

Filter Factory : Asbestos, Cigarette Link Probed

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WEST GROTON, Mass. — By the time he was 40, Milton Wheeler was too short of breath to fix the kids' mini-bikes or play a round of golf. He had to quit his job as a policeman--and his dream of becoming chief--there being no place for a small town cop who couldn't haul a stretcher.

Wheeler spent his last months tethered to an oxygen tank, taking an hour and a half to totter to the bathroom and back to bed.

"He stared at the bathroom, thinking about how he was going to get in there, and wouldn't let anyone help him get in there, and that's how he lived his life," his oldest son Garry recalled.

In 1982, soon after his 50th birthday, Milton Wheeler died of asbestosis, a disease caused by the scarring of the lungs by asbestos.

Worked With Asbestos

Asbestosis was a word he'd never heard until the doctors said he had it. In a fleeting, nearly forgotten chapter of his life, Wheeler worked with asbestos at a paper mill for just a few months in 1953-54. His exposure must have been very heavy, for asbestosis usually signifies years of asbestos exposure.

Wheeler's job was making asbestos material for the filters of Kent cigarettes. It was the marriage of two notorious health hazards--asbestos and cigarettes--that led many at the mill on a sorrowful procession to early death. At the time, there was little talk of the dangers of asbestos, but the link between smoking and lung cancer was getting increased attention in the press. Threatened with the loss of jittery customers, the tobacco companies launched a swarm of new filter brands to convince smokers that their habit could be safe.

'Health Protection'

Among the most touted new brands was Kent, introduced in 1952 by P. Lorillard Co. (now known as Lorillard Inc., the nation's fourth-largest cigarette maker). Something of a maverick among cigarette firms, Lorillard came closer than its rivals--then or since--to admitting that smoking was harmful. It said Kent's "Micronite" filter offered "the greatest health protection in cigarette history," and was designed for "the one out of every three smokers who is unusually sensitive to tobacco tars and nicotine."

In its advertising, Lorillard said its quest for the new filter "ended in an atomic energy plant, where the makers of Kent found a material being used to filter air of microscopic impurities."

Another ad described Micronite as "a pure, dust-free, completely harmless material. . . ."

In reality, the "dust-free, completely harmless material" contained crocidolite, also called "African blue" asbestos for its origin and bluish color and regarded by many experts as the most hazardous of the six asbestos minerals.

It was used in the filter from 1952 at least until 1957, a period in which Americans puffed their way through more than 13 billion Kents. It is unknown if Kent smokers inhaled asbestos from the filter, or if they have experienced any more cancer than smokers of other brands. It is also uncertain if Lorillard knew anything about the risks of asbestos, which had not been widely publicized at the time.

Lorillard would not respond to written questions on these subjects, nor to verbal requests to three vice presidents to tell the company's side. It offered only this statement, by Sara Ridgway, vice president for public relations:

"We do not have asbestos in our products, nor have we had for many years. That is all I'm going to say."

The Micronite filter was developed jointly by Lorillard and Hollingsworth & Vose Co., a Massachusetts-based manufacturer of paper and filter products. The company set up a subsidiary, H&V Specialties Inc., to supply Lorillard from plants in West Groton and Rochdale, near Boston.

Rolls of Asbestos

According to correspondence between the firms, rolls of asbestos material were shipped to Lorillard factories in

Jersey City, N.J., and Louisville. This correspondence--produced in connection with lawsuits on behalf of dead or ill Specialties workers--shows that the filter was a blend of 30% crocidolite and 70% cotton and acetate.

Lorillard still uses the Micronite trademark. But for reasons it won't explain, Lorillard severed its arrangement with Specialties, prompting Hollingsworth to fold the subsidiary in 1957.

In August that year, an article in Reader's Digest casually mentioned that the Kent filter had contained asbestos, and that a new recipe had been developed. With the hazards of asbestos unknown to readers--and apparently to the Digest staff--what might have been a sensational disclosure instead proved to be a forgettable detail. In fact, the article praised the Kent filter as better than rivals in trapping tar and nicotine.

Lorillard itself recounted the filter's redesign--but not the reason for it--in "Lorillard and Tobacco," a company history.

