

Home was no haven

By Jim Morris, Houston Chronicle

HOCKLEY -- As a child in the 1950s, Rita Thomas was party to the almost-daily ritual.

Her father, an insulator in Houston, would come home from work and hug her and her brother. Then he would strip off his dirty clothes, roll them up and toss them next to the washing machine.

The clothes, Rita Thomas Schmidt would recall some 40 years later, were coated in a white substance. "He would have it all over him. There was no way you could get it all off."

The white substance Maurice Thomas brought home day after day, year after year, was asbestos. It was in the insulation he used to wrap pipes in refineries, chemical plants and commercial buildings. It was in his hair, on his lunch box, in his pickup truck.

In February 1977, 56-year-old Maurice Thomas died of mesothelioma, an aggressive and incurable cancer of the lung lining caused -- as far as scientists know -- only by asbestos exposure. On June 22 of this year Rita, his only daughter, died of the same disease. In her last months the pain was so excruciating that she had to take morphine.

She had never worked around asbestos. Her father, an insulator from 1943 to 1972, unwittingly had exposed her to the microscopic mineral fibers that took her life at 47. She left behind three teen-age children, a husband, a mother and her still-healthy brother, Edwin, who worked as an insulator from 1959 to 1969.

"It's definitely not my daddy's fault," Rita Schmidt said last March, three months before her death. "He wouldn't have hurt us for anything."

THE mesothelioma that savaged Rita Schmidt was the product of what some researchers call a "take-home" exposure. This phenomenon is not limited to asbestos. Lead, silica and other dusty

compounds that can accumulate on the clothes and skin also are of concern.

"We've been looking mainly at lead dust," said Elizabeth Whelan, an epidemiologist with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Cincinnati. "It can be transported on the skin of the worker, on his clothing, in his car, on his shoes. There are anecdotal reports of lead contamination on tools and lunch boxes."

Whelan worries most about young children, who are highly susceptible to lead's potent neurological effects. "They are the ones climbing around on the furniture and putting toys in their mouths," she said. "There's a lot of hand-to-mouth contact among toddlers that can increase their exposure."

Children of building-trades workers may be in additional danger, Whelan said, because such workers typically do not have showers and changing facilities at their job sites. And dust may not be the only take-home hazard. Some recent studies suggest that offspring of certain blue-collar workers -- notably painters -- may be at increased risk of being born with cancer or birth defects.

Jean Brender, an epidemiologist with the Texas Department of Health, was involved in a three-year study of babies born with anencephaly, a fatal skull malformation characterized by little or no brain. Brender and her co-investigators found that fathers who were painters or worked regularly with paints and solvents were three times more likely to have anencephalic children than fathers with other occupations.

"That is a statistically significant elevation," Brender said. "There will be some follow-up work in the near future. I think it's an area that really needs to be investigated further, although there are some scientists who dismiss it."

DR. Andrew Olshan, an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health, cautioned that there is no smoking gun -- no straight line between fathers' occupational exposures and what he calls "developmental toxicity." He said the area requires further study.

Nonetheless, in a 1993 review of laboratory and epidemiological studies, Olshan concluded that "the available data do indicate that paternal exposures can produce adverse developmental outcomes."

Olshan wrote that children of painters, for example, appear to have increased odds of being born with, or developing, central nervous system anomalies, congenital heart defects, leukemia, brain tumors, cleft palate and Wilms' tumor -- a kidney cancer that mostly affects young children.

Olshan also noted that the wives of men regularly exposed to certain compounds -- lead and the solvents toluene, xylene, benzene, for instance -- have had an excess of spontaneous abortions.

RITA Schmidt's deadly contact with asbestos began when she was a baby.

"My mother told me she had her washing machine out in the garage, and she would put me in a high chair while she was washing," she said. "She would go to the door and shake the fibers out (of her husband's clothing) and see them floating. When Daddy would come home, he would feed me or hold me before he took a shower."

Charles Dronett, business manager of Local 112 of the International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators and Asbestos Workers in Lake Charles, La., said it was not unusual for insulators in the 1950s to bring home the soft cloth used to wrap rolls of asbestos pipe covering. In the Thomas household, the cloth was torn into dishrags.

"Everybody and his brother wanted that stuff," Dronett said. "People would make diapers or curtains or rags out of it. It was just something for nothing."

Rita Thomas left home at 19 and at 25 married Don Schmidt, a Houston police officer. She worked as a substitute teacher but gave most of her time to her sons and daughter. Her weeks were filled with Little League, Boy Scouts and other activities. Her energy level was high.

In her early 40s Rita Schmidt began to tire easily. Then, in March 1992, the coughing spells started. At first doctors thought she had tuberculosis, then pneumonia. She underwent surgery for a partially collapsed lung and was sent home.

The fatigue and coughing continued, however, and in November 1992 she was told she had mesothelioma, the disease she had seen consume her father.

"It was kind of like hitting a brick wall," Rita Schmidt said. "You get to thinking that everything's going along real well. You've got plans you're looking forward to, and all of a sudden you realize it's all going to be taken away."

"I felt totally defeated," her husband said. "I knew that her daddy had died from it, but I just could not understand this. She had never worked with asbestos. I asked her about it and she said, 'I don't know, Don, I guess I got it at home.'"

In time, the dread turned to anger. Don Schmidt did some research and discovered that the manufacturers of asbestos products, the government and the petrochemical industry knew about the dangers of asbestos insulation long before workers like Maurice Thomas were warned about it.

THE Schmidts sued 15 insulation manufacturers, as well as the owners of six plants in which Maurice Thomas had worked on a contract basis. Thirteen of the manufacturers and five of the plants settled before or during the trial that began in Beaumont last April.

On May 2, a state court jury found that the two remaining manufacturers -- Owens Illinois and Owens-Corning, both based in Toledo, Ohio -- were liable for Rita Schmidt's illness and awarded the family \$4.1 million in damages. It did not penalize Monsanto, the only remaining plant defendant, reasoning that Maurice Thomas had worked in too many places to pinpoint the source of his -- and his daughter's -- exposure.

The Schmidts' attorney, Herschel Hobson of Beaumont, thought the verdict fair. When it began distributing its Kaylo insulation in the early 1950s, Owens Illinois had scientific evidence showing

that the product was dangerous but "kept the cards close to its chest," Hobson said.

Owens Illinois owned half the stock of Owens-Corning at the time, Hobson said, and jumped at the chance to unload a dangerous product. Owens-Corning began selling Kaylo in 1954 and took over the entire product line in 1958.

Owens-Corning spokesman Bill Hamilton said the company would appeal the Schmidt verdict and would have no other comment. Officials with Owens Illinois did not respond to interview requests.

The manufacturers' position at trial was that they had no reason to believe insulators were at risk of contracting asbestos-related disease from the 1940s into the 1960s. Therefore, they had no obligation to warn anyone.

The jury in Beaumont, however, rejected this argument and found that Kaylo was defective and "unreasonably dangerous."

It further found that the defendants had fraudulently misrepresented the product's safety. A 1956 Owens-Corning brochure on Kaylo, for example, described it as "non-toxic" and popular among insulators.

On a cool, sunny day last spring, Rita Schmidt sat on the front porch of the log house she and her husband built in a grove of tall pine trees. She must have been in great pain, but she was stoic. The only time she showed discomfort was when the subject of the asbestos manufacturers came up.

"I just wonder what made it so important for them to be so careless," she said. "I guess it was the money. I don't understand how they can put money over people's lives."