

Letter from Port Allegany, Pa.

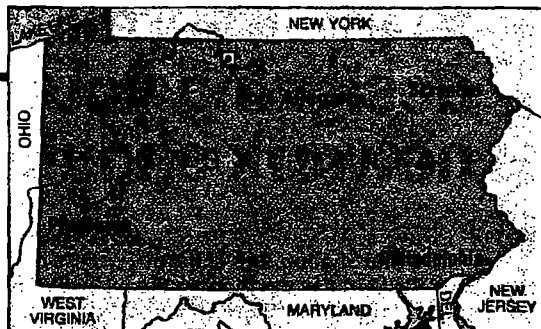
A neighborly way to fight asbestosis

Even with the Allegheny Mountains stretching down to the silky river below, you could call Port Allegany, Pa., a "company" town. After Saturday nights of drinking beer and dancing at the lodge and Sunday morning strolls to church, talk generally leads to "Pierce and PC"—Pierce Glass Co. and Pittsburgh Corning Corp. The two glass factories together employ about 25% of the town's 2,700 citizens and directly or indirectly support nearly all of them. There are no other large employers in town.

Pittsburgh Corning, a jointly owned subsidiary of PPC Industries Inc. and Corning Glass Works, has made an effort to blend its sprawling 23-acre industrial complex—whose drab cement-block buildings clash with the pristine

ly related health problems that could threaten the life of every person who ever entered the company's Plant 8 from 1964 until it was closed in 1972. Even the wives and children who came in contact with clothing worn in the plant could be affected, say doctors. The danger stems from exposure to asbestos, which was used in Plant 8 to make pipe insulation. Many of the 1,129 workers exposed there are already showing signs of asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs by asbestos fibers that causes shortness of breath and other respiratory difficulties. Doctors have also linked several cancer deaths to asbestos.

A minority of the persons involved—64 employees and 47 spouses—have filed a lawsuit in Pittsburgh against Pittsburgh Corning and its owners, PPC Industries and Corning Glass Works, and various asbestos suppliers. Attorneys for the employees expect the cases to come to trial sometime early next year, and verdicts in similar cases give them reason to expect favorable judgments. For instance, in February an Illinois jury awarded \$500,000 to the wife of an asbestos worker in Bloomington, Ill. And a suit filed by workers at Port



Allegany's former "sister" PC plant in Tyler, Tex., was settled out of court in 1978 for about \$23 million.

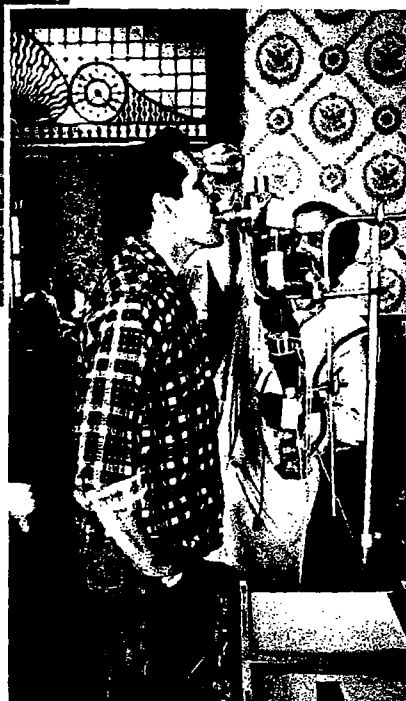
But in Port Allegany, public opinion seems to be with the company. "Whose fault is the air we breathe?" asks the Reverend Paul Schill. "We don't want to zero in on one company." Pauline Ryan, whose husband was an employee at Plant 8, just shrugs and says: "It has at least given the men work." Dr. Margaret H. Sloan, chief of the occupational cancer branch of the National Cancer Institute, blames the exposures on widespread ignorance. "The idea of what heavy exposure to asbestos means has been growing since the late 1960s, but the truth was not generally known."

'Internal time bomb'

The real danger, says Dr. Edwin C. Holstein of the Environmental Sciences Laboratory at New York's Mount Sinai Medical School, who has led two medical teams to this little town, is what he calls the "internal time bomb." Twenty years after exposure, up to 58% of the workers could show signs of asbestosis, while 40% could develop cancer. Just last September a 24-year-old man died of mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer that attacks the chest lining, because, doctors say, he played with his father's work clothes as a child.

