Touring the Coke Region
by David Demarest and Eugene Levy

... Grass grew around the tunnel heads and on the yards, and an air of desolation then settled about the plant, giving a hint of what the famous Connellsville coking field may look like half a century hence. — 'Connellsville Letter,' in Coal, October 7, 1905

FROM Pittsburgh most visitors to the mid-September event in Alverton travel east on the Turnpike, exit at New Stanton and drive south on Route 119, a modern four-lane highway. Very quickly the erstwhile Volkswagen assembly plant comes into view. In the late 1970s and early 1980s this newly built facility employed thousands of workers, many from the old coal towns of Westmoreland and Fayette counties. Seen from the highway, the plant in those days gave the impression of modern, clean, efficient industrial activity. Then in the late 1980s Volkswagen stopped operations and for a time the site sat idle — acres of asphalt surrounding an immense but quiet building. The new plant seemed as much a relic as the rows of abandoned beehive coke ovens just a few miles away. Now, in the early 1990s, Sony is refitting the plant to manufacture color TV tubes.

David Demarest and Eugene Levy are professors at Carnegie Mellon University — Demarest in English and Levy in history. Their interest in coal mining and coke making in Western Pennsylvania has entered its second decade. Both men are frequent contributors to Pittsburgh History. Right: Rural Western Pennsylvania's coal, used to make coke, which in turn is used to make steel, powered the nation's industrialization. Change — especially in technology — erased local coke producers' competitive advantages by the 1920s, and the industry began to crumble. At Donnelly, Westmoreland County, in 1981, a worker leveled coke at one of the area's few remaining "beehive" ovens. The site is now a gun club's firing range.
Otherwise the landscape along Route 119 stays rural: farm fields, a scattering of houses, horses and cattle grazing. Pittsburgh visitors reach the turn-off to Alverton before an active strip mine on a nearby hilltop reminds them that this is, after all, Western Pennsylvania’s historic coal country.

We have visited Alverton many times in the last 15 years. Up through the early 1980s, we went there to watch the last commercial beehive coke-making operation in the United States. At Alverton Coke Company the scene was always busy: a half-dozen beehive ovens at one or another stage of the coking process; the smell of acrid smoke in the air; a coal-laden truck being weighed on the scales; piles of coal ready for loading into the ovens; workers leveling the coal inside the beehive or drawing the finished product, coke, after the 48 hour burn; railroad cars being filled with coke from the ovens and moving out. The slow, two to three day burn in the refractory brick ovens, which turned coal into nearly pure carbon (coke), was essentially the same technology used a hundred years ago in the region’s heyday.

The daily activity is gone now, but when Edith Painter and Carl Huffman closed down their ovens in 1983 they decided to honor the Coke Region’s industrial tradition by maintaining the site for history buffs and tourists. Once a year they fire up a crumbling beehive oven as their contribution to “Coal and Coke Days” in Westmoreland and Fayette counties. Those who wish to can still arrange to sample the sights, sounds and smells of the beehives in operation. In the 1990s, the coke yard itself seems almost swept clean — not a mound of coal or coke anywhere, though underfoot there’s no lack of “hard” evidence of what was once there.

The annual Alverton ritual (to which we’ll return later) is a glimpse of the Pittsburgh region’s past. Anyone who reads the daily papers or, for that matter, who attended the Homestead exhibit at the Historical Society two years ago, knows that interest in Western Pennsylvania’s industrial heritage is on the rise. Much of the effort has focused on steel, but the local steel industry came into existence because of the region’s vast reserves of coal. Without the superior metallurgical (coking) coal, in what is known widely as the “Pittsburgh Seam,” Western Pennsylvania would not have become the dominant steel-making center of the United States from 1880 until World War I.

What is the historic Coke region like today — almost a century after a Connellsville journalist described the desolation that had already settled over abandoned coke plants? What will people concerned with the past and its relation to the present find if they tour the region, by foot and auto, with an eye for the landscape and an ear for the stories of some of the “locals?”

Ruins of the old beehive coke industry are plentiful 35 to 50 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, in Westmoreland and Fayette counties. This was H.C. Frick’s empire. At its peak in 1910, the Connellsville region dominated coke production in the United States. Over 40,000 beehive ovens produced 18 million tons annually, 60 percent of the nation’s coke. Much of that tonnage went into Pittsburgh’s blast furnaces.

