

Today's News

The Record
Online

Uranium's legacy for Navajo miners is a painful death

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Sunday, July 30, 2000

By DEBORAH HASTINGS
The Associated Press

COVE, Ariz. -- Inside the stifling cinder-block house of Dorothy Joe, nothing moves but waves of grief. One by one, the old widow and her children begin to sob, as if despair were contagious. The weeping circle begins and ends with her, sitting at the dining-room table, staring at weathered hands as if they held answers.

She murmurs in Navajo, describing the white man's prized uranium and how it destroyed her husband.

"They never told us it would kill us," says David Joe, 38, choking on his tears. "I'm sorry," the son says, drawing a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

They received \$100,000 from the government for the death of Raymond Joe, who scraped radioactive rock from surrounding mountains to fuel the Cold War. The conflict never turned hot, but it killed Ray Joe just the same.

He died six years ago, but his family is inconsolable, as if he were just now drawing his last breath from these stagnant rooms.

Lung disease has killed at least 400 uranium miners on this reservation, according to the Uranium Radiation Victims Committee, a Navajo advocacy group.

The Navajo Nation covers 27,000 square miles in the Four Corners area, where the boundaries of Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico meet like the crosshairs of a rifle scope.

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Here lies the world's largest deposit of uranium ore, and the Navajo who have lived on it for seven centuries. Neither troubled the other until the 1940s, when mining companies began blasting holes in stippled sandstone cliffs.

Virtually unburdened by health, safety, or pollution regulations, the mines ran at least two shifts every day for nearly 40 years. By the 1980s, decreased demand closed the mines.

By then, Navajo men happy for the work and ignorant of radiation had loaded millions of tons of ore into open rail cars.

They wore no protective masks or clothing. They ate their lunches in holes choked with radioactive dust. They drank mine water that would have triggered a Geiger counter. They staggered home to wives who washed their filthy overalls with the family laundry.

The dying started in the 1960s. In places such as Cove, there are hardly any old men. Instead, there are poisonous dumps, contaminated springs, and thousands of gaping mines.

Recently declassified documents show the government knew from the start it was playing with poison, but concealed the dangers.

In 1990, Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act and apologized for failing to protect uranium workers and their families. It ordered payments of up to \$100,000 to miners in Wyoming, Washington State, and the Four Corners area, as well as to others who lived in the Nevada Test Site's fallout.

The money did not come easily. To get it, the Navajo had to produce documents, which have no place among their people. Marriage certificates. Death certificates. Pieces of paper unable to convey whole truths.

A special tribal court was convened to verify marriages, births, and deaths, a process that takes months. Witnesses must appear "to verify, sometimes, a person's existence," said Timothy Benally, a former miner who leads the victims committee. "We had six people die while their claims were pending."

On July 12, Congress amended the compensation act, increasing benefits and reducing paperwork. Still, the Navajo say it is not enough.

"Nothing can equal a human life," says Dorothy Joe.

Like the reservations, radiation is now part of the white man's legacy -- a primer on what happens when the government tries to make amends for debts no man can pay.

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Federal government interest in the Navajos grew during World War II.

First it courted men to be "code talkers." The Japanese, who broke nearly every U.S. radio code, never cracked spoken Navajo. Then, the government wanted uranium to make atomic bombs.

When Kerr-McGee and other corporations arrived to run the mines, no one on the reservation thought twice about taking the work. Navajo miners were paid \$45 a week, a small sum even then but better than nothing.

Kerr-McGee declined to comment. "This is a subject that is under litigation," said a spokeswoman. The company is being sued for allegedly causing the deaths of two Navajo by exposing them to radiation.

Johnny Sam, now 60, worked a hopper for five years beginning in 1975, examining chunks of rock under a special light to identify high-grade uranium. The good stuff was blue. The low-grade was gray.

Most was yellow, meaning average. "Leetso" is the Navajo word for uranium. It means "yellow brown" or "yellow dirt."

"They didn't explain to us what it did to you," says Sam, his dark eyes scanning the hillsides of Church Rock, which is 17 miles northeast of Gallup, N.M., and the site of one of the biggest nuclear accidents in U.S. history.

Sam remembers foremen ordering miners into smoky shafts minutes after a TNT blast. The longest tunnels ran 1,800 feet, often with no ventilation. The men trudged in, their hats beaming shafts of light, their lungs filling with radioactive dust.

It has been 20 years since Sam wore a miner's hat. His breath comes hard now, and his lungs burn. He has never smoked cigarettes; he blames the mines.

"Nothing bothered us right away," he said. "Fifteen or 20 years later, things bother you."

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Lung cancer is a torturous and humiliating way to die.

Breathing is agony. Control is lost over private things.

To his family, the swift demise of Ray Joe was stupefying. Suddenly, the sturdy bear of a man weighed less than 100 pounds and couldn't get out of bed.

"He tried to stay strong till the end," says David Joe. "But there was nothing left of him."

It started with wheezing. Ray Joe couldn't catch his breath. He found himself unable to haul well water to the house he had built with his two hands. His family took him to hospitals in Albuquerque, Gallup, and Farmington. But the cancer in his lungs was too far gone.

Six months after his diagnosis, Ray Joe died.

It was the widows who first petitioned the government in 1960 for redress. As their husbands died, they began to talk among themselves. And to notice things. Like the way death started with not being able to catch a full breath.

The wives remembered other things that seized their hearts. How they used to bring uranium chunks in the house at night so their children could watch them glow in the dark. How their husbands' work clothes, covered in radioactive muck, sometimes sat in the kitchen for a week because running water didn't come to this reservation until the 1980s.

"The government destroyed this community," said David Joe. "They destroyed our lives."

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