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Like a Rainstorm

CHERYL CUTTER

One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

O

n a hot August day, I find myself standing once again on top of Hyner Mountain, looking over the town towards two million acres of remote rolling hills in central Pennsylvania. As I stand amongst the heat and humidity, you might think I am feeling the pure joy and lightness that standing at the top of a mountain brings (see figure 1). Instead, I am feeling something heavier. I am staring out over a forgotten town, Renovo, covering an area just over one square mile, nestled along the river bank (see figure 2). This town is immersed in stretches of state forest and designated wildlife areas that spread out across central Pennsylvania like patches on a quilt. Companies want to strip this area down for its resources, burying the beauty of the land among the debris of fossil fuels. I stand with hesitation, wondering, how long could one stand here and see what I see now? How long can this wilderness remain unowned?

Figure 1. Aerial view from top of Hyner View. You can see a hang glider ramp, the Susquehanna River, the Allegheny Mountains, and state highway Route 120, which cuts through Renovo about seven miles west of here (2016).

Figure 2. View of South Renovo from across the Susquehanna River (2016).

Renovo, my grandmother’s town, has seen the changing of industries over time. The economy of Renovo and the surrounding area was primarily based on lumbering, until the first-growth forest was almost entirely stripped away and the industry collapsed. Next, the companies turned to coal mining in the neighboring towns (see figure 3). Now they have moved on. More recently, natural gas was discovered in the area, and, like a rainstorm, the companies descended on the area slowly, then all at once.

Figure 3. Bitumen Miners outside a mineshaft (circa 1900). They earned about 30 cents per ton of coal mined. Photo courtesy of Bitumen Roots.
When I think of coal mining and natural gas drilling, initially, I think of the damage they cause and not what they produce. But even more, I think of how these coal mining communities have brought happiness to my family and, at the same time, sadness. If it wasn’t for these communities my great, great grandfather, Michael Hritzko, wouldn’t have found a job, and he may have never settled in Pennsylvania. His community, a town called Bitumen (named for the coal being mined in that area), is a short seven-mile drive up a winding road from my grandmother’s house in Renovo (see figures 4, 5, and 6).

Figure 4. A picture of Joe Pitonyak driving on Main Street, Bitumen, in a 1924 Overland Whippet (circa 1930). Photo courtesy of Bitumen Roots.

Figure 5. Bitumen Store, which I often heard about as a kid, circa 1910. Photo courtesy of Bitumen Roots.

Figure 6. A picture of Bitumen, although the exact location of the view is in debate, because the land has changed so much in 125 years (circa 1890). Photo courtesy of Bitumen Roots.

I have seen firsthand the environmental impact from coal mining bitumen. My great, great grandfather emigrated from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1913. He moved to Bitumen, 1,398 feet above sea level, in central Pennsylvania. My grandmother remembers Bitumen fondly, but she grew up in neighboring Renovo, where my mother spent her adolescence and teenage years. The community created a safe place and employment for immigrants. The mines were up in the mountains, and the workers would transport the coal down to the river valley, where the train tracks were, and load it on the trains. The town sits on the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad as the midpoint between Philadelphia and Erie. I visit my grandmother frequently in Renovo, and usually find my way to Bitumen (see figure 7).
Figure 7. My great, great Uncle Tommy Tomko brother’s house in Bitumen (2017).

The entrance to Bitumen’s old Main Street is marked on the left side of a dirt road by a Ukrainian Catholic Church which is bordered by an old cemetery that houses traces of the once populous Slovakian community. Unfortunately, if you continue to follow the dirt road beyond the church, almost all that remains of Bitumen’s Main Street is fragmented house foundations that spring up out of the thickly wooded mountain side. I walk through these same woods today, cut off from all technology, and, somehow, I feel closer to those who lived here a century ago. As I stand among the noisy silence of this obscure forest, I envision the bustling mines of long ago. My siblings and I run between the trees like children in a scavenger hunt, but what we find evokes more complex emotions. As I sink back to reality, my eyes focus on the now collapsed mine tunnels. The land is uneven, filled with unnatural mounds where workers once entered the earth. There are no towering trees immediately around these sites: it has not been long enough for the once barren coal mine entrances to flourish with a sea of green plants and trees. The mine entrances stick out in the mountainous forest, leaving the wandering eye to catch how deeply scarred the natural beauty is.

