

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

VICTOR ROMANO

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

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Victor Romano's home
Horsham, Pennsylvania

on

10 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Victor Romano was born in Abington, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Ambler, Pennsylvania. His neighborhood consisted of mostly Italians and African-Americans, and he claims there was no prejudice. His father sold produce from his truck; his mother was a housewife. His only sister as since passed away. During Romano's childhood, Ambler was a nice blue-collar town, pretty much dependent on Richard Mattison and his asbestos shingle factory, Keasbey & Mattison (K&M) for employment and, for some workers, for housing. Businesses stretched along Main Street; there was a trolley and then a train to Philadelphia and to other nearby towns.

Romano describes the good sledding on the seventy-foot-high waste dumps at the factory and says kids swam and fished in the reservoir from which the factory drew its water and to which it sent the water back; at that time the reservoir was unpolluted. He talks about the exemption for essential war work that K&M had for its workers, and its pride in winning an Army-Navy "E" Flag.

When Romano returned from military service and settled in Ambler with his wife, the town had already begun its decline. K&M closed, and workers dispersed to other localities for jobs, though many continued to live in Ambler. Businesses dependent for custom on K&M's workers also disappeared. The first deaths known to be from asbestosis were occurring. Romano was in a good position to evaluate all of this as he had become involved in real estate investments. A high-rise project, ultimately rejected, brought to light the asbestos hazard in the "White Mountains," Romano's childhood sledding piles of asbestos-containing waste material. Romano's sister, a member of the Borough of Ambler Council, and Romano's uncle, a chemist at the Navy Yard of Philadelphia, were instrumental in persuading the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to remediate the Ambler piles. Romano's uncle also had his own chemical lab and tested the area well water, as he was worried about runoff from the factory.

Even with the National Priorities Listing of the BoRit site in Ambler, as well as the now-remediated piles, no one in Romano's circle has been sickened. He is not concerned about having lived and played amidst all the asbestos, and he would not fear having his grandchildren living there. He does, however, worry about Amchem, another chemical factory in Ambler. Romano does not know what Amchem produced, but it killed many maple trees around the factory; there was an explosion at the factory fairly recently; and lawsuits continue. Nevertheless, Romano feels that Ambler is a good place to live; real property is less expensive, there are good restaurants, and night life is returning. If only there were more parking!

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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