

Report on steel plant challenged

By Cindi Wittcop
Lockport Journal

Charles H. Emery and countless other workers were exposed to radiation from uranium and thorium billets at Simonds Saw and Steel Co. during the 1940s and 1950s.

Relatives of some of the workers who later died say their loved ones may have fallen victim to the radiation.

Emery, now a retired metallurgical engineer, doesn't think so. He says that at age 75, he's in "extremely fine health." And, he says, he's not alone.

Today, he lives in Boynton Beach, Fla., but during the early years of the Cold War, he worked at Simonds and eventually became vice president and general manager of the firm.

In a report published by USA Today earlier this month, Simonds and the federal government are accused of exposing workers to high levels of radiation. The article claims that men who worked in the rolling mills at Simonds were not told they were being exposed to radioactivity. The company and the government also are accused of not making sure workers were adequately protected.

But Emery, along with several other former employees who are now in their 70s and 80s, takes exception to the information published in the article.

In a letter to the editor at USA Today, Emery says, "Your article in the Sept. 6 edition entitled 'Toxic exposure kept secret' is a despicable example of 'witch hunting,' sensationalism and irresponsible journalism. It depicts the former Simonds Steel operations, as well as many other reputable companies, in an unjustified and unfavorable perspective.

"Simonds Steel processed many tons of unenriched uranium and thorium under the auspices of the Atomic Energy Commission and in accordance

with standards and regulations of the times. All employees associated with the program were constantly monitored for radiation with periodic health examinations."

Emery said, "There has not been a single case of health or medical complication attributable to Simonds employment in the AEC program."

He goes on to name former Simonds workers Ed Cook, 84, and Nick Cappola, 80, who were quoted in the USA Today article. He says, "... Cite Messrs. Cook and Cappola, ages 84 and 80, respectively, and me, too, at 75, who are enjoying extremely fine health and longevity with just as much exposure."

Cook, who was featured in the USA Today story, told the Union-Sun & Journal that he doesn't think he suffered any ill effects from working at the plant for 45 years. He said 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."

Cappola, who lives on Ohio Street about 1,200 feet from the plant, worked at the site for 43 years and one month. His work centered on the 10-inch mill, and he also worked on the 16-inch roller mill.

Though Cappola said he and his fellow workers were not initially told they were working with radioactive material, he thinks the company did a comprehensive job of keeping tabs on its workers' health.

"We were all sent to the hospital for checkups, we would go to the doctor one day and the hospital the next day," Cappola said. "They were real good checkups."

Cappola said he remembers the company installing vents to draw the dust up and out of the building, and workers also wore special coveralls that he believes were laundered in a special solution.

All in all, Cappola said he's thankful for his years at Simonds. He had five children to support, and Simonds was a good place to work.

"I never had any fear working there, I just went to work with some real nice people," Cappola said. "I'm one of the lucky ones."

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In this series

This is the third of a three-part series about former workers at the old Simonds Saw and Steel mill on Ohio Street.