Research Program

According to the booklet, "An intensive research program was ordered to make the Kent Micronite filter even better. The directive emphasized the objective of a more flavorful smoke within a filter cigarette. Lorillard scientists developed and sent countless experimental filter cigarettes to headquarters over a period of many months. Each was tested and tried--until February, 1957, when at last word went to the laboratory: 'You've done it!' . . . The Kent filter, revolutionary when it first appeared in 1952 and brilliantly improved in 1957, showed how scientific innovations anticipated, and kept pace with, consumer demand."

Whether fear of asbestos prompted the change is something Lorillard won't discuss. It is uncertain if Lorillard even dropped asbestos and Specialties at the same time. The asbestos filter was expensive and may have been scrapped as a cost-cutting move. Then, too, the original filter was *too* good to suit most smokers, who had to draw extra hard to get any taste.

Asbestos Fear?

But some think Lorillard also grew skittish about asbestos. Peter Breymeier, a former chemist with Hollingsworth, said he understood that Lorillard "got cold feet about the asbestos. . . . My grapevine information is they got worried about the consuming public finding out about the asbestos and raising hell with them."

Given the risks of smoking, the question of asbestos inhalation by Kent smokers may seem beside the point. Yet studies have shown that people breathing asbestos and cigarette smoke face a much higher risk of lung cancer than those exposed to one of these hazards alone.

Whatever the effect on Kent smokers, there was a devastating impact on Specialties workers, who made the filter under fairly primitive conditions.

Rather than being handled wet, which would have reduced the dust, the asbestos was processed dry with textile equipment. Workers slit open bags of asbestos, piled it by hand on a conveyor with cotton and acetate, and ran it through a "picker"--a rotating cylinder festooned with spikes that tore the mix to bits.

Dust in the Air

Dorothy Peters, whose husband Sidney Peters died of lung cancer and asbestosis at 51, recalled seeing clumps of the dust "hanging from the rafters" at the Specialties plant in West Groton when she brought him his lunch. One employee at the Rochdale plant remembered a co-worker whose "very long eyelashes . . . would have a bluish tint to them from the dust."

At least some workers got protective masks, although they apparently were of limited value. In a deposition before his death, Milton Wheeler said the picker raised a dust so thick "you couldn't see from one end of the machine to the other."

"You were covered with dust and the fibers of all three components, the acetate, the cotton and the asbestos," he said. "It would be in your ears, it would be in your nose, even through the mask. It would be under your pant legs, it would be inside your socks. You'd just be literally covered with it. You'd be blue."

It was a "dust-creating monster," said Dr. James Talcott, an oncologist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, where some victims have been treated.

"There couldn't have been a better means of trying to produce respirable asbestos fibers," Talcott said. "There's nobody who worked in the Micronite filter project . . . who wasn't extremely heavily exposed."

Not Aware of Hazards

Hollingsworth, Specialties' parent company, contends that it was not fully aware of the hazards of asbestos at the time and that it sought to follow the recommendations of state safety inspectors to improve conditions for workers.

There have been at least 20 Specialties workers who died of asbestosis, lung cancer, or mesothelioma, a rare and virulent form of cancer almost invariably caused by asbestos inhalation, according to a reporter's examination of death certificates and hospital records.

Talcott and other researchers have traced 36 men who worked for Specialties in 1953, some of whom also were exposed to asbestos in other jobs at Hollingsworth. Seven of the men are still living, some of them suffering from asbestosis. Of the 29 who are dead, more than half died of asbestos-related disease, according to Talcott, who stressed that the numbers are preliminary.

If a similar proportion holds for the approximately 160 men who worked for Specialties during its five-year life, several dozen workers have died of asbestos-related disease.

West Groton, about 50 miles northwest of Boston, is a mix of mill hands and white collar commuters, a quiet village among orchards, lush green fields and pine-shaded country roads.

In front of the Hollingsworth mill on the Squannacook River is a sign that proclaims, "The Right Time for Safety Is All the Time."

Important Employer

With a payroll of 180, the mill has always been among the biggest employers around, a source of steady work and plenty of it, where men sometimes work double shifts for the overtime pay.

It is a family mill, with a tradition of fathers and sons and kid brothers working--and sometimes dying--together.

Elizabeth Jacobs' 40-year-old brother, Raymond McDowell, died of asbestosis and pneumonia in 1970, and her husband, Joe Jacobs, died of mesothelioma in 1982 at the age of 61. Both men were Specialties workers.

