

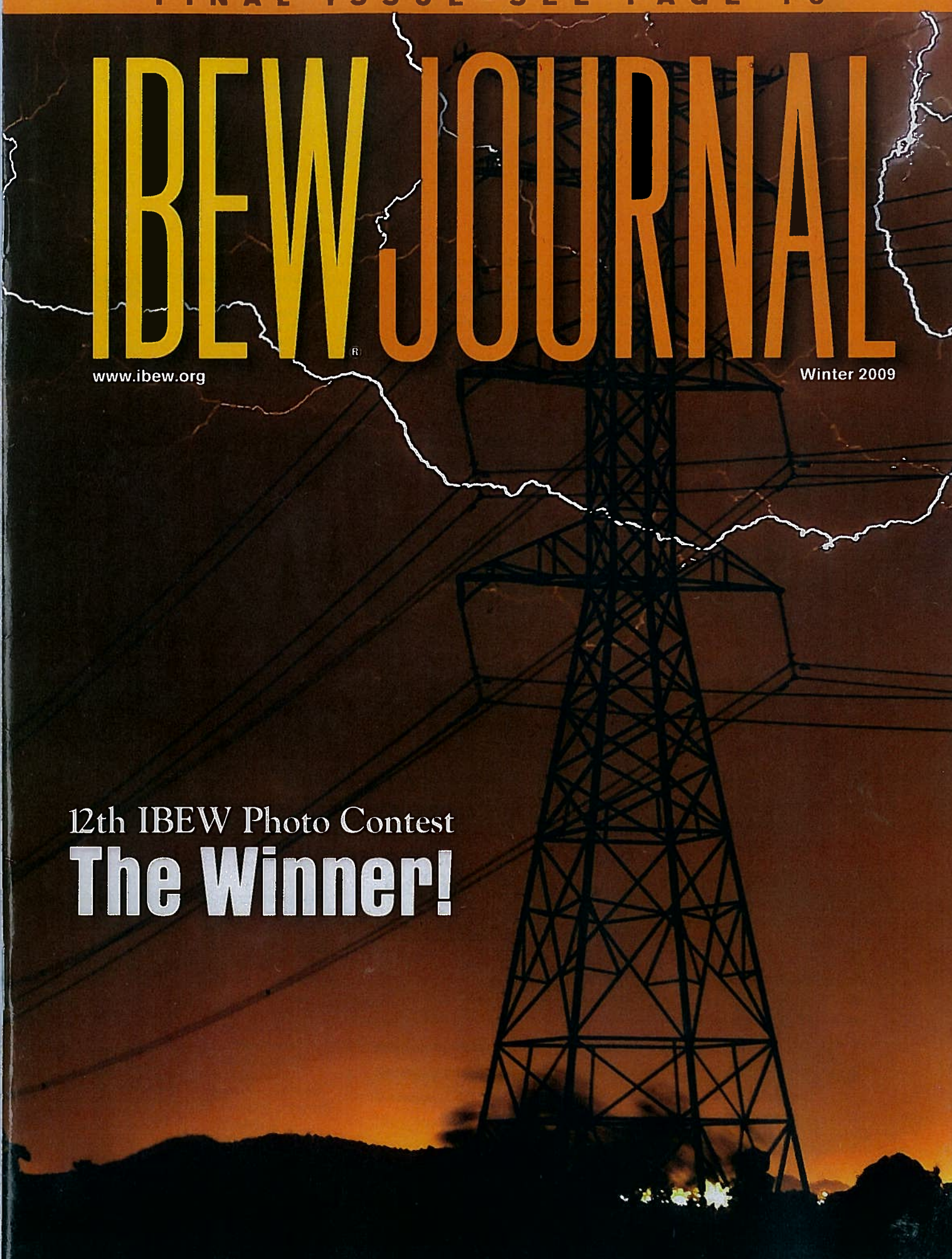
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Screenings Offered for Nuclear Weapons Site Workers

