A TIMES INVESTIGATION

POISONED

Hundreds of workers at a Tampa lead smelter have been exposed to dangerous levels of the neurotoxin. The consequences have been profound.

BY COREY G. JOHNSON, REBECCA WOOLINGTON AND ELI MURRAY
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PART 1: THE FACTORY

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P

imes of dust, laced with lead, blew across the fac-
tory like a sandstorm. The poison hangs so thick in the air, sometimes the only thing visible in the room, orange glow from the fur-

nace.

Workers, hundreds of

them, sweat through 10-hour shifts at Gopher

Resource in Tampa. They extract lead from used

car batteries, melt it down and turn it into blocks

of metal to sell.

Eric Arter, 45, came to the plant in the sum-

mer of 2017 looking for a fresh start. An Army

vet from Virginia, he dodged bullets and mine explo-
sions in Afghanistan and Iraq but faced new dan-
gers inside Florida’s lead smelter.

He worked in the furnace department, skim-
m ing impurities off the top of glowing, molten

lead. He moved fast in reinforcing boots against

a steady mist of fumes. He’d feel his respira-
tor slide on his face, the cool separating from his

pasting sweat. He’d smell the metallic stench, like

cold rain, seeping in.

His completion turned green. His body felt

heavy. His lead pranked.

The level of lead in his blood shot up weeks

after he started. Co-workers and supervisors told

him he needed to wash better before breaks, or

after his shift.

But the poison was bound to enter his body.

The amount of lead in the air was seven times

what Arter’s company-issued respirator could

handle.

Arter is among hundreds of workers at

Gopher who have been exposed to extreme

amounts of lead.

They’ve inhaled it, been burned by it, been cov-
ed in it.

And some has stopped it.

Tampa Bay Times reporters spent 18 months

examining thousands of pages of regulatory

reports and company documents, including data

tracking the amount of lead in the air and in

workers’ blood. They interviewed more than 60

current and former workers, 20 of whom shared

their medical records.

The following investigative findings will be
detailed in a series of stories starting today.

Gopher exposed workers for years to levels

of lead in the air that were hundreds of times

higher than the federal limit. At times, the con-

centration was considered life-threatening.

Workers described regular tasks that left them

caked with dust, in though they’d been drenched

in powdery snot.

Eight out of 10 workers from 2006 to 2018 had

enough lead in their blood to put them at risk of

increased blood pressure, kidney dysfunction

or cardiovascular disease. In the past five years,
at least 14 current and former workers have had

heart attacks or strokes, some after working in

the most contaminated areas of the plant. One

employee spent more than three decades around

the poison before dying of heart and kidney dis-
ease at 56.

Gopher knew its factory had too much lead

dust, but the company disabled ventilation fea-
tures that captured fumes and moved slowly to

fix faulty mechanical systems. Workers were left

vulnerable, weaving respirators that couldn’t pro-
tect them when poison levels spiked. In 2019, one

employee faced an air lead concentration 15 times

beyond what his respirator could guard against.

Federal rules required that Gopher provide

regular checkups, but the company-contracted
doctor didn’t tell workers their blood-lead levels

put them in danger. When employees had health

problems that could be tied to lead exposure, he

dernied them.

Gopher rewarded employees with bonuses if

they kept the amount of lead in their blood down

and punished those who couldn’t, a practice that

alarmed medical experts and workers.

Work took desperate measures to strip metals

from their bodies, including undergoing dangerous

medical procedures. In the most extreme cases,
some donated contaminated blood.

Dust from the plant has been the suspected

cause of lead exposure in at least 16 children —

the sons and daughters of employees who someti-

mest carried the poison home in their cars or on

the soles of their shoes. A baby girl tested so high

for the neurotoxin that her pediatricians recom-

mended she be monitored weekly.

Federal Occupational Safety and Health Admin-
istration regulators haven’t inspected the factory

for lead contamination since 2014 and missed crit-

ical problems in previous visits. Even when top

See POISONED, 2W
INSIDE THE DUST STORM

Production runs day and night. Dozens of workers clock in at 7 a.m. or 7 p.m. A tangle of pipes, hoses and clamping conveyor belts awaits them in a sprawling shell. They feed used car batteries into machinery that crushes them, draws out the acid and separates the lead from plastic and steel. The lead is shipped out loaded trucks and sold into furnaces that turn at around 5,000 degrees. The metal is pure lead.

But unusual for water to liquid lead, triggering violent explosions that sometimes send flames from lead splash and spatter. There are no common workers every time as "sweatshop" and consider the lead.

The lead slides downchannel, blowing its way into kettles, where it goes large-batch batches out of outlets.

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Lead particles, what this isn't dirt?
No, it's lead.

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Eric Autery, who worked in the furnace department at Gopher Resources, recounts a conversation with a former colleague.