In 1985, Elizabeth herself died of mesothelioma at the age of 54. Her only known asbestos exposure came from washing her husband's clothes.

Cigarettes Also Suspected

For some, cigarettes were at both ends of the problem, because smoking possibly contributed to their disease. At times they helped themselves to free packs of Kent, sent by the case from a Lorillard factory as a gesture of good will.

For each one who, like Milton Wheeler, died slowly year by year, there was another who went with stunning swiftness.

Friends remember Dick Valcourt as a powerhouse, a man who could lift a 150-pound motor with one hand as if it were a six-pack of beer. Valcourt worked for Specialties in West Groton and continued at Hollingsworth after the Micronite project was shut down. Clearly quite ill last winter, he continued showing up for work until supervisors yanked his time card to make him see a doctor.

A friend who saw Valcourt in the hospital a few weeks later was shocked at his wasted appearance. "His arms were no bigger than that," said George Griffin, curving his hand to form a small ring. "I couldn't believe it. It made me sick." In May, the 57-year-old Valcourt died of mesothelioma.

Bosses and Workers

There's been an element of equality to the suffering and death. One of the first to go was Lorrel Nichols, general manager of Specialties, who died of asbestosis and lung cancer in 1964.

Love and heartbreak twist the face of Phil Lemere Jr. when he recalls his father's death from mesothelioma last December. The senior Lemere worked a few months for Specialties between high school graduation and the Army, after which he earned a master's degree in education, taught junior high school and started a small business. He was best man at his son's wedding, and the two were side by side the morning he died.

"The fluid was building up. He was a big as a whale. His arms were like this big around, filled up with fluid, and I stayed with him all night," Phil Jr. said.

"I woke up hearing him gurgling and stuff and, you know, I just leaned over him, just talking to him and I said, 'Dad, you know, it's OK. We all love you. It's just time to go. . . .' I told him, 'I'll be with you again some day. . . .'

"He just knew it was time to let go and he just stopped breathing. He just stopped breathing." He was 51 years old.

Brief Exposures

Some victims worked for Specialties so briefly that when their illness was diagnosed years later, they had to be pressed by doctors to recall where they had encountered asbestos.

The risks of asbestos were not widely publicized until about 1970, but they were known long before in medical circles and in the asbestos industry. By 1950, asbestos had been linked with asbestosis and lung cancer in medical journal articles. A workers' compensation claim by an asbestosis victim reportedly was upheld in Massachusetts in 1927.

Hollingsworth began using asbestos in the 1940s, when it helped the military develop an asbestos filter paper for gas masks. But company officials have said they did not realize the danger to workers on the Micronite project.

Aubrey K. Nicholson, former president of Hollingsworth, denied that the company supplied masks because it knew asbestos was dangerous. In a deposition, Nicholson said the masks merely were intended "to prevent the unpleasantness, and inconvenience, and lack of comfort from dust."

Safety Measures

Andrew McElaney, lawyer for Hollingsworth, pointed out that Specialties had made safety improvements on advice of state inspectors, who he said did not seem alarmed by conditions at the West Groton plant. "Here we had a small Massachusetts company being told by these experts that the situation was safe," McElaney said.

He described Hollingsworth as "a very concerned employer" that did not "knowingly subject any employee to substantial risk of harm."

Some disagree. "I think they realized what asbestos was," said Jake Nutting, 55, a former Specialties worker now disabled by asbestosis. "There was some educated people there."

Others give the company the benefit of the doubt. "I think at that time, the company was just as ignorant as we were," said John LaValley, 47, who works for Hollingsworth and whose father, Francis LaValley, an ex-Specialties worker, died in 1980 of lung cancer and asbestosis.

Several lawsuits have been filed against Hollingsworth by former workers or survivors. Workers' compensation laws bar suits against employers, but at the time the men worked for the Specialties subsidiary, not Hollingsworth itself.

At least four suits have been settled out of court. Last year, Milton Wheeler's family got a settlement worth "seven figures," according to Albert Zabin, a lawyer for the family, who would not disclose the precise amount. Suits by the Lemere and Jacobs families and by survivors of cancer victim Lewis Johnson have also been settled. McElaney would not comment on any of the settlements.

Apparently none of the suits has named Lorillard as a co-defendant, nor has Hollingsworth filed cross-claims asking Lorillard to share in any damage awards.