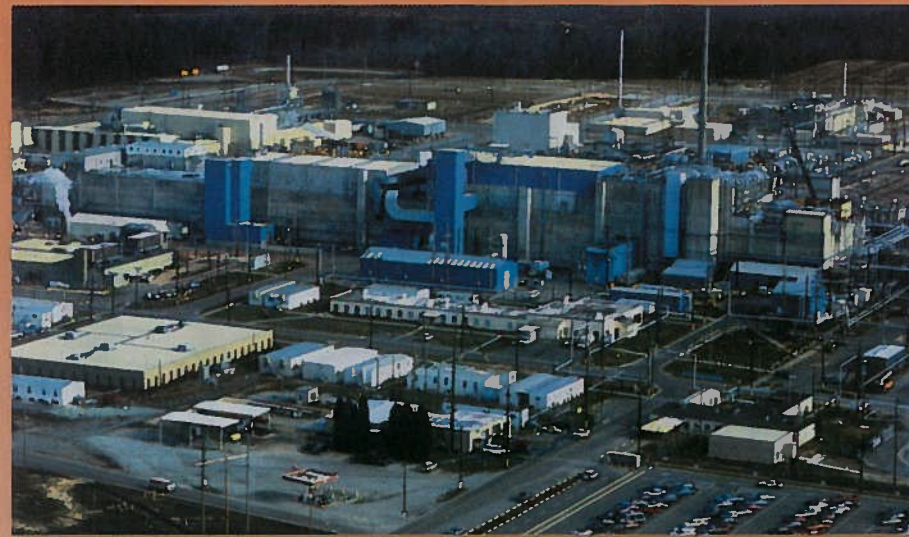
Gordon Rowe has heard all the jokes about glowing in the dark.

Still, this Augusta, Ga., Local 1579 member knows that during the 16 years he worked at the Department of Energy's Savannah River site and the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion plant, he was working around some very dangerous material.

He was working around nuclear weapons.

Maintenance, repair and new construction go on daily at sites that build nuclear weapons, so construction workers are there, just doing their jobs. But in the time they are on a site—whether a few days or years—they may be exposed to incredibly harmful substances, such as beryllium. Electricians may know it as a lightweight but hard metal that's easy to shape and a good conductor of heat and electricity. It's used in aerospace parts, semi-conductor chips, nuclear reactor fuel rods—and nuclear weapons.

Performing maintenance or demolition where beryllium was used can disturb beryllium dust on floors, in ceiling tiles, or on pipes. Inhaling that dust can make a person sick within a month or 30 years—from bumps on skin and wounds that don't heal to constant coughing,



The sprawling Savannah River Site in South Carolina was built in the 1950s to refine nuclear materials for nuclear weapons.

shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing up blood, night sweats, loss of appetite, and rapid heartbeats.

Those are the symptoms of chronic beryllium disease, a treatable, but incurable, disease. Beryllium also can cause lung cancer. There's no way to tell who will be affected or how they will be affected by beryllium dust. But if you've worked at a DOE site with nuclear weapons, it is best to be tested for beryllium and other hazardous materials.

Rowe knows. Not only did he get tested with a free screening through the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program, he now helps run its outreach

