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SPECIAL REPORTS

'It didn't matter what they called it ... it's killing us' Generations of miners were fiber's victims

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GOUVERNEUR, N.Y. -- The tombstones of Talcville and Balmat and Hailesboro tell the story.

Beneath them lie generations of talc miners, and the numbers carved in the marble and granite stones show that generations here run short. Many of the men who took their living from this soft white rock died young -- in their late 40s and 50s.

Mining has always been a perilous profession, but few of these men died from caved-in shafts or runaway ore cars or any of the multitude of accidents that torment humans extracting minerals from the earth.

Far more of them died the excruciating death of suffocation -- from lungs made uselessly rigid by scarring from deeply embedded mineral fibers, lungs with cancerous tumors, lungs filled with muddy-yellow fluid the consistency of honey. Lungs that could no longer absorb life-giving air.

The fibers that did this are the same fibers the government found this month in crayons. That's because most of the nation's top crayon makers put talc from The R.T. Vanderbilt Co. mines here in their products.

The Post-Intelligencer reported last month that tests commissioned by the newspaper had found asbestos in three major brands of crayons. Two weeks ago, after the Consumer Product Safety Commission conducted its own tests, the agency urged crayon makers to eliminate talc from their products. The three major manufacturers agreed to do so within a year.

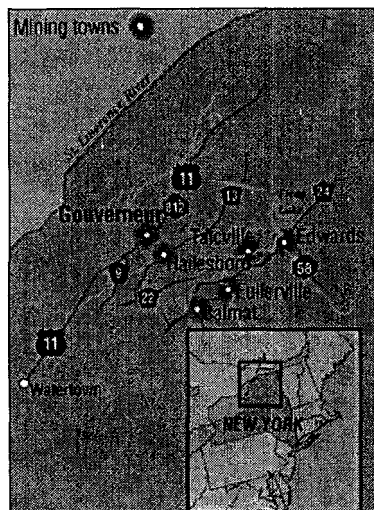
Vanderbilt insists that the fibers in its talc are not asbestos. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration agrees, despite the fact that doctors say the fibers have the same chemical composition and shape as asbestos.

Spending even a short time in St. Lawrence County makes it clear that whatever the fibers are called, they are dangerous to miners.

Many of the houses tell the same story as the gravestones:

Kitchen tables bear baskets full of pills -- unless the grandkids are visiting, and the pills are shoved out of reach.

Cylinders of oxygen and coils of tubing can often be found beside the bed, or next to the best armchair in the living room.



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These men have the same disease that has been killing the miners and millers of talc for years. Doctors say the cause is asbestos.

Vanderbilt says it's anything but.

"There have been many claims of finding asbestos in our mines, but when we've been able to analyze those claims, we've not been able to confirm it," said John Kelse, manager of Vanderbilt's Corporate Risk Management Department.

"There is no asbestiform -- anthophyllite or tremolite. There are transitional fibers which can be described as asbestiform, and we wouldn't argue with that. Are those things considered asbestos? No. And more importantly, do they pose the same type of risk as asbestos? The data that we have says they do not."

Kelse, who sounded weary from decades of explaining Vanderbilt's position, said yesterday he has "stacks of boxes filled with studies and reports showing the talc contains no asbestos." Despite repeated requests, this material was not made available to the Post-Intelligencer.

The Syracuse law firm of Setright & Longstreet spent years gathering depositions and other evidence on behalf of 139 talc-country miners or the heirs of miners who died from asbestos-related diseases.

A jury will never get to weigh the evidence or hear the miners' stories. Last year, the New York Supreme Court ruled that the mining companies cannot be sued because state law requires claims to be handled through workers' compensation.

The P-I found hundreds of such claims, in which talc workers were found to have work-related respiratory disabilities.

A foot-high stack of the documents -- autopsy reports, medical records, pathology studies and death certificates -- show that miners, millers and mine supervisors have died or are dying from disease caused by fibers -- mostly asbestos -- in their lungs.

The depositions, medical records and company documents show repeated examples of company doctors telling workers for years that they were healthy, when X-rays locked away in company files showed lungs filled with asbestos or tumors. If the miners had known this medical information, they could have halted the deadly exposures, doctors say.

"We probably didn't believe that the X-rays showed asbestosis," Kelse said when asked why the company withheld the information. "You can't do mineral analysis on an X-ray."

Other statements showed Vanderbilt's continuing assurances to its workers that there was no asbestos in the talc. But interspersed are company letters and reports touting the value and variety of the asbestos-containing products it sold.

Surviving is not easy

While the court depositions graphically document the medical plight of the miners, the true magnitude of the pain inflicted on these families is far more apparent sitting across a kitchen table.

