*Paul Kachmak stops to look at a set of wooden garage doors made by his grandfather in Nemacolin on March 13, 2016.*

# The boom and bust of Pennsylvania's coal towns

The state of hundreds of company-built towns offers a glimpse at the existential struggle ahead for areas dependent on the coal industry.

Reporting by **DANIEL MOORE**
Photography by **MICHAEL HENNIGER**

One hundred years ago, scouts for Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co., a titan of the American steel industry at the time, discovered a most ideal 400 acres of rolling farmland along the Monongahela River in Greene County.

Locked into a Gold Rush-esque competition for the coal seams underneath, the company raced to dig shafts and build a processing plant. Up high on the steep banks, it began carving narrow roads, stung power lines, installed a sanitary sewer system and began laying foundations for duplex houses.

Within five years, the Buckeye Mine was well on its way to supremacy, producing nearly a million tons of coal each year to produce coke, a material thrown into blast furnaces at steel mills. On top of it all, the company had established the village of Nemacolin, a model community for hundreds of miners with a school, churches, store, an amusement hall and baseball fields.

*Source: Esri | Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

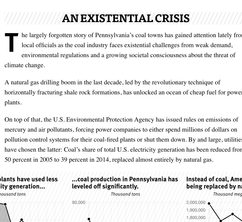
Nemacolin is among scores of company-built towns in southwestern Pennsylvania that dot the rail lines and rivers used to haul coal to steel mills and power plants. But today, decades after the mines shuttered, the towns show what remains when an industry responsible for building a region leaves it behind.

Since the Buckeye Mine shut down in the eighties, Nemacolin's elementary school burned down in a suspected arson. The store closed and the swimming pool was filled with dirt. Many of the duplex houses now sit vacant, roofs missing, tagged with graffiti and looted, verging on collapse. And the citizens' group left with the town's charter lacks funding and resources for large-scale change.

The economic, social and cultural void left after the miners moved away has been replaced with distrust, absentee landlords, drugs and crime.

Once homes for generations of coal miners, many villages are now considered areas to avoid — even by those who roamed the streets as children.

"This was a beautiful place to grow up," said Paul Kurincak, a retired miner who grew up in a duplex on Bliss Avenue and now lives in neighboring Carmichaels. "Now, there's nothing here."




*Despite erosion and occasional spontaneous explosions, the Buckeye Mine waste dump about 1,000 feet from Bliss Avenue still towers mountainous.*

## AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

The largely forgotten story of Pennsylvania's coal towns has gained attention lately from local officials as the coal industry faces existential challenges from weak demand, environmental regulations and a growing societal consciousness about the threat of climate change.

A natural gas drilling boom in the last decade, led by the revolutionary technique of horizontally fracturing shale rock formations, has unlocked an ocean of cheap fuel for power plants.

On top of that, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued rules on emissions of mercury and air pollutants, forcing power companies to either spend millions of dollars on pollution control systems for their coal-fired plants or shut them down. By and large, utilities have chosen the latter: Coal's share of total U.S. electricity generation has been reduced from 50 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2014, replaced almost entirely by natural gas.

*Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration*

While coal has always gone through booms and busts, there is a sense among local officials here that this new challenge facing coal is lasting. Three coal units have closed in southwestern Pennsylvania since 2012, including FirstEnergy Corp.'s Hatfield's Ferry power plant, a 1,710-megawatt landmark so close to Nemacolin that, on a sunny day, it would eclipse the village's streets with its plume of white steam.

Coal producers have experienced a wave of bankruptcies and soul-searching. In 2013, Cecil-based Consol Energy, long a major regional player in Appalachian coal, sold five large West Virginia mines to Ohio-based Murray Energy and is focusing more on natural gas production.

Virginia-based Alpha Natural Resources, which operates Emerald and Cumberland mines near Waynesburg, declared bankruptcy in August and closed Emerald at the end of last year, affecting close to 500 workers. This month, the world's largest coal producer, St. Louis-based Peabody Energy, warned of a possible bankruptcy.

ADVERTISEMENT
20% OFF SITEWIDE!
Sale ends December 31
SHOP NOW
PG STORE

## OBSESSIONS OVER COAL

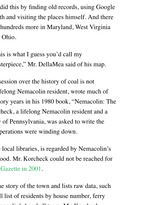
The world around coal could not have looked more different in 1917, when Youngstown Sheet and Tube started digging into the "Klondike" coal formation — a chunk of the Pittsburgh Seam so named because the dash to development brought to mind the Alaskan Gold Rush.