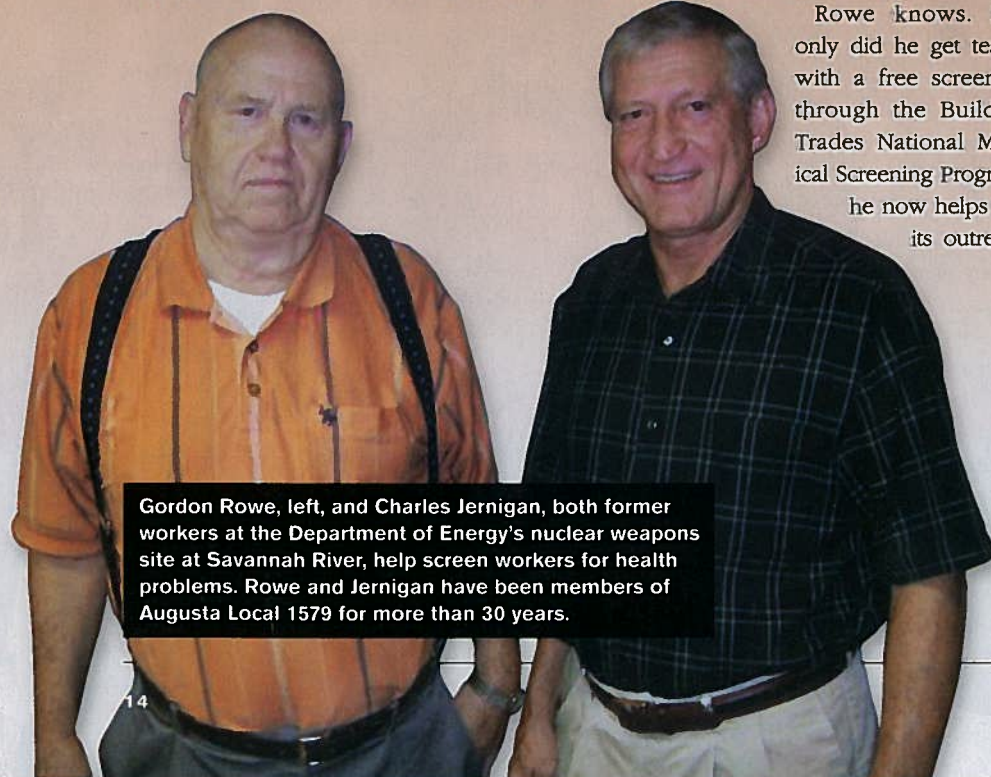
office for construction workers who have worked at the Savannah River site.

"Any construction worker who was on a Department of Energy site that involved nuclear weapons needs a screening—even if you worked just one day," says Rowe. Beryllium is not the only problem. Workers may have been exposed to asbestos, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury, radiation, silica and other health hazards.