Modern coke-making is done at huge “by-product” facilities close to the mills — e.g., at the Clairton and Hazelwood plants built by US Steel and Jones & Laughlin Steel during World War I. At the turn of the century, American coke-making was decentralized. The beehive-shaped brick ovens (12 feet across at the base, 7 feet high) were constructed out in the countryside, row after row, next to the coal mines that provided the raw material. The wreckage of hundreds of these ovens still exists. Especially in the Brownsville/Masontown area, where a few plants functioned as late as the 1960s, long rows of ovens, 100 or more, stretch off in perspectives of arched doorways and brick and stone masonry: Leckrone Two, Allison, Shofaf. At other sites, just a few ovens remain. East of Ardara (in Westmoreland) a score or two are hidden by jungle-dense overgrowth next to the Conrail tracks. At Hostetter, 15 or 20 run along the edge of a farm field, barely distinguishable from the natural bank into which they are built. In the summer, some rows of ovens are so overgrown that they are nearly impossible to find: Morgan (up the hollow from Broad Ford), Smock (actually “Colonial One,” near Uniontown), Champion (south of Brownsville).

The Coke Region’s landscape was, and still is, full of surprises and contrasts: hills and hollows, open farm
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land and abandoned mine buildings, summer verdure (or winter's snows) versus industrial refuse. Writing in her 1947 book Cloud By Day, during the final bloom of the region's industries, Muriel Earley Sheppard relished the effects: "a country of extremes, ugly by day with banks of coke ovens, tipples, sidings, and fields gnawed to the rock with strip-coal operations; luridly beautiful by night when the glare of the ovens paints the sky ... a place of great wealth and great poverty, with too much smoke, too much violence, and far too many people."

By the 1970s, when we started exploring the district, Fayette County was no longer burdened by smoke, or by much visible wealth. As traditional industries declined in southwestern Pennsylvania, many people, especially young people, moved away. Today, Fayette County is sparsely populated, its resources and people underemployed.

The region's plight registers statistically. The 1940 census showed the population of Fayette County at an all-time peak of 200,999. The decline began after World War II; by 1970 the population was under 155,000. A slight growth-blip marked the 1970s, perhaps due to the newly opened Volkswagen plant just across the Westmoreland County line and to the rebuilding of Route 119. But in the early 1980s, Fayette lost what little it had gained; its population was back to 155,000 by 1986.

The prolonged loss of people reflects, in part, the shutdown of mining. Between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, US Steel alone cut its mining work force by 50 percent, down to 5,000 from a war-time high of over 10,000. (In 1990, US Steel operated no mines in Fayette.) In the post-war period miners took to commuting to work by car, many of them crossing the Monongahela River into Greene County; others drove to industrial jobs in Pittsburgh, an hour away. The 1970

You often have to look hard to see through nature's reclamation process, but thousands of abandoned coke ovens remain in Westmoreland, Fayette and Washington counties. Opposite page: The "beehive" was the oven where the region's wealth was baked. New capacity was still being built in the early twentieth century, including these new beehives at Pittsburgh Coal Co.'s Colonial No. 1 mine in Smock, Fayette County, 1905.
census showed 3,800 miners living in Fayette, of whom 3,000 worked out of the county. But when mining and manufacturing jobs fell sharply throughout southwestern Pennsylvania in the early 1980s, few good jobs were left for Fayette residents to commute to. Out-migration resumed with force in the 1980s. In 1987, 13 percent of Fayette County’s population was on public assistance—a rate second in the state only to Philadelphia’s.

Fayette’s problems are the legacy of an extraction industry that removed wealth over a long period of time and invested only grudgingly in local wages and infrastructure.

Still, along the route Muriel Sheppard describes in the first chapter of Cloud By Day—down from Chestnut Ridge on Route 40, through Uniontown, then west on a county road into the old Klondike region, heading toward Brownsville—the scene in the 1990s is an evocative mix of old and new, of industrial remnants and post-industrial artifacts. Some are depressingly, some hopeful. Some catch the special look of the Coke Region’s landscape.

Uniontown itself has suffered the fate of small American cities: losing retail stores to a nearby mall, its downtown become a set of one-way through-streets. In Summer 1990, a number of large storefronts stood vacant, and the sidewalks were empty at mid-day. Meanwhile, just west of town on Walnut Hill, the Uniontown Mall was completing a project to post-modernize its facade and add 10 new stores. According to “The Splendor and the Promise,” an article on Fayette County in the Pittsburgh business magazine Executive Report (Dec. 1989): “The retail complex’s payroll will exceed 1500 employees.” Across from the mall—across Route 40’s busy four lanes—stands the former mansion of legendary local coal magnate J.V. Thompson, owned and operated since the 1930s by the Sisters of Saint Basil. Mount Saint Macrina, as the sisters call their “motherhouse,” was briefly touted by another article in the same issue of Executive Report—“Tourism: Fayette’s Future?”

The county road to New Salem turns west here, conveniently approached today from the mall parking lot. Then, just as Sheppard described it in 1947, the road “leads through farm country for the first four miles,” though a scattering of small 1950s houses sprinkled between the older farmhouses says this is now rural suburbia. Three miles west of Route 40 some large contemporary houses appear. Suddenly, on the left, is “Faithful Pets Cemetery,” its graves decorated when we visit in mid-December by red-ribboned wreaths peeking through the snow. Suburbia, vintage 1990s.

