

Part One

[La Oroya, City of Lead]

In the garden of Felipe' Vargas there is nothing more precious than a flower.

(Felipe Vargas says "Everyday I have to cover them.")

He pulls a sheet over the plants at night, trying to protect them.

(Vargas says "This gives us life. It helps our health. It brings us better air, better oxygen.")

In Felipe's hometown of La Oroya, Peru there is a desperate need for better air.

(La Oroya resident says "It asphyxiates you, it burns.")

La Oroya, an impoverished city of 50,000, surrounds a metal smelter, owned by the St. Louis based Doe Run Company. And, it is a company town. Doe Run employs more than 4-thousand workers. They have some of the highest paying jobs in the region. But the community, nestled deep in the central Andes, is also heavily contaminated with lead and many residents blame the Doe Run plant.

(La Oroya resident says "We don't all know how many people here in this town are sick. We're not sure of all the people that are sick here.")

Two local doctors say many children in the town are developmentally disabled and that there are also high rates of miscarriages, cancer, stomach, kidney and lung diseases.

(Felipe Vargas says "I've seen many children die, nieces and nephews, little brothers and sisters of mine have died already.")

A series of tests during the last three years reveal all the children in Old Town La Oroya have lead poisoning. And, samples taken by American volunteers in July found 11 out of 13 children tested have so much lead in their blood, they should be hospitalized immediately.

(American volunteer Patty Nussle, a Pharmacist, says "We have a U.S. based company that's down in a small city in the Andes Mountains wreaking havoc with young children's lives, permanently, neurologically damaging them in all likelihood.")

Children, like 8-year old Jordy, who is barely able to communicate. How much lead is in Jordy? His parents may never know.

(Patty Nussle says "Unfortunately in La Oroya their medical capabilities are such that I don't think you'll ever know what their people die from. They just don't test and they don't have treatment capabilities like we do. You just bury the dead and keep going.)

There is a movement underway to declare La Oroya a national disaster area.

(Felipe Vargas says "It really hurts. It hurts so much to see how little they care about us.")

Doe Run didn't invent the crisis. The smelter has polluted La Oroya for 80 years. Doe Run bought it from the Peruvian government in 1997, promising a significant drop in pollution. But the book "La Oroya Cannot Wait," a detailed study of Doe Run records by groups critical of the company's operation, reveals Doe Run has boosted production and dramatically increased toxic emissions, including Arsenic, Cadmium and Lead. Although there's no direct evidence the Doe Run emissions are creating health problems here, studies show heavy exposure to the toxins coming from the smelter can create many of the health problems found in La Oroya. And, it doesn't take long to feel the effect of the pollution.

(Cheatham STANDUP "In La Oroya, you can smell, feel and sometimes even taste the air. We've been here for two days and virtually the entire time my eyes have burned, my throat has burned and I've had a splitting headache.")

The Peruvian government admits Doe Run is allowed to pollute far above the federal limits without risk of being fined or shutdown. Under a ten year agreement, which Doe Run admits it has renegotiated three times, the company has until 2006 to make the most significant improvements to the plant, putting scrubbers on the main stack. Until then, Doe Run says it's allowed to pump nearly 1-thousand tons of toxic Sulfur Dioxide into the air every day. The book, "La Oroya Cannot Wait" reports there are SO2 levels in the town ten times higher than what the World Health Organization considers safe.

(Cesar Robilliard, the Peruvian Vice Minister of Energy and Mines, says "They are protected. They have an umbrella now.")

Cesar Robilliard, the Vice Minister of Energy and Mines for Peru, downplays damage caused by the company's toxic emissions.

(Cesar Robilliard says "We know that there are problems with children in La Oroya, but poisoning is a big word, no? At least in Spanish it's a big word. I think that the situation is not poisoning.")

In fact, Robilliard claims the children in La Oroya are among the smartest in Peru.

(Robilliard says "Eighty or ninety percent or sixty percent, I don't know, have superior intelligence. Superior intelligence? Superior.)

The Peruvian government and Doe Run deny the smelter is the main source of pollution, blaming vehicles burning leaded gas, even dirty handed children for contributing to the health crisis.

(Jose Mogrovejo, VP of Environmental Affairs for Doe Run Peru, says "The main point is to reduce the risk. That is the main point.)

Doe Run says its pollution control program has reduced emissions 30-percent.

(Mogrovejo says "The work is not done yet. We need to continue working. It is a process that will take, at the end, ten years to the year 2006 because it is a process that has a lot of steps and we are working in each step very carefully.)

The company has replanted tens of thousands of dying flowers and trees, always painting parks in green and white to remind residents Doe Run did it. The company says it has helped bring down the blood lead level in children by teaching them how to wash their hands.

(Mogrovejo says "We are working very hard to bring down the blood lead levels in kids.)

Where does the responsibility begin and end? Felipe' Vargas prays for an answer.

Every week he walks two miles to a cemetery outside La Oroya. This is where he brings his flowers.

(Vargas prays in the cemetery)

He places one on the grave of a young nephew. One of eight relatives who have died from lung, stomach or heart diseases Vargas blames on toxic emissions from the La Oroya smelter.

(Vargas prays at his brother's grave.)

