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INSIDE SECTION B

Opinion / **B2**

Metropolitan News / **B5**

Deaths / **B6**

Business / **B7**

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HEALTH

Revisiting a deadly atomic history

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News Staff Reporter

Lewis Malcolm suspected that the health problems that eventually led to his death might have been related to his exposure to radioactive materials on his job in a steel mill, but he wasn't bitter about it, and neither is his widow.

"What would be the use of getting that way about it?" asks Betty Malcolm. "We're both Christians, and we never thought about it."

Mrs. Malcolm and others were once again reminded of Western New York's deep connections to America's atomic development history after a report in

Wednesday's editions of USA Today detailed how workers in private plants across the country were exposed to very high levels of radiation as the country developed its nuclear weapons arsenal in the 1940s and '50s.

The workers included Malcolm, Ed Cook and Charles Leavitt, all of whom worked for the defunct Simonds Saw and Steel Co. in Lockport, which milled radioactive uranium and thorium for the government in the time following World War II.

Both Cook and Leavitt said they were aware they were working with hazardous materials, and Mrs. Malcolm said her husband also knew.

"I think they told us (about health risks). I can't really remember it all, but they said there were health problems and we had to be careful." Ed Cook of Lockport, who worked with radioactive material after World War II

"I think they told us (about health risks)," said Cook, 84, now retired and living in Lockport. "I can't really remember it all, but they said there were health problems and we had to be careful."

Mrs. Malcolm added that her husband "knew that they were running material for the government. He knew it was radioactive, because they had guys cleaning up the dust with vacuums, and they had guards all the time he was working with it."

Whether any of the workers knew the level of their exposure is another matter, according to Dan Guttman, a lawyer and former head of the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Activities.

Guttman said it's clear from records obtained by USA Today that workers

See Radiation Page B4

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were not provided with information on exactly what the hazard was, whether radiation levels were within recommended safety standards or what the proper protection was to minimize their exposure.

"Those are critical bits of information they were denied in many cases," said Guttman.

Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Town of Tonawanda, said, "Historically, the federal government had never acknowledged that certain workers were exposed to materials that may have been more radioactive — and much more deadly — than previously revealed."

In a prepared statement issued late Wednesday, LaFalce added: "But this April the Clinton administration acknowledged a potential problem and promised to help these men and women by supporting the creation of an occupational illness compensation program.

"In June, a provision was included in the Senate-passed (fiscal year) 2001 Department of Defense authorization bill which would establish an occupational illness compensation program for the Department of Energy and contractor employees who are sick as a result of exposure to beryllium, radiation and certain toxic substances while building and operating the nation's nuclear weapons complex," LaFalce said.

A final version of the bill has not been released yet.

At many plants, according to the newspaper report, exposure levels were well above what the government knew to be safe.

At Simonds, workers were told beginning in 1948 that they would be working with a new metal. Leavitt said workers put the metal rods of uranium and thorium into ovens, heated them, then put them into rollers that decreased their diameter from about 4½ inches to about 1¼ inches.

"When we finished rolling them, they would vacuum up floor plates and your work area to get the dust" that was produced in the reduction process, Leavitt said.

Leavitt, 71, said it didn't take him long to figure out he was working with hazardous materials.

"They did send us to the hospital for frequent checkups. Then we heard the rumor that radiation was involved," he said.

"After a time, they started furnishing coveralls. We used the coveralls, and when we were finished, they would take the coveralls and clean them. From what we heard, they could get the dust out of the coveralls and use that."

Between 25 million and 30 million pounds of uranium and 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium were milled at the plant before production stopped in the mid-1950s, according to the newspaper report.

What the Simonds workers didn't know — but what documents obtained by USA Today showed the government knew — was that those workers who were the most highly exposed were inhaling uranium dust that, on average, was up to 190 times the maximum allowable concentration of the time.

"This operation results in pro-

fuse atmospheric contamination," read a 1949 report of the medical section of the Atomic Energy Commission, which oversaw the federal government's work in the area.

Many of the rolled rods produced at Simonds ended up at the government's plutonium-producing nuclear reactors in Hanford, Wash. The 1949 report indicated the need was so great that it was "necessary to begin (the work) before suitable (safety) controls could be installed."

A 1954 survey at Simonds found levels of thorium dust that approached 40 times the federal limit, a level the government felt was "too high, even for intermittent operations."

AEC staff pushed Simonds management to upgrade the plant to protect workers, but according to the newspaper report, management suggested that if it had to install more elaborate dust-limiting systems, it would stop doing the work.

"It appears that the AEC officials are saying, 'Holy smokes, this is pretty excessive, but if we tell people, we'll have a problem,'" Guttman said.

"The government didn't talk straight to the workers, and it wasn't simply because of national security," he added. "There was embarrassment and liability. (The silence) was for the wrong reasons. It wasn't, 'This is war.' It was that they didn't want to tell the truth."

Among other area private companies that USA Today said had contracts or subcontracts to do work for the government's nuclear weapons program are B&L Steel in Buffalo, Bethlehem Steel in Lackawanna, Titanium Alloys Manufacturing in Niagara Falls and Linde Air Products Division in Tonawanda.

Lewis Malcolm, who died in June of kidney failure, told the newspaper that his doctors couldn't tell him whether the ailment was caused by his time working with uranium and thorium rods.

That's because while science is able to link radiation exposure to increased risk of cancer and other ailments, it is not yet able to make a direct connection between radiation exposure and an individual's diseases, according to Mark Pierro, radiation safety officer at the University at Buffalo.

"We know that radiation has an effect on biological systems. The problem is, we can't tell that something was caused by a certain agent," he said. "You have to look at all the environmental factors. I'm sure they had co-workers who were perfectly fine and lived long lives. Each person has their own sensitivity."

Leavitt said he has a "slight problem" with weak kidneys, but believes the problem to be genetic, rather than plant-related.

Both Cook and Leavitt said that even though they knew of the possible danger, they didn't think about leaving the plant, because they had good-paying jobs and families to support.

"At the time, I think I was a little too young to be scared, or maybe didn't know enough to be scared," Leavitt said.