

When Coal Came Calling

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Photo by Amanda Leung

With the price of oil at \$120 a barrel, the search is on for alternative fuels in the United States, including a resurgence of coal and natural gas. A news report recently detailed how Pennsylvanians are striking it rich by selling the mineral rights to their land to companies that will extract natural gas. A minor economic boom is on in Wyoming, as the coal industry reemerges. And our president stresses that we would not have all these troubles if we would just use the oil from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

These latter-day fuel rushes bring to mind my own family history. For 14 decades, my ancestors were modest but self-sufficient Pennsylvania farmers. For the last 60 of these years, between 1833 and 1895, they tilled the rolling foothills of the Allegheny Mountains in Western Pennsylvania. Their ancestors had farmed in Berks County, near Philadelphia, for more than eight decades before moving West.

Then, in the 1890s, the coal company representatives came along and offered my great-grandparents and their neighbors cash and royalties for the bituminous coal beneath their lands. Whether they knew it or not, the plan was for what is euphemistically called “surface mining,” better known today as strip mining.

Henry and Hannah Redinger took the deal and used the money they received to embark on the greatest adventure of their lives, moving with their eight children, including my nine-year-old grandmother, to Pasadena, California, to grow citrus fruit. They kept their house in the town of New Salem, near their farm. Discouraged after losing a son in an epidemic in California, most of the family returned three years later to live in New Salem.

I have visited their Pennsylvania home and the area where they farmed. Redinger Farm now lies behind a giant wall of earth, concealing the strip mine. Only about 25 people still live in New Salem, and the huge berms fronting the strip mines loom over the area.

As I stand on the porch of my great-grandparents’ still-charming Victorian, I look out at the countryside and try to imagine what must have gone through their minds, and those of their neighbors, as they contemplated the coal companies’ offers. With the development of farm machinery and the railroads to transport produce, farming must have become more and more competitive and financially challenging. The coal companies’ largesse would have seemed like an opportunity too good to pass up. And the pressure to sell

would have grown greater with each neighbor who accepted the coal company’s offer. Who would want to be the last remaining landowner, surrounded by coal company property?

It is impossible for me to second-guess my great-grandparents’ decision. They made the rational economic choice for their family. Their property in Pasadena, which one son stayed on to farm, and their citrus-growing enterprise, which later expanded to Puerto Rico, was eventually worth far more than their Pennsylvania farm.

But what about their descendents? After six generations on the land – which gave various family members the stability to buy additional property, start businesses, take up the practice of medicine, join the ministry, serve in the Revolutionary and Civil wars, hold local political offices and devote themselves to education and music – for the past three generations the family has been scattered without a link to the land on which they first settled in America.

And a century later, strip mining’s impact on Armstrong County is shocking. Not only is the land severely disturbed, but coal mining has polluted the local streams. There is no economy in the area. Most of the residents, like my family, have deserted the region and few people live there. Twenty percent of those who remain live below the poverty level. Houses like my great-grandparents’ – which stands empty, but oddly, fully furnished even though no one has lived there since 1968 – are available for purchase for a pittance.

I am sure my ancestors never envisioned that these would be the side effects of their decision to embark on a new and exciting future for their family. Progress is inevitable, and we need energy to sustain our economy. But the choices we make now about how to pursue a prosperous future can impact not just our own families, but the land and other resources, as well as the ultimate prospects for a viable economy in a region.

One hundred and twenty years ago, there were few alternatives besides coal to drive the industrial development of the United States. Today we are in the fortunate position that technology makes many renewable and sustainable energy choices available to us to address the current spike in oil prices.

The full and long-term costs of decisions like those my ancestors made are important to contemplate, as we consider the energy options before us. Ω