

HENRY GORDON ACADEMY, CARTWRIGHT

presents

P.C.B.'s - POSSIBLY CONTAMINATED BERRIES

CAST:

Grandmother - Tina Mesher
Joan - Sharon Hamel
Bill - Melody Pardy
George - Dawn Praught
Mayor - Robyn Holwell
Mr. Thomas Lacy - Melody Pardy
Dr. Sarah White - Faye Pittman
Eleven Questioners - Tina Mesher
Daron Praught
Sharon Hamel

SCENE I

(It's supper time. Grandmother is alone cooking supper. Young boy, about 14, enters the kitchen from another part of the house. He starts putting on coat and boots.)

GRANDMA: George, where are you going? Supper will be ready in 15 minutes.

GEORGE: Aw Nan, don't worry. I won't starve to death.

(He rushes through the door and bumps into his mother.)

JOAN: George, slow down! You nearly knocked all my berries over. Don't you think about all my hard work?

GEORGE: Aw, Mom, there's loads of berries up there anyway.

JOAN: You're going to pick the next lot. (Pause...mumbles.) Kids these days. (Shakes her head, turns to her mother.) Mom, is Bill home?

GRANMA: No my dear, he's still at the sawmill. He'll soon have enough lumber to build another part on the house, I guess.

JOAN: My God, yes. That will be some good. We'll have lots of room for berries then. (While they talk, Joan puts the berries on the table. She walks offstage saying she's going to wash her hands. Grandma remains on stage still cooking supper. Joan comes back out again.) Mom, I'll help you with supper. Just let me sit for a minute or two.

GRANDMA: You got lots of berries didn't you? I guess there was lots of people up there today. It's such a beautiful day.

JOAN: My dear, not only lots of people. There's loads of berries up on the base this year, too. You had to fight to get a good spot.

GRANDMA: It's a good thing you got some more. I just used my last batch for a pie for supper.

JOAN: Supper? Oh, that reminds me. (She gets up to help.)

GRANDMA: How far up did you go?

JOAN: Right up past the radar site. They're growin' and growin' up there. (Bill enters the house.) Is that you, Bill? Did you get all the lumber cut?

BILL: Not yet. At least another day's work there. Mother, how long have we got before supper is ready? I gotta try and get some of this dirt off.

(He removes his boots and goes into the bathroom to wash up. Water sound.)

GRANDMA: You better not take long. I've only got to finish laying the table and it's ready to be served.

(Grandmother and Joan finish setting the table.)

JOAN (WHILE SETTING THE TABLE): What are you up to tonight, Mom?

GRANDMA: Not much. I dare say I'll probably go over and give Elsie a hand. She's making a wedding dress for Sophie, you know.

JOAN: Oh, that's right. I forgot that she's getting married next month.

BILL: You're not forgetting about the meeting tonight, are you? (Calling out from the bathroom.)

JOAN: What meeting?

BILL: The one at the Town Hall to talk about the PCBs.

JOAN: Oh yeah, that's tonight, isn't it? I clean forgot about that.

(Bill comes out. They all sit down to supper and Grandmother says grace.)

BILL: Joan, will you pass me the butter? (She passes it.) Thanks. (Bill proceeds to butter his bread.) Did you go berry picking today?

JOAN: I did. It'll take a week to get these stains off. (Shows her hands.)

BILL: How much berries did you get?

JOAN (POINTING TO THE TWO BUCKETS IN THE CORNER): Two.

BILL: Mom, where's George gone?

GRANDMA: I don't know, my son. You can't keep track of young people these days.

MAYOR (STANDS UP): Please, no questions until both Mr. Lacy and Dr. White are finished.

MR. LACY: (Looks at his notes.) In your case, the PCBs were being used by the Americans in their base transformers. Everything was safe until the Americans decided to leave. It would have continued to be safe if people had paid attention to the 'danger warning' signs that were posted on the site, but they didn't. Once the Americans left, people vandalized the base buildings and damaged the transformers containing the PCBs. The chemical then leaked out into the surrounding environment and created a potentially dangerous situation. That's where we came in. The Federal and Provincial governments combined their efforts to provide a cleanup team to come in here and clean up the spill. (Lacy takes a drink of water.) This team isolated the contaminated area and began by placing what they could get of the chemical into containers and sealing them. These containers, incidentally, were taken out of this community. The team burned the remaining building that originally housed the transformers and they checked the surrounding areas to be sure that there were no PCBs left in the area. The people who came into contact with the base area at the time were told to burn any clothes or boots or anything that was exposed to the area. To the best of our knowledge, this was done. Environment Canada is confident that all efforts made to clean up the PCB spill on the Cartwright base were successful. We have no reason to believe otherwise.

