

Too high a price

By Jim Morris, Houston Chronicle

Albert Schaefer came east from his hometown of Uvalde when he was only 17. He didn't want to leave the Hill Country but needed work and heard he could find it in Houston. His ninth-grade education limited his options.

After brief stints at a shipyard and a San Antonio construction company, Schaefer became an industrial painter in 1961. For 32 years he did some of the harshest work imaginable at plants around the Houston Ship Channel and Texas City: sandblasting and painting the insides and outsides of storage tanks and ships.

Schaefer worked for more than a dozen companies and made a good living, but he gave up his health in return. He has silicosis, a progressive and incurable lung disease caused by the inhalation of microscopic particles of silica, or sand. As is typical of older sandblasters, Schaefer had little or no respiratory protection for most of the years he worked, although the dangers of silica were well-documented by the 1930s.

"It makes you feel bad when they do you like that," Schaefer said.

Today Schaefer, who relished hunting on his family's 18-acre place in West-Central Texas and other outdoor activities, is largely confined to his sofa and bed. The silicosis has stolen most of his energy.

"I don't know much about this disease, but I do know it can take your life," Schaefer said.

He also is feeling the neurological effects of exposure -- usually in confined spaces -- to paints and solvents.

"We worked around some bad stuff," he said. "Sometimes I get to shaking so much I can't even hold my coffee good. Something's destroying my nervous system."

Schaefer grew so desperate for money that he worked through 1993, although he felt terrible. "I worked sick for three years," he said. "At the end of the day I could barely walk. But you've

got to force yourself. You've got to pay your bills."

He and his wife, Eula, have no health insurance. They did receive a settlement from a product-liability lawsuit they filed against sand suppliers, but Schaefer doubts the money will last more than two years. "The doctors and lawyers got over 50 percent of it," he said.

His hope is that they can get by on his wife's \$5-an-hour job at the San Jacinto Monument and on Social Security disability income, for which he has applied.

Meanwhile, Albert Schaefer deteriorates. "He's too young to be so inactive," his wife said. "He's like an old man."