A moment later the road passes “the abandoned Shamrock Mine with a crumbling bank of ovens” (the words are Sheppard’s), then “into New Salem and out of the burning dump of Buffington on the edge of town.” The fire is out now, but the drama of the historic landscape remains. The open farm land, the hills, intersected suddenly by the grid of a town, then smeared, marked indelibly, by the structures and remnants of gritty industrial work.

As we drive or walk sections of this route, we pick our own favorite details: the well-preserved company store buildings in Buffington and Filbert; the school front in Herbert that announces “Public School, Anno Domini MCMXVI” over the door; the rigid geometry of Filbert climbing up a slope; the historic photos, newspaper clippings and posters displayed in Barbusch’s service station in Fairbank and at Johnny’s restaurant in Repub-

“Patch” is the term for the region’s small towns, such as Marguerite, above, Westmoreland County, 1912, with its chief employer smoking heavily at the far left. Opposite page: This 1876 lithograph from Westmoreland County shows the typical coke yard: coal from nearby mines is delivered by horse-drawn wagon; workers bake the coal in the ovens; and train cars carry the product away. In most cases, the coke was then taken to river barges, for transport to steel mills.
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The coal towns, or "patches" as they are known locally, were already changing in the 1940s. The coal companies started selling their company-owned housing, usually to a single realtor. (US Steel's major buyer was John Galbraith, who became better known as owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates.) The realtor in turn was often able to sell the individual units to the families that already lived in them. The result was that some of the patches, or sections of them, stayed remarkably stable and in good repair over the years. The houses became, in effect, family homesteads, and the towns themselves evolved into something like commuting suburbs. When individual houses fell into disrepair, they were cleared away, giving the patch a more open, spacious look than it had when it functioned as part of an operating mine and coke site. By contrast, some patches decayed into poverty.

Smock, off Route 51 a few miles north of Uniontown, provides one example of change. The two-lane county road into the patch passes small farmhouses and barns, then several recent suburban-style homes. On the right, in the Redstone Baptist Cemetery, New England-style markers — vertical flat slates — show dates from the 1820s (before the mining era). Past the cemetery, small two-story houses start clustering along the road, then come the large double-houses so characteristic of the patches of southwestern Pennsylvania. The center of Smock is to the right: about a dozen blocks, about 75 houses. A turn through the town's streets shows that most of the housing looks well kept: painted or aluminum-sided. The general effect is suburban. The backyards are large and moved. In August the small vegetable gardens kept by many of the residents display neat rows of staked tomato plants. The rows of several hundred coke ovens that once dominated the patch's landscape are in ruins, barely visible in the dense underbrush beyond the edge of town. Smock's clean, renovated look, plus a mid-morning quietness, suggests that many residents are off for the day working somewhere else. Its pasted streets are a far cry from the "crowded" patches pictured by Muriel Sheppard in the 1940s.

Our sense of Smock is complicated by the fact that we've visited over a period of years. For example, the local war memorial, a standard feature in Western Pennsylvania's industrial towns, is rendered especially memorable by two flanking homemade statues: to the right, a sailor dressed in a blue uniform; to the left, a soldier in green. In Summer 1989, we were puzzled by the sailor's change of complexion. A few years earlier, he had been black; now he is white. What can the change mean?

Each time we visit Smock, we notice an African-American or two. How many blacks live there? What is their history? As we loiter between the war memorial and the old company store, now converted to a post office and community center, an old-timer (a white man) recalls how the Homestead Grays, a famous black baseball team, used to come to Smock on the Fourth of July to play the local team. Traditionally the coal towns were segregated by race, and to some extent by ethnic group. Tom Turosak, an 83-year-old ex-miner who has lived his whole life in Smock, tells us that the town was always Polish, Slovak, Russian. But in the 1920s, he says, Smock had a black neighborhood: workers the company brought in during the famous 1922 strike. These families started a small church next to the ball field that still holds Sunday services, though, according to Turosak, most of the blacks moved away not long after the strike.

Walking back a couple of hundred yards along an abandoned right-of-way (its tracks long since salvaged), we pass the ball field and spot the First Baptist Church, a tiny white building, its cornerstone dated 1923. Kenneth Lee, a church deacon, tells us that many of the
Smock, above, was built in 1904 to house workers at nearby coal and coke operations. Unlike many “patches” in Fayette County, where unemployment is among the state’s highest, Smock seems to have adjusted to economic changes. The county has lost one-quarter of its population since World War II, but Smock’s neat, suburban-style streets suggest its residents’ high success rate in finding new jobs. When the authors visited Smock’s war memorial in 1989, opposite page, the statue on the right had a white face — but not in this photograph, from 1982. “For the sake of peace and harmony,” says one black resident (see page 105), “we haven’t complained.”