After the Civil War and at the onset of the industrial revolution, southwestern Pennsylvania became the epicenter of American demand for iron and steel, said Elaine DeFrank, oral historian for the Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette.

"We had the coal that made the coke that made the iron and steel that built the buildings and bridges across America," said Ms. DeFrank, who grew up in Amend, a Fayette County company town. She has been guiding visitors through the Penn State coal museum, a collection of artifacts on the first floor of the campus library, since 1992.

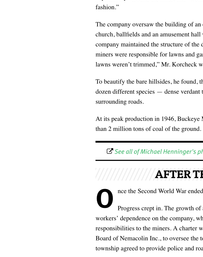
"You could look out any distance and see the beehive coke ovens," she said.

With no place for the rush of miners to stay, companies bought up land from farmers to build towns. Called coal "camps" or "patches" — after the German word "pacht," which means "to rent" — they were named after the companies, or the corresponding mines or the farmers who sold the land.



*Companies built coal "patches" or "camps" to provide housing and basic resources for miners in the most rugged, isolated areas. (Photo courtesy of Chris DeRiddea)*

Towns sprung up virtually overnight with names like Shoaf, Smock, Reduction, Shamrock, Crucible, Hope. Steel baron Henry Clay Frick alone had 72 holdings throughout Fayette County, Ms. DeFrank said, and there are countless more. The folk-song aphorism "I owe my soul to the company store" rang true, she said, as miners in many villages could only shop at the store and used company-issued currency called "scrip," which came out of their paychecks.




*Coal companies built hundreds of coal towns in southwestern Pennsylvania alone. (Map courtesy Chris DeRiddea - Click for full size PDF (4.4MB))*

In the 1920s, about half of all Pennsylvania coal miners lived in company towns, according to a U.S. Coal Commission study. Historians with the state say towns are found in 30 Pennsylvania counties. The true number of coal towns across Allegheny, Fayette, Washington and Greene counties is somewhere around 260, according to Chris DeRiddea, a Beckley, W.Va., resident who — as a hobby — created a map every company town he could verify in Appalachia.

He did this by finding old records, using Google Earth and visiting the places himself. And there are hundreds more in Maryland, West Virginia and Ohio.

"This is what I guess you'd call my masterpiece," Mr. DeRiddea said of his map.

Obsession over the history of coal is not uncommon in the patches. Robert Korcheck, a lifelong Nemacolin resident, wrote much of what is know about the village's founding and glory years in his 1980 book, "Nemacolin: The Mine — The Community, 1917-1950." Mr. Korcheck, a lifelong Nemacolin resident and a retired English professor at California University of Pennsylvania, was asked to write the history of Nemacolin by mine officials as their operations were winding down.

The book, long out of print but available at some local libraries, is regarded by Nemacolin's older residents as being a window to their childhood. Mr. Korcheck could not be reached for an interview, though he was profiled by the Post-Gazette in 2001.

Published in 1980, the 225-page narrative tells the story of the town and lists raw data, such as miner wages, annual production tonnage, a full list of residents by house number, ferry traffic and the batting averages of players on Nemacolin's baseball team. Mr. Korcheck reported Nemacolin's degree of planning and care served as a new model for company towns.

Unlike boom towns in the traditional sense, Mr. Korcheck wrote, Nemacolin "did not grow haphazardly" around the mine, and "workmen's shanties were not scattered in a disorganized fashion."

The company oversaw the building of an elementary school, a Catholic and Presbyterian church, ballfields and an amusement hall with a bowling alley and 550-seat theater. The company maintained the structure of the duplexes and regularly painted them while the miners were responsible for lawns and gardens. "The mine police would voice displeasure if lawns weren't trimmed," Mr. Korcheck wrote.

To beautify the bare hillsides, he found, the company planted 608,000 trees comprising a dozen different species — dense verdant thickets that today isolate the village from surrounding roads.

At its peak production in 1946, Buckeye Mine employed nearly 1,300 workers and dug more than 2 million tons of coal of the ground.

See all of Michael Henniger's photos from this project on Pittsburgh: In Focus.

## AFTER THE COAL RUSH

Once the Second World War ended, however, life in Nemacolin began to change.

Progress crept in. The growth of automobiles in the 1950s and 1960s lessened the workers' dependence on the company, which sold off housing and transferred municipal responsibilities to the miners. A charter was created for a group of citizens, officially the Board of Nemacolin Inc., to oversee the town's water, sewage and lighting utilities. The township agreed to provide police and road maintenance.

