

“A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” – From Family History to Community Museum Exhibit

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I want to give special thanks to the McLean County Museum of History, Laborers' International Union (LiUNA) Midwest Region, and curators Mike Matejka and Susan Hartzold for creating and supporting this important exhibit through worker/union/community/museum collaboration. I am grateful to everyone who shared their time and wealth of knowledge. There is a special place in my family's hearts for this exhibit, for everyone who made it a reality, and for each person whose life has been changed by a company's deadly deceit.

My earliest childhood memories are of my tall, smiling grandfather—in whose muscular arms I loved to curl up—rapidly becoming more frail and pained when I crawled onto his lap. I was proud of my grandfather, Willard Tipsord: a caring family man, a foster father, and an active member of Carpenters Local 63 in McLean County, Illinois. As a preschooler, I would point out buildings around town that he had helped construct. These places would later mark the passage of time in my early life, from the Eastland Mall, where I would meet friends as a teenager, to the Student Center at Illinois State University, where I would complete my graduate degrees.

Until Grandpa Tipsord became sick, I didn't know that in the 1950s, as a newlywed with a young child at home, he had worked at United Asbestos & Rubber Company (UNARCO) in Bloomington, Illinois, before earning his Carpenters union card. He was barely 20 years old when he started at UNARCO. 20 years later, in his late 40s, Grandpa was diagnosed with mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer, and doctors told our family that he had six months to live. Yet he lived until May 1, 1989, which also happens to be International Workers' Day. He was 57 years old when he died from cancer caused by asbestos fibers that had lodged deep in his lungs three decades earlier.



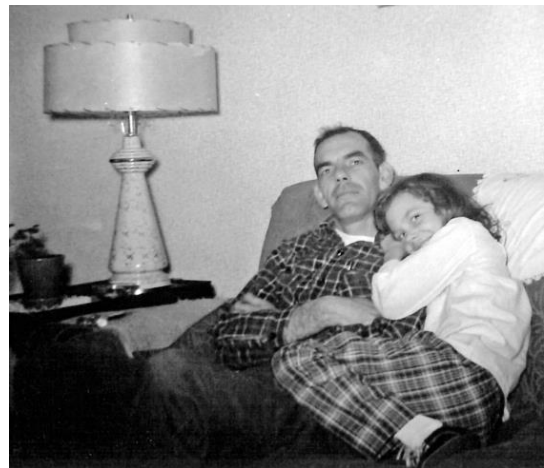
Ericka Wills and her Grandfather Willard Tipsord.

I was six years old when Grandpa died, and I couldn't have imagined at the time how the circumstances surrounding his death would eventually change the trajectory of my life. I did not

know or understand how, for decades, UNARCO had suppressed studies that scientifically proved the dangers of asbestos or how, as a cost-cutting measure, the company had knowingly “phased out” workers showing early signs of asbestos-related illness to create plausible deniability surrounding their eventual deaths. I didn’t know how the company had moved production to Bloomington from Cicero, near Chicago, after workers in Cicero started getting sick, or how UNARCO left Bloomington just as quickly after workers in Bloomington also fell ill. As a confused and grieving young child, I understood only that a “bad company” had made Grandpa sick.

Today, I am an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin School for Workers, the oldest university-based labor education program in the U.S. We proudly carry forward the slogan “Education for Workplace Democracy,” and build upon the legacy of men and women, like Grandpa, who gave their lives as part of the struggle for safe workplaces, a collective voice on the job, and the dignity of labor. Since I got my start as a labor educator in my early 20s, I have taught thousands of workers through their unions across the U.S., Mexico, and Canada – ranging from miners to flight attendants and teachers to steelworkers. Using a Community-Engaged Scholarship approach emphasizing collaboration with workers, families, labor organizations, and allies, I have helped workers self-organize in my neighborhood, facilitated transnational multi-union contract campaigns, and participated at every level in between. But even with my engagement in workers’ struggles, I knew relatively little about UNARCO, the company where Grandpa worked as a young man. Nor did I know the consequences that management and doctors’ choices to suppress data about the dangers of asbestos had on other families and the legacy that personal and corporate deceit had on shaping my home town.