Across the creek, on the top of a hill, is another grid of classic patch houses, perhaps 25 in all. The upkeep here is good, though without quite the sparkle or spaciousness of the lower main section of the patch. Along the central street, 4-foot-tall chain-link fences guard yards, front and back. Typical patch town “dou-

ble” outhouses (originally half privy, half coal storage) line the alleys: tool sheds now, we guess. At the neighborhood’s far end is St. Hedwig’s Roman Catholic Church. On Sunday mornings the streets are full of parked cars.

“Smock Hill,” according to Turosak, was built in 1904 by the Pittsburgh Coal Company (which opened the mines and the town’s first sections in the mid-1880s). In 1911, H.C. Frick/US Steel bought Colonial One and Two (both at Smock), plus Colonial Three at Rowe’s Run and Colonial Four at Grindstone, a couple of miles down Redstone Creek. With the practiced words of a local historian, Turosak recalls the bad old days, before World War II, before the union: “Stalin bossed the Russians; the superintendent bossed the patch.”

US Steel closed the Smock mines in the mid-1940s and sold the town to realtor John Galbraith, who in turn sold the houses to the residents. Today, Smock is a livable rural-suburban village, for the most part clean and attractive. Its industrial past is a memory.

Searights, off Route 40 west of Uniontown, presents an entirely different version of patch evolution. In fact, at first it is a real visual puzzle. From the county road, its houses, in several rows of about a dozen each, look like uniform boxes: doorless, aluminum-sided, done in nondescript pastels. On the slope above the road they look almost like industrial installations — storage bins for curing, or quarantining, some obscure product.

These turn out to be patch houses with their porches removed, then reoriented so their backs (formerly their fronts) face the road. Their strange uniform look has been accentuated by treating the former individual yards as one continuous mowed lawn. And by putting in sidewalks. No individual garden plots are visible here.

Searights is owned by a private real estate firm and rented under a federal subsidy program to low income (mostly welfare and social security) clients. The current manager of the property is Paul Angelo, Jr., who tells us that his father bought the patch from Republic Steel in 1937 (it was built in 1902) and operated it until 1951, when he was incapacitated by a stroke. “Junior” took over then.

By 1971 rental rates had dropped so low ($15 a month for one side of a double house) that Angelo decided to advertise in Cleveland and Pittsburgh newspapers: “Would you like to buy your own town?” The eventual purchaser was Westgate Management of Trenton, New Jersey. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development subsidized the reconstruction, which involved gutting the houses and redoing them inside. “Everything was new,” Angelo emphasizes. “Right up to 1971, we still used outhouses here!” Angelo stayed on to run the property. Today, the patch has 144 rental units in 67 buildings. (Several houses were restructured to contain four efficiency apartments.) Approximately 90 percent of the renters are families (25 percent of whom are
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SMOCK HONOR ROLL
FOR THOSE WHO SERVED
OUR COUNTRY
Searights, Fayette County, 1972, at the peak of its post-World War II decline, top, compared to its new look in 1989, made possible by one federal program that financed the renovations and another that subsidizes rents. Opposite page: Ron Janosik (left) and Bill Arshen in front of Hopewell Tavern, Shoaf, Fayette County, 1990. They drove two hours a day to lucrative union jobs before the lay-offs at U S Steel’s Homestead Works. They’re not moving to Florida or Arizona. “I’ve lived here for 38 years,” says Janosik (page 110), “and I’m going to finish it out here.”

single parents); 10 percent are widows or widowers. About three-fourths of the tenants qualify for a maximum “low-low-income” rent subsidy (the difference between 30 percent of their income and the average Searights rent of $350-$400). About 10 percent of the renters are black. “All the units are full,” says Angelo. “We have a waiting list of about 300.”

Angelo’s perspective provides him a grim view of the former Coke Region. “This is a very, very distressed area,” he says. “If it weren’t for food stamps, I don’t know what people would do. There are no more mines. There are no more steelworkers. People who are working only get minimum wage anymore. [Lots of] people don’t want to work. If you’re on relief, you’re getting food stamps, you’re getting hospitalization. Why would you go to work for $3.35 an hour and have no fringe benefits? You’re better off staying home.”

As we walk through Searights, we are struck by the number of young people — women, small children. Also elderly women. Most of the people are white; many of the kids are blond. Angelo assures us that these folks descend from families of ex-miners, ex-steelworkers. They are Coke Region “natives,” he says.

Searights’ adaptation to poverty provides an unusual renovation story. Smock, on the other hand, suggests the success of some Coke Region residents in finding good commuting jobs. In fact, the statistics indicate that from the late 1940s through the 1970s Fayette County’s chief “export” became its labor force — thousands of workers driving to relatively well paid jobs in still flourishing industries elsewhere: e.g., mining in Greene or Washington counties, steel in the river towns down toward Pittsburgh. For these workers, Fayette County’s patches could be good places to live, even though few nearby jobs offered middle class wages.