If Norman Rockwell was still searching for images that capture the spirit of the nation, Herb and Margaret Conklin would be great models.

An American flag hangs from a pole in a driveway covered with white tailings from the mine. Behind the pristine, carefully kept house are two large, dilapidated barns.



A doctor in 1990 told Herbert Conklin, 77, right, that he had talcosis, an incurable condition. Conklin and his wife, Margaret, 72, had noticed the problem in 1987. Conklin worked at the Gouverneur Talc Co., a subsidiary of R. T. Vanderbilt Co. in Balmat, N.Y., for 30 years. A bowl of medicine is a constant reminder of his illness.
Renee C. Byer/P-I

Conklin is one who did not die young. But his later years have been filled with suffering.

"I worked in the mines for 30 years to the day," says Conklin, who is 77. He ran a rock crusher, drove ore cars, fixed heavy machinery.

"I did about everything that could be done at the mines and all of it in dust so heavy you sometimes couldn't see 10 feet," he recalls.

"They claimed the dust was safe,

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non-asbestiform. Vanderbilt called it non-fibrous, nothing that would harm us. They posted signs on the bulletin board saying the government doctors, the guys from NIOSH, were wrong, that it wasn't dangerous," he says.

He recalls a late afternoon in one of the buildings away from the dustiest areas of the mine and mill.

"The sun had dropped low enough to shine through one of the dirty windows," he says, "and the sunbeam cutting across the room was thick with fine particles of dust.

"It scared me because I knew there was asbestos in that dust. The company knew it and they tried to hush it up every time the government mine inspectors came up."

He and other miners interviewed were critical of mine inspectors for being too cozy with Vanderbilt.

"They always called two or three days before they came out to tell the company they were on the way and for the next two or three days we shoveled, swept and wet down all the dust we could find," Conklin said, fingering a brown pill bottle.

It was 1978 when he realized just how much he had been harmed.

"I was climbing up a ladder to work on the roof of the barn and all of a sudden, I couldn't breathe. I just held on knowing that the asbestos had gotten me," he says, patting the hand of his wife of 53 years.

The Conklins' lives and future changed. The 35 cows that he and Margaret had milked twice a day, and were to provide enough to live on when he retired, were soon sold.

He lowers his head, raises his thick glasses and rubs his eyes. Margaret clutches his arm a little tighter.

Conklin says he's not going to let anger burn him out, but the anger is always there.

"It was wrong. If Vanderbilt didn't care enough about its workers, why didn't the government step in? Everything got tied up over what the company called the fibers. It didn't matter what they called it, it was dangerous.

"It is killing us."

Fingers tell the tale

About a mile away, on the main street of Edwards, down from the one store and tiny cafe, two other Vanderbilt veterans sit in an immaculate living room and compare notes on life in the mine.



Charlie Minckler, 65, of Edwards, N.Y., worked at the Gouverneur Talc Co., a subsidiary of R.T. Vanderbilt Co. in Balmat, N.Y., until 1989, when he underwent a quadruple heart bypass. Minckler, who worked in the mine pit, knew he had a lung disease by the curving of his fingernails.
Renee C. Byer/PP-I

Charlie Minckler spent almost half of his 65 years working for Vanderbilt. Bill Fuller, who is 68, did more than 26 years at the same company and at St. Joe's, a zinc mine across the road.

As a yellow canary looked on from its cage, they tried to recall the young men they started at the mines with decades earlier.

After a litany of "He's dead," "He's gone," and "Nope, he passed also," the men became quiet.

"I guess I'm lucky," Minckler says in a soft but raspy voice. "Of the 52 guys I began with at the mine, all but three are dead and most of them died young, in their 40s and 50s.

"Cancer took a bunch of them. The rest just couldn't breathe."

They talk about other acquaintances who must use tanks of oxygen to make it through the day.

"Once they get on that oxygen, they won't be around much longer," Minckler says, shaking his head sadly.

As the two old friends used their precious breath to tell stories, they compared notes on the private anguish of being unable to suck in a chest full of air.

"I used to be able to mow my lawn in 20 minutes," Minckler said. "Now, if I'm lucky and it's not too hot, it can take four hours."

Fuller doesn't even try to do anything strenuous.

"I can't walk to the window without stopping," he says, "and that's no way for a man to live."

Like Conklin, they target their anger at both Vanderbilt and the government.



Bill Fuller, 68, who worked in the talc pit of the Gouverneur Talc Co., inhales from a portable medical device that forces oxygen to his lungs, helping him to breathe. He uses the appliance every six hours. Fuller has an incurable lung disease, and says he "can't walk to the window without stopping."