I told myself that someday I would learn more about that part of my family history and the rippling effect decisions made at UNARCO had on workers, families, and communities. Yet it was too painful and frightening for me to reopen those only partially-healed wounds. It wasn’t until September 2024, at the opening of the McLean County Museum of History’s exhibit “A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County,” that I realized I am part of an entire community which was just now recognizing and engaging with this history and its contemporary legacy.



Cheryl Tipsord Wills and her father Willard Tipsord.

Julia Rose explains, “[D]ifficult histories in museum and historic sites can raise intense emotions and incite visitors’ resistances to engaging in learning about a painful history...For history workers, the tasks of assembling representations and crafting interpretations for difficult histories are both personal and political” (Rose 2016, 33). Recognizing this, I chose to write my own subjectivity into this article, highlighting the way that meaning-making occurs in museum exhibits at the intersection of personal, public, past, and present. My personal responses and memories are interwoven through what follows, as this article briefly situates the exhibit in a context of presenting difficult public labor histories, provides an overview of the exhibit with an emphasis on workers’ oral histories, and finally offers sample community responses from young union

apprentices who experienced “A Deadly Deception.” While each of these sections focuses on this particular exhibit on McLean County history, as exhibit curator Mike Matejka explains, sharing the story of UNARCO “illustrates a national tragedy on a local scale,” as it is “a universal story of people being sacrificed, forced to endure toxic conditions and environmental hazards all in the pursuit of profit” (Matejka 2024a). Following this realization, I am offering “A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” as a model for local history exhibits to broaden the focus of inquiry on industrial tragedies beyond the human suffering and death (and there certainly is that) to encompass the agency, resilience, and remembrance of workers, families, and the community. In this way, the exhibit is about creating knowledge of the past to move forward by recognizing how companies have put profit before people, how this continues today, and how we can collectively create awareness and change.

Public Memory, Labor History, Truth-Telling and “A Deadly Deception”

“In the second decade of the twenty-first century, public historians have called for more public histories of labor. They ground their argument in the specificity of the moment,” explain Robert Forrant and Mary Anne Trasciatti in their introduction to *Where Are the Workers?: Labor’s Stories at Museums and Historic Sites*. “We see in the present moment an urgent need to tell the stories of working people and working-class organizations and movements, but we also know that class struggle is a defining feature of capitalist societies and the time for active engagement with labor history in the U.S. is always *now*” (Forrant and Trasciatti 2022, 2). “A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” seizes the momentum of the current moment, when public support for unions is at historically high levels (Brenan 2024), and the majority of Americans say unions have a positive impact on the country (Pew 2024).

This exhibit encompasses over a decade of diligent planning, listening, research, fundraising, design, and installation that involved collaboration between curators, former UNARCO workers, families, unions, community members, and others. Reflecting aspects of Commemorative Museum Pedagogy that Julia Rose develops in *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historical Sites*, the museum and curators took a holistic approach “to develop and construct ethical historical representations” that presented those with asbestos-related industrial illnesses not as one-dimensional “victims” but rather multidimensional people with “experiences, expertise, and agency” (Rose 2016, 153; 4). As such, the exhibit eschews presenting a “neutral” history in favor of what Rose describes as museums’ emerging role as “social agents that can take on social responsibilities that go beyond collecting and preserving materials. They have the ability to positively influence and affect society” (Rose 2016, 36).

Participants who experience the exhibit should recognize that the museum and curators addressed a certain level of risk in the hallways of the exhibit, including the possibility that the exhibit would upset or offend audiences (Rose 2016, 36). As the article, “Reaching into the Community to Interpret Labor History: A Museum-Labor-University Collaboration” details, “For museums in communities that may lack a well-known or celebrated labor past, public and labor historians face even more difficulties as they try to develop projects that document and present the history of workers and their popular protests” (Mercier, Tissot, and Richardson 2023, 74). Such challenges and risks are particularly evident in creating an asbestos exhibit that fuses the past and the present around the theme of “industrial homicide”: an evocative and accurate phrase that designates when

the action or inaction of an employer or those with decision-making power at a company results in the death of workers. Speaking at the opening of “A Deadly Deception,” Judy Emig, the executive director of the McLean County Museum of History, left no doubt about the museum’s commitment to share such bold social messages, clarifying, “The mission of the museum is to preserve, educate, and collaborate in sharing diverse stories of our community, and we are committed to investigating the whole of history. We are committed to truth-telling.” (Emig 2024).

