

States of the Union

TRAGEDY IN A SMALL SPACE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



EARLY-MORNING breakfast had become a pleasant ritual for Jeff Link and his older brother Tim. After finishing the third shift at Bastian Plating, Jeff would drive to his brother's house for a half-hour of chitchat over coffee and donuts; then Tim went to work and Jeff went home to bed.

"They really enjoyed each other's

company," recalls Linda Link, their mother, who with her husband James had raised four sons in Auburn, Indiana. "Jeff and Tim were in the middle. There was only 20 months' difference between those two. They grew up together here in Auburn."

But one morning—June 28, 1988—Jeff did not show up at his brother's house. Tim waited as long as he thought he could without being late for work before he got into his car and drove to the Bastian plant. At the entrance, he asked a truck driver when Jeff would be coming out.

The driver answered, "Jeff won't be coming out. He's dead."

Investigators later pieced together the fatal chain of events: Jeff had been cleaning sludge from deep inside a zinc cyanide tank when a reaction with muriatic acid produced a deadly gas. He collapsed, and fellow workers who climbed in to rescue him, collapsed, too. Five men—Jeff and four would-be rescuers—eventually died of the fumes they inhaled that morning. All the victims were under 30.

Bastian Plating employs some 35 people. As a critic of the company's safety policies has commented, "They killed about one-seventh of their workers in one day."

From the perspective of an industrial safety expert, what happened at Bastian Plating that morning was a classic "confined-space" accident, the kind that kills about 300 industrial workers each year. They die by suffocation, poisoning or drowning inside tanks, tunnels, sewers, and grain elevators.

Those who have rushed to the rescue, moreover, make up nearly two-thirds of the victims. Their high proportion underlines a unique quality of confined-space accidents: The workers involved invariably suffer from illusions of security; they have no sense of impending danger.

"There is something insidious about most of these accidents," says John B. Moran, who spent five years investigating confined-space disasters as research director for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). "Workers *think* they can tell when they are getting into trouble, but they can't. Right up to the moment of death they may have no inkling of the danger they're in. And then, most likely, they find they are helpless: Without oxygen the muscles don't operate."

The Federal government keeps remarkably close track of confined-space accidents, even if it does nothing to prevent them. On my desk lies a stack of re-

ports on "Fatal Accident Circumstances and Epidemiology," issued by NIOSH. The format is mimeo-draft, but the titles read like tabloid news headlines: "Truck Driver Dies While Cleaning Out Inside of Tanker"; "Two Supervisors Die in Manhole..."; "Three Sanitation Workers and One Policeman Die in Underground Sewage Pumping Station..."

In theory, industrial accident prevention is the job of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, commonly known as OSHA. In fact, since 1975 OSHA has been dawdling over a set of proposed safety guidelines which, if ever approved and enforced, could virtually eliminate fatalities in confined spaces.

Part of the problem, one guesses, has been the usual bureaucratic paralysis that benumbs so many Federal agencies (another sort of confined space). Here is how Sidney Shapiro, a professor at the University of Kansas Law School and an expert on OSHA's habits of procrastination, explains the delays: "The agency has a small staff and a large agenda, and it doesn't appear to have a means of setting priorities. And everybody knows industry is going to challenge whatever they come up with, so everything piles up in the legal counsel's office."

The other part of the problem has been conservative doctrine—namely, the Republicans' suspicion of any regulation that seems to interfere with the heavenly mechanics of free enterprise. So, while OSHA has fiddled, Jeff Link and some 4,500 other workers have died, all martyrs to red tape and marketplace dogma.

A few months ago OSHA held yet another hearing on its proposed safety rules for work in confined spaces (now 15 years old but unborn). Some of the bereaved Bastian families went to Chicago to testify. "We told them there must be no more senseless deaths," says Linda Link, "and they all agreed."

THAT A GREAT many of those deaths have occurred in small towns like Auburn (population: 9,000) should not surprise us. As Moran points out, "Small towns are where you find the not-so-big, family-

owned companies, and those are often just the companies that don't recognize any hazards. Maybe they don't have the money for safety prevention and training.

Or maybe—perish the thought—in such towns the managers tend to take their workers for granted. David Kurtz, editor of the Auburn *Evening Star*, has intimated as much. "In this town," he told me, "people are just happy when they get a job—and they're grateful to the company that pays their wages."

Certainly at Bastian—if we can credit the testimony of workers and their families—there had been a number of earlier warnings to which management apparently paid little heed. For instance, I've been told that one of the victims, 21-year-old Barney Sweet, had fainted weeks before in another tank. "They just took him out into the fresh air and let him lie on the ground till he came to. That's what Jeff told me," says Linda Link.

It was common knowledge around town, according to James Link, that Bastian workers frequently suffered cyanide burns on their arms and legs. "Even on their toes," he adds. "The stuff would burn clear through their red rubber boots. A man'd wrap his burns in Saran Wrap and keep on working."

"Once," recalls Mrs. Link, "the Bright Dip [an acid used in metal-plating] ate Jeff's shirt right off him."

But the Bastian tragedy was not the only disaster of its kind to have occurred in Auburn. A smokestack community with better than 100 small factories, it has had more than its share of work-related funerals.

In times past the town was known as the "home of the classic automobile," the spawning ground for such sporty phaetons as the Auburn, the Cord and the Duesenberg. Nowadays it is more likely to be known as "the industrial death capital of America." That was the label hung on it recently by an Associated Press reporter investigating the latest local epidemic of fatalities.

What the reporter had in mind of course went beyond Bastian. His story considered as well the six deaths that took place between 1974 and 1986 at the Au-

burn Foundry, an old-fashioned ironworks that happens to be located across the street from Bastian Plating.

Six fatalities over 12 years may not seem extraordinary, but at the Auburn Foundry they added up to a whopping annual mortality rate of 185 per 100,000 workers. In contrast, the corresponding rate during 1980-84 for the nation's most hazardous industry, mining, came to 30.1 per 100,000 miners per year.

So startling were the Foundry figures that they ultimately caught the attention of the U.S. Public Health Service. Last May it ran an article focusing on the phenomenon in a publication known as the "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report." Written by John Moravetz, who directs the Center for Worker Health and Safety Education at the Chemical Workers Union in Cincinnati, the article bore a dryly eloquent title: "Acute Occupational Fatalities in a Foundry—Indiana, 1974-86."

"The specific causes of these six fatalities varied," Moravetz concluded. He went on to stress that "the cluster of fatal events in so small a workforce indicates a need for intervention and preventive action."

Given all the industrial mayhem, you would think that on-the-job safety—or its opposite number, on-the-job danger—might be a popular subject around Auburn, but it isn't. "People don't talk much about the accidents," says David Kurtz. Asked if his newspaper ever questioned the safety policies of Bastian Plating or the Foundry, he said, "We haven't made an issue of it."

Others in Auburn—families of the dead workers, labor unions, Common Cause, and a group known as FAR (Foundation for Advancement of Industrial Research)—are trying to do just that. Last July Fourth they paraded in front of the Bastian plant (while a Bastian executive videotaped the proceedings). Then the crowd marched downtown to the courthouse lawn, where they held a memorial service for the five victims.

"We had 250 people there," says William Groth, a lawyer who helped organize the rally. "That's a lot of protesters for a town like Auburn. It was really emotional."