

THE LONG TERM EFFECTS
of the
RISE AND DECLINE OF THE CONNELLSVILLE
COAL AND COKE INDUSTRIES

PREAMBLE

We have spent 3 days rethinking and talking about an approximately 100 year era that changed history, lives, and the physical world around us. As we look back at the period it seems wise and apparent that we need to draw some conclusions about what happened, why it happened, how it changed lives and the physical world and weigh the pros and cons of the era. We also need to learn the lessons of that 100year plus period, if we are to do a better job as we enter a new energy era. The coal [coke]iron/steel. Oil era is ending. And a new era---the replacment of carbon based energy with natural gas, wind, solar, nuclear etc. Is taking shape. How do we want to shape it? What have we learned from our past experience that will help us to avoid having to spend another 100 years recuperating from the effects of this new era? With this in mind let me go through some of my conclusions about the “long term effects of the rise and decline of the connellsville coal and coke industries. I believe that much of what i have learned applies to many of the other regions affected by the pa. Coal industry.

“Silver Cinders' [12 min.]
What were the causes of the decline?
Negative long term effects
Positive long term effects
Lessons learned

CAUSES OF DECLINE

Technology Changes in coke and coal industries
Profit Driven Industries---high profit/low cost---depletion of easily accessible coal
of appropriate quality for coke
Industries dependent upon Non-Renewable Resources
Exploitation and Exportation---leads to short term profits and long term economic
Problems

LONG TERM EFFECTS

The Mostly Negative Side

Environmental Degradation/problems---

The industrial 100 year period led to destruction of farms, land despoiled and eventually stripped, water pollution, air pollution, overuse of timber, erosion, soil toxicity in industrial sites----we are still dealing with this 50+ years later.

Extraction/Exportation Industries have a finite future---

When they end, they leave no viable basis for building or growing new industries or reclaiming old industries [farming, lumber, fishing, etc.]

Excessive population for the jobs available---

Abnormal population expansion of the coal/coke boom years now becomes a problem: for example---Fayette County population was 39,909 in 1860, 58,842—1880 [early coal/coke years], 110,412---1900, 167,000---1910, and 200,000+---1940. The Coke industry began its decline in 1920's due to new technology and economic business decisions, the coal industry collapsed in 1950's at end of Korean War. Unemployment in the County rose to 20+% and remained in the double digits until about 10 years ago--- Nearly 50 years of economic hardship and dislocation for the area's residents.

Housing Conditions---

Much of the non-city/town housing spread throughout the county was developed by the coal/coke industries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of it was without modern amenities and when the industries collapsed, there was no one and no economic possibilities to upgrade the housing since much of it had been company built/owned. Add to this the lack of jobs and you can imagine the housing situation for much of the mid 20th century and even now.

Geographic Dispersion of the Population---

Due to the nature of the extractive coal industry, the coal usually wasn't necessarily near the population centers of the county. Transportation in the late 19th/early 20th centuries was limited by terrain and economics [farming needs]. So coal companies built the patches [coal towns] near to the mine entries. Each patch was meant to be self-contained. When the industries collapsed, the patches and many of their people were left isolated and stranded. In addition, the one connection between the patches and the commercial towns---the West Penn Railway System developed in the early 1900's also collapsed in the 1950's since the electric industry was directly connected to the coal industry.

Political One Party Domination---

In the early 18th century the farmers and merchants in the area tended toward the Republican parties. With the industrialization of the area and the economic struggle between the workers and the owners/industrial barons that resulted in the long (1880's---1940's) labor/unionization struggles that led to the identification of the Democratic party as the party of the working people and oppressed, the area ended up with a lopsided majority of Democrats spread throughout the rural/industrial areas of the county [the patches] and a minority of Republicans located in the small towns/cities. Uniontown was like the hole in the donut---it was Republican and was surrounded by Democratic townships. Many believe this put the county at a disadvantage in the political game---the

Democrats were so sure of the vote they ignored the area feeling safe while the Republicans wrote the area off as lost and so the area got nothing from anyone, thus adding to the economic/infrastructure woes.

Depleted Tax Base---

Since much of the tax base was built upon the coal and coke industries and upon the taxpayers who derived their livelihoods from those industries or related industries [explosive manufacturing, brick making, lumber, transportation---trolleys, rail, barge, commerce, agriculture], it collapsed with the demise of the industries. This then resulted in insufficient tax funds available for roads, water, sewers and general infrastructure development and repair and education.

Educational Dilemmas---

In addition to a decline in available support for public education, the county had no easily accessible higher education institution within its boundaries. The closest were located in Washington or Greene counties or in Morgantown, WVA. The lack of educational opportunities for a majority of the population resulted in a further bifurcation of the population. Those who could afford it---there were some who had profited from the coal and coke boom and managed to survive the collapse---sent their children to the better schools and to colleges outside of the area. Others in the less advantageous positions, relied on chance and whatever education they could receive locally. Many, due to economic necessity left school to find work somewhere, others coming from families that had been employed in the early labor intensive coal and coke industries were not prepared for education since their family tradition had not included education aspirations. In addition, many of those who left the area to receive their higher education or training did not return to the area because of lack of opportunity, thus depriving the area of badly needed brain power and leadership.

