

Cotter at the Crossroads

A community
grapples with a
uranium mill's past,
present and future



Jack Hadley has growths on some of his bones that give him pain. The pain has affected his life for years. Despite the bone growths and pain they cause, he and his horse Effe still participate in calf roping. Hadley is part of a lawsuit against Cotter. Times-Call/Jeff Haller

Faces of pain

*By Jackie Hutchins
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Though scientists have an idea of what causes certain types of cancer or other health problems, when individuals become ill their doctors cannot always point to what caused that particular event.

So while some Canon City area residents are convinced exposure to materials from Cotter Corp. caused their health problems, others are equally convinced their health problems are not related to anything the company did.

And others merely wonder, realizing they will never know for sure.

Esther Lombardi

Esther Lombardi of Florence is among those who wonders.

Her husband Gene, who had worked at the Cotter facility years earlier, died of lung cancer in 1997.

Mrs. Lombardi said her husband worked for three to five years running a loader, moving dirt around on the mill property. The loader didn't have a cab, so he was exposed to the elements.

She said she thinks the exposure he got there could have given him the cancer that showed up later. "I often felt that it was. I knew that that stuff wasn't good for him."

When his cancer was diagnosed, the doctors asked if he was a smoker, she recalled. He had been, but had quit 15 years earlier.

He died at age 66, "too young, I'll tell you that," Mrs. Lombardi said. "We still miss him, that's for sure."

His eight-month fight included 81 radiation treatments and five rounds of chemotherapy. It was difficult, his widow said.

She said they thought about suing, but never did. "I was just so shook up when he passed away. I didn't want to go through the hassle."

Jack Hadley

Bruce and Virginia Hadley moved to Lincoln Park before son Jack was born 34 years ago.

When he was diagnosed with abnormal bone growths, he was told radiation exposure while his mother was pregnant had likely caused them. He has lived in the Lincoln Park

area his whole life, and he's convinced his problems and those of others around him were caused by radiation exposure. "I don't have any doubt in my mind," he said.

The growths afflict his knees, wrists and shoulder, and his left leg is bowed. He had surgeries on that leg when he was 8 years old and again twice as an adolescent. "It wasn't much fun," he recalled.

And the pain has gotten worse through the years. "When I was a kid I had some pain, but nothing like it's been as I've gotten older," Hadley said.

The growths have pushed into his joints, especially affecting his knees. "I've got pain everyday in my knees," he said. He eventually may have to have his knees replaced, but his doctor says he's too young now.

Other members of his family also have had health problems. His sister also has a couple of bony growths. His mother has arthritis, as does Hadley himself.

A jury agreed with the Hadley family's belief that their problems were related to exposure to hazardous materials from Cotter. The family members are among those who won a \$43.5 million settlement in the Dodge et. al. v. Cotter lawsuit, but it's currently under appeal and he hasn't gotten any money to help with his medical expenses.

Hadley said he has no idea what his future will hold, but it may be like his present. "I live in pain every day," he said.

Margaret Anderson

Not everyone agrees that Cotter Corp. has caused their health problems.

When Royal Anderson got prostate cancer while working at Cotter, some people might have assumed he had been exposed to a carcinogen on the job.

But his wife thinks the routine health tests employees got actually saved his life that time. She said he had a family history of prostate cancer - his father died from the disease - but the tests found his cancer while it was still early enough to easily cure.

Later, when he developed chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a combination of emphysema, bronchitis and asthma, it likely happened because he had been a three-pack-a-day smoker, Mrs. Anderson recalled.

"It was just a gradual process over the years," she said of his disease. It started with coughing and progressed until he was having pneumonia a few times a year. "You just can't get enough oxygen into your lungs and it shuts down the other systems," Mrs. Anderson said. He died of the disease in February 2000.

Mr. Anderson, who worked for Cotter for 23 years, retired in the late 1980s, and he and his wife moved to a cabin

they had near the site of the Iron Mountain fire and lived there for eight years before moving back into Canon City.

