CLEARING THE AIR: HOW TO DEAL WITH ASBESTOS SIDING

by B. Derek Strahn

For years, homeowners have sought inexpensive ways to spruce up the appearance of their aging properties with new siding materials. As early as the 1930s, homeowners turned to asbestos siding as a way to avoid costly painting jobs and to better fireproof their residence. Today, asbestos shingles continue to clad many historic houses in Bozeman, due in part to the assumed danger and expense involved in removal.

Although dealing with asbestos siding can present some headaches for historic property owners — and extreme caution in dealing any form of asbestos is highly recommended — the appropriate removal of asbestos siding can rapidly restore the original appearance of a historic residence.

Often times, asbestos siding has helped to preserve the original wooden siding and architectural detailing underneath. Proper removal of asbestos siding, therefore, will not only eliminate potential health risks, it can also significantly enhance the historic character and economic value of your older residence.

Asbestos is a name given to a group of naturally occurring fibrous minerals including chrysotile, amosite, crocidolite, anthophyllite, actinolite and tremolite. Although the known use of these heat-resistant substances dates back at least 300 years, asbestos became especially popular in the United States with the advent of the age of the steam locomotive during the 1800s. By the 20th century, the shipbuilding and automotive industries relied heavily on asbestos. It was even utilized in household appliances, such as handheld hair dryers, ironing boards and textiles.

The use of asbestos as a construction material first occurred in 1905, when the Johns-Manville Company combined it with Portland cement and marketed it as a sealer for joints around chimneys, dormer windows, skylights, scuppers, shingles and rooftop nail holes. Soon the substance was found in roofing, floor tiles, insulation for heating systems and boilers, acoustical plaster, wallboard, and reinforced concrete water pipes.

By 1937, Johns-Manville introduced white and gray textured asbestos siding shingles as a popular new product. Marketers soon promoted a variety of other asbestos siding materials, noting that they were less expensive than wood, required no painting and were easily applied by an amateur. The asbestos siding craze reached a peak in popularity in the mid-1940s, when salesmen called "blue suede shoe boys" distributed the asbestos siding in a variety of colors to builders and individual homeowners.

Gradually, health concerns regarding asbestos became more pronounced. The first documented case of an asbestos-related death was reported in 1906 when the autopsy of an asbestos worker revealed lung fibrosis. Many studies have since provided irrefutable evidence about a multitude of serious health problems caused by inhaling airborne microscopic asbestos particles.

Following confirmation that asbestos is a health hazard in the 1970s, its use has sharply declined and rules regarding its handling have increased dramatically. Today, according to Montana's Department of Environmental Quality, "asbestos is one of the most highly regulated substances in the U.S."

In Montana, agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, (OSHA), the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and a variety of local entities regulate asbestos related activities.

Given all the concern about asbestos, and the red tape surrounding its removal and disposal, it is understandable that owners of historic homes might have some apprehension regarding the deadly substance. This is especially true if they are considering a major restoration or remodel project that will impact asbestos-containing materials.

Here's the good news: Asphalt or cement roofing and siding that contain asbestos are generally considered "nonfriable" and are not hazardous when intact and in good condition. In other words, just having asbestos siding and roofing on your home does not pose a hazard

SDMS Document ID 2031674

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