Four generations of women in my family toured the “A Deadly Deception” – my Grandma Tipsord (Willard’s widow); my mother, Cheryl Tipsord Wills (Willard’s daughter); my daughter, Willow; and me. As my mother shared memories of her father and his description of working conditions with my daughter, a statement made by museum board president Carolyn Yockey at the exhibit



Cheryl Tipsord Wills explaining the exhibit and family memories to her granddaughter, Willow.

opening echoed in my mind: “There are times we think about our history as ‘oh the nice parts about grandma and grandpa or what the great grandparents did.’” “This exhibit that opens today isn’t as pretty and fun to read about. It is sad. It’s alarming. I used the word horrifying earlier today. But it is part of our history and something we need to know and share.” (Yockey 2024). Touring or learning from the exhibit may mean sorting through messily intertwined facts, emotions, memories, and current events in an active meaning-making process.

The Exhibit¹

Upon entering the exhibit, participants encounter a sign displaying its name –“A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County”– followed by a subheading that sets the stage for viewers. The sign reads, “The story of asbestos, and how the proprietors of a local manufacturing company kept a lethal secret in order to maximize profits.” The exhibit is arranged in a spiral formation, taking participants from the entrance walls lined with general information around the perimeter and then inward, with increasing specificity about the asbestos company’s deadly impact on workers, families, Bloomington and the surrounding communities.

Along the entry walls, exhibit participants learn about asbestos mining and its ubiquitous uses in the mid-twentieth century. They learn about the United Asbestos & Rubber Company (UNARCO), which moved into a factory in Bloomington in 1951. The building had once been a railroad shop, but when steam locomotives were replaced by diesel, it had closed. Bloomington had lost several hundred jobs in the railroad industry, so when UNARCO opened its doors, the community celebrated the 160-250 new jobs that the company promised.

¹ Unless otherwise cited, quotations in this section come from the exhibit “A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” at the McLean County History Museum. Supporting documentation can be found in Matejka 2024b and Schlenker 2024.

As the visitor moves inward, the tone of the exhibit shifts. Visitors turn the corner to a second wall with the large, bold heading, “What Bloomington Workers Didn’t Know Would Hurt Them.” The following panels offer historical data, photos, workers’ narratives, and scientific studies that detail how, beginning in the 1930s, the asbestos industry funded and then actively suppressed the results of studies demonstrating the dangers of asbestos. “Leaders at UNARCO and other asbestos manufacturing companies were withholding the results of their health studies from their workers, as well as the public,” reads a description next to excerpts from a 1948 study by the asbestos industry-funded Industrial Hygiene Foundation. As Egilman, Bird, and Lee argue, “Asbestos product companies would like the public to believe that there was a legitimate scientific debate surrounding the asbestos–cancer link during the twentieth century that delayed adequate regulation...[T]here was no such legitimate debate” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 115). Instead, corporate, medical, and insurance interests who were “members of the Industrial Hygiene Foundation (IHF), acted in concert to manipulate dust disease science and avoid legal liability for the injuries their products caused to workers, consumers, and their family members” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 116).

By the time UNARCO moved to Bloomington, it was already well aware of the industrial disease caused by asbestos. The company had shut down its plant in Cicero, Illinois, after paying thousands of dollars in workers’ compensation claims and, in search of a new, healthy workforce, relocated to Bloomington. “Worker Complaints About the Dust at UNARCO Landed on Deaf Ears,” reads a panel at the end of the second wall. Next to photos of workers handling raw asbestos with no protective gear are images of union grievance forms with workers’ complaints about asbestos dust. A quote from union president Richard Babb explains that when the union would take workers’ grievances to management, “They wouldn’t listen to us that dust was dangerous to our health. They told us dust was in no way affecting our health.”

