

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**SHARON COOKE VARGAS**

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH  
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Lee S. Berry

at

Vargas Home  
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

15 September 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

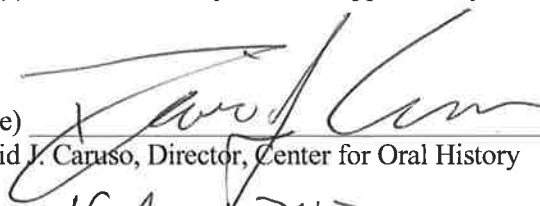

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## ABSTRACT

**Sharon Cooke-Vargas** and her two brothers grew up in Ambler, Pennsylvania, after their parents divorced and their mother moved there to be near her own parents. Cooke-Vargas' grandfather, who died of asbestosis, worked at Keasbey and Mattison Company and then at Upper Darby schools, and her grandmother was a domestic worker; they also owned property in the black communities. Cooke-Vargas' neighborhood was black, but the schools were integrated, and kids all played together, not noticing differences. She did only a little sledding on the so-called White Mountains of Ambler.

Finding Cheyney University overwhelming, Cooke-Vargas decided to join the US Army; she traveled widely with the Army, becoming a recruiter. After leaving the Army she returned to Ambler, her home town, then to Mount Airy. She owned a tea shop in downtown for a while. Cooke-Vargas says everyone knew about the asbestos, but because it took decades to manifest as a health problem, she was not concerned until the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ordered dumping of the asbestos-containing waste stopped. Though her grandfather died of asbestosis, and was receiving compensation, Cooke-Vargas did not realize the relationship between his death and his work at Keasbey and Mattison Company.

After a developer wanted to build a mixed-use high rise on one of the unremediated piles, as well as witnessing the impact of the flooding in South and West, Cooke-Vargas joined the community advisory group (CAG) as an American Legion member, later becoming a member in her role as tea-shop owner. She feared the high-rise would finally displace the black communities that had been there for generations. Unfortunately, her experience has been that the CAG is ineffective, that the EPA does what it chooses, regardless of the CAG's wishes. She feels that because the CAG meets outside the affected areas, those residents often do not attend meetings and are therefore less knowledgeable. Cooke-Vargas also believes that because asbestos-related disease manifests so late, it is easier to put off worrying about it and that poor communication from the EPA and the CAG keeps people ignorant of decisions made.

Cooke-Vargas' strongly-held opinion is that there is no good use for the BoRit Asbestos Area, that South Ambler is not safe anywhere and she would never buy a house there. Flooding is, she thinks, a more urgent problem anyway and should be solved first. The EPA should communicate better and accede to citizens' wishes about remediation, not acting until its tests are all completed. The West Ambler Civic Association (WACA) began well, wanting to clean up the neighborhood and to provide social programs for both young and old citizens, a place to go, but the Association never really got going. The worry about asbestos has not changed her love of Ambler, however; it is still home, a quaint and interesting town, to Cooke-Vargas.

## INTERVIEWER

**Lee Sullivan Berry** earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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