"We did a lot of hunting and fishing and things. We enjoyed retirement," she said.

Mrs. Anderson said she doesn't hold Cotter responsible for the health problems her husband suffered.

And she noted safety procedures at the company were strengthened through the years. In the early days of the company, "they didn't realize or know the things that could happen," she said.

"You learned as you went along, so you can't blame them for that."

Carolee Bullen

Carolee Bullen of Artesia, N.M., hasn't lived in Canon City since 1965. So she isn't sure what to think about the cancer that killed her husband, Glenn, three decades later.

He died of kidney cancer in 1995. He had been diagnosed with the cancer in 1982 and had a kidney removed at that time to rid his body of the disease.

"They thought it was gone, but it came back," Mrs. Bullen said.

Her husband had worked in the Cotter chemical lab with Lynn Boughton, and the Bullens kept in touch with the Boughtons, so she is aware that Boughton's lymphoma was ruled as being a result of radiation exposure.

But she said there's no way to know if her husband's cancer was caused by exposure to radiation. They did wonder about it, though, as they heard of health problems among others who had worked there. "I think a lot of them had health problems afterward," she said.

The couple lived in Lincoln Park during the time her husband worked for Cotter. She said she hasn't had any health problems that she thought were remotely connected with exposure to radiation.

Jody Enderle

Jody Enderle grew up in Lincoln Park, living there 18 years. Four years ago, at age 32, she was diagnosed with systemic lupus of the central nervous system and brain lesions. Since that time she has been hospitalized 19 times.

Her first rheumatologist told her that her lupus was not hereditary, so he believed it was caused by environmental factors. "I know I could never prove this, but deep in my heart I feel it's Cotter," Enderle said.

She was diagnosed with lupus when pregnant with her now 4-year-old daughter. One doctor told her she would never live to see her daughter go to school. Her son, at age 10,

has had to learn how to set up an intravenous line for her.

But after going to the Mayo Clinic in August 2001, where doctors corrected her medications to help control her disease, she feels her condition has improved.

"I'm doing a lot better now. I haven't been in the hospital since October," Enderle said. "I really do feel like I owe my life to them."

If the soil from the Maywood, N.J., Superfund site is brought to Cotter, she may reluctantly move from Canon City. Enderle said she doesn't think she could willingly expose her children to the risks the dirt might pose.

They live on the other side of town, but she feels the wind blows so hard that waste could reach them.

"I'm really fighting to keep this material from coming here," the member of Colorado Citizens Against ToxicWaste said.

Ella Rosenstrauch

Ella Rosenstrauch's husband, Lloyd, died 12 years ago of prostate and lung cancer.

He had worked at Cotter Corp. for nearly 24 years, retiring in 1982. "He was a shift foreman and he worked pretty much all over the place. I feel like he acquired it out there," his wife said.

Before he went to work for Cotter he worked briefly for Pinnacle, where the ore Cotter processed was mined.

Mrs. Rosenstrauch has begun to file for an Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program payment, but after so many years she's finding it hard to get ahold of all the records she needs to document his cancer case. "They really don't care much, some of the hospitals," she said.

The Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program provides benefits to people who qualify under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, or their survivors.

Her husband's prostate cancer was first diagnosed in 1977. The lung cancer was found later, and Mrs. Rosenstrauch now has been asked to find medical records that will show which cancer came first, she said.

She said her feeling on seeking the payment is "I wouldn't want anything if I'm not supposed to have it."

But, "If he got it out there, I'm entitled to it."

"I feel like he got it there," she said. "I'm searching for answers yet, and I've got some more to look into."

Some defend Cotter

Another man contacted for this article asked not to be included. He had worked for Cotter for 18 years and said the company had been a good employer, helping him buy his house and raise his family. He does not believe that Cotter was responsible for any health problems he has.

[*Return to the Critical Mass home page*](#)