

Work: with selected photographs from the exhibit
Faces From An American Dream

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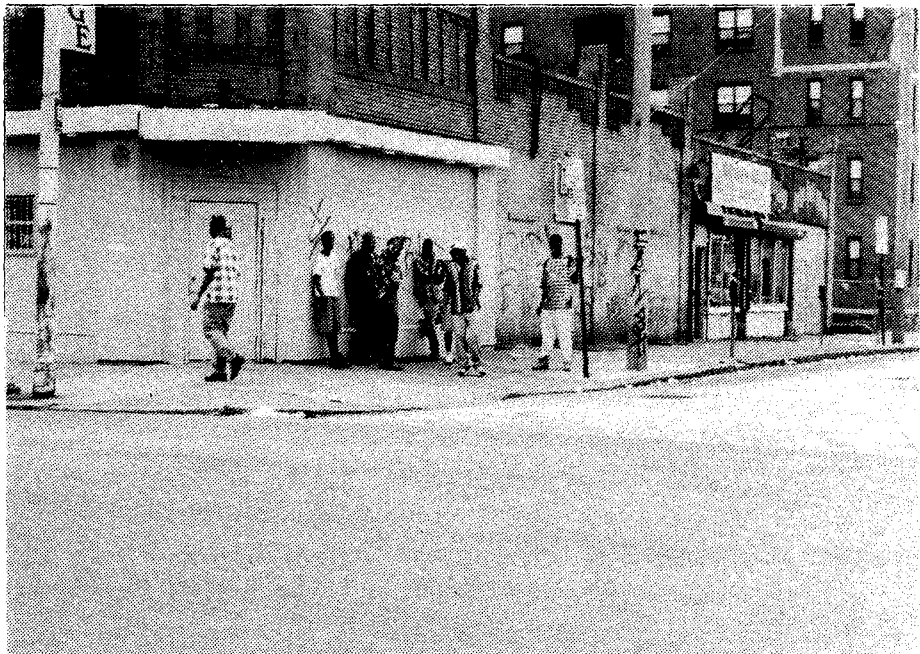


Philadelphia Youth, North Broad Street and Fairmount Avenue. 1997.

In April of 1990 Richard Sharpless, a historian at Lafayette College, and I toured southwestern Pennsylvania to photograph the old steel towns and steel mills long established in that region. Apart from what we had heard and seen in the newspapers, Richard had also read about the region in a book ominously titled *And the Wolf Finally Came*.¹ It described the demise of the steel industry



North Broad and Oxford Streets, Philadelphia. 1996.



North Broad and Clearview Streets, Philadelphia. 1996.

and included a map of all the steel towns and mills located up and down the Monongahela River south of Pittsburgh. The last time I had been in industrial Pittsburgh was in 1967, passing through on a night passenger-freight from industrial Philadelphia to Chicago and the Great Lakes. Until 1990, I had never seen western Pennsylvania in daylight.



Monessen Youth. Westmoreland County. 1990.

Our project however required some sensitivity and genuineness of purpose beyond merely photographing abandoned steel mills. We wanted to try to understand and see more than what met the eye or camera at the surface of film. We specifically wanted to shake hands, converse, find food for thought, and politely inquire of the people living there, once the greatest steelmaking center in the United States, as to how they were getting on with their lives. It was important to us that we didn't appear as prying holiday gawkers from back east, as aloof university academics, or as a pair of newsmen hungering for a story for the readers back home.

By 1990, plant closings, of course, weren't news in Pennsylvania any more, as they weren't in Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, or Massachusetts. A newly coined word had already named the beast some years before. Bluestone and Harrison's studious and thorough *The Deindustrialization of America*² had been heard as a howl from academe in 1982. But in the popular press *deindustrialization* and *global economy* at times became convenient euphemisms, or verbal slumber laid over the American industrial landscape conveniently concealing the terrible consequences of deindustrialization for industrial communities. For those who were left behind, usually the already *unheard froms*, the roar of Reagan eighties' globalism was deafening. In a way Richard and I were tugging at a media mask that seemed wholly fabricated

out of language and spin, and so during the global boom of the late nineteen eighties it was for the vanished and the unheard froms that we went looking one fine April day.