He lays his last flower at his brother's grave. Felipe' tells his brother that their mother is very sick, but Vargas promises to never leave her side.

(Vargas weeps at his brother's grave.)

As he grieves for La Oroya, Felipe' Vargas also understands that his hometown needs Doe Run.

(Vargas says "We're not asking them to go. We're not asking them to close down, but why can't they care a little more about the people around them.")

In a cemetery filled with loved ones, there is nothing more precious than the gift of life, especially for a man desperately trying to survive in a city he believes has been left for dead.

Part Two

[La Oroya, City of Lead]

(Sound of music in the market)

In the crowded, often chaotic streets of La Oroya, Peru, Gloria Origuela, mother of 4, earns a living squeezing oranges in the marketplace.

She's one of thousands of residents living off the economy created by the Doe Run Company, which owns and operates a huge lead smelter, less than a 1/2 mile from her stand.

(Gloria Origuela says "I think that they should keep on going. That's helpful for us. ")

Studies, conducted by Doe Run, the Peru Ministry of Health and private groups, show every child in Old Town La Oroya has lead poisoning. It's likely Gloria's children have it too, but despite her concerns about pollution from the Doe Run plant, she believes La Oroya faces even bigger problems if the smelter closes.

(Origuela says "They need to stay open if not it will hurt all of us here in the town. Where will we all go if the business closes down?")

Doe Run Peru employs 4,000 workers.

(Union leader Evaristo Torrez says "It's generating work and employment and that's letting us have economic security.")

Doe Run managers have it better than anyone, living in the only gated community in La Oroya. But Mayor Coqui Rios and dozens of community leaders say they are paying too high of a price for the company driving the economy.

(Mayor Rios says "What we have noticed in the last few years in which Doe Run has increased their production is that the environment locally has become a lot more difficult to survive upon, particularly it has become very difficult to breathe.)

Doe Run insists it has cut pollution by 30-percent, but residents say they've noticed a dramatic increase in emissions since Doe Run bought the plant five years ago.

(Cheatham STANDUP "Studies show the toxic pollution from La Oroya can travel more than 50 kilometers poisoning villages far away with Doe Run's own brand of acid rain.")

In the village of Yauli, about 20 miles from La Oroya, farmers say emissions are poisoning the water and killing field grasses.

(A Yauli political leader says "It's impacting the health of animals and is therefore damaging the possibility of this community to survive.")

Protestors, including farmers from Yauli, marched on the Doe Run plant last year, bringing their sick and dead animals.

(A protestor says "The contamination, it didn't used to be this way. This sheep has just died. It's enough, enough of this abuse.)

The acid rain, fueled by nearly a thousand tons of Sulfur Dioxide a day from Doe Run's stack, will continue uninterrupted for at least three years. It's part of the deal Doe Run negotiated with the Peruvian government to protect the environment.

(Yauli residents play volleyball)

It's also part of the game, at least politically.

Yauli residents say instead of putting expensive scrubbers on the main stack right now, Doe Run offers community service projects to silence critics.

(Yauli activist says "They come in and they say 'look what is it that you want? Do you want us to paint your schools? Do you want us to fix your churches?' But around the issue of less environmental contamination that's not an issue to discuss with them because they insist that they are not polluting.)

In La Oroya, residents say Doe Run uses this small zoo at the plant to prove the emissions don't harm animals. But the town's political leaders say Doe Run removes sick sheep, replacing them with healthy ones.

(La Oroya leader says "Every two to four months they are rotating the animals.")

(Jose Mogrovejo, Doe Run Peru VP, says "No. We don't rotate the animals.)

Doe Run Peru Vice President Jose Mogrovejo says the company has invested millions of dollars in the 80-year old plant, reducing air and water

pollution, even though the company still uses old leaky steel buckets to carry contaminated waste directly over a river to a 200 foot high roadside pile of lead waste.

(Mogrovejo says "That is a very old problem, but we are very confident that we can control that problem.")

It's all part of the challenge of doing business here.

(Cesar Robilliard, Peruvians Vice Minister of Energy and Mines, says "If we become very fixed in our position, knowing our legal position because they are under the law, we would have to close La Oroya.")

But critics say it's another example of the Peruvian government caving in to a multi-billion dollar industry.

(Javier Medina, Oxfam America Spokesman, says "The Peruvian state should take measures to better supervise what the Doe Run company is doing in La Oroya, both in the environmental field and in terms of human health.")

The financial health of Doe Run may also depend on Peru. The company, which owns the smelter in Herculaneum, Missouri, has already threatened bankruptcy. Doe Run Peru may keep it alive. It's Doe Run's biggest source of revenue, generating 434-million dollars in revenue last year. It also contributes to the fortune of billionaire Ira Rennert who is building a 100-thousand square foot home on the New York coast. Rennert, the only shareholder of Doe Run's parent corporation, charges Doe Run Peru 4-million dollars a year for his management fee. Rennert's mansion will have 25 bedrooms and 39 bathrooms. It's bigger than Gloria Origuelo's entire neighborhood.

(Sound of La Oroya market)

In La Oroya, Gloria Origuelo squeezes every ounce out of the Doe Run generated economy. The heavy smoke coming from the plant is no longer taken lightly, but in La Oroya many residents believe it is also their only choice for economic survival.