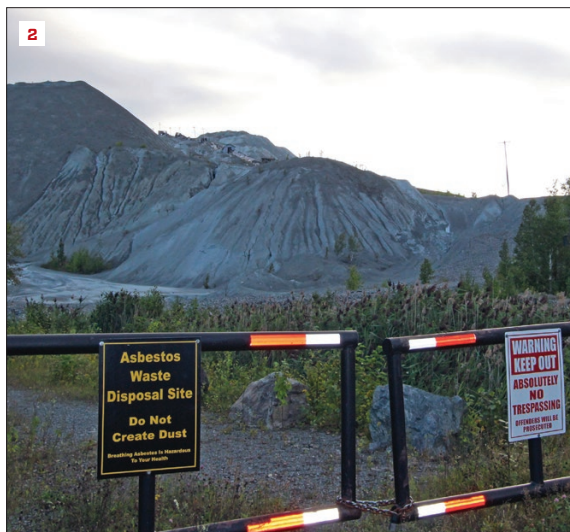


BY TIM HEALEY



Asbestos fiber is loaded into 100-lb. bags at Ruberoid Co.'s Vermont mine, circa 1950 (1). The Eden-Lowell mine was the first (and largest) commercial asbestos mine in the U.S. Thirty million tons of tailings, upwards of 350 feet high, were left at this 1,550-acre site (2). Trucking the tailings off site as well as turning the mine into a solar farm have been proposed.

Photos: 1, courtesy/Abestorama; 2, Tim Healey

## Home-Grown Asbestos

According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), there are 142 former asbestos mines in the continental United States. Of these, only a handful of mines in a few states (California, Vermont, Arizona, and North Carolina) have produced large, commercial quantities of asbestos. Starting in the early 1960s, multiple large, open-pit mines in California were brought on line, greatly increasing the country's domestic production. Before that, from roughly 1900 to the late 1950s, "home-grown" asbestos was largely confined to the Eden and Lowell mines at the base of 3,376-foot-high Belvidere Mountain in Northern Vermont.

Chrysotile asbestos or "white asbestos," the most common type of asbestos mined in the U.S., was first discovered in the Belvidere Mountain area in the 1820s. By 1899, two mines on either side of the mountain had opened: the Eden mine on Belvidere's south slope and the Lowell mine (the larger of the two) a mile or so to the east. Geologically, these mines are the southern tip of the Quebec asbestos belt—vast deposits of chrysotile asbestos in Quebec Province, Canada—starting some 60 miles north of the Vermont border with the Jeffrey Mine in the French-Canadian town of "Asbestos" and heading northeast 50 miles to Thetford Mines, Quebec. These Canadian mines were among the largest in the world and they dwarfed U.S. production of asbestos (historically, the U.S. produced enough asbestos for roughly 10% of its manufacturing needs and imported the rest from Canada, Russia, and South Africa).

In 1936, the Ruberoid Co. (maker of building products such as asbestos-cement shingles, house sidings, and protective paints) bought the Belvidere Mountain quarries from local owners and began what would be the country's first modern, large-scale open-pit asbestos mining operation. Ruberoid merged with General Aniline & Film in 1967 (changing its name to the GAF Corp.) and continued its mining operation. But as health issues associated with asbestos came more into public focus in the early 1970s, and costs to comply with new environmental regulations (the Clean Air Act of 1970 classified asbestos as a hazardous air pollutant) mounted, GAF scheduled to close the mine in 1975.

In an effort to save hundreds of jobs (the mine was the largest employer in the region), its workers bought the mine from GAF. They raised \$2 million for the purchase (most of which was used to retrofit the plant for the required environmental dust-control equipment) and named the new company the Vermont Asbestos Group (VAG). In 1977, the Copperopolis mine in California eclipsed the Eden-Lowell mine as the biggest producer of asbestos in the U.S.

From the late 1970s to early 1990s, VAG survived ownership battles, labor strikes, and dwindling demand for its product. No longer profitable, the Eden-Lowell asbestos mine officially shut down all operations in 1993, 25 years ago.