We were curious: what did the demise of what was once the world's greatest industrialized economy really look like? Besides academics and labor statisticians, what did ordinary people have to say about it? Had anyone asked a crane operator or a garment worker what he or she thought about it? And since Lewis Hine, had anyone recently photographed people and their streets and their closed factories? And what did they think about the promise of the new service and information economy? Would their children be better off than they were or had been? Or, did anyone care?³

Pennsylvania is a long ride when every brick chimney catches your eye. Whether it designated a church or a school or a factory, every small town seemed to have one or two of these tall industrial landmarks. If not a stack then a coal breaker, as common as a ballfield next to a school.

Since our minds were pre-occupied with purpose, food for the body, Richard thought, could be enjoyed in any number of greasy diners, some new, some old, that he found or remembered along the way. Two things we especially liked when traveling: old diners and old, remembered books. For me books had always been a way to meet people. It's how I met Huck Finn, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, just about all the good folks and plain fools in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and landlubbers from all walks of life. I met a few cutthroat pirates and unruly sea captains in books and then later went to sea for a number of years looking to meet them in person. In a sense I was doing that now, looking to meet and shake hands with people I thought I would only ever read about.

We got as far as Blair County the first day. That night in Altoona we listened for freight trains rounding Horseshoe Curve. The next morning a cold gray sun brought clouds and threatened rain. I didn't want rainy day pictures and worried about esthetic neutrality.

It was about noon when we arrived in Westmoreland County on the shores of the Monongahela. We traveled on the river's west side along Route 837 and occasionally crossed back to the east bank whenever a bridge arched over a steelworks or met with a town on the other side. Our map counted thirteen mills with ten closed. The remaining three were more or less just making coke and some steel.

Crossing from North Charleroi on the west bank brought us to Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corporation: a long steel-sided building perhaps hurriedly erected during the boom years of the Second World War and now, almost fifty years later, rusting away as a war monument that didn't quite make it to Washington. We parked the car and I climbed up a grassy slope to get a better shot. On the incline I stumbled over the ruins of old housing foundations,

and then imagined the immigrant houses that perhaps stood here once. In Bethlehem some of the old housing remains—triple deckers offering front, streetside views of gothic steeples and graveyards, and with backside views of furnace stacks and coal.

A short walk up a side alley found us in downtown Monessen. A man waved at us from an opened doorway and we learned that he was a retired steelworker. He was African-American and spoke softly and freely about his past in the mills, the raising of his family in what was evidently a modest working class neighborhood, and about having once had an honorable means to earn and live an honorable life. He mentioned this last because from the time he invited us onto his front porch he was eyeing what we were eyeing: four youths, men probably in their twenties, gathered on the street corner. He had been watching them all along he said, and almost everyday, too.

They stood across from a four-story tavern with rain-curved plywood nailed over a pair of balcony doorways. With heavy lingering awnings, from street level the plywood looked like the placement of coins over the eyes of the dead. A sign hung beneath. 'OK Lodge' it said. 'Drink Coca-Cola.' A joke sent the four laughing as they waved high hands to a passing car. Another car stopped. We asked leave of our friend and approached them. They spun around and looked amazed.

Were we from the newspaper? they asked.

"You want pictures of black American youth?" asked one. "We'll show you what black American youth is."⁴

They were friendly, appearing eager to talk, but two of them, wary of the camera, quickly stepped aside. The others stood their ground, rigid, almost



Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corporation. Monessen. 1990.

bristling with the energy and power of youth. They began to clown for the camera. We asked about their lives. Soon all four admitted that none of them had ever had a full-time job.

"You're from Easton?" they asked excitedly. "Do you know Larry Holmes? He's from Easton. He's famous!" they said. "You know him?"

Though neither of us could say that we knew Easton's most famous prizefighter, I mentioned that I had seen him riding in his limo once.

Then we explained why we had traveled three hundred miles across Pennsylvania to the Mon-Valley.

They couldn't believe it:

"You guys came all the way out here to take pictures and talk to us? Three hundred miles to this place?"

Then came the query:

"Are there any jobs in Easton?"