The careers of Bill Arshen and Ron Janosik, both raised in Shoaf, a patch southwest of Uniontown, illustrate the commuting pattern and then the subsequent underemployment of the 1980s. For more than a dozen years after graduating from high school in the late 1960s, Arshen and Janosik commuted to the Homestead Works of US Steel, where they were first helpers on the open hearth furnaces — high-paying, skilled jobs. When we interviewed them in 1989, Arshen recalled the appeal of keeping his home in Fayette County, even though it meant a long daily drive: “I grew up in Shoaf. If somebody got out of work, the other guys would pitch in and help them out. If your car broke down, they’d take you or your wife to work. Everybody looked out for everybody. It was a nice community. Everybody had big poplar trees in their yard, a white picket fence all around…. People had some pride.” Both Arshen and Janosik emphasized their family roots. Janosik’s grandfather worked in the coke yard in Shoaf “back in the 1920s;” Arshen explained that his father emigrated from Slovenia.

Laid off when Homestead’s open hearths closed in the early 1980s, neither man had found a permanent job seven or eight years later — and they expected none would ever come close to paying what they made at US Steel. Some of their former fellow commuters to Homestead have moved out of the region looking for work, but both Arshen and Janosik are committed to staying in Fayette County.

We interviewed the men at the Hopewell Tavern just outside of Shoaf on a snowy Sunday afternoon in December 1989. A televised
Steel game roared in the background as they talked about their careers.

Arshen: Quite a few people from around here commuted to Homestead. I’d say maybe 20 people out of Shaof alone worked at the mills in Homestead, Duquesne, Clairton. People started going down there around 1950, but not that many. The peak with us younger guys who are now in our 30s and 40s was probably from ’68 to ’72; that’s when a majority of the guys from here started.

To tell you the truth, I liked open hearth work. It was a hot, dirty job in the summer. But after you were in there a certain amount of years, you got to know how to pace yourself so you wouldn’t be passing out — the heat got really bad in the summer time. The travel was a pain. We’d have to get up at 5 in the morning to start at 7:30, and sometimes we wouldn’t get back till 6 or 7 at night. But it was a good paying job. In fact, in 1982, when it shut down, I made over $18,000 in six months — I was top-grade first helper. If I could have got another 15 years like that, I would have been all right.

In the ’70s a lot of my neighbors... were also working good over at the mines [in Greene County], at the Robena mine of US Steel and at Duquesne. A lot of those guys got laid off too, about when I did. Robena shut down, Duquesne Light’s [coal mine] got shut down — they’re finished. Duquesne Light operated for years and years and years; nobody ever figured that they’d shut down. But they did. Lot of guys had 20-some years in there, and now they’re out of work.

At first I mainly just picked up odd jobs here and there. You know, working with concrete, putting on roofs. Then the last two summers a friend of mine got me temporary jobs working for Texas Eastern [a natural gas pipeline company]. I also worked for about a year down at Preston Truck. There’s not many jobs out there. You could maybe get something in McDonald’s for $3 an hour, but if you got a family and a kid, what are you going to do for a medical card? You’re in a bind. A lot of guys moved out, went to Ohio, Virginia. But I can’t do that. My wife works, she’s got 20 years in the hospital in the physical therapy department. She’d have to quit her job.... Two years ago one of my general foremen down at Homestead called me up and asked if I would go to Philadelphia and work at Bethlehem as a melter foreman. But it would only be temporary — six months. So I said no, I’d have to relocate for a temporary job and everything....

It was all right when you first got laid off. You thought, “I’ve got unemployment, I’ve got some time to do a few things.” Then after a year — two years, three years... I never thought it would depress me, but it really did. And then my wife was working, and that was demoralizing to me: she was out working and I’m home — I could only find a little bit of work in the summer. Then I went to work for Preston Trucking and for Texas Eastern, and that boosted my morale, you know. I feel a little bit better about things now. Got a little out of the hole. I wasn’t actually in a hole — but it’s a big transition: coming from making $45,000 a year, going down to $16,000.

Janosik: We knew Homestead was an old mill — mostly all those mills down there are, even Irvin Works and Edgar Thomson. But you just never wanted to face it, that someday it was going to go down. Even in the last four months of operation they were supposedly netting $4 million profit each month on Homestead’s open hearths. Yet the place still goes down — when it’s making that kind of profit. That’s what really doesn’t make sense about the whole thing. You know it’s not just economics; there’s got to be a lot of politics. I think that as soon as US Steel bought Marathon Oil they were just slowly stepping their way out of the steel business — trying to put all of their profits into oil. I think that had more to do with it than anything....

