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REPORT ON THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE CREEKSIDE TIMBER COMPANY

INSPECTOR: Frederick Mallard
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I was initially called in by the state of Maryland to perform an incident analysis in the case of a worker's death at the Creekside Timber Company's Black Hills Forest facility.

During my inspection, I noted concrete widespread evidence of failure to observe basic security protocols, unsafe working conditions throughout the facility, and a pattern of wildly inappropriate behavior from nearly all of the site's employees.

I have also noted some sort of hysteria affecting the workers, the psychological effects of which seem to predate the death of James Berman.

INSPECTION OF WOODCHIPPER:

I focused much of my initial inspection on the woodchipper involved in the Creekside employee's death. A thorough examination revealed nothing faulty with the machine itself. However, during my inspection, I discovered no fewer than seven childrens' handprints upon the lower third of the machine's outer body.

Foreman John Martell claimed to have no knowledge of any children's presence and further claimed that the machine had not been touched since the accident. I find myself dubious of this claim on both fronts, as the handprints appeared to be fresh; whatever substance they were made from was wet, viscous, and warm to the touch.

The discovery of these handprints prompted me to search the entire facility for further evidence of the presence of children. I soon came to observe additional handprints inside the break room, foreman's office, two bathrooms, and, most perplexingly of all, on the ceiling directly above a secretary's desk.

It was at this point in my inspection when, as I looked up at the handprint on the ceiling, a rusted light fixture very nearly fell upon my head. Had I been standing three feet to the left, I would have sustained a grave injury.

Although the handprints covered the facility, no further evidence of the presence of children turned up during my inspection.

However, the evidence of the presence of minors on the premises is irrefutable and damning. To allow young children on the premises at all, let alone near such a dangerous piece of machinery, is an unconscionable oversight on the part of Creekside management.

OBSERVATIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS UPON EMPLOYEES:

During my inspection of Creekside Timber Co., I also observed significant and alarming abnormalities in the behaviors of its employees.

On my tour with foreman John Martell, I heard multiple workers whisper things to the effect of me not belonging there. That I could at least understand, being in a small town, and with the recent accident, I represented the possibility of a shutdown, and therefore a lost paycheck. But some of those remarks moved beyond simple hostility and into the nonsensical and unnerving. I heard one man say that I should "stand in the corner," and another that I would listen when "she tells [me] to leave."

I have also repeatedly observed workers behaving negligently. Multiple men appeared to be staring off into the woods while operating dangerous machinery such as woodchippers and saws, and while swinging axes. When I approached to reprimand them for their actions, these workers all responded with slight confusion followed by disbelief and denial that they had indeed been staring into the distance at all.

I also observed one worker counting his own ten fingers. He did this multiple times. He would seem satisfied with this number and then count again. When I asked him what he was doing, he seemed to snap out of a stupor, and said, in all seriousness, "Just wanted to make sure it was all still there."

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Many of the men I spoke to over the course of my inspection seem to have bought into a superstition about rocks, of all things. They claimed to fear the appearance of small piles of stones as omens of death and injury. I happened to find one such pile just outside my own automobile as I was finishing my inspection. There were no signs of damage, simply piles of rocks outside my door, on my hood, and on my roof. I can only assume this was a pathetic attempt at a practical joke by a disgruntled employee.

Additionally, nearly everyone on the company's payroll reports missing time, of which there is seemingly some evidence. Mr. Martell showed me employee complaints with time discrepancies no one could understand. The times shown on the cards did not match what employees reported, nor the amount of work they were supposed to have completed in that time. Others have worked for what feels to be an entire day, but returned with no more timber than they'd chop in an hour. Men shown clocking in for only an hour claimed to have worked their entire shifts and have returned with a day's worth of wood.

When I asked Mr. Martell if this discrepancy could be the result of human error, or if he could have found himself the butt of a practical joke, he said he trusted his men implicitly. An inspection of the time-keeping machine also proved it to be in perfect working order.

PRESENCE OF UNKNOWN, POSSIBLY TOXIC SUBSTANCE:

Found at the Creekside Timber Co. was what many of the men have referred to as strange "slime" leaking from the trees.

I interviewed the man who, weeks before Berman's death, first discovered the substance: a logger named Adam Barrett. He described an incident in which he and coworker Simon Donner came across trees that were, to use his word, "bleeding." By his account, eight separate trees in the same vicinity discharged this substance in place of sap. Barrett and Donner then marked any affected trees with red Xs.

The men could not replicate this phenomena for me. They brought me to the allegedly affected trees and, observing the proper safety protocol, proceeded to peel back the initial layer of bark, only to find regular sap. I watched them cut into every marked tree, only to find nothing out of the ordinary.

The men did however claim to have kept some of this dark, mucus-like material in a jar and produced it from the safe in the foreman's office. The loggers all insisted it came from one of the trees they attempted to cut down, but to me it smelled like little more than scorched engine oil.

CONCLUSION:

For the reasons herein compiled, it is my conclusion that the Creekside Timber Co. should immediately cease all present and future operations at their Black Hills Forest facility until such a time that a more thorough analysis of both the building and employees can be completed and a safe reopening can be confirmed. I will be sending copies of my recommendation to all pertinent state officials, as well as to the company itself.