

Assignment:

Quebec

Asbestos country fights to improve its cancerous image

By Howard Witt
Chicago Tribune

ASBESTOS, Quebec—It has not been easy living in a town whose name instantly evokes images of lung disease and cancer and suffering and death.

People whose lives have centered for generations on the asbestos mines in this area take it as a given that motorists will drive miles out of their way just to avoid passing near this place.

Most every one of the 7,000 residents, it seems, has some version of a Typhoid Mary story to tell.

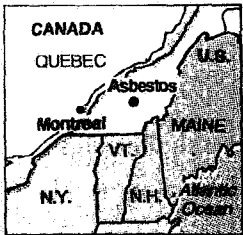
"I was at a ballgame in Montreal not long ago and the guy next to me happened to ask where I was from," recalled former Mayor Roch Frechette. "I told him, and he got up and moved."

For a time, Asbestos residents considered changing the name of their century-old town, so tired were they of having to wear it like a badge of shame.

But nothing the people here have endured in the past would seem to compare with the daunting task they have set for themselves lately. They are determined to do nothing less than rehabilitate the image of asbestos, the miracle fire-retardant mineral that in its dust form is considered one of the leading sources of occupational cancer in North America.

Even as billion-dollar lawsuits for asbestos-related health claims make their way through the courts in Canada and the United States, even as workers clad in protective moonsuits strip insulation containing asbestos from thousands of American schools and buildings, the people who dig the stringy, greenish-white mineral from open pits in central Quebec hope to persuade the world that the product can be used safely.

It is an effort, they readily concede, that has everything to do with saving jobs and preserving dwindling international markets.



Between Asbestos and nearby Thetford Mines, the two Quebec towns that account for most of Canada's asbestos production, there are only about 4,000 jobs left in the industry. As recently as the beginning of the 1980s, there were three times that number.

Total production has declined from 1.5 million tons annually a decade ago to about 500,000 tons last year. Meanwhile, other countries, among them the Soviet Union, Brazil and Greece, have stepped up their production and exports.

But beyond the economic considerations, there also is a sincere belief among people in this area, reflected in frequent anecdotes, that the dangers have been greatly exaggerated.

"My whole family has worked in the mines—my father, my grandfather," said Andre Brouchu, 39, president of a United Steelworkers Union local that represents workers at the largest asbestos mine in Thetford Mines. "None of them has gotten sick from asbestosis. I have three children now, and I would have no hesitation about letting them work in the asbestos industry."

No one disputes that from the 1870s to the 1950s, before the dangers of airborne asbestos fibers were widely appreciated, conditions in the asbestos operations were horrendous and contributed to unknown numbers of deaths.

"When I started working in the mines in 1952, you couldn't see your friend standing next to you, there was so much dust in the air," recalled Clement Bernier, now an executive of LAB asbestos company in Thetford Mines.

What the public does not understand, Bernier said, is that "things are nothing like that now, and they haven't been for decades. The only cases of disease we hear of now involve older workers who retired years ago. It makes sense to conclude the problem is over."

To be sure, the clean, modern LAB mill would appear to be a model of workplace safety. The building features an elaborate filtration system that constantly scrubs and recirculates the air.

But the issue of asbestos safety has generally moved beyond the Quebec workplaces where it is produced to focus on the safety of the product's users. In this arena the governments of Canada and Quebec, a reluctant owner of several asbestos operations as a result of an ill-conceived plan by a previous administration to nationalize the faltering industry, have been waging a sustained lobbying battle.

For nearly two years, attention has been focused on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which in January, 1986, proposed a total ban on asbestos use after declaring that "no level of exposure is without risk." Canada countered with conflicting evidence suggesting asbestos is no more dangerous than the materials that would replace it, and the EPA has yet to issue a final ruling.

Only about one-fifth of Canadian asbestos exports are shipped to the U.S.

But the Canadians fear an American ban would carry substantial weight in less-developed countries, which absorb about a third of Canadian exports.

Canadian government and industry officials stress that they have set up programs to demonstrate safety precautions to Third World users. But at least one U.S. asbestos expert has his doubts.

Dr. Irving Selikoff, a professor at New York's Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, said, "The Canadians don't have the capability or the responsibility to see that their product is being used safely everywhere it goes."

IL-D23 CHICAGO TRIBUNE
(N)760,031 (S)1,163,083

OCTOBER 14, 1987