I had a house that I’d bought about three years previous to the mill going down (it was only two years old when I bought it) — over by Leckrone, about four miles from Shaof. I hung onto it as long as I could, but, hey, my payments were $525 a month, and when you have no money coming in.... So I put it up for sale, and it took, I think, eight months to sell. I didn’t lose nothin’ on it, but still.... I was just basically scratching, putting applications in anywhere I thought I had a chance of getting hired.

Then a couple of years ago we got this job at Saint Helen’s here in Shaof and we moved into the parish house. The guy that was living there, him and his wife were caretakers for the church for 32 years. But he was 73 or 74 years old, and it was just getting too much for him, you know. So that place came open, right across the street from my mother’s house. We’re still living there — free rent, plus they pay me so much a month for taking care of the church. Like in
the summer, I cut the grass and my wife does the cleaning.

Now, for a little bit better than a year, I’ve been working with PennDOT [Pennsylvania Department of Transportation]. But until I got on PennDOT it was hard to find anything. Doing odd jobs: cement work with my cousin; one year, cutting wood and hauling it. Just any way to turn over an honest dollar. Oh, it’s tough, ain’t no doubt about it. Very depressing. A lot of times you feel ashamed to sit down to eat supper, believe me. At least that’s my opinion. There are times that you get so depressed you actually feel guilty eating supper.

**Arshen:** That’s what I was saying in a more roundabout way. It was all right for the first year or two, until you couldn’t find anything, and then it just got worse and worse.

**Janosik:** It’s the God’s truth — there was many times I’d be so depressed I’d feel guilty (I know I shouldn’t have, because I didn’t have to; none of us did.) — I’d feel guilty sitting down to eat supper. Honest to Christ. That’s a shame.

Well, I’m working for PennDOT now. I’m not a steady employee yet, but hopefully when they hire a couple more guys I should be next in line. Like they say, you don’t count your chickens till they’re hatched. I’m not making no big money, and I know I’ll never make that big money again, not around here. I’m making around $8 an hour. But I enjoy what I’m doing. I just enjoy the fact that I have a job I can do.

I’m a hometown person. A lot of people can pick up and go to Florida, but not me. I told my wife, I don’t care how bad things get, I just totally put the idea of moving out of the area out of my mind. I’ve lived here for 38 years and I’m going to finish it out here. I don’t care if I got to cut fire wood, or however I have to do it. I’m staying. There are just so many things I am used to after 38 years, me and Bill both. We’re hunters, we’re fishermen.... Just to walk in the woods, I’m in my glory. Where somebody else goes bowling, I come home from work and take a walk in the woods and I’m at peace — just like some doctors out on the golf course. Or we go fishing up the Yough. That’s what it’s all about for me. There’s other things in life — sure you got to support your family. But believe me, I totally refuse to move.
away from this area. Like I say, I’m 38 years old, and they’re going to bury me here, because I’m not moving, I’m not going anywhere.

**IV**

In 1991, not a single underground mine was operating in Fayette County. The Frick District of US Steel, once by far the largest mining operator in the Coke Region with some 100 mines, closed its last underground site in the county in 1983. H.C. Frick’s coal and coke empire is mainly discoverable today in scattered ruins out on the landscape: abandoned mine buildings, a few company stores turned to other usages, a decayed turn-of-the-century office building in Scottsdale with the “H.C. Frick Coke Co.” logo above its doors — the home more recently, according to a battered sign, of the “Scottsdale Casket Co.”

Nonetheless, a coal industry still exists in Fayette County, run mostly by small independent operators, and there is some evidence that coal may play an increasing role in the region’s future. Moreover, US Steel (now USX) is still active in the area. In the last couple of years, courtesy of USX’s Fayette County office, we’ve been able to get a good overview of coal’s past, present, and future.

The last USX work site in the old Coke Region still staffed by the corporation’s own employees is a small suburban-style office on a country road just outside Uniontown. The landscape to the west features a golf course; suburban houses line the ridge to the south; to the north is a scattering of barns and farm houses.

When we first meet him in late 1989, Tony Graziani, a handsome man in his mid-40s, tells us: “This is it. This is what’s left of the US Steel Frick District — a one-man, one-woman operation.” Graziani’s title is Geologist and Field Inspector; his part-time assistant, Joan Sepsi, who previously worked at J&L Mining, helps with the paper work.

Graziani manages USX’s mineral rights in southwestern Pennsylvania. He explains that USX’s surface holdings used to be some 20,000 acres; now they are about 500. The good money still to be made is in leasing beneath the surface, he explains. Business has been booming, with coal at $33 per ton. USX’s income is in royalties from coal recovered by independent operators.

