

Deadly Choctaw gas accident case settled for \$8.6 million

► Victims, families had sued Georgia-Pacific after 2002 release of hydrogen sulfide killed two men and injured a dozen more

By **GARY McELROY**
Staff Reporter

Victims and families have agreed to an \$8.6 million settlement in a case brought against Georgia-Pacific Corp. after a 2002 deadly gas accident at a Choctaw County paper mill, their Mobile lawyer said Monday.

Two construction workers with a subcontracting company died and at least a dozen others were injured, including several emergency medical technicians, when exposed to hydrogen sulfide at the Naheola Mill near Pennington.

The paper products manufacturing plant, about 140 miles north of Mobile along the

Tombigbee River in Choctaw County, produces pulp, paperboard and tissue. It's owned by Georgia-Pacific.

On Jan. 16, 2002, victims were exposed to hydrogen sulfide, a byproduct of the pulping process.

The toxic, naturally occurring gas product of decaying organic matter engulfed the men as they were replacing a pipe rack at the plant, according to reports last year.

A settlement between Georgia-Pacific and a Texas law firm representing one of the men who died, 35-year-old Benjamin Singleton, was reached earlier this year, Mobile attorney Jim Yance said.

And just recently, he said, the family of the other dead worker, James Michael Sager, 45, and about a dozen construction workers and EMTs — represented by Yance and Choctaw County attorneys William and Jeff Utsey — reached a settlement totaling \$8.6 million.

"Our investigation indicated

there was an inappropriate release of chemicals into the draining system that caused a reaction and the release of hydrogen sulfide," Yance said.

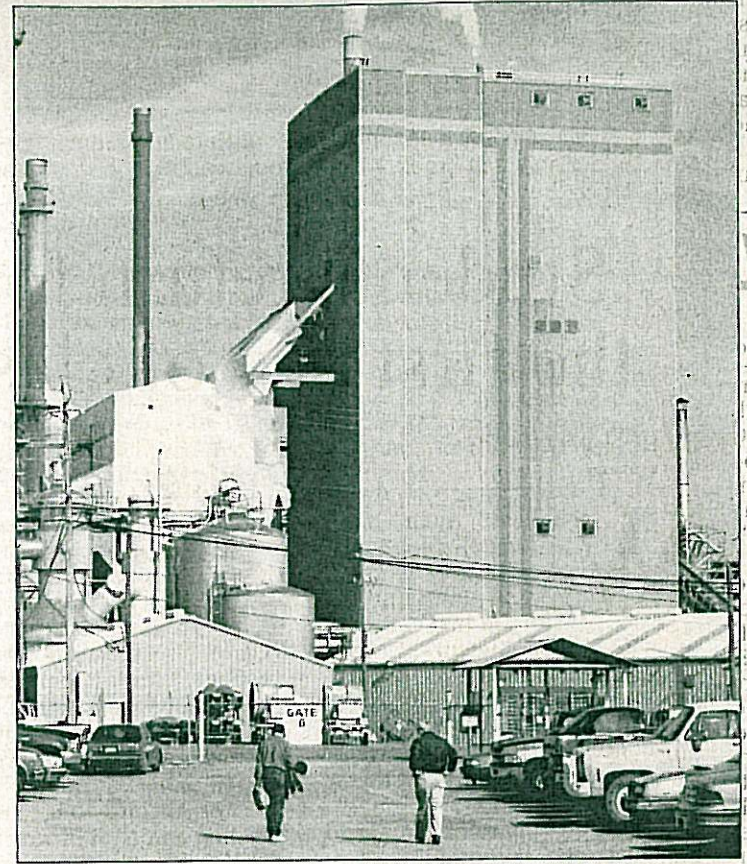
The lawyer said further investigation showed there had been similar releases of the gas in the past, and that some of the warning sensors were inoperable and had been for some time.

Yance said the individual amounts of compensation received by each victim would not be disclosed.

In July 2002, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration proposed fining the Naheola Mill \$91,000 as a result of the accident.

Yance said that since the accident, the company has corrected deficiencies in operations and equipment that led to the deadly leak.

Georgia-Pacific's Mobile attorney, Mack Binion, contacted late Monday, deferred comments about the settlement to the company's main office in Atlanta.



MIKE KITTRELL/Staff Photographer

The Georgia-Pacific Consumer Products Naheola Mill near Pennington is shown on Jan. 17, 2002. A poisonous gas leak a day earlier at the mill had killed two workers and injured at least a dozen others.

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