FILE NAME: Uniroyal (UNIR)

DATE: 1975

DOC#: UNIR025

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Barry Castleman Notes of Visit with Retired Uniroyal Employees

Barry I. Castleman ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANT / 1738 Riggs Place, North West, Washington, D.C. 20009/202 - 387 - 7595

Notes of Visit to Dorothy and Elmer Hester, disabled retirees from Uniroyal asbestos textile plant

The Hesters have both worked for over ten years at this plant in their town, Hogansville, GA, off-and-on since the mid-1940's. The plant opened in 1941, and for awhile Hogansville was a company town. The plant now makes textiles from cotton and manmade fibers as well as asbestos. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health believes this to be one of the best controlled asbestos textile facilities in the U.S.

There are numerous cases of asbestosis in the area. There is evidence that the company doctor impedes claims for disability from asbestosis. Black employees that become too disabled to work are turned out with $30/mo. pensions, and apparently few of the affected families have filed disability claims. I interviewed several disabled persons and their families, and no one could remember the company warning that asbestos could be harmful to health. There are numerous stories about the plant personnel man (Mr. Sprayberry), including one that he showed up at the funeral of a deceased woman in her 40's with release papers for the husband to sign.

The plant features a billboard out front, "Life is Fragile, Handle with Care". I am trying to confirm a story that the hazard warning signs required by the 1972 OSHA rules were received by the plant 2 years ago but have been buried in a basement and still are not hung on the walls in some or all regulated areas.

Some people are working themselves to death in the plant. A woman who is 40 and was there since she was about 16 is blue from asbestosis, her limbs are like sticks, and she still works with asbestos. Her husband committed suicide not long ago, I am told because of her condition.

The Hesters are severely disabled. He is worst off, mainly because he smokes, and can not walk two blocks into town. He has not worked since April, 1972. Mrs. Hester left work in mid-1974. Though the state law provides for up to 27,000 dollars for disability Mr. Hester settled out-of-court for $9,000 in order to pay pressing bills. The lawyer got ⅓.

Mrs. Hester is trying to organize a group of affected families. We found that a number of Blacks had been disabled, some have died. Of those who died, the company's retained Dr. (Welles) probably wrote the death certificates. Attempts are now going to be made to see the cause of death listed on the certificates. If they say asbestosis, the families will be instructed as to how to file claims for disability.

There are numerous asbestos-lore stories here. One man operated a gas station after being disabled at the plant, with tubes in his neck and an oxygen tank on his truck. He is dead. Another let the company dump several tons of asbestos waste on his lawn for fill, it is still there, exposed. Mrs. Hester will try to find out what the plant does now with its solid wastes. A settling pond out back of the plant is purple (from treatment chemicals used on the fibers, I am told), and on weekends children could freely have access to unsupervised playing there. There are many remembrances of hasty clean-ups for anticipated government inspections, but no one I talked to ever saw an inspector. Sprayberry used to take air samples in the open doorway for the record (not near the equipment). Disabled supervisory employees were paid off slightly better than the rest (free visits to Welles, etc.) and many remain loyal to the company.

In 1971, traincar shipments of asbestos cloth started coming into the plant from Japan. I am trying to find out if this still goes on, The result was the immediate loss of 4 jobs at the plant, according to Mr. Hester. Uniroyal unpackaged the cloth (which looked good but was lousy due to shoddy patching technique) and repacked the stuff under its own label. Mr. Hester thinks the cloth was made from yarn made in the Hogansville plant. It is possible that the oriental characters on the packages denote another origin, such as Taiwan or Korea.

More and better information is being prepared, and color photos are being taken of some of the sites.

Stories of weekly clean-up operations suggest that the regulations for occupational exposure should address the maintenance operations explicitly. The abrasive removal of accumulated fiber in the carding equipment is an example.

Careless operation of the weaving equipment - allowing the fiber to run dry when wet rollers are available - suggest the need for an annual required worker briefing in detail on the hazards of asbestos and the ways of minimizing exposure. Of course, if management cared about workers' health, employees who failed to operate equipment in the safest manner would be transferred or fired.

THere is no union at this plant, which sounds quite unusual. Union talk would be reacted to by a speech about all the good things at the plant from a company official, and for workers who just wanted to hear that everything was all right this sufficed.

It is difficult to locate doctors who are familiar with asbestos in the area, and several workers think the local medicine men are in cahoots with the company. One examined Mrs. Hester and wrote asbestosis on one form, but would not call it asbestosis in giving a deposition.

meetings were in late December, 1975