Most of the current strip mining, Graziani explains, is from coal seams that were pretty much ignored in the Coke Region’s heyday in deference to the 9-foot-thick Pittsburgh Seam — the world famous coking coal that was the basis of the region’s wealth. For example, at Phillips (just outside of Uniontown), one local coal operator is stockpiling Redstone coal from several nearby sites. Graziani says that in the late 1980s stripping tonnage for all of Fayette County averaged 10,000 to 20,000 tons per month.

Surprisingly perhaps, a lot of coal from the Pittsburgh Seam is still recoverable, in one way or another, at long-abandoned deep-mine sites. Sometimes it’s a matter of recycling waste. In the early 20th century, the mining companies discarded tons of what was then considered low-grade coal. Mingled with slate, this waste — or “gob” — was piled in mounds that were sometimes 100 feet high or more. In recent years, small operators have been recovering coal from the old gob piles at such sites as Edenborn (outside of Masontown) and Standard (near Mt. Pleasant). The coal recovery rate averages 25 to 40 percent. Another salvage operation at the old sites is stripping the “rooster” or “wild coal” — the 4-foot thick stratum of mixed slate and coal running just above the Pittsburgh Seam that may test out to be as much as 45 percent coal.

A significant reserve of Pittsburgh coal also still exists underground, unmined, at old closed-down sites. Some of it is in the “roof-coal” of underground entries and rooms, in the solid-coal “stumps,” “ribs,” and “pillars” left in place when the mines closed. In sections of the old mines that are in shallow-cover areas (i.e., near “outcroppings”), strippers can cut back the “overburden” — “strip down from the top” — and get at the Pittsburgh coal with their machinery.

Graziani took us out to two small strip sites near Leckrone. At one, the operators were slicing off the top of a small hill above an old Frick mine. On the day we visited, they were leveling off their cut across the top of the old entry ways beneath, their dozer sitting directly on top of the Pittsburgh Seam. They will probably end up extracting 40,000 to 50,000 tons of coal at this site. After the wages of their 10 or so employees, plus the state fees (a $3,000 per acre up-front bond to ensure restoration of the land, plus a 35-cent per ton tax), plus the actual cost of restoring and reconquering the land, plus royalties for the surface and mineral rights, the operators should realize $4 to $5 a ton.

A second strip site Graziani took us to looked like a muddy hole chopped out of a patch of woods. There we met 81-year-old Bill Piccolomini, one of the region’s longtime successful strip-mine operators, who was riding a roaring, bucking dozer at the other side of the site as we approached. He jumped off his machine and came
bording over, shouting a mixture of Italian and English. It was a hot day, and he was dressed in jogging shorts and work boots. This particular site — the muddy hole in the woods — was worth stripping, it turns out, because it is a solid block of 9-foot Pittsburgh coal, originally left in the ground in order to hold up a long-gone railroad station.

Its low-sulphur, low-ash characteristics still make the Pittsburgh Seam the coal of choice, wherever it can be extracted economically. Graziani is able to locate the stumps, pillars, and other remnants of Pittsburgh coal by studying mine maps back in his office. Graziani’s office is in fact an archive that he uses every day. To show us how he works, he spreads out large maps of Continental Two (near Uniointown, closed more than a half-century ago): first a topographical map whose curved lines show the surface features, then an amazing underground map of the mine entries, looking like the dense geometric grid of a city. Finally, he unfurls a map whose various sections are colored: blue for areas that have been “mined out,” orange where mining was underway when the site was closed, and yellow for large sections that were never mined.

Many mines were closed with Pittsburgh coal still in the ground because they lost their economic advantage in the 1920s, after US Steel moved its coke production from the mine-site beehive ovens to its new “by-product” coke plant at Clairton. Shipping coal by rail was more expensive than moving it downstream on river barges, so by the 1920s US Steel was closing mines in the countryside in favor of sites that fed tipples on the Monongahela River: the Palmer Dock (between Masontown and Brownsville), supplied with coal by a 4.5-mile-long underground conveyor system; Colonial Dock, linked by a 5-mile underground conveyor to the Colonial mines along Redstone Creek. After World War II, US Steel developed new sites on the west bank of the Mon: the Robena mine and its preparation plant, opened in Greene County in 1946 and expanded during the 1950s; and Maple Creek mine, to the north in New Eagle, which opened in 1958.

The effect of this geographic shift was that a number of mines were closed with a good deal of coal still underground. Graziani estimates that at least 60 million tons of Pittsburgh coal are still recoverable in USX holdings between Latrobe and Mt. Pleasant, another 15 million tons in abandoned mines south of Uniointown. The key to recovering this considerable reserve (enough coal to provide some years of work for a revived underground mining industry) is “dewatering” the mines, which were allowed to flood when they were closed. The cost of mining a flooded site will involve not only pumping the water out but decacidifying it (letting the water stand in ponds) before recirculating it into the natural system. Graziani believes that some of these mines can soon reopen: “As long as coal is selling for more than $30 a ton, the profit’s there, including the dewatering.” He envisions King Coal reborn, vigorous again, if a bit more modest in size than in the glory days of Henry Clay Frick and Josiah Thompson.

