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As the Mountaintops Fall, a Coal Town Vanishes

By DAN BARRY

LINDYTOWN, W.Va.

To reach a lost American place, here just a moment ago, follow a thin country road as it unspools across an Appalachian valley's grimy floor, past a [coal](#) operation or two, a church or two, a village called Twilight. Beware of the truck traffic. Watch out for that car-chasing dog.

After passing an abandoned union hall with its front door agape, look to the right for a solitary house, tidy, yellow and tucked into the stillness. This is nearly all that remains of a West Virginia community called Lindytown.

In the small living room, five generations of family portraits gaze upon Quinnie Richmond, 85, who has trouble summoning the memories, and her son, Roger, 62, who cannot forget them: the many children all about, enough to fill Mr. Cook's school bus every morning; the Sunday services at the simple church; the white laundry strung on clotheslines; the echoing clatter of evening horseshoes; the sense of home.

But the coal that helped to create Lindytown also destroyed it. Here was the church; here was its steeple; now it's all gone, along with its people. Gone, too, are the surrounding mountaintops. To mine

the soft rock that we burn to help power our light bulbs, our laptops, our way of life, heavy equipment has stripped away the trees, the soil, the rock — what coal companies call the “overburden.”

Now, the faint, mechanical beeps and grinds from above are all that disturb the Lindytown quiet, save for the occasional, seam-splintering blast.

A couple of years ago, a subsidiary of [Massey Energy](#), which owns a sprawling mine operation behind and above the Richmond home, bought up Lindytown. Many of its residents signed Massey-proffered documents in which they also agreed not to sue, testify against, seek inspection of or “make adverse comment” about coal-mining operations in the vicinity.

You might say that both parties were motivated. Massey preferred not to have people living so close to its mountaintop mining operations. And the residents, some with area roots deep into the 19th century, preferred not to live amid a dusty industrial operation that was altering the natural world about them. So the Greens sold, as did the Cooks, and the Workmans, and the Webbs ...

But Quinnie Richmond’s husband, Lawrence — who died a few months ago, at 85 — feared that leaving the home they built in 1947 might upset his wife, who has Alzheimer’s. He and his son Roger, a retired coal miner who lives next door, chose instead to sign easements granting the coal company certain rights over their properties. In exchange for also agreeing not to make adverse comment, the two Richmond households received \$25,000 each, Roger Richmond recalls.

“Hush money,” he says, half-smiling.

As Mr. Richmond speaks, the mining on the mountain behind him continues to transform, if not erase, the woodsy stretches he explored in boyhood. It has also exposed a massive rock that almost seems to be teetering above the Richmond home. Some days, an anxious Mrs. Richmond will check on the rock from her small kitchen window, step away, then come back to check again.

And again.

A Dictator of Destiny

Here in Boone County, coal rules. The rich seams of bituminous black have dictated the region's destiny for many generations: through the advent of railroads; the company-controlled coal camps; the bloody mine wars; the increased use of mechanization and surface mining, including mountaintop removal; the related decrease in jobs.

The county has the largest surface-mining project (the Massey operation) in the state and the largest number of coal-company employees (more than 3,600). Every year it receives several million dollars in tax severance payments from the coal industry, and every June it plays host to the West Virginia Coal Festival, with fireworks, a beauty pageant, a memorial service for dead miners, and displays of the latest mining equipment. Without coal, says Larry V. Lodato, the director of the county's Community and Economic Development Corporation, "You might as well turn out the lights and leave."

In recent years, surface mining has eclipsed underground mining as the county's most productive method. This includes mountaintop removal — or, as the industry prefers to call it, mountaintop mining — a now-commonplace technique that remains startling in its capacity to change things.

Various government regulations require that coal companies return the stripped area to its "approximate original contour," or "reclaim" the land for development in a state whose undulating topography can thwart plans for even a simple parking lot. As a result, the companies often dump the removed earth into a nearby valley to create a plateau, and then spray this topsy-turvy land with seed, fertilizer and mulch.

The coal industry maintains that by removing some mountaintops from the "Mountain State," it is creating developable land that makes the state more economically viable. State and coal officials point to successful developments on land reclaimed by surface mining, developments that they say have led to the creation of some 13,000 jobs.

But Ken Ward Jr., a reporter for The Charleston Gazette, has pointed out that two-fifths of these jobs

are seasonal or temporary; a third of the full-time jobs are at one project, in the northern part of the state; and the majority of the jobs are far from southern West Virginia, where most of the mountaintop removal is occurring, and where unemployment is most dire. In Boone County, development on reclaimed land has basically meant the building of the regional headquarters for the county's dominant employer — Massey Energy.

