

Chapter 9

A Clean and Healthful Environment

(22:30 minutes)

Synopsis

This 23-minute video—which in large part presents excerpts from the feature-length documentary, *Libby, Montana*—describes the history of vermiculite mining in Libby. Libby’s blue-collar history is traced from its logging roots to the discovery of vermiculite in the soil. For a quarter of a century, Libby residents saw vermiculite mining as a source of opportunity and prosperity. But the asbestos-contaminated vermiculite ended up taking a devastating toll on Libby families. Today, Libby continues to deal with this painful legacy.

► The video begins with students giving their best answer to the following focus question: **“What do you know about Libby, Montana?”** Teachers may wish to ask their students the same question before viewing the episode.

The narrator transitions from Montana’s commitment to preservation to the situation in Libby, Montana, with the following observation:

“Montanans’ attachment to preservation goes back a long and logical way. Indian culture and lifestyle, and air, forest, grassland, and water stewardship all grew from conservation principles. Visible abuses of the Montana environment, along with the vagaries of the market economy and mechanization, marked the state’s ‘boom and bust’ evolution. Although Twentieth Century Montanans crave more industry and good jobs, we have rarely wanted those ‘at any price.’ A look at the situation in Libby tells us a great deal about the balance we want to strike.”

Post-viewing Discussion Questions

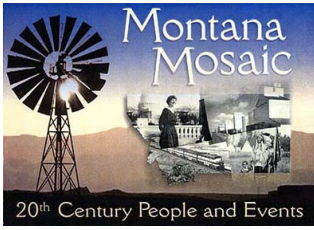
Engage students’ critical thinking skills and elicit their emotional responses with the following four questions, most easily remembered through the acronym DICE: What **disturbed** you? What **interested** you? What **confused** you? What **enlightened** you?

“Getting at the Meaning” Questions

1. In the introduction, the narrator tries to tie Libby’s history to broader questions of mining and environmental protection. What larger lessons, if any, can you draw from Libby’s history?
2. In 2009 (two years after the video was completed) a Montana jury found five W.R. Grace executives “not guilty” of criminal conspiracy to hide “the truth about the asbestos contamination in Libby from miners and the federal government.” How, if at all, does this verdict change your perception of the video? In your opinion, what steps, if any, should be taken to ensure that companies uphold Montanans’ constitutional right to “a clean and healthful environment?”
3. If you were mayor of Libby, what steps would you propose for moving forward socially and economically? [Teachers: note that debate rages among Libby residents on this question. Some feel it is important to memorialize the tragedy. Others fear its economic consequences to the tourism industry.]

Additional Resources

For more information on topics addressed in this episode, see *Montana: Stories of the Land*, Chapter 22, “Living in a New Montana, 1970–2007,”



(Chapter 9, continued)

(<https://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/chapter22/Chapter22.pdf>) and the feature-length documentary *Libby, Montana*, produced and directed by High Plains Videos; Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis, https://www.highplainsfilms.org/films/libby_montana/play-film/.

Content Standards

This chapter of *Montana Mosaic* aligns to the Montana Social Studies Content Standards as follows: 1.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 5.1, 5.4, 5.6