

CRISIS RESPONSE

What happened? What drove that once mighty industry into the dust? It's simple. During a relatively short period of time from the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, the "magic mineral" was exposed for what it really was - probably the most hazardous industrial material ever unleashed on an unsuspecting world. I know. I was there.

The Right Place at the Right Time

In June 1965 I took a job as an assistant editor in the public relations department of the Johns-Manville Corporation in New York City. The man who hired me, William P. "Bill" Raines, the head of public relations, had recently joined J-M from the Koppers Company in Pittsburgh. Like myself, he had done his undergraduate work at the University of Pittsburgh and had worked on the school newspaper.

My job was not very demanding. I was the number two man on the company's monthly employee magazine. Mostly I traveled around the country from J-M plant to J-M plant, taking pictures and interviewing plant personnel for stories on a new product line or new plant addition. If nothing else, I got to know the company pretty well: where asbestos was used, how it was handled, what products it was in and why, although it never occurred to me at the time how valuable that knowledge was to become in later years. In 1967 my boss was promoted to head of all J-M publications and I was given the editor's job on the employee magazine. Life was fine and uncomplicated. And then it happened.

In the late summer of 1968 I was called into the office of Jack Solon, who was Raines's boss and vice-president for advertising and public relations. Raines was there, too. Solon said he knew I had specialized in science journalism and he wondered if I would be interested in leaving the magazine and joining him and Raines to work on a new problem that had recently arisen in the company. He asked me whether I had ever read anything in the press about recent allegations regarding the safety of asbestos. I said I thought I recalled seeing an article or two but since Manville's name was not mentioned, I didn't pay much attention to them. He assured me it was time to pay attention. I left Solon's office with a new but ambiguous title, coordinator of special projects. My first task on my new assignment was to learn all I could about the asbestos-health issue. I discovered a long and interesting story.

History of the "Magic Mineral"

To begin with, asbestos is not synthetic; it is a mineral mined from the earth, generally from open-pit mines. There are three commercially valuable types of asbestos: chrysotile, which comes primarily from mines in Canada and a few

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