Before turning to continue down the third outer wall, participants can choose to sit for a minute at the corner and listen to workers’ oral histories narrated through a loudspeaker. Excerpts of workers’ and family members’ accounts are integrated throughout the exhibit as well as being accessible in the audio nook. Firsthand accounts transition the visitor from an exhibit about an asbestos company to one about workers, their families, those who advocated on their behalf, and the larger community. Writing about asbestos-related archives at the University of Strathclyde, Arthur McIvor asserts that an such an oral history “approach democratizes knowledge, accepting that eye-witness accounts are valuable and valid; that we can learn from those who directly experienced the past” (McIvor 2024, 11).



Jim Sumer working an asbestos loom at UNARCO's Bloomington, IL facility. Photo courtesy of McLean County History Museum, Pantagraph Achieves

He continues, “These oral histories of asbestos victims and advocates... provide us with privileged insights, giving us the capability of standing on the shoulders of those who directly witnessed or experienced industrial work and its myriad hazards and risks; seeing things through their eyes; their world” (McIvor 2024, 11). Increasingly, the exhibit draws the participant into the world of the workers and their families through the voices, photos, and first-hand experiences that continue to unfold throughout the rest of the exhibit.

While listening to workers’ own words describing the conditions of the asbestos factory and the agony of suffering from asbestosis, participants can see photographs from inside the factory: workers without protective equipment shoveling raw asbestos fibers, piled like mounds of fluffy, white cotton. Two types of face coverings sit in a display case labeled, “Workers Were Supplied With Inadequate Dust Masks.” One mask, which was only occasionally made available to factory workers, is similar to today’s disposable paper masks. Another mask, a more sophisticated Bureau of Mines-approved metal and rubber respirator, was purchased by UNARCO for its lab technicians but not made available to factory workers. The display underscores which workers UNARCO considered disposable, much like a single-use mask.

These masks make me think back to Grandpa describing how he would tie a handkerchief around his nose and mouth to keep from choking on the fibers in the air. Grandpa was evidently one of the disposable workers. As my mom, Cheryl Tipsord Wills, described on a radio interview for the exhibit opening, “Management came out and made them take the hankies off their faces. They would not let them wear hankies to protect themselves” (Schlenker 2024).



William Mau, who died of asbestos related illness, filling asbestos weaving machine at UNARCO. Photo courtesy of McLean County History Museum Pantagraph Achieves

Continuing down the third outer wall, side by side panels read, “UNARCO Ignored Warnings to Improve Conditions in Their Factories” and “Negligent Practices Placed Workers in Harm’s Way.” With photographs and first-hand accounts of factory conditions, participants learn that “[r]ather than replace the old machines from the Cicero plant, UNARCO moved them to Bloomington. The old ventilation systems used at UNARCO to remove asbestos dust from the air were grossly inadequate.” Although UNARCO was aware of both the scientific evidence of asbestos-related cancer and the asbestos-related illnesses it had documented at the Cicero facility, the company chose to use the same machinery in a different poorly-ventilated location where, according to employee Chuck Hammond, “[u]sually there was [asbestos] dust anywhere from an inch to three inches deep on it [the floor].”

Remembering the conditions in the shop, Otto J. Kessinger described, “At the end of the plant where I worked, you could look up ... it looked like it was snowing with asbestos fiber.” Hammond

and Kessinger's accounts provide a human context in which to understand how the decisions by UNARCO's management – such as where to relocate the plant, who to provide with adequate masks, and when to suppress scientific evidence – had material consequences. Through such asbestos oral histories, as McIvor recognizes, “We get beyond the cold documentary records and statistics of ill-health to more complex and multi-layered stories” of workers and communities (McIvor 2024, 12).

At the corner of third and fourth walls, the story moves from the workers to their families and community. “Asbestos Dust was so Thick Inside UNARCO and so Poorly Contained That the Air and Land Outside the Plant was Also Contaminated with Asbestos,” reads a bold heading on the last panel of the third wall. Photos and text illustrate that community members were exposed to asbestos, although they never set foot in the plant. Mark Britton, who lived in the neighborhood by the plant and played in a nearby park as a young child, died of asbestosis at only 39 years old. He is one of those who died of an asbestos-related illness simply because of his proximity to the plant.

