

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**GREGORY COOKE**

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

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Chemical Heritage Foundation  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

13 August 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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Chemical Heritage Foundation  
Center for Oral History  
315 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106



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THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION  
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**Title of the Research Study:** Resources for Education and Action for Community Health in Ambler

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**Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email)** Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, [fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu](mailto:fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu)

**Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email):** Jody Roberts, PhD, Chemical Heritage Foundation—315 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, 215-873-8281, [jroberts@chemheritage.org](mailto:jroberts@chemheritage.org)

**Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email):** Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, [fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu](mailto:fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

Gregory Cooke grew up in West Ambler, Pennsylvania, one of three children of a single mother. His childhood community was all black. He attended the local public schools and liked to swim in the creek, bike, fish, and hunt with his grandfather. After eight years as chaplain's assistant in the U.S. Army, Cooke moved back to nearby North Hills, Pennsylvania, with his wife and young son. After he and his wife divorced Cooke lived in Ambler with his grandparents for seven years. During that time he worked as a heat treater, but he also obtained a social work degree from Villanova University and began his practice in Philadelphia Senior Center.

Cooke and his sister, Sharon Cooke Vargas, opened a tea shop in Ambler, and there Cooke met Edward Emmett, who hired Cooke to interview residents of Ambler for the REACH pilot program. He helped interview seventy or eighty residents; most had lived near and played on the huge piles of waste without awareness of or concern about asbestos's dangers, though some had contracted asbestosis. Cooke's own grandfather died of mesothelioma, and Cooke and his fellow descendants received settlements from a class action lawsuit.

Today Ambler is "up and coming," says Cooke; businesses may appear one year and disappear the next, but then another new place appears. Demographics are changing. Cooke thinks that the Environmental Protection Agency is taking too long to clean up the hazard and is not good at communicating with Ambler's citizens. He would like to have all the waste removed, not just capped, despite the many years of inconvenience that would cause, and would like a recreation area on the remediated site. He has left the REACH project and is currently working with Lisa Jacobs and Frances Barg on a University of Pennsylvania project studying the health of Ambler's residents.

## INTERVIEWER

**Lee Sullivan Berry** earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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