

Too high a price

By Jim Morris, Houston Chronicle

Jim Sartain has the symptoms of someone with Parkinson's disease: the incessant shaking, the stiffness, the memory loss, the imbalance.

Only Sartain doesn't have Parkinson's -- or any other product of fate or heredity. He got sick from the manganese in welding fumes.

An ironworker, Sartain welded for 33 years, often in places with poor ventilation. There were no fans. There was only a welding hood, which did not protect him from the metal-laden fumes.

The first sign of trouble for Sartain came in the early 1960s: His stomach would turn every time he welded. That, in itself, wasn't unusual. Welders have long believed that such nausea is an annoying but essentially harmless side effect of their work that can be alleviated by a few swigs of buttermilk.

But buttermilk didn't help Sartain. And nausea wasn't his only problem. He started shaking, and by the late 1960s was having difficulty speaking. "His tongue would get thick," said his wife, Ronda. "He would babble."

Sartain went to several doctors in the 1970s, but none made an accurate diagnosis. One was on the verge of ordering an analysis of Sartain's welding rods, but that doctor died suddenly. It wasn't until the mid-'80s that Sartain's worsening illness, characterized by severe tremors and disorientation, was traced to manganese.

By then it was too late. Sartain was asked to leave his job in 1989 because he had become a danger to himself and others.

His income now consists of Social Security disability and an ironworker's pension. A worker's compensation case is pending.

"My husband never in his life drank or smoked," Ronda Sartain said. "He used to be a really healthy man. He snow-skied, he water-skied. He loved his job, and it devastated him when they asked him to leave."

Sartain said his life is "very boring. I kind of lay around, mostly, and get on my wife's nerves."

He misses the trade. He can drive around Southern California and see the fruits of his labor: hospitals, schools, office buildings. "When you do something all your life and then you can't do it anymore," he said, "it's kind of hard to take."

Dr. Kaye Kilburn, a Los Angeles internist and a professor of medicine at the University of Southern California, examined Sartain not long ago.

"We've looked at a lot of welders," Kilburn said. "We've not seen very many who are as affected as he is. It's not a pleasant outlook."

"In the last five or six years, Jim hasn't really gotten any better," Ronda Sartain said. "I get emotional when I think about it. He's just really not here anymore. He really can't think. Everything he does is hard for him."