

Simonds site back in spotlight

Former Simonds workers say they realized products were radioactive

By Cindi Wittcop
Lockport Journal

Retirees from the Simonds Saw & Steel Co. say they weren't initially told that they were handling radioactive materials, but the nature of the materials eventually became common knowledge.

Retired Simonds worker Ed Cook said he worked "just about everywhere" in the plant, but ended up being superintendent in the rolling department, where workers were assigned a government-contracted job.

The metal they used for the job was shipped to the plant via armed guards, Cook said, and at that time (late 1940s), workers on the floor were unaware that they were handling radioactive material. It was only later that they found out.

"The (metal) pieces were brought in by the government in a round form that were approximately four inches in diameter and I would say about 12 to 14 inches long," Cook said. "They weighed about 200 pounds — heavier than lead."

Cook said the pieces were submerged in molten lead until they were the proper temperature, then they were taken out one at a time, rolled, cooled, then sent to Washington State. He said the average worker didn't know exactly what the pieces were used for, just that they were to fill a government work order.

Later, he said, employees learned that the government-issued billets were eventually used in the production of atomic bombs.

Cook said he doesn't think he suffered any ill effects from work-

ing there for 45 years. He says he's in pretty good health, especially for someone who will turn 85 on Oct. 8.

"Here I am, I'm still alive," Cook said. "Some of the fellows I worked with did pass away through the years, but I couldn't say if it was from working there."

Cook said he doesn't think there's any sense worrying about what went on at the plant.

"It's just too late to be saying anything about it, there's not too many of us left," Cook said. "I can't complain."

Another former Simonds employee, Charles Leavitt, 71, worked at the plant from 1948 to 1983. He says he's in "fairly good" health and feels that his well-being was never threatened by the radioactivity at the site.

Though he worked in many departments during his tenure at Simonds, Leavitt took several turns in the 16-inch roller mills. "For a long time, I was on a crew that would get laid up in one place or would catch up on orders in one place and they would stick us on one of the mills. I was on the 16-inch mill several times."

And even if workers didn't actually take part in the rolling procedure, they at some point in the process came into contact with radioactivity. "Even when you charged the furnace, you had to handle (the radioactive pieces)," Leavitt said.

He said he clearly remembers being sent to the hospital sporadically to be checked for something, but at that time, he didn't know what. "After a while we surmised that we were being checked for radiation, but they never told us that," he said.

Though he knows of several former Simonds workers who have died, he can't say if their deaths had anything or everything to do with the plant.

"I did get a phone call from a friend of mine who used to work there. He had two pacemakers installed, then he had to go to the Cleveland Clinic for a heart transplant. He thinks his problems could be related, but it's hard to say," Leavitt said.

Looking back, Leavitt admits he feels some anger at the government's apparent disregard for the welfare of Simonds workers.

"Knowing the government lied is what makes me mad," Leavitt said. "They keep you in the dark as long as they get what they want, that's it."

Pete Apolito, 63, who worked at Simonds from 1961 to 1983, is from a long line of Simonds men.

His grandfather, father and three uncles all worked there.

"I heard my uncle John discussing (the radioactive materials), he was one of the men on the 30-inch roller mills," Apolito said. "He died of lung cancer in 1978, but I have no idea if it was related (to the job). My dad, Joe, worked there during World War II, and he died of brain cancer in 1989."

Spotlight con't...

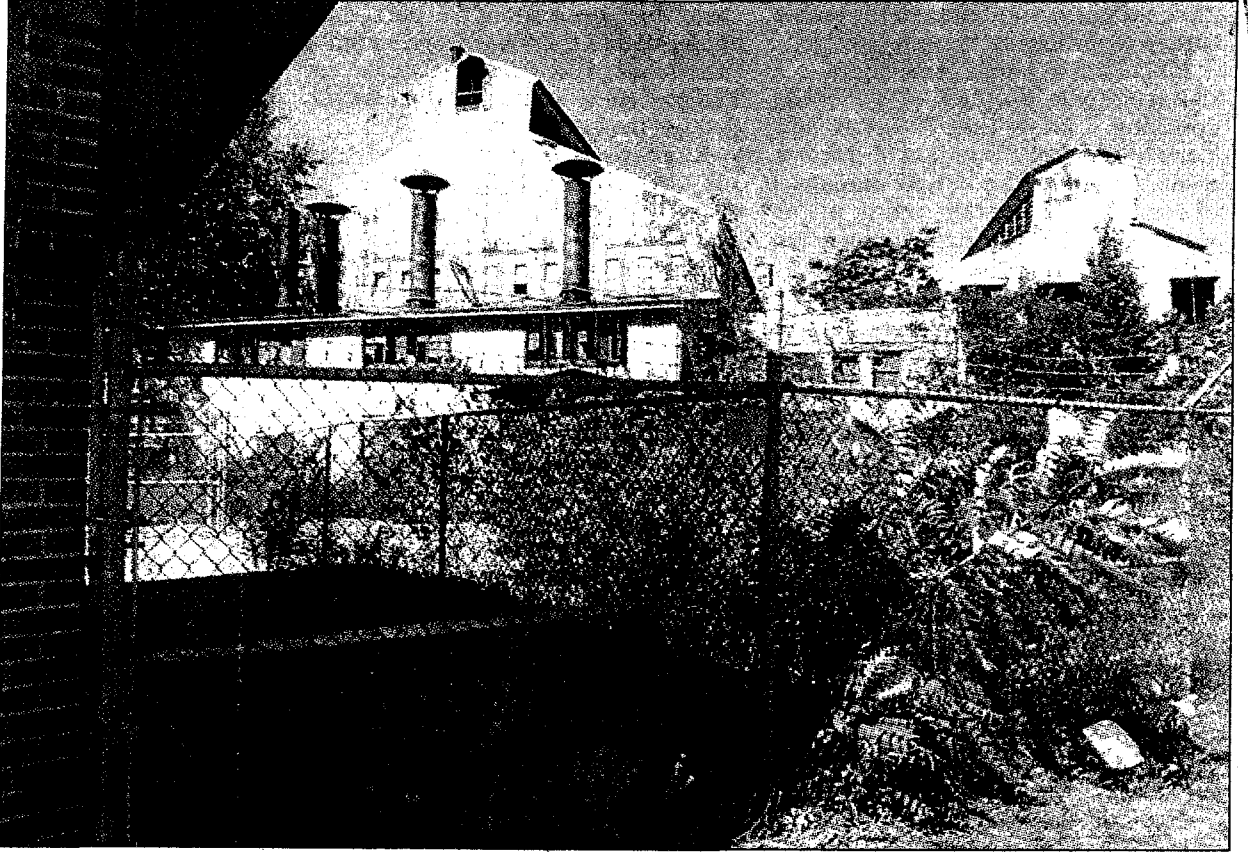


Photo by Dennis Stierer, Lockport Journal

The former Simonds Saw and Steel plant is included in a recent report by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research. The institute determined that the federal government misled employees about the dangers of the radioactive materials they were handling