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OUR VIEW

Cold war still chilling Western NY

The Lockport and Tonawanda areas recently were visited by ghosts, thanks to a series of articles concerning nuclear weapon production a half-century ago, in the 1940s and 1950s.

More than 100 plants throughout the United States were under contract with the federal government as the Cold War got under way, according to the series by USA Today.

One of those operations was the Linde plant in the Town of Tonawanda.

In addition, there was the Simonds Saw and Steel Co. in Lockport, whose employees worked with uranium and thorium.

Many of the employees have died during the intervening years, and their deaths, coupled with the fact that they worked with radioactive materials, give new life to an old question: Did the working conditions contribute to their deaths?

The fact of the matter is that we will never know.

Two important allegations emerge from all of the comments:

- The workers were not told they were working with radioactive materials, and

- There were inadequate safety precautions.

The strong implication from some people is that the radioactivity at Simonds contributed to diseases — mostly cancers — that caused the deaths of their loved ones.

The suspicion is fueled by statements from the president of a research group hired by USA Today. He alleges that the working conditions at Simonds were "appalling," and that protection standards were "routinely violated." He also said the government "failed to adequately protect the workers or properly inform them of the severe hazards that many of the faced."

Charles H. Emery, who was president and general manager of the plant when the work was going on, takes issue with those statements, and he describes the USA Today stories as "witch hunting," sensationalism and irresponsible journalism.

He offers himself as living proof that no harm came to employees as a result of the work. He is now 75 years old and in "extremely fine health." He said he knows of other workers who also are still alive and doing well. Emery's claims seem to be supported at least in part by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education in Oak Ridge, Tenn. Last year, the institute studied the Simonds operation and the site on Ohio Street.

According to the institute, the uranium that passed through the plant was not all that dangerous to begin with.

What's more, the workers didn't handle much thorium, and so the risk there wasn't that great, either.

Furthermore, the institute found that the former Atomic Energy Commission did take steps to protect the workers.

There were hoods, dust collection equipment and catch pans. Also, the mill area was vacuumed periodically, and the shipping area was vacuumed daily.

Collected residue was given to the AEC, which moved it to the Niagara Falls Storage Site for interim storage. Finally, the institute found that the site, itself, isn't a radiation hazard today. The real danger at the site: the dilapidated buildings.

Where does that leave us?

There are no easy conclusions, no easy answers, and we doubt that there ever will be. The fact that some of the Simonds workers are still alive and well seems to argue against plant conditions that killed.

The use of special equipment and special procedures seems to indicate that Simonds and the government did care about the well-being of the workers.

We're afraid, then, that nothing has been resolved in this latest spate of stories, and we're also afraid family members will be haunted by the possibilities forever.

It is one more sad legacy of the Cold War.