An adjacent panel with a black-and-white photo of a woman putting clothes into a mid-century electric washing machine explains, “In an Environment in Which Asbestos Dust Prevailed, Workers Carried it Home on Their Clothes. Subsequently, family members were exposed.” While I had been thinking about Grandpa during the exhibit, this brief statement reminded me that my grandma, too, suffers from asbestos lung damage due, most likely, to fibers that Grandpa brought home on his work clothes that Grandma washed.

For me, experiencing the exhibit involved emotional and intellectual responses: learning and feeling. As Dickerson, Blair, and Ott point out in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, “The partiality and contestedness of public memory are virtually undeniable” (Dickerson, Blair, and Ott 2010, 17). Therefore, it must be noted that while the exhibit offers worker, family, and community member oral histories, it goes beyond public memory (and forgetting) to ground information in scientific and legal documentation. The medical evidence and asbestos-company documentation exposed during class action lawsuits, particularly in the 1980s, suggest that while individual, family, or community memories might vary, in instances of companies like UNARCO, a preponderance of evidence demonstrates the “manipulation of science and law by the asbestos product manufacturers” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 116).

Like the change in tone around that first corner of the exhibit, the emphasis shifts again, from workers' personal accounts to evidence of scientific data and legal documentation that UNARCO and other asbestos companies knew about the dangers of asbestos, yet willfully exposed workers, their families, and the whole community. Under the heading, spelled out in bold, capital letters, “THE DECEIT,” the next panels provide medical documentation, health records, and physicians' accounts to illustrate how “UNARCO and other asbestos manufacturing companies regularly monitored the health of their employees, but not because they wanted to ensure they stayed healthy in a dangerous environment.” Rather, in “a callous and calculated process, UNARCO management and doctors used the X-rays to watch any asbestos disease's progress, and then ‘eased workers out’ (laid them off) before the devastating symptoms of the disease became apparent to the worker.”

When workers began to show asbestos-related illness, UNARCO would also convince workers to sign away their right to sue in return for a cash payment through the asbestos company's self-insurance front, Associated Safety & Claims Services, Inc. "Why would the company take an x-ray of workers every year?" asked exhibit curator Mike Matejka. "Because they knew we want to follow people so that if they reach a certain point, and we start seeing disease in their lungs, they are going to get a little visit from the personnel manager who says sign this paper for a \$2,000 settlement if you agree not to sue us" (Matejka 2024a). This practice was not unique to UNARCO; rather before stricter laws in the 1960s, asbestos companies "moved to channel all legal claims into workers' compensation or out-of-court settlements, eliminating the potential of publicly accessible trial records" (Shearer 2015, 178).

As the fourth wall of the exhibit begins to curve inward, the panels transition to the collapse of the asbestos industry's willful deceit. "Beginning in 1964 the U.S. Department of Labor conducted industrial hygiene surveys at factories that produced asbestos products," a panel reads. Before the establishment of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1971, the Department of Labor could issue citations and recommendations but there were no meaningful enforcement mechanisms to protect worker health and safety. Perhaps because of the Department of Labor's Industrial Hygiene findings, such as a 1967 report that "UNARCO asbestos levels were well above the acceptable levels and was in violation of the law due to non-use of respirators, dry sweeping during work hours, inadequate dust hoods, and poor housekeeping" and the growing number of asbestos-related illnesses in the Bloomington area, by the late 1960s, UNARCO was looking to get out of the asbestos industry altogether.

"In 1970 Owens-Corning purchased the Bloomington facility from UNARCO, intending to continue asbestos production," reads an adjacent panel. However, an industrial hygiene firm hired by Owens-Corning found that "atmospheric conditions in the work environment of this plant are unbelievably bad...No consideration was given to protecting the health of the workforce...The outdated equipment and methods of handling prevent proper control under present conditions." After this report, Owens Corning stopped manufacturing asbestos products in its Bloomington plant and shuttered the operation in 1972.

