

Weekender

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Courtesy of Carolinas Brown Lung Association

Brown Lung



DTH/Jay Hyman

Byssinosis and compensation for it loom as problems for mill workers

By DINITA JAMES

Willie Rappe spent more than 50 years in Southern textile mills. He held just about every job there is in a cotton mill, from sweeping to running a carding machine.

When Willie retired in 1973 from Cone Mills in Greensboro, he was 63. The year before, he had been told by his doctor that he had emphysema. But what Willie had was byssinosis—brown lung.

Willie was the first member of the Greensboro chapter of the Carolinas Brown Lung Association to receive workmen's compensation for byssinosis from the N.C. Industrial Commission. He filed in June 1975, appealed to the full commission in December 1977 and was given his award in May 1978.

When Willie died Oct. 18, his money had run out.

"I had a room over here, and Willie had one over there," said Flossie Rappe, Willie's surviving wife. "We used to sleep together, but Willie was up and down about every two hours with his nerves all tore up and his head busting open."

When the coroner's report on Willie's death was released, it showed he died of heart failure due to his lung condition, a death that Betsy Hailey, staff member of the Greensboro chapter of the CBLA, said was common for brown lung victims.

Willie was not alone in his plight. State and federal officials estimate that up to 15,000 people in North Carolina and more than 100,000 across the country suffer from varying degrees of byssinosis, characterized by wheezing, shortness of breath, dizziness and headaches.

The CBLA, an advocate organization for textile workers, estimates that 35,000 workers older than 45 are totally disabled from the disease, 30,000 are partially disabled and hundreds of thousands of others now working in the mills suffer from "Monday-morning asthma," the first sign of the illness.

Willie's hope that workers now employed in textile mills would not be subjected to the same hazardous conditions and would be more readily compensated for byssinosis is less of a dream today, largely because of his and other's work with the CBLA.

Brown lung has become much more of a political issue in recent years. It was only in 1971 that the first company, Burlington Industries, recognized the existence of byssinosis and began compensating workers for it monetarily. Many observers say the

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