The citizens know the medical odds, and for three days in mid-June some 250 workers and 80 of their spouses lined up in the Masonic Hall on Main Street to be examined by 20 Mount Sinai physicians and technicians. While the citizenry appears to accept with equanimity the effects of their exposure, just as they accept each jarringly cold winter in this remote community, the town is not about to give up hope for long lives. In February a cross section of local citizens joined with the American Flint Glass Workers Union, the AFL-CIO's Workers' Institute for Safety & Health, PC, and the Mount Sinai Medical School to set up the Port Allegany Asbestos Health Program (PAAHP). In what many officials call a bow to public pressure, Pittsburgh Corning agreed to provide unlimited funds for PAAHP for two years. "They were forced into it," says Dr. Knut Ring-

From meeting hall to clinic: The workers are learning to reduce the harmful effects of asbestos.



skyline—into the fabric of this rural community. When the swimming pool needs painting or some work needs to be done at the town park, Pittsburgh Corning sends over a few workers for the day. And when local organizations go looking for donations, PC is a pretty soft touch, say residents.

After 44 years of such neighborliness, PC workers have developed a unique kind of company spirit that has kept most of them loyal despite news of occupational-

en, a director at the Workers' Institute. Charles L. Croop, a former local union president, says PC has done a complete turnaround on the asbestos issue. "When we first contacted them back in 1974," he says, "they wouldn't have anything to do with a surveillance program. They didn't think it was their fault."

In the face of the class action, PC officials have little to say about the Port Allegany plant, but emphasize that they did have an internal health program while the plant was in operation. "That program evolved into PAAHP," says Pittsburgh Corning President John Baldwin.

Company cooperation

The program is designed ultimately to offer quarterly exams to workers and their families and to teach the community proper health care to minimize the effects of asbestos. So far about 550 employees and 110 spouses have been examined. Local physicians will begin examining the remaining workers and their spouses and conducting follow-up exams in the fall, at the expense of Pittsburgh Corning. While the results of the latest exams are not in yet, Dr. Holstein says the April, 1979, screening

of 355 workers showed "quite a bit" of asbestosis but no cancer.

"We can save lives, and I don't mean wheelchair lives. I mean active lives for most people," he says. One goal of the program is to persuade people to stop smoking. "Five years after a person quits smoking, he cuts his chances for developing lung cancer in half," he says. Many PAAHP participants are following the advice. Says Edward V. Nolder: "I stopped smoking 11 months ago because I want to see my grandchildren grow up." Asbestos-exposed workers are also taught to take colds and flu more seriously because they have lower resistance to respiratory infections. And, finally, by locating these high-risk patients, PAAHP can keep them and their doctors up-to-date on any new treatments.

Similar programs have been set up elsewhere, but none has shown the promise that officials here see in PAAHP. Ringen of the Workers' Institute says PAAHP is the most comprehensive program in the country. "No one else has bothered to get the families involved." In addition, he says, "there is a much greater drive here to make the PAAHP not just a company program or a union program but a self-reliant community program." In Tyler, the asbestos health

program folded in 1977 after only three years because of what appeared to be a lack of local interest.

But the residents of Port Allegany have made a firm commitment and are channeling their enthusiasm into PAAHP. In preparation for the June examination, the program coordinator and volunteers worked feverishly to contact every person who had worked at PC during the eight-year period. To help trace those who had worked only for brief stints before leaving the area, PC's personnel department opened its books.

Meanwhile, the men of the town were busy with hammers and nails. "They came to the Masonic Hall and built partitions and strung lights—they made a clinic out of a meeting hall," says Dr. Holstein. And when the doctor and his crew arrived in town, they got a Port Allegany welcome. "They danced with us at the Moose Lodge for an hour past the regular midnight closing time," says a young Mount Sinai doctor. "And they even showed us the swimming hole." That, in Port Allegany, is hospitality.

—Jo Ellen Daily

Correspondent Daily has been reporting on Pennsylvania business and industry for BUSINESS WEEK's Pittsburgh bureau.

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