FROM CROWD: Oh yeah, well maybe we do. Would you be so sure if you were living here? We'd like to believe otherwise, too, but we don't.
(Rumble...rumble.)

MAYOR: O.K. people. Let's give them a chance to speak. Dr. White, would you care to speak now?

(Crowd reacts.)

DR. WHITE: Ladies and gentlemen, as I read the situation, you have three health concerns. They are (1) the hazardous health effects of a PCB spill, (2) whether or not the cancer rate in Cartwright is higher than in other places and (3) if the PCB spill here is in any way related to the cancer cases in this community. First, PCB can be absorbed, inhaled and ingested by humans. It is easily absorbed through the skin. This contact leads to the removal of natural fats and oils, subsequently drying and cracking the skin. PCB liquid products and their vapours can be mildly irritating to the eyes. Toxicity from PCBs is not great. Inhalation of PCBs has, only in experimental animals, been shown to cause liver damage and this occurs only after prolonged exposure, between 1.5 to 5.4 mg per cubic metre of 54% chlorinated material. So, any serious disorder to the skin, kidneys and liver would take an extremely long time. Secondly, in regards to the cancer rate, our statistics show that Cartwright does not have an above average percent of cancer victims. Let me make one thing clear, we do not know what causes cancer, neither do we know how to cure it.

JOAN: Bill, you're going to have to do something with that boy. He doesn't listen to me.

BILL (INDIFFERENTLY): Yeah, I'll have a talk with him when I get around to it.

GRANDMA: Bill, you were saying something earlier? Something about a meeting on PCBs. What is it? What's PCBs? I hears everybody talkin' about it, but I still don't know what it is.

BILL: Well, mother, as far as I can figure out, when the Yankies were here, they had this stuff called PCBs. It's some kind of chemical they needed to run things up on the base, and when they left, they never bothered to take what was left of it with them and people thinks it's all over everything up there and might even be in the old water supply. They say it's poisonous. We might've been drinking poison water ever since they left.

GRANDMA: Go away with ya. That can't be true. Sure they been gone for ten years or more. For sure if we were going to be poisoned we'd be in our graves by now.

BILL: Perhaps it takes awhile mother. Perhaps it takes ten years. Look at all the people that've been dying lately. They say it's cancer, but who's to say it's not PCBs doing it? We don't know. People say it's ten years of drinking water with PCBs in it that's doing it; and eating berries that're coated in it.

JOAN: No, go away. The berries are bigger and better than ever. There's nothing different about them. You can't see anything on them and they tastes just as good as they ever did.

BILL: Perhaps it's like a fertilizer to the berries. How do we know?

JOAN: Mom, shall we do the dishes before we go?

GRANDMA: No, leave 'em. I'll do them when we come back.

BILL: You can't anyway. The meeting is tw'once.

(Puts coat on...George comes in.)

GEORGE: Where are you going, Mom?

JOAN: To a meeting. Your supper is on the stove and there's pie on the counter.

GRANDMA: Pie, oh yes, I almost forgot, I was going to bring a pie over to old Uncle John this evening after the meeting. He's not feeling so well.

JOAN: Mother, where are you going to put it?

GRANDMA: Oh, I'll slip it under my chair or something. I'll find a place so it won't get squat.

JOAN: Oh, George, do the dishes while we're gone.

GEORGE: But mom, that's women's work.

BILL: George, do as you mother tells ya. (They leave. Lights out.)

(CURTAIN CLOSES)

SCENE II

(Taped sound effect of a crowd. Lights on front of stage. Three seats and desks.)