Over the next two decades, the asbestos industry's deadly deception would increasingly come to light, in significant part due to class action lawsuits filed by workers against asbestos companies. As Shearer explains, "Worker and consumer lawsuits against asbestos manufacturers helped raise awareness of the harm from asbestos exposure, and the litigation helped uncover documents showing industry knowledge of harm and attempts to suppress the information" (Shearer 2015, 178). In legal proceedings, asbestos companies were required to produce records, studies, health data, and other documents during discovery, and management personnel were deposed under oath. A panel summarizes, "Depositions revealed a plethora of unconscionable practices by UNARCO owners and managers." This section shares that workers could not recall "receiving printed materials from management regarding the dangers of asbestos" or "seeing signs anywhere in the plant or on any bags of asbestos that warned them of the dangers of asbestos," while the vast majority of workers recalled "piles of loose asbestos on the floors, and high concentrations of asbestos particle[s] in the air." In another attempt to avoid accountability and "to protect its shareholders from asbestos liabilities, on July 29, 1982, UNARCO became the first [asbestos

company] to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy. [As part of the] reorganization, on June 2, 1989, a trust was established to pay asbestosis claims against all manufacturers.”

However, the story of asbestos and companies’ deadly deceit does not end there. As the exhibit participant moves towards the center of the room, asbestos issues are brought into a contemporary context. Under the unambiguous title, “Secrecy and Greed—the Continuing Story,” a panel details, “This is not the first, nor will it be the last time that businesses have lied to consumers in order to grow their profits.” Participants can flip through a book attached to the panel that details “Deadly Deceptions” in other contemporary U.S. industries, including military burn pits, lead in water pipes, Purdue Pharma and OxyContin, and forever chemicals like Gore-Tex, Teflon, and Scotchguard.

Next to this panel is a closing admonition to the viewer: “Today we rarely hear about the issues of asbestos, but they still exist and continue to be a very expensive problem.” The assertion reflects what Egilman, Bird, and Lee recognize as historic and contemporary asbestos exposure that “translates into hundreds of thousands of additional asbestos injuries and deaths worldwide and the accompanying individual and human toll that results” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 122). The panel details financial costs to society and families from asbestos removal in local schools, continuing medical bills, and lost earnings. What cannot be quantified is the emotional and psychological toll all of this took.



Author, Ericka Wills, viewing Grandpa Willard Tipsord’s memorial book page.

Around the final corner, at the heart of the exhibit, is a memorial wall naming the over 130 known McLean County workers or family members with secondary exposure who died of asbestos-related diseases. Attached to the wall is a small table with a photobook that shares family pictures of those who died and describes them in their loved-ones’ words. It contains a wedding photo of Grandma and Grandpa and a picture of Grandpa smiling widely as he held me. Each of those names is more than a worker; the names signify someone with hopes and dreams who went to work to support themselves and their families and whose life was sacrificed for corporate greed.

Participants leave the exhibit walking through a model decontamination chamber, passing through plastic flaps and by a mannequin wearing the full hazmat gear that should be used today when workers are in the presence of asbestos. This final display of personal protective equipment emphasizes the true deadly nature of the substance and stands in stark contrast to the photos and descriptions that exhibit participants previously saw of UNARCO workers handling raw asbestos fibers without any safety equipment and the columns of the names of those who died because of that exposure.

By integrating oral histories, personal photos, and contemporary connections alongside historical, legal, and scientific evidence, “A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County”

centers the worker, their family, and the community in the asbestos story. By reading and hearing workers' accounts, an exhibit participant can, as McIvor recognizes, view "the asbestos story through their lens and relay that to us to enable better understanding of the meanings of their working lives, work-health cultures and how they navigated identity transitions from fit, able breadwinner, to disabled, dependent, and dying" (McIvor 2024, 12). Echoing Rose's call for multidimensional representation in exhibits on difficult histories, integrating worker, family, and community voices fosters an understanding of how they were "active agents in this process, not just passive victims. They reacted to corporate irresponsibility and managerial exploitation, putting production and profit before health, by mobilizing and campaigning" (McIvor, 2024, 12).

