

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

GORDON CHASE

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

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Gordon Chase's home
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

17 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Gordon Chase grew up in London, England. He worked for Shell International Petroleum Company and then smaller companies, trading oil and petrochemical products, until he retired to travel. A visit to Kathmandu, Nepal, inspired an interest in pollution control, and he obtained a BSc (Hons) degree in environmental studies and diploma in pollution control from The Open University. Chase met his wife in Boston, Massachusetts, and the couple moved to Ambler, Pennsylvania, to be near her parents.

Chase joined the BoRit community advisory group (CAG), is now chair of the Removal, Remediation, and Monitoring workgroup, and was later elected as co-chair of the CAG. He first became aware of Ambler's asbestos problems when a high-rise development was proposed. Surprised that BoRit was not remediated at the same time as Ambler's asbestos piles, he talks about EPA's monitoring and testing procedures.

Chase acknowledges a tension between private and public interests as represented by the differing opinions among members of the CAG, but he regards Ambler's reticence to confront its asbestos as a "malaise" reflecting a general "malaise" in much of the United States on issues ranging from liquor sales to power lines to derelict buildings to infrastructure repairs.

Chase hopes for open green space for BoRit. He says people who live near highways are often more at risk from pollution than from contained asbestos. He feels that communication between the CAG and EPA is generally good; EPA gives the CAG weekly reports of what they have done and informs them of what they propose to do. Chase wishes Ambler would agree to have its water tested for a number of chemicals that have turned up nearby, but the Borough feels this unnecessary. Chase has a positive view of Ambler in that its citizens fight hard for what they want; but acknowledges that private interests can sometimes conflict with the public good. Ambler's main challenge now is to change from a manufacturing town to a service or bedroom/commuter town. Chase believes that asbestos is now a problem of industrial blight as well as a health hazard. Chase has found some government agencies better than others, but acknowledges that they all have limitations and requirements prescribed by law.

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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<p>Good communication between Removal, Remediation, and Monitoring workgroup and EPA; weekly reports. Air testing only when activity going on; asbestos inert; data shared with CAG. Other chemicals found in nearby ground water, but Ambler declines to expand its existing testing protocols. Opinion of Ambler: positive is that citizens fight for what is right; negative that private interests can conflict with common good. Lesson for other communities: see the "big picture" and compromise. Challenges for Ambler: adjusting to being service town instead of manufacturing; destroying derelict buildings; taking out asbestos; having a fast train to Philadelphia. Asbestos at this point as much a problem of blight as hazard. "Public health" means health of community, not just individual bodies. Success of EPA in Ambler: some agencies better than others; some relationships with citizens difficult because of statutory/legal limits and requirements.</p>	
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