On a sunny day in the early 1960s, a 12-year-old boy named Richard Trumka turned to his grandfather, Attilio Bertugli, and asked, "What can I do to help the miners?" Buckeye Mine was going through a prolonged downturn, and workers were digging half the annual coal tonnage they had dug in the forties.

"Look around you," his grandfather responded. "Who are the people that can help the most?"

At first, Richard said, "Politicians?" His grandfather gave him a playful slap across the head.

"Think a little harder," his grandfather said.

So Richard tried again: "Lawyers?"

After getting his law degree and rising through the ranks at the United Mine Workers union, and now the president of the AFL-CIO, Mr. Trumka recently recalled the conversation with a hint of nostalgia.

As one of the village's most revered former residents, Mr. Trumka said he watched Nemacolin's luster faded, ever so slowly, after the mine closed in 1987. He took increasingly frequent trips back to the village as his parents became older. Each time, he noticed the manicured lawns and up-kept houses showed more signs of wear and neglect. Longtime residents moved to find work elsewhere, and the duplexes became rental properties.

*Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, grew up on Bliss Avenue in Nemacolin — in these photos, he hold a union fire boss flyumine, courtesy of a wooden handle, in his Washington, D.C. office. (Photo courtesy of Jacob Kyle)*

"When the mine shuts down, it's like the heartbeat slows down until it comes to a stop," Mr. Trumka said. "The town starts to atrophy. The vibrance of the town starts to fade."

Mr. Trumka's father died in 1999, followed by his mother in 2010. His childhood home sits abandoned on Bliss Avenue.

## THE LAST REFUGE

Today, almost none of the 900 or so people living in Nemacolin mines coal for a living.

Aside from the post office, there is no business based in the village. Instead, residents work elsewhere — as a cashier at the Circle K down the road in Carmichaels, or as a medical receptionist an hour away in Connellsville, or a health inspector in Morgantown. Many are retired or close to retiring. About 19 percent are living below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census.

The duplexes were picked up — several at a time — by landlords in tax sales. Home prices fell. Tenants from all over flocked to Nemacolin for dirt-cheap rent. In the early 1990s, the school burned down by arsonists who were never caught, forcing students to attend elementary school in Carmichaels.

"The towns deteriorated," said Ms. DeFrank, the coke and coal historian. "The people that moved in didn't take care of them."



*Rev. John Bauer, pictured on March 13, 2016, has lived in the rectory of Our Lady of Consolation church in Nemacolin since 1999.*

From the rectory of the Our Lady of Consolation church, Rev. John Bauer has watched people in the town quit coming to mass since he arrived in 1999. He fears what will happen to the building when revenue brought in from donations eventually won't be enough to cover maintenance costs.

For now, the congregation remains full thanks to graying parishioners who moved away and feel compelled to come back for services, he said.

"This was the center of the universe at one time, his little town," Rev. Bauer said wistfully.

"That's why a lot of the folks still come here to mass. It was the mother church of everything. And at one time, the older folks all lived as kids up in Nemacolin — now, it's sex, drugs and rock and roll."

He described the church as a last refuge of stability and protection in the village. Amid spurts of vandalism and crime carried out in the village over his 17-year residency, no one has laid a finger on the church, he said.

"It is amazing. Nothing has ever touched here," he said. "I think that's pretty cool. I like to say we have a little spiritual canopy over the place."

## EASY ANSWERS

When the sun goes down, silence typically blankets Nemacolin, a village along the Monongahela River. But on one Saturday evening in January, music drifted from the fire hall's banquet space.

Complimentary wine and beer were offered to guests. A server orbited the room with a tray of appetizers. Guests mingled — a county commissioner, a county judge, Waynesburg business owners, a couple of college students. Also in the mix were a recently laid-off coal miner, an out-of-work oilfield worker, an underemployed auto repairman.

Where coal miners in the past would congregate, Jonathan Graham and Amanda Laucher were hoping to convince residents that computer programming — not digging more coal — can help save this town that has crumbled since the Buckeye Mine closed in the 1980s.

*Jonathan Graham and his wife Amanda Laucher teach a coding class inside the former United Mine Workers of America union hall in Nemacolin on Feb. 6, 2016.*

The "Mined Minds" tech consultancy, started last fall, is a first promising effort to breathe life into Nemacolin. Ms. Laucher grew up in the village with a family full of coal miners. She left the village and entered the booming tech industry. Mr. Graham, a native of the United Kingdom who entered computer programming as a musician, met Ms. Laucher at a conference in Europe.

