

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

JACK DELCONTE

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

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

34 East
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

21 March 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Jack DelConte grew up in South Ambler, Pennsylvania. His father worked at Keasbey & Mattison, as did his grandfather and an uncle; only his uncle and a cousin have developed asbestosis. He remembers Ambler as a thriving town until about the time he returned from the Air Force, when K&M had left and the town began its economic slide. The hills of waste materials were good for sledding; kids and catfish swam in the reservoir; on St. Francis Day Sons of Italy set off fireworks from the top of the “dump”; the neighborhood was Italian and close-knit; there was baseball on the field that now holds a Post Office.

Having returned from the Air Force and a few years working in Washington, D.C., DelConte and his wife settled in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. The “dumps” had been cleaned up and carted off; not many people were sick, and generally people just accepted illness. DelConte was hired to demolish and refurbish some of the old Wyndham Hotel, which had deteriorated badly. A whole wall collapsed from water damage; the basement was only dirt; there were jerry-built rooms on the upper floors. When the construction was complete DelConte, who had restaurant and bar experience, was hired to manage the hotel’s restaurant, 34 East Tavern. The restaurant had been an Irish pub but is now a family place.

Although the dangers of asbestos are now known, most people DelConte knows are fatalistic about the probability of harm. When asked his opinion about the BoRit site, DelConte says he trusts the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to be capping it properly, as they did with the “dumps.” Furthermore, he thinks that attempting to remove all the asbestos is impossible, as it will have been dispersed everywhere by weather and flooding. He feels that the seventeen-story high-rise that caused the initial concern at BoRit was probably a good idea; that Ambler could use more housing. Otherwise, he says, Ambler is progressing nicely. There are eleven or twelve restaurants, all with good food. There are a playhouse, a symphony, parades, art festivals, nice new houses near the train station. All the new businesses help the whole town prosper. Despite all these changes, however, he says that there is still the old community feel.

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<p>Noticed decline when K&M left town. Decline due to unemployment, not asbestos fears. Ambler was company town. Knowledge of possible hazard first spread after his return from Air Force. Remembers dumps being cleared out; piles of waste material good for sledding. Fatalistic beliefs. Swimming in reservoir common when he was young; catfish also in reservoir.</p>	
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<p>Lives in Lansdale. Brother and friends still in Ambler. Worked at Finn McCool’s, now manager of 34 East Tavern. Ambler revitalizing: now eleven or twelve restaurants, all with good food; playhouse; Ambler Boiler House; nice new houses near train station; art festivals; parades; symphony; students from Temple University. Still has community feel; many improvements mainly to night life. Thinks seventeen-story high-rise project would be good; new high-rise near Deck’s Hardware already full. Parking difficult. Many would like asbestos removed altogether, but he thinks it impossible, as Wissahickon Creek flooding and weather generally have dispersed asbestos widely.</p>	
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<p>Former Wyndham Hotel, high-class hotel when he was young. Deterioration terrible, but almost all redone. DelConte supervised demolition and rebuilding, putting in concrete basement. Collapse of wall. Apartments above restaurant when building finished. Was Irish pub, Finn McCool’s, now a family restaurant. DelConte had worked in restaurants and bars, so was hired as manager of 34 East when renovation complete.</p>	
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<p>Likes Ambler’s progress. Thinks more businesses bring more prosperity for all. Nice town, friendly, still cohesively Italian, like South Philadelphia. Everyone knows everyone else. Diversity of professions now.</p>	
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