MAYOR: Excuse me, can I have your attention please? I guess we can get started. Thank-you all for coming. I'm glad to see such a good turnout tonight. As you all know, we're here to discuss PCBs. To find out all the facts and to see how dangerous this substance really is. There's been alot of talk, alot of rumors going around our community about PCBs, and people are afraid that it's harmful and may even be causing deaths by cancer in this town. Well, tonight we have with us, Dr. Sara White, a medical doctor with the Grenfell Regional Health Services, and Thomas Lacy, an environmentalist with the Federal government. Welcome to Cartwright. We appreciate you taking the time and effort to come and talk to our citizens on such short notice. (He nods to them. They nod back.) Both of these people will give a short talk on PCBs, and after that we're going to open the floor for discussion and you can all get a chance to ask your questions then. Hopefully, we'll be able to clear up any misunderstandings about PCBs tonight. (He turns to environmentalist.) Mr. Lacy, will you start off?

MR. LACY: I'm glad to be here tonight. I hope I can be helpful in putting aside your fears about PCBs.

FROM THE DARKNESS: Yeah, we are too.

MR. LACY: PCBs, well, let me begin by telling you exactly what you're dealing with here. Polychlorinated Biphenyls or PCBs, is a chemical widely used by the electrical equipment industry mainly as an insulator in such electrical devices as capacitors and transformers. It has even been used in lubricants and paints. So, it is a very useful chemical. However, it is a very harmful pollutant when it is released into the environment. It is a hard chemical to get rid of once it's been used because it cannot be broken down by common waste treatment. You can't dump it in a lake or a river because it can be diluted and it would be poisonous to anything that came into contact with the water. Needless to say, there aren't alot of options left. We can put the chemical into containers and keep these containers away from humans as much as possible or, less satisfactorily, we can bury the chemical deep underground. You could burn it under controlled conditions. The key word here being CONTROLLED. It will only burn at an extremely high temperature.

QUESTIONER 4: Sir, was it burned at that high temperature?

Finally, there is no relation between PCBs and cancer. This means that there is no documented case of cancer having been caused by PCBs. Thank-you.

(Crowd reaction.)

MAYOR (CALLS TO ORDER): Let's hear your questions one at a time, please. Would you stand up when you speak?

QUESTIONER #1 (YOUNG MAN): Is it safe now, or are we going to get sick from things up there?

DOCTOR: As I just said, harmful effects from such a combination would definitely have shown up as a pattern of related types of sicknesses. In other words, we would have seen a larger than normal number of disorders of the kidneys, liver or skin. And as said before, such a pattern has not shown up in our studies of the medical records from our clinic.

QUESTIONER #2 (UNCLE JOE): What type of disorders? Do you mean cancer? Because we've certainly seen a lot of that around here, and people who are getting it were the young people at the time of the spill. They were the ones who used to go up on the base all the time.

DOCTOR: First of all, there has not been an abnormal number of cancers occurring in this community. The statistics show that the percentage of cancer patients per capita in this community is on par with the average Canadian community. Secondly, we cannot prove one way or the other whether the cancers that have occurred here have been caused by, or are, in any way, related to the PCB spill, but in our combined educated opinions, there's no reason to believe they are.

QUESTIONER #3 (OLD WOMAN - SOPHY): How did they clean it up? How can we be sure they got it all?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Well, the team that did the cleanup were a well trained group. They were aware of the hazards and took precautions to guard against them. They went up there wearing protective gear. They marked off the area and posted 'danger/warning' signs. Then they dug up the earth where the PCBs were spilled and put the contaminated earth into containers and sealed them. These were shipped out on the next available boat - quite safe I assure you. The cleanup crew then burned the buildings that were affected by the PCBs.

QUESTIONER #4 (FLORA (ANGRY)): Sir, didn't you say that PCBs had to be burned under controlled conditions at a high temperature?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: Yes, that's true...

QUESTIONER #4: Well, how can you be sure they burned the building at the

right temperature? And the top of the hill doesn't seem very controlled to me.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: That's correct. We couldn't be 100% sure of the conditions or the temperature when it was burned, but at the time it was far safer to burn it than just leave it as it was. Chances are, the fire did take care of the leftover PCBs.

QUESTIONER #5: Doctor, have you ever seen anyone who had been sick from PCBs? What symptoms do show up?

DOCTOR: No, but the symptoms would be disorders of the kidneys, liver and skin, but that doesn't mean that everyone who gets these symptoms has PCB poisoning.

QUESTIONER #5: Well, it's a funny thing how there's alot of people around here suffering from those very same symptoms.

DOCTOR (MAD): Look! I can only tell you that, as of last week, there have been no proven cases of PCB poisoning in Cartwright in the last ten years!