The husband-and-wife team, who live in Chicago, has spent 15 years working for technology consulting firms. The prospect of using their talents at home emerged last July, when Ms. Laucher was home visiting family.

She and Mr. Graham had a series of rhetorical riffs: Why is Silicon Valley the only place coders can make a living? Why do local businesses have to call developers in other time zones when they need affordable software development? Why are Greene County workers relegated to the whims of the extraction industry?



*A painting of a coal miner hangs inside the former United Mine Workers of America union hall on Feb. 6, 2016.*

And: Why can't we teach classes here for free that cost thousands of dollars for people in cities?

The easy answers may not be optimistic.

The learning curve for coding is steep, both in terms of mastering the craft and gaining full-time work. Former New York City Mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg told an energy conference in 2014 that it's naive to think coal miners could ever learn to code.

Operating behind everything in Greene County, there's the monolithic economy. Coal may have faded from its peak, but mining companies still hold much of the stake they claimed during the time of company towns. Miners account for about a quarter of the county's employed residents, according to the state Department of Labor & Industry.

Of the top 10 biggest employers in 2015, the only private employers not connected to coal were Essent Healthcare, a Nashville, Tenn.-based health care company that operates the Southwest Regional Medical Center in Waynesburg, and Wal-Mart, which operates one store in Waynesburg.

At the end of 2015, miners earned the highest pay of any sector: an average annual wage of $99,478, compared with the county average across all industries of $57,298.

ADVERTISEMENT

One membership to do more for less.

Uber Pass Join now

## TROUBLES AT HOME

But layoffs in coal and natural gas had begun hitting home. Ms. Laucher's 33-year-old brother, Marvin Laucher, began working severely reduced hours at Consol Energy's Enlow Fork Mine and had seen his friends laid off without notice.

Plus, there was the persistent decline of her hometown.

Since the mine shut down in 1986, residents left to find work elsewhere, leaving their duplexes abandoned or selling them cheaply to a landlord. With a revolving door of tenants came a fair amount of suspicion among neighbors. "No Trespassing" signs mark the edges of property lines. Dogs bark ferociously at cars that creep along the vertiginous, serpentine streets.

> ***"IT HAS A REPUTATION THAT IT'S NOT A PLACE YOU WANT TO BE"***

"It has a reputation that it's not a place you want to be," said Marcia Sonneborn, community development administrator for Cumberland Township. "I hear that all the time."

Last year, county officials identified Nemacolin and West Waynesburg as two "pockets of need" in a study led by John Fox, then-director of the Greene County Drug and Alcohol Program. The county planned to help Nemacolin start a structured neighborhood watch, rehabilitate the park and ballfields, and put up signs establishing official drug-free zones — which carry the risk of heavier fines for offenses.

But Nemacolin Neighbors United, as the endeavor was called, fell apart after a few meetings. Residents feared retaliation from their neighbors for calling the police, even anonymously.

Angie Vinesky, who was elected board president of Nemacolin Inc. in January 2014, said the village is aware of the challenges facing its residents and its reputation in the area. But her hands are largely tied, she said, due to the limits of the board's charter left by the company, coupled with the lack of outside money and the lack of galvanized community support.

"I can provide good trash service," said Ms. Vinesky. "But I can't do anything about bringing in jobs and education."

## BUILDING JOBS

Given the distress at home, Ms. Laucher and Mr. Graham went forward with Mined Minds while keeping their consulting jobs. They made a Facebook page and fliers and held information sessions. From August to December, 10 people completed the first phase of the program, including Marvin Laucher and Ms. Vinesky, the village's board president.

The course consisted of in-person tutoring at the fire hall each weekend — the couple made the eight-hour drive from Chicago — and virtual sessions over Google+ every Wednesday. The participants learned Ruby, a coding language that Mr. Graham described as versatile enough to perform a range of tasks for businesses, and created a digital tic-tac-toe game.



*Dolly Throckmorton of Waynesburg looks over her screen while taking a coding class taught by Jonathan Graham, standing at left, and his wife Amanda Laucher, not pictured, on Feb. 6, 2016.*

This spring, 12 students have signed up to attend sessions.

At the January information gathering at the fire hall, some of the students stood up to speak about what the classes — and the prospect of a business in the village — means to them.

