

Genetic Research at Ft. Detrick Raises Few Hackles in Frederick

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By Felicity Barringer

Washington Post Staff Writer

FREDERICK, Md., March 8—Over the last 30 years the residents of this city surrounded by cornfields have become accustomed to the idea of exotic research going on almost in their backyards.

So the news that the National Institutes of Health plan to install a \$3 million center for the study of the most complex and potentially hazardous forms of genetic modification in neighboring Ft. Detrick, in the same red brick complex where biological warfare experiments were conducted for three decades, stirred little anger, little praise, and a lot of indifference here today.

"Ain't nothing I can do about it," said one old farmer in the Snow White Grill on South Patrick Street, turning back to his bowl of ice cream after two taciturn sentences.

Down the street in the Koffee Kup, a 40-year-old woman who has lived in this town of 30,000 all her life said, "It can't be any worse than what was there (the germ warfare experiments)."

Looking back at her cup of coffee, the woman, who did not want to be identified, added, "It's like anything else. They're going to do it whether you like it or not."

The woman had heard the news of the facility, where scientists will experiment with altering basic cell material to create new forms of life, on television.

But word of the planned experiments did not make the local papers until this afternoon, when the banner headline "Genetic Research Planned at Fort Detrick" appeared on the front page of the afternoon "News." So this afternoon most of the approxi-

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Few in Frederick Opposed to Idea Of Genetic Study

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mately two dozen residents interviewed knew nothing about it.

"I wasn't paying much attention to it. It didn't really bother me," said Dwight Palmer, 16, a parking garage attendant. Or, as Jerry Miss, 26, during an afternoon snack at the Snow White Grill, "I just don't know that much about it . . . but I don't see anything wrong with it."

For years, from 1943 until June, 1972, scientists three-quarters of a mile from the Snow White Grill, inside the chain-link fence that surrounds Ft. Detrick, worked with the biological agents that cause such diseases as anthrax, plague and encephalitis.

"They had germ warfare—that is, germ research—there for years and there were safeguards taken in protecting the community," said Ronald N. Young, mayor of Frederick. "I'm sure there will be safeguards in this case."

"I know there are moral issues involved with this. But I don't think you can stop research," he said.

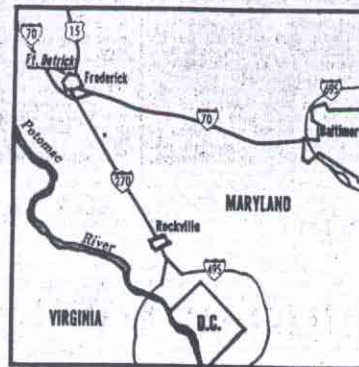
The equanimity with which residents such as these greeted the genetic research experiments contrasts sharply with the hostile reception given similar experiments proposed in Cambridge, Mass., at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Cambridge Mayor Alfred Vellucci, who has fought the experiments for several years, recently tried to pass an ordinance outlawing such research, but was overruled by the City Council.

Vellucci had some academic allies in his battle, as several professors from the universities involved expressed grave concern about possible consequences of the experiments.

This does not seem to be the case in Frederick.

At Hood College, a few blocks from Ft. Detrick, James Gilford, the head of the biology department, said, "My gut feeling is that the people over there are darn fine scientists. They're competent individuals . . . and the



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containment facilities at Detrick are among the best in the world."

For the most part, though, the residents interviewed did not talk of the sophisticated protective apparatus that is being designed for the facility. Those who knew anything of the proposal talked first of the aura of mystery around the genetic work, and immediately afterward of the possible economic benefits that will be provided by the new Ph.D.s moving into town.

"It has a sort of science-fiction-type feeling, this research," said Andrew Koose, from behind the counter of the Blue Ridge News store. "It's exotic. I like that."

"It would help the city's economy a lot," added the 22-year-old. "It might put back a lot of jobs that were taken away when the biological warfare people left."

"But basically people here will probably just say, 'So what?' Unless they get the idea of squirmy things ending up in their sewers. Then they might not like it," Koose added.

Thus far, the one loud voice of protest that has been heard belongs to Rita Gordon, a member of the Frederick County School Board, who called Mayor Young's office to protest, saying she totally opposed the project and that the community should get together to fight it.

"That's the only reaction we've had here," Young said. "I myself think research is necessary, even if it touches on moral issues. I had a stronger aversion to what was going on here before—and even that aversion wasn't, very farnky, that strong."