One of the biggest impacts these mines have had is their drainage runoff. The Susquehanna River is at the base of the mountains. This river bends and swirls its way across vast amounts of land, pumping water for miles over the pebble ridden riverbed. This river does not discriminate. Once the core of this community, this river was the life line for trade. Oh, the countless hours I have sat afloat on a brightly colored inner tube feeling the river’s life beat against the plastic tube and splash over my toes. Under the surface of the shiny blue metallic water, though, the river struggled to sustain amphibious life. The Susquehanna was polluted by the countless creeks that contained mine runoff. These creeks flowed like veins emanating from the mountain side into the river (see figure 8).

Figure 8. Drury Run, a creek in Renovo that flows south into the Susquehanna River (2017).
It didn’t stop there. Natural gas companies have infiltrated the area. I first noticed this phenomenon as a child. My family would drive the mountain roads looking for elk (see figure 9). The forest would suddenly open up into clearings where man-made structures sat, all fenced in. Although the population was slightly affected by these new companies, when a hundred workers came into Renovo the population of 1,200 took notice. As more out-of-town natural gas company workers came and stayed there, they complained to their companies about the backwardness of the town. Now, more technological advances have come to Renovo. Better roads have been built for access to the remote mountains. Five hundred workers are expected to come to Renovo in 2018, for construction of an $800 million, natural gas-fired electric power station, and the town is already wondering where to put all the workers. A “preliminary artist’s rendering” of the plant shows an expanse of large smokestacks and huge storage tanks. Ironically, this plant will be built adjacent to the Greater Renovo Heritage Park (a site dedicated to commemorating the town’s mining past) after they demolish the old PA Railroad shops where they once built railcars. I wonder what else will be affected. I have seen the natural views and landscape of this remote area destroyed by the natural gas companies. The heritage park is a beautiful backdrop to the small town, but soon the windows of those who live next to it will show only the cold, sharp outlines of factories, instead of the soft, green, arched landscape of rolling hills. This part of Pennsylvania is one of the least densely populated areas in the eastern United States, and was featured as such in *The Last Empty Places* by Peter Stark. I think back to the little girl standing atop the mountain thinking that this place would always belong to her, and now, at 20, I stand here hoping that I won’t live to see this place become industrialized. I’ve always hoped that wouldn’t happen.

For some reason I always felt this place was invincible, that it would always be untouched. I was mistaken: anywhere on this planet is fair game for developers. I worry about the five hundred expected workers who, perhaps, instead of enjoying the middle of nowhere vibe, will want chain stores and restaurants, turning this town into the towns they left behind for work.

What should I tell the future generations about this place?

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**Figure 9.** My sister and I looking over one of the elk wildlife areas (2017).

**Figure 10.** Picture of a bucket outside of an old brewery on Brewery Lane in Renovo (2017).
That this barren-looking landscape holds more life to me than a bustling city? Should I tell them that these places are the reason the sun rises, to shine its rays between the hollows, to glisten over the river, and to guide the trees upward in growth? Should I try to convince them that this is unclaimable wilderness? Do you think they’ll know that time stops when you stand at Hyner View and watch the numerous hang gliders descend into the open fields below? Will they believe me when I say, a place like this can save your soul?

I wasn’t ready for the land outside my grandmother’s kitchen window to change. Unfortunately, the things I look upon today may be memories tomorrow.

And what should I tell the future generations about this place?

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Endnotes


About the Author

Cheryl Cutter graduated in May 2018 with a major in History and a minor in Social Studies. Her project was completed in the Fall of 2017 under the mentorship of Professor Ronald Maribett (Geography). She plans to pursue a graduate degree in Education the Fall of 2018.