And with reclamation, there is also loss.

"I'm not familiar at all with Lindytown," says Mr. Lodato, the county's economic development director. "I know it used to be a community, and it's close to Twilight."

A Fighter

About 10 miles from Lindytown, outside a drab convenience store in the unincorporated town of Van, a rake-thin woman named Maria Gunnoe climbs into a maroon Ford pickup that is adorned with a bumper sticker reading: "Mountains Matter — Organize." The daughter, granddaughter and sister of union coal miners, Ms. Gunnoe is 42, with sorrowful dark eyes, long black hair and a desire to be on the road only between shift changes at the local mining operations — and only with her German shepherd and her gun.

Less than a decade ago, Ms. Gunnoe was working as a waitress, just trying to get along, when a mountaintop removal operation in the small map dot of Bob White disrupted her "home place." It filled the valley behind her house, flooded her property, contaminated her well and transformed her into a fierce opponent of mountaintop removal. Through her work with the [Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition](#), she has become such an effective environmental advocate that in 2009 she received the prestigious [Goldman Environmental Prize](#). But no one threw a parade for her in Boone County, where some deride her as anti-coal; that is, anti-job.

Ms. Gunnoe turns onto the two-lane road, Route 26, and heads toward the remains of Lindytown. On her right stands Van High School, her alma mater, where D. Ray White, the gifted and doomed

Appalachian dancer, used to kick up his heels at homecomings. On her left, the community center where dozens of coal-company workers disrupted a meeting of environmentalists back in 2007.

“There was a gentleman who pushed me backward, over my daughter, who was about 12 or 13, and crying,” Ms. Gunnoe later recalls. “I pushed him back, and he filed charges against me for battery. He was 250 pounds, and I had a broken arm.”

A jury acquitted her within minutes.

Ms. Gunnoe drives on. Past the long-closed Grill bar, its facade marred by graffiti. Past an out-of-context clot of land that rises hundreds of feet in the air — “a valley fill,” she says, that has been “hydroseeded” with fast-growing, non-native plants to replace the area’s lost natural growth: its ginseng root, its goldenseal, its hickory and oak, maple and poplar, black cherry and sassafras.

“And it will never be back,” she says.

Ms. Gunnoe has a point. James Burger, a professor emeritus of forestry and soil science at [Virginia Tech](#) University, said the valley fill process often sends the original topsoil to the bottom and crushed rock from deeper in the ground to the top. With the topography and soil properties altered, Dr. Burger says, native plants and trees do not grow as well.

“You have hundreds of species of flora and fauna that have acclimated to the native, undisturbed conditions over the millennia,” he says. “And now you’re inverting the geologic profile.”

Dr. Burger says that he and other scientists have developed a reclamation approach that uses native seeds, trees, topsoil and selected rock material to help restore an area’s natural diversity, at no additional expense. Unfortunately, he says, these methods have not been adopted in most Appalachian states, including West Virginia.

Past a coal operation called a loadout, an oversized Tinker Toy structure where coal is crushed and loaded on trucks and rail cars. Past the house cluster called Bandytown, home of Leo Cook, 75, the

former school bus driver who once collected Roger Richmond and the other kids from Lindytown, where he often spent evenings at a horseshoe pit, now overgrown.

“We got to have coal,” says Mr. Cook, a retired miner. “What’s going to keep the power on? But I believe with all my heart that there’s a better way to get that coal.”

Ms. Gunnoe continues deeper into the mud-brown landscape, where the fleeting appearance of trucks animates the flattened mountaintops. On her right, a dark, winding stream damaged by mining; on her left, several sediment-control ponds that filter out pollutants from the runoff of mining operations. Past the place called Twilight, a jumble of homes and trailers, where the faded sign of the old Twilight Super Market still promises Royal Crown Cola for sale.

Soon she passes the abandoned hall for Local 8377 of the United Mine Workers of America, empty since some underground mining operations shut down a couple of decades ago. Its open door beckons you to examine the papers piled on the floor: a Wages, Lost Time, and Expense Voucher booklet from 1987; the burial fund’s bylaws; canceled checks bearing familiar surnames.

On, finally, to Lindytown.

The Company Line

According to a statement from Shane Harvey, the general counsel for Massey, this is what happened: Many of Lindytown’s residents were either retired miners or their widows and descendants who welcomed the opportunity to move to places more metropolitan or with easier access to medical facilities. Interested in selling their properties, they contacted Massey, which began making offers in December 2008 — offers that for the most part were accepted.

“It is important to note that none of these properties had to be bought,” Mr. Harvey said. “The entire mine plan could have been legally mined without the purchase of these homes. We agreed to purchase the properties as an additional precaution.”