Renee C. Byer/P-I

"We know why Vanderbilt lied about the danger. It would be bad for business and no one would work for them," says Fuller. "But what about the government? Why don't they care? This asbestos, or whatever Vanderbilt wants to call it, is not a secret. The graveyards are filled with proof that those fibers are dangerous."

What sparks their fury more than anything, they say, is that company doctors hid the illness from them.

"It wasn't as if they didn't know," Minckler said. "Hell, just look at our fingers. They're clubbed. Everybody's are like that. It's a sign the lungs aren't working."

Clubbing, a bulbous distortion of the fingertips and nails, is caused by a prolonged state of inadequate oxygenation. Asbestos specialists say it's rare today and usually only found when there has been poor medical treatment or no

treatment.

"They knew we were sick. We took company physicals every year," Minckler says. "They knew whose lungs were shot, but they wouldn't tell us and they wouldn't send us to a specialist."

Local doctors miss signs

Most of the asbestos disease cases were not reported to workers by company doctors or diagnosed by other physicians in the county.

When deteriorating health and increasing difficulty breathing forced the miners and millers to seek other opinions, usually at their own expense at medical centers far outside St. Lawrence County, physicians often quickly diagnosed asbestosis, lung cancer and other significant respiratory impairment.

One local doctor did find the disease, and suffered for his efforts.

Dr. George Wineburgh, a radiologist, stood up for the sick miners. He showed that scores of patients diagnosed as suffering from emphysema actually had asbestosis.

Even though the state health department confirmed his findings, by the end of his first year on the job, Wineburgh found himself fired as the radiologist at a community hospital in the heart of talc country. (See accompanying story.)

'Asbestos by any standard'

Dr. Jerrold Abraham is director of environmental and occupational pathology at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse and has fought the battle over asbestos in talc for years.



Dr. Jerrold Abraham, a pathologist at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, N.Y., has fought the battle over asbestos in talc for years.

Renee C. Byer/P-I

His cluttered office in the crowded, red-brick pathology department is probably one of the world's largest storehouses of knowledge on the health effects of the fine white powder.

The two rooms house an eclectic accumulation of voluminous file folders, overfilled cabinets, floor-to-ceiling shelves brimming with medical charts, death certificates, studies on talc going back to the 1920s, and hundreds of slides with

the slivers of organs of miners.

"It doesn't bother me that Vanderbilt can get away with not calling the fibers what they are -- asbestos," Abraham says. "What should bother everyone is that Vanderbilt and the government say they're not harmful."

Vanderbilt's Kelse, who acknowledges that Abraham is "a good pathologist," says, "Vanderbilt has never said that overexposure to our talc or anyone else's talc is safe. It isn't. Talcosis is different from asbestosis. But there's not much difference in the X-rays."

Abraham peers over the top of his glasses at a dozen microphotographs spread atop a long table.

"These are fibers from the mill at Vanderbilt mine," he says, holding a photo up.

"This is from the lung of a Vanderbilt miner," he says, reaching for another. "They're identical. Anyone can see that. My findings in reviewing the autopsy lung tissues of these miners show disease attributed to asbestos by any competent medical standard. You get OSHA and the mine inspectors to say why they don't believe it's asbestos."

Vanderbilt fights hard

"Our position," Kelse said yesterday, "has always been just call the stuff what it is. Whatever the health effect that's demonstrated as a result of overexposure to these fibers, you regulate it and control it to avoid those health problems."

But regulation is precisely what Vanderbilt has been fighting for decades.

In a 1983 letter to the Department of Labor, lawyers for Vanderbilt challenged OSHA's acceptance of NIOSH's determination that asbestos in their mine was tremolite and was harming the health of the miners.

OSHA's decision "portends disastrous economic consequences," the letter said.

"If such talcs are going to be considered as asbestos both the paint and ceramic tile industries will eliminate the use of talc" and Vanderbilt will be forced out of business, the letter predicted.

A note to Vanderbilt employees May 27, 1988, said: "We are certain that the aspect of labeling our product as asbestos as required by the OSHA regulations would lead to a rapid loss of our business. The public panic over asbestos is such that our operation could not survive the stigma attached to such a label."

About the same time, then-company president Hugh Vanderbilt came to the mine to rally the miners. A portion of his speech is vividly etched in the minds of the miners who heard it.

Bill Fuller was there.

"I've never seen a nicer dressed, more well-spoken man in my life," he recalls.

The mine captain gathered all of the day-shift miners and millers in the carpenter shop.

Vanderbilt, attired in a dark suit and tie, stood before the talc-smeared miners and told them not to worry about the debate over defining the fibers in the talc as asbestos because everything was under control.