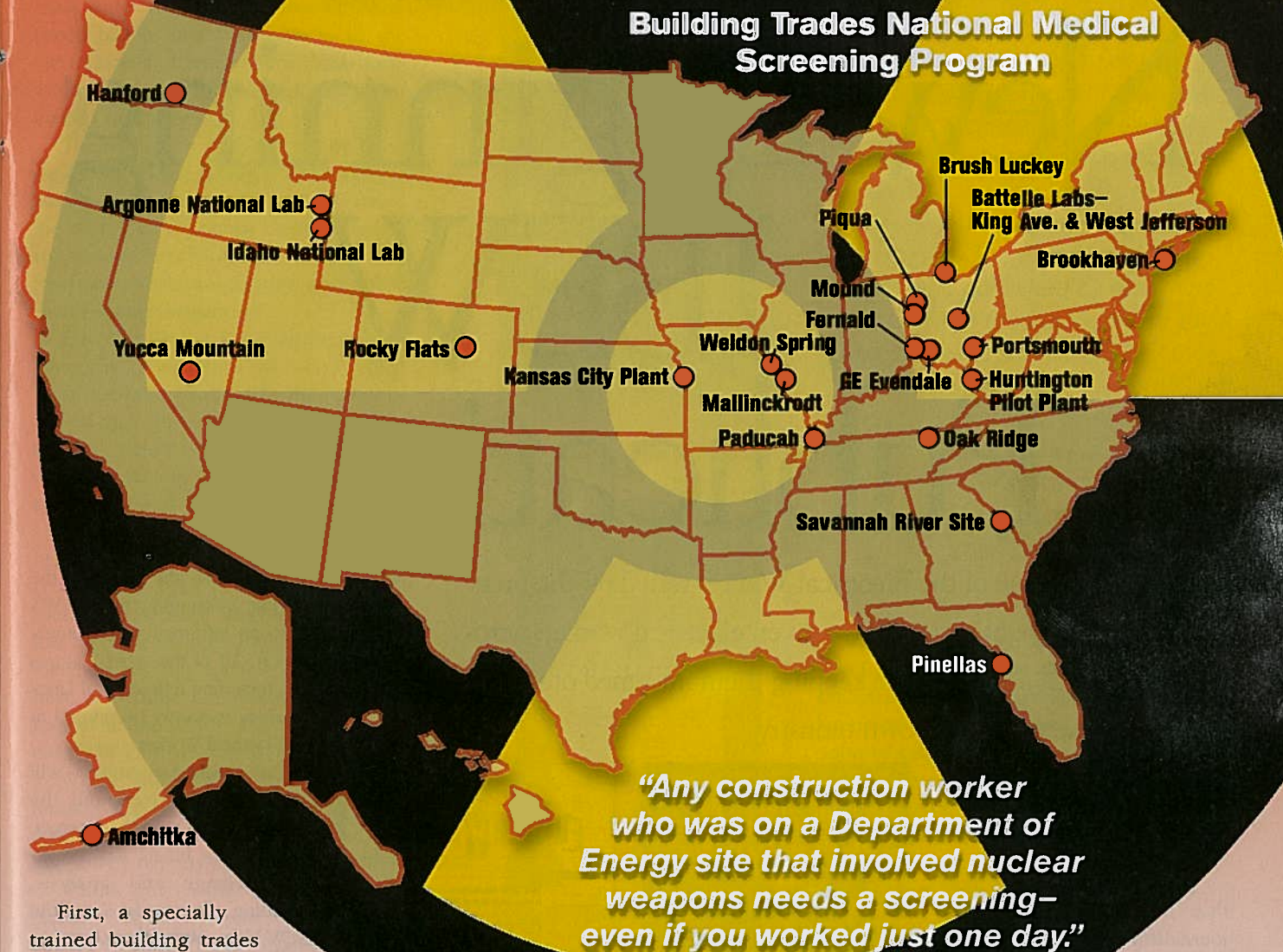
Most of these exposures happened years ago when the government was not as forthcoming about the health hazards construction workers might face. But many of these health problems can lay dormant—or go undetected and undiagnosed.

"The efforts of the Building Trades and the Center for Construction Research & Training have helped a tremendous number of construction workers find things they didn't know they had," says Rowe. When a health problem related to their DOE work is identified, these workers may be eligible for compensation and a medical benefit to help cover the costs associated with their treatment.

The free medical screenings offered at the covered sites listed on the map (at right) are run by the building trades program. Screenings include a work history interview and a medical exam.



Gordon Rowe, left, and Charles Jernigan, both former workers at the Department of Energy's nuclear weapons site at Savannah River, help screen workers for health problems. Rowe and Jernigan have been members of Augusta Local 1579 for more than 30 years.



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—Gordon Rowe, Augusta, Ga., Local 1579

First, a specially trained building trades worker, such as Rowe, or another work site expert, conducts a work history interview to determine what exposures to hazardous material the former worker may have had and the types of illnesses that could result. "It's been a rewarding experience for me since I worked out there, too, so I know how uninformed we were about the hazards of the work we did," Rowe said.

Then comes the free medical screening examination to test for illnesses that may have developed from exposure risks, as well as other unrelated health problems. Following the exam, the worker

receives a letter indicating any medical findings and identifies those that could be work-related.

"The program does a very in-depth job," says Rowe. "The exam is remarkably thorough, and the information I received was very helpful. It definitely made me more aware of all the hazards that were out there."

Screening participants who discovered DOE work-related health issues may

apply for government-funded benefits for treatment by filing a claim with the U.S. Department of Labor under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act. This program offers workers medical coverage for the illness from the date the claim was filed and a lump-sum payment.

Although the process was lengthy, says Rowe, he recently had his claim approved for his work at Portsmouth. "It took three years," he says, "but I finally got compensated."