When asked to elaborate, Mr. Harvey responded, in writing, that Massey voluntarily bought the properties “as an additional backup to the state and federal regulations” that protect people who live near mining operations.

James Smith, 68, a retired coal miner from Lindytown, says the company’s statement is true, as far as it goes. Yes, Lindytown had become home mostly to retired union miners and their families; when the Robin Hood No. 8 mine shut down, for example, his three sons had to leave the state to work. And yes, some people approached Massey about selling their homes.

But, Mr. Smith says, many residents wanted to leave Lindytown only because the mountaintop operations above had ruined the quality of life below.

His family went back generations here. He married a local woman, raised kids, became widowed and married again. A brother lived in one house, a sister lived in another, and nieces, nephews and cousins were all around. And there was this God-given setting, where he could wander for days, hunting raccoon or searching for ginseng.

But when the explosions began, dust filled the air. “You could wash your car today, and tomorrow you could write your name on it in the dust,” he says. “It was just unpleasant to live in that town. Period.”

Massey was a motivated buyer, he argues, given that it was probably cheaper to buy out a small community than to deal with all the complaint-generated inspections, or the possible lawsuits over silica dust and “fly rock.”

“Hell, what they paid for that wasn’t a drop in the bucket,” he says.

Massey did not elaborate on why it bought out Lindytown, though general concerns about public health have been mounting. In blocking another West Virginia mountaintop-removal project earlier this year, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) cited research suggesting that health disparities in the Appalachian region are “concentrated where surface coal mining activity takes place.”

In the end, Mr. Smith says, he would not be living 150 miles away, far from relations and old neighbors, if mountaintop removal hadn't ruined Lindytown. "You might as well take the money and get rid of your torment," he says, adding that he received more than \$300,000 for his property. "After they destroyed our place, they done us a favor and bought it."

Memories, What's Left

Ms. Gunnoe pulls up to one of the last houses in Lindytown, the tidy yellow one, and visits with Quinnie and Roger Richmond. He uses his words to re-animate the community he knew.

For many years, his grandfather was the preacher at the small church down the road, where the ringing of a bell gave fair warning that Sunday service was about to begin. And his grandmother lived in the house still standing next door; she toiled in her garden well past 100, growing the kale, spinach and mustard greens that she loved so much.

His father, Lawrence, joined the military in World War II after his older brother, Carson, was killed in Sicily. He returned, married Quinnie, and built this house. Before long, he became a section foreman in the mines, beloved by his men in part because of Quinnie's fried-apple pies.

After graduating from Van High School — that's his senior photograph, there on the wall — Roger Richmond followed his father into the mines. He married, had children, divorced, made do when the local mine shut down, eventually retired and, in 2001, set up his mobile home beside his parents' house.

By now, things had changed. With the local underground mine shut down, there were nowhere near as many jobs, or kids. And this powder from the mountaintops was settling on everything, turning to brown paste in the rain. People no long hung their whites on the clotheslines.

Soon, rumors of buyouts from Massey became fact, as neighbors began selling and moving away. "Some of them were tired of fighting it," Mr. Richmond says. "Of having to put up with all the dust. Plus, you couldn't get out into the hills the way you used to."

One example. Mr. Richmond's Uncle Carson, killed in World War II, is buried in one of the small cemeteries scattered about the mountains. If he wanted to pay his respects, in accordance with government regulations for active surface-mining areas, he would have to make an appointment with a coal company, be certified in work site safety, don a construction helmet and be escorted by a coal-company representative.

In the end, the Richmonds decided to sell various land rights to Massey, but remain in Lindytown, as the homes of longtime neighbors were boarded up and knocked down late last year, and as looters arrived at all hours of the day to steal the windows, the wiring, the pillars from Elmer Smith's front porch — even the peaches, every one of them, growing from trees on the Richmond property.

“They was good peaches, too,” says Mr. Richmond.

“I like peaches,” says his mother.

Would Lindytown have died anyway? Would it have died even without the removal of its surrounding mountaintops? These are the questions that Bill Raney, the president of the West Virginia Coal Association, raises. Sometimes, he says, depopulation is part of the natural order of things. People move to be closer to hospitals, or restaurants, or the Wal-Mart. There is also that West Virginia truism, he adds:

“When the coal's gone, you go to where the next coal seam is.”

Of course, in the case of Lindytown, the coal is still here; it's the people who are mostly gone. Now, when darkness comes to this particular hollow, you can see a small light shining from the kitchen window of a solitary, yellow house — and, sometimes, a face, peering out.

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