, the school they attended and it seemed to be happening in our general area. I said something has got to be done."

MRS. CLEFFI said she talked to Amorelli and Supt. Luke Sarsfield, about her findings. She also presented them to the PTA at a meeting.

Late last week Sarsfield held a news conference and when the stories hit the papers last weekend, the panic began, residents said.

Some residents said they were worried that state officials were not taking a more active interest in investigating the causes.

"I think something is getting into our water," Mrs. Cleffi said. "Since what my son got was from the chemicals, I want the air and the water checked.

"The cause of this cancer has to be something everybody is looking at and can't see."

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