

Family ponders connection between work, man's death

Norman Marsh worked at Simonds, where uranium was handled



Dennis Stierer

Brenda Harper and Karen Hallifax hold a picture of their father, Norman Marsh, who worked at Simonds Saw and Steel, shown behind them, for 29 years. Marsh suffered from many illnesses, and the women blame the materials he was exposed to while working at the plant.

Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series about former workers at the old Simonds Saw and Steel mill on Ohio Street in Lockport. The next two installments will run Monday and Tuesday.

By Cindi Wittcop
SUNDAY STAFF

Like many members of the group dubbed the "greatest generation" — Americans who came of age during the World War II era — Norman Marsh had a remarkable work ethic.

Employed at Simonds Saw and Steel from late 1952 to 1982, Marsh worked with loyalty and dedication, putting in long hours to fill orders that included "special jobs" for the federal government.

Little did he know that his commitment and hard work at the plant may have contributed to the illnesses that plagued him for two decades, eventually leading to his death at the age of 59.

Marsh was one of hundreds of Simonds employees who, from the late 1940s and into the '50s,

were exposed to uranium and thorium. According to a recent report by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, Simonds was among several privately owned plants across the nation contracted by the government to roll rods containing the radioactive material for use in nuclear weapons.

Simonds was sold to Guterl Specialty Steel in 1978. Guterl filed for bankruptcy in 1982 and the plant was closed.

The report, published Sept. 6 in USA Today, states, "The U.S. government and its contractors were well aware of the dangers (of high radiation exposure) and deliberately misled the workers by providing false reassurances of safety."

What may be worse is that many Simonds retirees and former employees say they were not initially told they were handling dangerous materials.

Charles H. Emery, who was president and general manager of the plant during the time the radioactive material was milled, denies claims that workers were unknowingly exposed to radiation.

Emery says all standards and regulations of the time were followed, and all employees were told about the materials they were handling. He also says he is in "extremely fine health" at age 75, and knows of several other workers who are also healthy.

According to Marsh's daughters, Karen Hallifax of Lockport and Brenda Harper of Medina, Marsh suffered from several ailments that ultimately led to his premature death. In their hearts, they say they know their father became ill from exposure to radiation at Simonds, but admit they can't prove it.

Marsh's descent into illness started with a rash that wouldn't go away.

"In the mid-'60s, Dad developed a horrible rash on his hands and arms. He actually had open lesions that never healed," Hallifax said. "He was sent to a dermatologist, who said it was from the oil used at the plant to wash the steel. He couldn't avoid it at work, but when we went away on vacation, the rash cleared right up."

Hallifax said at the time, her father was working in the 10-inch and 16-inch bar mill, where the radioactive billets were processed, but he eventually became a tow motor operator. Shortly after he changed jobs, the rash disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared. But Marsh's troubles were not over.

In 1981, he developed severe pain in the back of his neck, which was mistakenly diagnosed as arthritis. At about the same time, Marsh began experiencing numerous transient ischemic attacks (TIAs), sometimes referred to as "mini-strokes," in which there is a temporary decrease in the blood supply to the brain. The episodes became more frequent, and in 1982, he took an early medical retirement necessitated by the TIAs.

In 1984, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer and under-

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went a radical urostomy (removal of the bladder) in 1985. By December 1986, Marsh began complaining of numbness in his legs and feet and by Feb. 12, 1987, he was paralyzed from the chest down and told he would never walk again.

At that point, he entered Veterans Hospital in Buffalo, where surgeons removed a tumor from the back of his neck that had eaten through three-fourths of his spinal cord. He also had 12 inches of intestine removed and received chemotherapy and radiation treatments, but at that point, "it was too little, too late," Hallifax said.

Marsh died March 11, 1987, more than 20 years after his symptoms first appeared.

During the last years of his illness, Marsh's family saw a steady decline in not only his physical being, but also in his mental functioning.

"We saw his personality change so much," Harper said. "He went from being a laid-back, easygoing person to someone who snapped at a moment's notice."

The sisters said they "spent many nights changing beds, washing clothes and watching him cry."

Hallifax and Harper said that over the years, they often questioned their father's illness, along with the cancer deaths of many of their relatives and friends. In virtually all of the deaths, the cancers were never linked to Simonds, but most of the survivors feel the evidence is convincing.

"Before Dad died, he buried several close friends who had died of cancer," Hallifax said.

One of those friends, Dane Huth, a Newfane resident who ran Bye's Popcorn for many years, attended Marsh's funeral, then died of lung cancer several years later. Huth, who was not a smoker, was a former Simonds worker, Hallifax said.

After the USA Today story

ran, Hallifax and Harper began collecting the names of people who worked at Simonds who have since died, most from cancer of the lungs and brain. The list also includes survivors of deceased workers, along with names of former employees who are suffering from illnesses that might be attributable to radioactive exposure at the plant.

Harper is sorting through a 2-inch-thick stack of computer papers containing information obtained from the Internet, and Hallifax said the process has only just begun.

"I'm spending six to eight hours a day on the Internet, looking for people who worked there or who are survivors of someone who worked there and has died," Hallifax said. "We're trying to gather as much information as possible, whether it be through knocking door-to-door, on radio, TV, whatever it takes."

The sisters' ultimate goal is to create a coalition of people with connections to Simonds, either through their own employment there or through a relative's. When they feel they've accumulated enough information for a database, they will present it to Lee Simonson, chairman of the Niagara County Legislature.

Their hope, they say, is to start putting pressure on the powers that be at a local level and work their way up to the federal government.

"We want to make the government responsible for what it did to private sector workers," Hallifax said. "We want this injustice corrected. This may turn into a class-action lawsuit."

Hallifax and Harper say they realize that monetary compensation to survivors could never replace the lost lives. They say it's not for the money — it's the principal.

Other concerns they have is how the site will be cleaned up and how the health of people

who live around the plant has been affected.

"We have some of the oldest sewer and water districts in the area," said Hallifax, who lives on Ohio Street, not far from the Simonds building. "Nothing has been done to test the water and no ground samples have ever been taken. It's horrifying. And I want to know how the radioactivity is going to be cleaned up. You can't get rid of it, it's not going away and I don't want just a clay cap put on it."

Both women say they want to see the state Legislature get involved in the matter, and they credit state Sen. George Maziarz, R-North Tonawanda, for his interest and action, but say more help is needed from the state officials.

"We need more support from Gov. Pataki," Harper said. "He should be here, looking at this site."

Hallifax and Harper have pledged that their father's early and painful death won't be in vain. They said the work they are doing now is in tribute to him and to all the Simonds workers whose health and lives may have been damaged through their employment there. They admit they can't help but be angry at the government.

"As far as I'm concerned, the government sent these men to their deaths, just as much as the Nazis led the Jews to their deaths," Hallifax said.

To contact Hallifax, call 434-2186 or 390-8336, or e-mail her at Khallifax@usadatanet.net. Harper can be reached at 798-3256.