



BE SAFE

PVC

P.O. Box 6806 * Falls Church, VA 22040 * Phone: 518-732-4538 or 703-237-2249 * Email: besafe@chej.org

January 16 - Effects of Deadly Train Crash Still Rumble Through Town

A year later, people in Graniteville, S.C., say the release of chlorine gas damaged their health and harmed their property and businesses.

By Jenny Jarvie, From the LA Times

GRANITEVILLE, S.C. — A year after a train crash spread a toxic plume of chlorine gas through this small mill town, John Logan, a 60-year-old handyman, continues to inspect property damage.

Nails on a side porch are rusting, he noted as he looked at houses recently; a metal roof is stained with brown streaks, and the underside of a heating unit is flaking.

Inside many of the homes, residents describe headaches, breathing difficulties and memory loss.

Graniteville has not been the same since a Norfolk Southern train carrying pressurized chlorine gas crashed into a parked train on Jan. 6, 2005, killing nine people, injuring 240 and forcing more than 5,000 residents to flee the poisonous gas that seeped into their homes for days.

"Its been one thing after another," said Logan, an inspector for the Douglas Schmidt Law Office, which represents 600 residents and business owners who say the chlorine spill harmed their property or their health.

As a result of the corrosive gas, Patricia Courtney's clocks stopped telling time; Melinda Borst's television turned itself on and off; and the organ at Graniteville's First Baptist Church emitted sound erratically.

Many residents fear that this close-knit community will never recover from the train derailment, the deadliest train wreck involving hazardous material since 1978. They worry about the future of Avondale Mills, the vast industrial complex in the heart of town. In October, the company announced plans to lay off 350 workers and sue Norfolk Southern for "catastrophic damage" to its machinery.

Norfolk Southern has estimated that it will spend \$39 million cleaning up the accident and paying legal claims.

"The chlorine damage is more insidious than anyone expected," said Stephen Felker Jr., Avondale Mills' manager of corporate development. Microscopic metal chloride salts, he said, continue to corrode electronic components and metallic surfaces throughout the company's 13-acre dyeing and finishing plant.

According to papers filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company had spent \$52.5 million on cleanup costs by August, the end of its fiscal year.

Textiles have been the bedrock of this town's economy for 160 years. Before William W. Gregg built his mill out of granite — one of the South's most successful antebellum cotton mills — in this South Carolina valley, the area was known as Hardscrabble.

James Oscar Farmer Jr., a history professor at the University of South Carolina in Aiken, said poor Southerners flocked to Graniteville and its mill to escape backbreaking farm work.

Although community life no longer revolves around the mill as it used to — in 1998, Bridgestone/Firestone constructed a tire manufacturing plant on the outskirts of Graniteville — residents fear the town will deteriorate if the mill shuts down.

"We're crossing our fingers," said Robin Anderson, a 39-year-old Graniteville resident. "We've got to hope this won't become a ghost town."

Already, some residents say, they spend more time inside their homes.

"I don't hardly go to church," said Patricia Courtney, 65, who lives on Main Street, less than half a mile from the crash site. "I don't feel like going anywhere anymore."

Courtney has been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a persistent obstruction of the flow of air out of the lungs, as a result of exposure to the gas.

What bothers her most, however, is memory loss.

"I'm just not smart anymore," she said. "Sometimes I just can't get all my thoughts together."

Louisiana Wright, who founded the Graniteville Community Coalition to assist local residents after the train crash, said many residents continued to smell chlorine.

[> return to PVC News Index](#)