Health Care Availability---

As a basically rural area, the coal and coke region had the same health care problems of any rural area---a shortage of medical personnel. During the operation of the mines and coke yards, there was a system of medical care provided by some of the companies who provided company doctor/doctors, for which the employees paid a fee, sometimes deducted from their paychecks at others it was a fee for service system. Much of the health care resided in the women of the community---the midwives and other women who provided home remedies and nursing support. Eventually, H.C. Frick Company built a miner's hospital in Mt. Pleasant, and other local hospitals had miner's wards to deal with mine injuries and serious life threatening injuries and diseases. By the 1940's the UMWA had developed the Miner's Health and Welfare Fund that paid most of the medical expenses for the miner/coke worker and his family. People who needed glasses, dental care, etc. were finally able to get what they needed. But with the collapse of the mining industry in the 1950's many lost those benefits due to insufficient time in the industries and eventually the UMWA was pressured by the 1970's to accept a less comprehensive health plan. In addition, the region's inhabitants of later generations---born in the 1950's and on---usually had no way to claim the UMWA benefits and often were employed in minimum wage jobs with no benefits. They suffered a lack of

sufficient access to health care except through the Welfare system. All of this added to the lack of attractiveness needed to bring many top rate medical personnel into the area unless---in many cases---this was their home, and to a general lack of sufficient quality health care for the area's residents.

LONG TERM EFFECTS---

Mostly Positive

Cultural Richness---

Although some in the area bemoan the lack of culture---which they associate with High Culture such as opera, serious theater, concert/symphony music etc.---many will tell you that we are rich in culture, the diverse cultures of the diverse people who came to the area to work in the coal and coke industries. We are the heirs to various ethnic foods, customs, music, art, and value systems.

Value System---

While some parts of our nation are bemoaning the loss of values, we here in the coal and coke region seem to be on the fringes of the problem. Of course, since we are a part of the national world, we too have many of the same problems as other regions. But we also have a deeply rooted value system that emphasizes strong family and community ties, church/religious affiliation, survival training for difficult economic times, a strong work ethic [a good day's work for a fair wage], honesty, directness or straight forwardness [that some feel is a lack of tact], simplicity, frugality, respect for life and authority and at the same time a distrust of those in authority, realism that at times becomes resignation bordering on fatalism, hardy independence of spirit/ political dissent, and a love/connection to the land and nature. We tend to be pragmatic, sometimes too pragmatic, thus limiting ourselves to dream and our fierce attachment to being free and independent erupts into fierce disagreements with and opposition to perceived power structures.

Ethnic Blending---

This region due to the impact of the coal and coke era is a good case study of what can happen in ethnically diverse communities. The original English, German, Scotch-Irish, French population was faced with dealing with a huge influx of ethnic groups from southern and eastern Europe, people with different language, customs, dress and culture. In addition, there was a substantial influx of southern African-Americans in the early 20th century. There was a lot of tension, distrust, and struggle in the first 50 years or so. But by the mid 20th century, things were beginning to gel. Today, we still have differences and sources of tension and distrust but to a much lesser degree. Time and the need to survive have by necessity forced us to deal with each other and in many ways to blend together and to share in each other's differences while adapting and blending customs, values, and cultures to arrive at a point where we can say that we have proven that different kinds of people can live together in peace and respect. We may not have arrived at perfection yet, but I would say that we have made phenomenal progress when I look at

the problems around the world that have beleaguered people for hundreds and thousands of years.

LESSONS OF THE PAST

What are some of the things we have learned from this 100 year experience of the effect of ideas, economics, and technology upon a land and a people?

- 1---Technology changes and that will impact jobs and people
- 2---Never put all of your economic eggs in one basket---if it breaks you can starve to death. Diversify your industry.
- 3---Don't depend upon extractive or export industries to assure your economic health
- 4---Build a strong, educated middle class---invest in education
- 5---Guard your environment.
- 6---Be proud of your heritage
- 7---Don't depend on others or the government to come to your aid---you're on your own, except for your family and community.
- 8---Study the past and learn from it. It is the basis of the present and can give valuable insight into how to build a future.
- 9---Different does not mean bad or of lesser value or status---learn from those who are different, this can lead to a richness in life.
- 10---When industries come to your area make sure that when they leave they take all of their "stuff" with them, not leave it for future generations to deal with it.
- 11---Remind incoming industries/businesses that they are welcome and that you expect them to be good community citizens and contribute to the good and welfare of the people of the community---set-up a scholarship, build a park pr playground, construct a community center, etc. Extractive/exportation industries, in particular, should be approached. They cannot be forced to be a contributing part of the community, but they should be guided to do the right thing[s] for the community. They are taking from the general wealth of the community resources that can not be replaced or renewed. They owe the community something.
- 12---Consider adopting the attitude that what the industries break or destroy [roads, water, excavated/erosion prone land, etc.] they fix.

Let's not make the same mistakes we made during the heyday of coal and coke! Let's learn from that experience. We should never have to spend a hundred years cleaning up the mistakes of industries that have been gone for decades and generations. And let's proudly celebrate the achievements and pluses of that era too.

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