QUESTIONER #6: Did you know people went up to the base at that time and took lumber and pieces of metal from the base buildings to build their own homes? Does that mean that their homes are still contaminated?

DOCTOR: With all the warning signs that were posted about the area at the time, that was rather stupid, wasn't it? But, to answer your question, yes, it is likely that the PCBs are still contained in the building materials. However, they aren't likely to be in large enough quantities to be of some serious threat.

QUESTIONER #7: There's a water supply on the other side of the base hill and it's the one that was being used by everybody in town up until about 6 or 7 years ago. The underground water from that hill drains into that supply. Did you check out the water to see if it was contaminated?

ENVIRONMENTALIST (PAUSES): Not to my knowledge, in fact, there was no mention of a drinking water supply near the spill in any reports that I have read. I guess it was not reported by the community or it certainly would have been checked.

(Murmur of horror.)

A YOUNG MAN: You mean to say that water supply has never been checked!?

ENVIRONMENTALIST: That is correct. However, since no cases of PCB poisoning have surfaced to date, it is highly unlikely that the water supply you speak of was ever affected. Now, in the interest of putting your fears to rest, we will check out this water supply for you as soon as we can arrange it.

COMMENT: About 10 years too late, isn't it?

QUESTIONER #8: Will we ever be free of PCBs?

ANSWER ENVIRONMENTALIST AND DOCTOR: As far as we know, you are now. (Together in agreement.) That's right.

QUESTIONER: Doctor, does PCBs cause cancer?

DOCTOR: There's no proof that it does.

QUESTIONER #9: What about the berries, Doctor?

DOCTOR: What berries?

QUESTIONER #9: The berries we've been picking from the base hill for 10 years. Were they contaminated, too?

DOCTOR: Well, if people picked berries in areas of the PCB spill where 'danger/warning' signs were posted, there, again, that was plain stupidity. They really should have known better.

QUESTIONER #9: Well, that's all very fine and dandy for you to say now, but what about the berries?

DOCTOR: Well, given that the berries were likely washed, then baked, I think it's highly unlikely that they were dangerous. As we've said before, no proven cases of poisoning showed up.

GRANDMOTHER: So, we can eat our redberry pie then, can we?

DOCTOR AND ENVIRONMENTALIST TOGETHER: Yes.

DOCTOR: You can eat all the pies you want.

(Grandmother comes up to the stage with a covered dish in her hands.)

GRANDMOTHER: Well, now, that's good news. You know, I baked this lovely redberry pie from berries that Joan picked on the hill last week. I was going to bring it over to old Uncle John this evening but, John, being the kind he is, I know he'd be disappointed if I didn't offer a little hospitality to you people who were so good as to come here this evening. So here you go. From us in Cartwright to you, Doctor...you're just going to love it.

(CURTAIN CLOSES)

SCENE III

(Open curtain. Coming home from the meeting.)

BILL: Did you see the look on his face when you offered him the pie?

GRANDMA: Yeah, I really put him on the spot.

JOAN: Did you here all that applause? It was a really good idea you had there, Mom. And didn't the community snicker when he refused to have any of the pie?

BILL: What a stupid excuse - to my supper - my foot. He's headin' over to Hazel's and she only has leftovers for supper.

JOAN: Besides, they don't eat 'til late anyway.

GRANDMA: I don't think that meeting helped. He didn't eat any of the pie. I don't feel any safer eating the berries.

(Grandma puts her coat on the hook and Bill starts to take his off.)

JOAN: Bill, I almost forgot, I told Ruby we'd be over after the meeting. (Turns to Mom.) Mom, you don't mind staying home with George for a little while, do ya?

GRANDMA: No, maid, go on. He's no trouble.

(Joan and Bill leave.)

GRANDMA (AS SHE SITS DOWN): Oh my, I'm some tired. (She looks over at the pie.) That pie would be some good for a little lunch. I don't know if I should eat it or not. Perhaps a small bit won't hurt. (She gets up and sees George on the couch.) Oh, George, you're home. (Goes over to him.) Oh my, you're asleep. Poor boy, you must have had a hard day at school. (She goes over to the pie and sees half is gone.) Oh no, George, you didn't eat the pie!?

(Silence. She looks at the pie, worried expression. Puts the pie on the table, goes over to the rocking chair, sits down, shakes her head.)

THE END