The miners' depositions differed on how much money Vanderbilt said he had spent -- hundreds of thousands or millions -- but all agreed that Vanderbilt then told his workers, it would be OK, that if all else failed, he had a senator in his back pocket, and he made a show of patting his wallet. He said none of them had to worry about their jobs.

Documents touted asbestos

Neither Abraham's works, Wineburgh's X-rays nor the repeated studies by NIOSH investigators has diminished Vanderbilt's insistence that there is no asbestos in its talc.

But going back years, Vanderbilt's own documents tell a different story.

In a Jan. 2, 1975, letter from Vanderbilt to the Georgia Pacific Corp. in Portland, the sales office wrote that "In assuming the business of the International Talc Company, we will continue to market five fibrous

asbestiform talcs," and then went on the list them.

The letter concluded by saying Vanderbilt would "label bags containing these products with an asbestos caution label as follows: CAUTION -- PRODUCT CONTAINS ASBESTOS FIBERS. AVOID CREATING DUST. BREATHING ASBESTOS DUST MAY CAUSE SERIOUS BODILY HARM."

"At that time there was no one here at Vanderbilt that had good mineralogical expertise or a full understanding of what OSHA's regulations were all about," Kelse says. "The people here didn't understand that there are two varieties of tremolite and they assumed that meant that the company would have to label some of its talc products as asbestos-containing."

"Then they hired a mineralogist who said, 'What are you doing?' So the company stopped" the labeling.

International Talc, which mined from the same area that Vanderbilt mines, sold at least seven different products called Asbestine. Court documents show they contained as much as 50 percent asbestos.

Court documents show that prior to the advent of OSHA in 1972 and the agency's concerns about asbestos as a risk to workers, Vanderbilt capitalized on the fact that its talc products contained asbestos.

Talc's long history

Talc has been mined and milled in St. Lawrence County since 1878, when Henry Palmer opened America's first talc mine, on a farm near Talcville. By the end of World War II, the county was honeycombed with deep shafts and pits, some mom-and-pop operations, others producing thousands of tons of minerals. The miners dug not only talc, but zinc, lead and other minerals. The one common fiber throughout the mines was asbestos.

Yet Vanderbilt continues to say it isn't so.

In 1942, the Saranac Laboratory documented that anthophyllite, tremolite and four other fibers were plentiful in the mines.

A book published by Vanderbilt in 1966 to celebrate its 50th anniversary described the importance of the talc and asbestos mixtures that it sold.

The deposition of Frederick Kuehl, a mining engineer who worked for International Talc for 27 years and ended up a general manager, talked of the mine that Vanderbilt bought having various types of asbestos that were mined depending on what the customer needed.

The tremolite portion went mostly into wall tiles and paints, he said. If you wanted a fibrous ore you mined the veins that contained more anthophyllite, Kuehl said.

In 1993, Arthur Rohl, a mineralogist with Mount Sinai School of Medicine and consultant to OSHA, testified that all the talc mines of St. Lawrence County contain asbestiform material. His studies of the Gouverneur Talc Mines found that the ore contained 60 percent tremolite, anthophyllite and a small amount of chrysotile.

Effects continue today

The effect that Vanderbilt, the asbestos industry, the American Mining Congress and the National Stone Association had in the '70s and '80s on OSHA's definition of asbestos continues to have ramifications today, well beyond the sickened talc miners.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission announced last week that it had found trace amounts of anthophyllite asbestos in crayons. But the two labs who did the government's analysis also found much larger quantities of what OSHA's laboratory in Salt Lake City called "transitional fibers." Scores of labs across the country, testing crayons for local and state agencies, found the same fibers and called them asbestos, as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Unless or until OSHA decides to revisit the asbestos debate, the agency must follow the decisions the industry pressured it to make in 1980s. Since OSHA's laboratory does the analysis for the Mine Safety and Health Administration, this may be skewing the results of sampling done by mine inspectors.

With rare exceptions, OSHA's analysis of MSHA's testing reported no asbestos detected in samples from talc mines in New York, taconite mines in Northern Michigan and Minnesota and vermiculite mines in

Virginia and South Carolina.

Davitt McAteer, MSHA's director, said in a January interview that he and his technical staff are mystified at the apparent contradictions between no asbestos being found and reports from unions, physicians and miners themselves of significant asbestos-related diseases among the work forces at these mines.

Meanwhile, conditions have improved somewhat at Vanderbilt. Better ventilation has been installed, and some workers have newer protective gear, although the dust is still a major concern.

As the miners in New York's talc country continue to do what their fathers and grandfathers did for more than a century, they still must wonder if their stories will end differently.

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