"They told me there's enough coal for 40 years, that your kids can come work," Marvin Laucher told the gathering. "Now I'm starting to think, what am I going to do? Coal isn't going to be around forever."

"I never thought I'd do something like this," said Shane Baker, who put in seven years as a contractor at Enlow Fork and carpooled to work with Mr. Laucher. Days after he decided to join the spring class, GMS Mine Repair & Maintenance laid him off. "I thought that was my career. ... But I don't want to worry about the industry shutting down one day."

"Computers aren't going anywhere anytime soon," reasoned Joseph McKenzie, a mechanic at a nearby auto shop.

Then spoke Carol Payton, a self-professed "technologically challenged" business owner from Morgantown, W.Va., whose sole website developer recently passed away. Her sign-making business, called City Neon Inc., was Mined Mines' first client.

Ms. Laucher and Mr. Graham have a long-term vision: continue to recruit students, gather up clients and sell local businesses on the notion of having computer help close to home. In other words, turn a spatter of freelance work into a full-time load for everyone who graduates the classes. Mined Mines is building jobs with salaries that they expect to reach six figures if developers gain experience, they said.

"Sometimes I question why I'm doing this," laughed Mr. Graham, who recalled a particularly tiring drive to the village to teach. "But then I see all the people we're helping. ... I want the opportunity to come back and help other people do what I do."

Though word of the coding classes has spread, regional workforce officials remain, at a high level, focused on miners' transferable skills for the manufacturing jobs. Officials pointed to a U.S. Department of Commerce designation last year spotlighting the Pittsburgh area's some 1,600 manufacturing companies that employ about 63,000 people.

Money is already on the way. In January, the state labor department announced $2 million in reemployment assistance for 1,100 laid-off coal workers in southwestern Pennsylvania to either find reemployment in coal or train for a different career path.

"We have dollars to help them," said Ami Gatts, president of the Washington-Greene County Job Training Agency Inc. "These miners have so many of those skills that can fit into those positions. I feel like we have a lot of potential."

## MARKETING THE TOWN'S HISTORY

Officials said there have been talks of marketing Nemacolin's little-known history and natural beauty as a destination.

They could extend the Greene River Trail, a crushed-stone recreational path that currently ends in Crucible, about nine miles downstream. A cheaper alternative would be to apply the village for the National Register of Historic Places, which already recognizes at least five patches from Fayette and Washington counties.

Evaluating the town's eligibility for the National Park Service's register has been a major task for Bill Callahan, a regional community preservation coordinator based in Pittsburgh with the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office.

In addition to unlocking tax credits and matching grants to rehabilitate certain structures, Mr. Callahan said, a designation carries with it "promotional opportunities and is an unparalleled method to raise public awareness about our shared history." He visited Nemacolin last year to give Ms. Vinesky and the Nemacolin board an overview of the requirements.

*Hundreds of duplexes, like this one seen on March 13, 2016, were built in Nemacolin beginning in 1917 by the Buckeye Coal Company, which rented the homes to its miners in a rush for the coal seams beneath.*

Based in Pittsburgh, Mr. Callahan has facilitated federal approval of Marianna, Whitsett, Smoaf, Smock and Star Junction. Mr. Callahan said patches are a critical slice of the agency's preservation work. "There's little doubt they have historic significance," he said.

Ms. Visnesky said that given the pressing tasks facing the board, including renovations of the park and playground, it could be years before the village can assemble an application.

"When you're one person, it's a heck of a lot of time," she said. "So it's kind of comes down to what takes precedence."

## HOUSE BY HOUSE

*William Cagle of Nemacolin sits on his porch and has a cigarette on Feb. 6, 2016.*

The resurrection of company-built coal towns may ultimately depend on people like William and Paula Cagle. Three years ago, the married couple moved from Florida and into the coal patch to be closer to their daughter -- who was attending school at Westmoreland County Community College -- and to get away from the heat, hurricanes and mosquitoes.

They bought a house on Wood Street for $7,500 that had been vacant for 20 years, from the children of one of the first miners who had moved into the house in 1919, Mr. Cagle said. With help from a new township grant program that helps low-income homeowners fix up their homes, the Cagles are remodeling the interior.

Perched high on a hill, they lauded the view looking east toward the Laurel Highlands.

"We fell in love," Paula Cagle said. "It's so beautiful."

Web Design **ZACK TANNER**

ADVERTISEMENT

20% OFF SITEWIDE! SHOP NOW PG STORE
Sale ends December 31

COMMENTS

Login Register Logout