



Radium Girls Monument

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Who Were the Radium Girls?

The Radium Girls were young women who worked in the luminous dial painting industry in Ottawa, IL starting in 1922. Women in their teens and early twenties were excited to work for Radium Dial: the workplace was nice, the work was fun, and the pay was great. The dial painters were paid by the piece to apply paint neatly and evenly to the numbers on clock faces. To ensure thin, even, accurate strokes, the dial painters were instructed to “point” the brush frequently by licking its end. The women didn’t know that the radium used to make their paint glow would soon be discovered to be a very dangerous radioactive substance. They also had no idea that by lip pointing their brushes they were ingesting enough of it to cause painful, crippling cancers and death.

In 1925 Radium Dial became aware of the occupational danger of radium radiation exposure and the radium radiation poisoning that would follow in time. Radium Dial workers were examined by the company, and although many women already showed signs of radium poisoning, they were never told. The company kept the danger a secret from the dial painters. Radium Dial went to great lengths to calm the fears of the dial painters, who had heard about dial painters in New Jersey who were suffering from radium poisoning.

In 1934 seven women, who would become known as “The Society of the Living Dead,” began a series of legal battles to win financial compensation for their occupationally acquired radium poisoning. The women suffered from debilitating joint pain, bone fractures and infections, bone tumors, and anemia. In the end, the women each received small financial settlements - not even enough to pay their mounting medical bills.

Amid these lawsuits, the Ottawa Radium Dial Studio was shut down, but a new dial painting company was soon opened in Ottawa. Luminous Processes, under some of the same management as Radium Dial, remained in the dial painting business into the 1970’s, when it was finally shut down by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission because of its improper handling of tritium.

How Do I Support the Radium Girls Monument?

The Radium Girl’s story needs to be told and remembered. A monument erected on the site of the old Luminous Processes building is the perfect way to do both. Madeline Piller has designed a life-sized bronze monument that depicts a young, healthy, dial painter who is ready to take on the tragic challenges that will come her way.

Although the sculptor has donated most of the time it will take to create this life-sized bronze, the completed monument will still cost approximately \$40,000. The monument will be a gift to the City of Ottawa in memory of the Radium Girls. To make a donation send a check made out to the City of Ottawa, with Radium Girls noted in the memo section. Mail to: Mayor Eschbach, City of Ottawa, 301 West Madison St. Ottawa, IL 61350. Your generous support for this memorial to these brave young women is greatly appreciated.

Why a Monument?

Each and every one of us owes a debt of gratitude to the Radium Girls. These young women took on an industry that deceived them, a medical community that dismissed their concerns, and a legal system that didn’t recognize their illness as work related. While they suffered debilitating illness and impending death, they fought a system that recognized women to be inferior, and individual workers to be less important than the industry in which they worked.

These women deserve a monument based on the example they gave us of strength in the face of certain death. Fortunately, however, that example wasn’t all they were willing to give. The Society of the Living Dead and hundreds of their dial painting co-workers made themselves available to Argonne National Laboratory. These women regularly traveled to Argonne where they underwent tests for the presence of radium radiation and its effects on their bodies. Their health was monitored for years. Sometimes their bodies were studied after death.

The information gathered from studies on dial painters was used to set safety standards for industrial exposure to radiation, making dial painting and other industries safer for workers. These data were also studied extensively to help understand the long-term health effects of other radioactive substances.