In my travels this question had come before. This time I was suddenly speechless.

"Are there any jobs in Easton?" they asked.

In the silence I heard the question repeated from a sewing machine repairman, a very friendly man I had met in Shamokin who now sells old baseball cards with his son. He longed for and was in eternal love with the fifties. Once I had heard the question from a garment worker in a small town called Shenandoah, from street people in Philadelphia—a city once cited as the 'workshop of the world'⁵—from a lonely middle-aged woman in a small town called Nicholson living in a leaky trailer that stood in the shadow of one of the world's greatest railroad bridges, from a heavy bearded biker in a bar called The Tipple in a small town called Windber, from a security guard in a beat-up pick-up in a place called Laurel Mine—who then promptly told me and the camera to "Get Lost"—from an ex-coal miner in Ralph's Bar in a small town called Stoystown, from a skinny prostitute walking a ridge with a bag full of groceries in Altoona, from a mine foreman in a place called Tire Hill, from three men and one woman camped in the weeds behind a Burger King in Allentown, from a newlywed pregnant garment worker with a mouth full of rotten teeth in a small town called Ashland, and from a 27 year-old construction worker who later took a shotgun to his head in a small town called Boswell.

"Are there any jobs in Easton?"

We didn't know what to say, lamely suggesting that from what we had read the jobs were supposed to be in the Northwest, in Seattle. In the sunbelt, Arizona. Maybe Florida. No, we couldn't recommend home as a place to find a piece of their American dream. Not now, anyway. No, the famous Bethlehem mills had gone the way of the Mon-Valley. And Allentown's Mack Trucks. No, go south. Go west. Go. Go, we said.⁶

It was ridiculous, and it showed all over their incredulous faces, as if to say: Go? Sure. On what? On what train? On what bus? Which black thumb do we stick out?

I did not know what Richard was thinking, but I was thinking about *No Exit, Being and Nothingness, And the Wolf Finally Came* and all the rest and yet I knew that there was nothing I could say to Joseph Michaels, David Johnson,⁷ and the other two men off to the side. There was nothing we could give to these four Black, Negro, Afro-American Youths and they knew it. We had camera, pencil, paper, means, voice, and they did not. Four Colored, Negro, Black, African-American Youths knew that too. We had the numbers, we had the inept confusing labels, the statistics, the raw facts, but they knew that all added up to nothing when our eyes met hard, right here, on this street, in Monessen, in their America.

We stood, we stared, and between us a river was as wide and deep as a continental divide. The six of us shook hands and exchanged farewells and Good Luck and Best Wishes, and Good Luck and Go West, and Good Luck and Go South. North. Northwest.

It was thin. Plastic. So cooked. So safe. I wondered, had anyone from the Department of Labor ever really stood on a street corner and talked with the young and strong and unemployed? Of course they had. Yet the point continued: In those canyons of computers and steel filing cabinets had any bureaucrat every really faced an unemployed person in a town like this? Of course they had.

We moved to go. I did not want to look back. We waved at the old steelworker on his porch. He nodded farewell and I recalled his words about the youths not having anything, not going anyplace, that you won't know what *is* if you don't know what *was*.⁸ That they would be lucky just to have an idea of what it was that had been lost to them.

We walked back to the car, passing an old lawn mower with one of those EZ-Start, ratcheting wind-up cranks. I thought about a shot, a 'romantic-halo' calendar sort of thing, like those sweet attempts to render steel mills into heavenly baroques. For those who had worked in them, and I had been one, blast furnaces and steel mills were anything but cathedrals, anything but romantic. We shouldn't be fooled. The mills were full of fire and dust and smoke, full of violent death and injury and vulgarity. But they mostly meant work for all. In their time they were places where the home-grown and the newly-arrived forged American dreams and homesteads. At a board meeting once, Charles Schwab reportedly said that Bethlehem didn't make steel, it made money.⁹ The steady paychecks were first-class tickets to the middle-class. In the time of industry, Philadelphia, with its row upon brick row of blue-collar neighborhoods, was the largest small town in middle-class America. Today, along with its constant profusion of new hopeful churches, it is trying,

like Monessen, to woo a new economy of art and tourism. It is looking for a new reason for being, hoping for a new romance with the American dream. Yet if we insist on industrial romanticism, then the romance of steel or of shipbuilding or of the assembly-line was that it paid your mortgage, and provided routine, long-term employment in one location. This did wonders for the cohesiveness of community and family.