"A Deadly Deception" provides a model for what a public history museum can achieve in place-based labor history to, as Farrant and Trasciatti articulate, "create awareness of present challenges, and support ongoing efforts to build power, expand democracy, and achieve justice for working people (Farrant and Trasciatti 2022, 14). For this to be more fully achieved, community engagement with the exhibit must be encouraged and fostered. At its best, the exhibit is not only a display of facts and perspectives contained within the walls of the museum but rather an experience that the viewer takes with them into the world, better educated on what happened in the past, the ramifications in the present, and the trends of corporate greed and labor exploitation that, unfortunately, may continue into the future without informed, concerted, organized intervention from collective workers and consumers.

Community Reactions: UA Local 99

A few weeks after the exhibit opened, a group of about thirty United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry (UA) Local 99 first year union apprentices visited the museum as part of their training. As I chatted with apprentices touring the



UA Local 99 apprentices at "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" at the McLean County History Museum.

exhibit, most told me they were in their late teens or early twenties – the age my grandfather was when he had worked at UNARCO. I couldn't help but wonder what resources about worker health and safety, let alone labor history, had or had not been available to my grandfather at that age, and what these young workers were taking away from their experience at the exhibit. Ultimately, to assess a public labor history project like "A Deadly Deception" requires not only considering the exhibit itself but also "responses of the learner[s] to the difficult histories" (Rose 2016, 153).

Apprentices John Kelleher and Clive Griffiths, both 19 years old, said that they didn't know much about asbestos before the exhibit and had no idea that there had been an asbestos factory in the community even though they have lived in the area their entire lives. Griffith explained, "This is

my first time ever hearing about asbestos, especially reading and seeing that there was a factory here. It's worrisome because we never really know what is going on around us." For Griffith what he learned from the exhibit also extended beyond asbestos and his community. He pointed out the information about contemporary toxic exposure from burn pits and shared, "This is good to know because I am in the military. We still dig holes and burn things like this."

While "A Deadly Deception" memorializes those whose lives were impacted by asbestos-related illnesses in central Illinois, the power of this exhibit lies not only in revealing an effaced local history but also exposing a trend of company decisionmakers knowingly and willfully sacrificing workers', family members', and community residents' lives in pursuit of increased profit. Malignant corporate greed knows no historical limits, impacting workers and consumers as it evolves from, for instance, the asbestos industry to opioid pharmaceutical producers to forever chemical proliferation to military burn pits. Conceptualizing the exhibit as speaking as much to our present conditions as recording the past reflects Rose's assertion that by "commemorating and interpreting difficult histories, history organizations can contribute powerful content to the collective narrative, effectively demonstrating that difficult histories matter in the present" (Rose 2016, 340). As such, "They have the ability to positively influence and affect society. Such a claim to social agency propels museums and historical sites into a wider and more urgent educational role of advocating for social justice" (Rose 2016, 36).

For UA Local 99 apprentices, an assertion of museums' role in social justice is neither abstract nor hypothetical. Rather, information from "A Deadly Deception" about worker health and safety is applicable to the everyday lives of the young plumbers and pipefitters who are exposed to a variety of building materials, chemicals, and toxins at their worksites. Jerry Kelleher, UA Local 99 Business Manager, who accompanied the apprentices to the exhibit, explained, "It is important for my apprentices to know the dangers that they could still be confronting when they are out in the field working on older piping or remodel jobs. You need to think about yourself and your family and how unsafe exposure is happening again with materials like Teflon."

As apprentices Kyle Sheldon and Nick Schuler neared the end of the exhibit, they stood by the list of names of community members that have died of asbestos-related illnesses. "We know now about asbestos and the dangers of it but to see the wall of names with all the people that passed away due to the conditions is really impactful" Sheldon said. "It is important to remember because it makes you look at the things you do on a daily basis and wonder: What am I handling that might be dangerous?" Schuler agreed, elaborating that not all the names on the wall were those



UA Local 99 apprentices at "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" at the McLean County History Museum.

of individuals who were exposed to asbestos in their workplace. “Learning about people who didn’t even work there like people in neighborhoods by the factory and workers families getting sick from the asbestos is really eye opening,” he explained.

