

Radiation claims are sad legacy

500HP
INCONCLUSIVE: *A report on nuclear weapons jobs raises the spectre of lingering damage from contaminants produced during the Cold War.*

Niagara County recently was 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.

Several of those plants were in Niagara County, including Hooker Electrochemical, Electro Metallurgical, Titanium Alloys Manufacturing and Niagara Smelting Division, all in Niagara Falls; the Linde Air Products Division in the Town of Tonawanda; and Simonds Saw and Steel Co. in Lockport.

These companies were responsible for the large-scale conversion of uranium compounds to metal. Linde, for example, refined the uranium ore used to make weapons during the Manhattan Project in the 1940s. At Simonds, workers reportedly were exposed to radiation from uranium and thorium billets manufactured for nuclear reactor fuel rods.

Former Linde worker Don Finch said employees who worked at Linde after the weapons project were never told that they may be exposed to dangerous contamination from the "hot" buildings.

Many of the Simonds 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.

The Niagara Gazette on Wednesday concluded a three-part series of articles focusing on the some of the former employees and on relatives of workers who died after working at Simonds.

Two important allegations emerge from all of the comments:

- The workers were not told they were working with radioactive materials.
- 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 them faced."

Charles H. Emery, 75, 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 says standards and regulations of the time were followed and all employees were told about the materials they were handling.

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 concluded 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 was dust collection equipment and the mill and shipping area were routinely vacuumed. Collected residue went to the AEC, which moved it to the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

Finally, the institute found that the site, itself, isn't a radiation hazard today.

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.