What's all this dust here on the ground?

Lead particles.

Lead particles?" Eric autery answered the worker who didn't know what to do.

Lead dust here on the ground?" Eric autery answered the worker who didn't know what to do.

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Eric Autery, an Army veteran, saw his blood-borne levels rise within weeks of starting at Gopher Resources.

About the cover

Using a portrait by Mahita Aravinda Silva, former factory worker Eric Takamatsu, designer Sue Karl, and Avery Jones created a collage of images from photographs taken at Gopher Resources.
Where are the lead smelters? There are 1,693 lead smelters in the United States that produce lead. These are called secondary smelters because they aren’t producing lead from one.

4. Quemotte Inc., (additional locations in Arkansas, Missouri, and Pennsylvania)
5. Quemotte Inc., (additional locations in Indiana)

When we acquired the Gulf Coast recycling facility in 2003, we found that we had led our employees to believe that small quantities of lead dust were considered to be acceptable, in part, because of our long-standing lead-smelting history. When we purchased the Gulf Coast recycling facility, we had no idea of the extent of the health and safety hazards that were present. Today, we are working to upgrade the facility to the highest standards of safety, health, and environmental protection.
Because of the dangers, Madeline Dumenus worried about her brother working at Florida’s only lead factory, Program Dumenus in an employee transfer for 35 years. Coronary artery and kidney disease were listed as factors in his 2009 death at age 56.

Dumenus, citing doctor-patient confidentiality, would not answer questions sent to him about any哥哥 employer. He also wouldn’t answer questions about his brother in the same level because of his brother’s job at a factory with the company.

**CLEARED FOR WORK**

Federal rules require Gopher to provide employees with regular medical evaluations, and it’s Dr. Bruce Bokler’s role to make sure new workers can safely do their jobs.

Bokler is the medical director of a Tampa time that Gopher has hired for the past seven years to monitor employee health.

But while workers had no allments that could be caused or made worse at work, Bokler didn’t feel a safe conclusion was in the workers’ best interest for a review by the Posen review.

In 2010, Bokler wrote Dumenus a letter describing findings from his exam and sorting his history of heart problems.

Bokler didn’t say in his assessment that Dumenus’ heart problems and hypertension could make him more vulnerable to the disease. He didn’t note a lab result indicating decreased kidney function. Gopher had a “long history of working at the plant with no problems.”

The Times obtained letters Bokler wrote to other workers who had hypertension, signs of possible kidney damage or both.

“I find no areas of concern from this physical examination related to occupational exposure with Gopher,” Bokler wrote to Dumenus and each of the other workers.

Workers described their exams with Bokler as cursory and said they didn’t get explanations of their lab results, including blood levels.

Gopher’s director Bruce Bokler provided medical evaluations and employees.

At the time of this assessment for Program Dumenus, in 2008, the workplace was deteriorating with workers and records showed.

**HELPING HANDS**

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He also wouldn’t answer questions about his brother in the same level because of his brother’s job at a factory with the company.
How lead attacks the body

Lead acts on the 35 million children who drink water in homes with lead service lines. In children

- Brain damage
- Stunted growth
- Learning disabilities
- Hearing loss
- Kidney damage

Bringing it home

Lead does not leave the factory with some workers, on their shoes, cars or cellophane. It traveled across Tampa and Brandon and up and down the roads in their homes where children found it.

The Times identified 36 children of plant employees who had lead in their blood, according to interviews and medical records. When workers discussed their blood-lead levels with pediatricians or the health department, they were told dust from the factory was likely the source of the problem, the workers said.

The Department of Health tracks lead poisoning cases across Florida that may come from old paint, ceramics, cosmetics or other sources. Nationwide, from 1980 to 2014, the agency found roughly 175 cases of workers exposing their children, including 48 in Hillsborough County. According to the department’s most recent study, the total of new cases in 2014 was 20. The most recent instance occurred last year.

Robert Pitcher and Joanne Blackman, both employees of the U.S. Bureau of Mines, worked in facilities with lead dust. Blackman said the work was dangerous.

"I don’t know what to do," he recalled telling the doctor. Robert’s job was dusty. He and other workers manually collected lead dust whenever the automated system crashed.

He thought about how the lead covered his body work at a factory. He threw whatever that might have stuck to dust. He considered whether washing his work clothes and hands at home was a good idea.

He thought about his kids, his wife who shared home with them, and the need to make over time on an hourly wage in a job that didn’t require a college education. He worried in some way how secure his children’s blood levels had come.

He switched to a department with less dust before leaving Gopher two years ago.

Many workers believed that in the dusty environment, they were always breathing lead dust. They worried it stuck to their necks, their clothing.

"If you had a blood level," said Blackman, "you were taking it home with you.""