Graziani is a native of the Coke Region — born in Fairbank patch of two generations of coal mining families. He moved later to Filbert, then to Ralph, and now lives in a suburban house near Footdale. He has worked for USX for 23 years, starting as a miner at Maple Creek and then moving into a drafting job in the offices of the Frick Division. He obviously loves his work, loves the Coke Region.

Interest in the history of coal mining and beehive coking has grown in recent years as Western Pennsylvania’s industrial culture increasingly fades into the past. Several local history groups have been active in Fayette County, and now the National Park Service has stepped onto the scene, to help gather information about the region’s coal and coking sites. This growing interest has led to specific proposals for presenting the history of the industry to a larger public. After several decades of talk, and various planning efforts, it looks as if a regional coal and coke museum may become a reality in the not too distant future.

The architecture of a large beehive plant is best preserved, we believe, at Shoaf, a few miles southwest of Uniointown. Two long rows of ovens (about 300 in all) are still in rather good repair — faced with quarry rubble, brick set around their doors. Several top-loading larry cars rest on tracks above the ovens; a couple of rusted leveling machines (the latest word in coking equipment circa 1910) wait as if their operators had walked away expecting to resume work the next day. Shoaf was an H.C. Frick/US Steel site, with an on-again, off-again history; built in 1907, idle from 1923 till 1943, rehabilitated during World War II, closed again in 1952. Max Noble, one of the region’s most successful independent operators, bought the site in 1959 and ran the ovens until 1972 — making Shoaf Fayette County’s last large-scale operating beehive coke plant.

Meanwhile, Alverton’s yearly live demonstration of beehive coking remains attractive...

When we arrived in Alverton on an overcast Sunday afternoon in September 1988, a school bus load of people was already standing in front of a smoking oven waiting for the 4 o’clock pulling of the coke. More folks arrived as Carl Huffman carefully examined the glowing oven interior and Edith Painter explained the cokemaking process to the crowd. Edith’s presentation wasn’t slick by current museum standards, but she spoke with authority, and she held the attention of the 80 or so people present.

Before the program started, we had talked to Carl who, as it turned out, was really sick and running a temperature. We knew he’d put in a lot of work preparing the event — securing several tons of coal and carefully patching one of the ovens, then spending many hours burning wood and coal to pre-heat the oven’s refractory bricks, for it is the hot bricks that provide the sustained heat that ignites the coal and gradually turns
it into coke. Only with the oven hot would he load the several tons of coal through the “trunnel head” and seal the front opening with brick and loam. “You can’t produce a commercial grade product from a one-shot effort,” he explains, “but with luck the result will at least look like usable coke.”

Despite his cold, Carl insisted like a trouper that the show must go on. Shortly after 4 o’clock he unbricked the front opening of the oven and set in the crossbar that would support the long steel scraper used to pull the coke. While the crowd came close, he worked the scraper to draw out some of the silvery gray coke, but he really wasn’t physically up to pulling much of the oven’s load.

At this point the audience made a real tourist event of it, with a number of us, under Carl’s instruction, taking turns working the scraper. It wasn’t easy — an 18 foot steel rod with a bent paddle at the end is a heavy, clumsy device in the hands of amateurs. The coke yard surroundings were authentic enough, the work was hard enough, the hot coke in a growing pile in front of the oven was close enough, so that most of us experienced at least a moment in which we sensed both the physical demands and dangers of this particular industrial work. In an ad hoc fashion and without realizing it, we had briefly created a type of “living-history museum,” one of the standard contemporary museum styles.

After a sizable pile of coke lay on the ground, the crowd around the oven broke up. Looking back on the coke yard from the higher ground where we had parked, we wondered how long such a scene, such an experience, will be available. Will a modern coal and coke museum be able to recreate the scruffy reality of an actual coke yard, even one, like Alverton’s, that hasn’t operated for almost a decade? Will the time come when costumed actors will imitate pulling coke for an audience of tourists bemused by such obscure rituals? It was hard to believe that any historical exhibit, any acted-out script, could be as effective as the Alverton setting — the one-woman, one-man show, the on-site living theater we had just been a part of.

1 Bullskin Township, just to the south of the Volkswagen plant, was one of the very few areas in Fayette County to show population growth in the 1980 census.
2 Muriel Sheppard, Cloud By Day (Chapel Hill, 1947), 1. The book is being reissued in late 1991 by the University of Pittsburgh Press.
3 The Klondike, the western section of Fayette County, is so named because the area was opened to extensive coal mining at the turn of the century, shortly after the Alaskan gold discovery.