Beyond their workplaces, the UA union members are learning to connect past labor fights with current workers’ struggles in their apprenticeship labor history education class. Providing direct education on these topics through a museum exhibit offers labor history that is accessible to the union apprentices and larger community. As Farrant and Trasciatti state, “given that most people are not learning labor history in high school or college... exposure to that history in alternative settings is essential for building and supporting a viable and formidable labor movement” (Farrant and Trasciatti 2022, 12).

Taylor Hemmingson, who had worked her first job as an apprentice the week before she toured the exhibit, connected what she saw at the museum to what she had learned about labor history and her experiences in the field. “This [UNARCO story] is beat-for-beat like the same playbook by the company as with Radium Girls,” Hemmingson recognized, referring to women in Ottawa, Illinois, north of Bloomington, who in the 1920s and 30s painted glow-in-the-dark wristwatch dials with radium-laced paint that the company knew was toxically radioactive. Hemmingson elaborated, “The parallels are that this is something that keeps happening. What’s happening to us now? I think about the focus on making sure important research on dangers to workers isn’t quashed and making sure you advocate for yourselves because the company isn’t going to.”

Hemmingson reflected on a narrative from the exhibit that other apprentices also recognized – the continuing story of workers and consumers being put at risk by corporate greed. Grant Weidner stated, “It’s very important to tell these stories because I didn’t know the timeline for asbestos. I think a lot of people might be under the impression that these things happened to workers way in the past, in the 1800s, but stories like this help us use our critical thinking to realize that things like this are still going on and companies are still going to be willing to put people in situations that they know are dangerous.” Weidner said he had been told to “just do the work” in unsafe conditions in construction before he joined the union, and he was now “so grateful to be part of the union” because, according to him, they take worker health and safety seriously.

Near the exit to the exhibit, Jerry Kelleher emphasized, “The more everybody knows, the more educated we are, the more we come together. True education makes a better community.” Kelleher’s statement articulates both the core goal of an exhibit like “A Deadly Deception” to educate for social justice as well as the task of a progressive labor movement that not only participates in traditional collective bargaining over wages, hours, and working conditions but also leverages power for the common good by using solidarity to create a better and more just society.

The Present and Our Future

Today we are teetering on a precipice for worker and consumer protections, as well as broader social justice movements in the United States. In 2018, the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Epic Systems v. Lewis* upheld mandatory arbitration agreements as a condition of employment, taking away workers’ right to file class actions, and echoing the agreements that UNARCO’s workers signed to waive their right to sue the company in exchange for a modest payout. Without

those class actions in the 1980s, there would have been no depositions or testimony exposing UNARCO's deceit. The Supreme Court's reversal of the *Chevron* doctrine in 2024, which empowered agencies like OSHA and EPA to pass regulations and required courts to defer to them, slammed the door on the power of agencies to protect worker and consumer health and safety. Will the result be similar to the ineffective and unenforceable mid-20th century citations and recommendations that the Department of Labor levied against UNARCO? Even the continued existence of the heart of United States labor law, the National Labor Relations Act, which is enforced by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), has been brought into question as courts may be poised to hold that the enforcement arm of the NLRB – once taken for granted by workers – is unconstitutional.

“A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” opened in September 2024 and only two months later, after the election in November of that year, projections for the future of organized labor echo struggles of the past. Forrant and Trasciatti provide a particularly apt analysis of our current era:

Research shows that both stagnating wages and rising inequality are a direct result of declining union membership. Although the situation is dire, there is hope. The U.S. labor movement is in a moment of transition marked by historic levels of popular support and increased militancy, on the one hand, and a stream of antilabor initiatives from the Supreme Court, federal agencies, and various state governments, on the other. This combination of growing support and increased threats makes labor history more relevant than ever. (Forrant and Trasciatti 4, 2022).

Moving forward in a new historical context will increasingly mean engaging with the past, as the laws, agencies, and governmental bodies that have protected workers and consumers are eroded, reminiscent of a time before these safeguards existed. A “Deadly Deception” reminds exhibit participants of the human lives sacrificed for corporate profit and the continuation of this trend. Effective advocacy for the future of workers' health and safety protections on national and international level may well depend on our ability to effectively convey the lessons of local labor history that surround us today.

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