The four youths were gone by the time we drove around the corner at the OK Lodge. We drove on, stopped briefly to remark on a patchwork of hillside houses, then rode toward the school building seen in the distance and headed for the next town. I repeated the names the youths had written on my model release cards. We talked about them from Webster to Milesville, from Elizabeth to Lovedale.

"It feels like rain," said Richard. The car continued winding along the broad Monongahela. We reached Glassport, then Duquesne and another bridge.



Inner-city youths. Ninth and Firth Streets. Philadelphia. 1998.



Rap Artist. North Broad and Spring Garden Streets. Philadelphia. 1997.

Coursing along we thought that we could have dropped from the moon and landed on that small piece of street across from a boarded-up beer joint in Monessen, or have careened east and landed deep in the heart of Philadelphia at Third and Indiana, or at Kensington and Allegheny. It didn't matter. As hideous as we might have looked as aliens from outer space, the question would have been the same: "Is there work where you come from"?



Church Security Guard. North Broad and Mount Vernon Streets. Philadelphia. 1997.



Center City Philadelphia, view north from the South Street Bridge. 1998.



"Abreu Grocery Store." Northeast Philadelphia. 1997.



Row Homes. "Sinking Houses" district. Northeast Philadelphia. 1998.



Volunteers. North Broad and Green Streets. Philadelphia. 1997.



Hillside Houses. Monessen. 1990.



Boys and Girls Club. Easton, Pennsylvania. 1990.

Notes

1. John P. Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came* (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, 1988).
2. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (Basic Books, Inc.: New York, 1982).
3. Yes, but a relative minority of Americans. There were few strikes or worker protests on any national scale of note regarding plant closings. What strikes occurred during the 1980s-90s usually were local and concerned job security and employer-provided healthcare. Deindustrialization belatedly made the mainstream media when, for example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a series entitled "America: What Went Wrong?" in the fall of 1991, and when the *New York Times* ran a front page series in March, 1996. As of 1997, despite presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan's frequent campaign remarks, it had failed to enter deeply into the mainstream political arena either. America's economic shift from an industrial base to a service and information base appears to have been one of the quietest economic revolutions ever.
4. Street interview. In possession of the author. For another essay based on a street interview see Martin J. Desht, "Two Youths Working Salvage, Northampton County, Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History*, vol. 63, no. 3, Summer, 1996, pp. 464-469.
5. Philip Scranton and Walter Licht, *Work Sights: Industrial Philadelphia, 1890-1950* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1986) p. 3, a fine volume on Philadelphia's peak period of industrialism.
6. Witold Rybczynski, *City Life* (Scribner's: New York, 1995). Rybczynski, a University of Pennsylvania urban studies professor, suggests that because large numbers of southern blacks had migrated to northern industrial cities in search of employment in the 1930s-40s, they should migrate once again to areas of employment and wean themselves of social welfare which merely inhibits their progress towards full employment (p. 171-172). But where to migrate remains unclear. Rybczynski also fails to note that by the late 1970s approximately 1,900 American-owned or controlled manufacturing plants were already established in Mexico, as were a number elsewhere in, for example, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Thailand, Korea, and China. African-American emigration to these countries was hardly likely in the 1970s, and doesn't seem likely during the 1990s.
7. Names have been changed.
8. A common comparative remark often voiced by those who lived the *American dream* because they had long-term employment in industries that have all but disappeared in the United States. While I was doing photographic street work in Philadelphia, my neighborhood guide and former industrial worker, George T. Ridout, Sr., 73, often drew historical and sociological comparisons on the availability of work and opportunity for the unskilled worker of the 1950s and for the unskilled worker of today.
9. Mark Reutter, *Sparrows Point: Making Steel: The rise and ruin of American industrial might* (Summit Books: New York, 1988), chap. 9, "Charlie and His Workmen," pp. 170-188.