Life After the Mines Closed

by Thomas Dublin
Photographs by George Harvan
cosis, the dreaded and deadly "black lung" caused by long-term inhalation of coal dust.

Both men and women possessed a strong commitment to the work ethic. Mike Sabron and Irene Gangaware's husband Grant worked two jobs to support their families. Wives worked to supplement their husbands' low or irregular earnings. During the Great Depression, children quit school to help. Narrators commonly commented on their commitment to work and self-reliance. Theresa Pavlacak is blunt. "We never got the welfare," she says. "We did it the hard way."

In spite of protestations, mining families received crucial assistance from the government in difficult periods. Sabron's family received Social Security assistance when his father died at a relatively young age. Some found government jobs during the Great Depression. Both Gangawares received help from the Veterans' Administration while Grant recuperated from surgery. Many former miners receive black lung compensation that supplement their Social Security income.

As a group, the commentators and their families benefited enormously from the social welfare safety net enacted during the Great Depression, yet they see themselves as self-made men and women. Several expressed disdain for newcomers to the area—often African American or Latino—who they believe rely excessively on welfare. Their inability, or unwillingness, to see similarities between their circumstances in the 1930s and 1950s and those of poor families in the 1990s is striking.

Ties to family, church, ethnic group, and community were extremely strong in the anthracite region, and older residents typically chose to remain, holding out against the pull of economic opportunities that required commuting or moving some distance. Many took lower-paying work in the Panther Valley, rather than travel daily to Bethlehem Steel or Mack Truck, two major employers within an hour's commute. Even those who migrated often returned to the region later in their lives. By the standards of broader American society, these elderly residents of the Panther Valley, surviving largely on government assistance, are impoverished. In their view, though, they are richer where they are, in fact, than they would be in distant communities where they could have earned more money. They prefer to live modestly among friends, family, and familiar institutions than to have a higher standard of living among strangers.

Virtually all the underground mines of the Panther Valley—and of the anthracite region—are closed today. Strip-mining operations, with their mammoth draglines, loaders, and trucks, employ most of the remaining miners. Only a handful of independent miners continue to work underground. Where hundreds of wood—then steel and glass—breakers once dotted the landscape, perhaps half a dozen rusting, decaying hulks remain. An era has passed; in another generation there will be no surviving underground miners to share their stories. These stories present a rare glimpse into a world rapidly disappearing.
I went to Linden in 1954. They had the Chevy, Oldsmobile, Cadillac-General Motors in Linden, New Jersey. I was there from March till December, [when] I was called back to go to the colliery, which was the happiest day of my life. Got you on that assembly line—that was rough! You see when you work in the mines you have two guys work up a chute. You work the way you wanted to work, but [at GM] you had to move all the time, and I just wasn't used to fast work like that. But we did it. I didn't like it at all. Nobody liked it.

We worked till February 1960, and the whole valley closed down then. Johnny Zuzu and a couple of the other guys got together and went to the company and asked if we could operate the water level in No. 9. They got it and we worked for about a year before they got it in shape to get any coal. Then we went from 1961 till 1972. We closed down June 27th or something like that. We still could probably go in there yet. There was enough coal there to mine, but they wanted us to put new trolley lines in, [and] they wanted to drive a chute out for air. In fact, inspectors were coming in, [and] we were making excuses...they did this, they did that...we hung for quite a few years that way. Then 1972 came and we were all getting a little older and everybody...Black Lung...and we closed 'er down in 1972.

When I think back, I could have stayed in Linden, but I didn't like it. I just loved right here. There's a mixture around here. You name it, we have it—the League of Nations. The street below here was practically all Polish. Here there was mixture. Well, there's about four Polish on this block right now. But this east end was all Polish town. Then on the other end we had a lot of Italians. And the majority of people here in Summit Hill are Irish.

All my kids are good. They're great to me. Almost nine years since my wife passed away, and the kids never fail to call me every week. They come home often. My kids wanted me to go and live with them. No, I want to die here, baby. I worked hard for this.

In 1970, Sabaon was employed by Lanscol, but retired when the operation closed two years later.
I was born in Lansford, September the twenty-first, 1915. My father was John Geusic. It was Geovich in Croatian, but they modernized it into Geusic because nobody could pronounce it, and you had an awful time spelling it.

I went to school at St. Michael's and then I went to St. Anne's High School, for two years. I had to quit because my brother was leaving to be a priest. He was stationed in Geneva, Illinois. The railroad ticket was fifty dollars to come home every summer, and my dad couldn't afford that. I had to go to work to help out. Coal mines weren't working. So I worked in that factory for twenty-five years.

I guess I must have been about seventeen. I'm not quite sure now exactly when—probably '30, '31. [I worked for] Rosenau Brothers—Kiddie Kloes, Cinderella Frock. It was a wonderful factory, wonderful people to work for. They had three factories at that time in Lansford—one on Sharpe Street, off the main street, one up on East Patterson, and then they had a factory in Kline Avenue. That used to be a pajama factory at one time. That's where I worked. We used to make the dresses, little panties with it—the Shirley Temple... At one time we had no union, so we didn't make a lot of money. But you made enough to put bread on the table—made it easier for the parents.

[The union came when] I worked on Kline Avenue in 1933 or '34. [Women] were picketing. There was a playground across the street, and I remember they were singing, about going out and striking. They were picketing and walking up and down with signs and all. The coal miners were coming home from work. My dad found out I was out there picketing, and he got a hold of me and he said, "You go home. You need the job." That's how they thought at that time, because it was the bread and butter. But in time to come, they got organized. Before you know it they were all organized and everybody was in the union and Roosevelt put the minimum wage in.

[Miners, like my Dad] supported [the garment union], but they needed that help from that girl. They were glad to have the union but they were afraid, because the miner that had two
or three daughters working in the factory, he had it good. He had three pays coming in—[better than] somebody that had nobody working in the Kiddie Kloe's. That's when people started remodeling their homes. If they had three girls working in the family, they could remodel the home or buy a car. One girl would buy a car and they'd share it. You could see progress.

I married when I was twenty-one in 1936. I married a fellow by the name of Michael Danshaw—[met him] at a dance in Tamaqua. My husband was a Tamaqua boy, but his mother and all, they were formerly from Lansford.

I only had the one daughter. When she was five and a half, she was going into the first grade. Her first day of school, we were going into church with his body in the casket. Her first day of school—[my husband] got killed in Coaldale Colliery.

He wasn't a coal miner, he was a loader. The coal that the men had picked, whatever it was, they had these little cars where they filled up with coal. They were going with these cars over the rails, they were going around the curve and the fellow that was driving the motor, whatever they called it, was going kind of fast. This was a Saturday morning about ten o'clock. And ran off the tracks, and when the car pinned him up against the timber, they said he looked like Christ on a cross, because it caught the hips and the two legs and an arm. Till they pulled him out of there, it was quite a while. [He] lived like that until midnight. He was twenty-eight years old.

I never got over it. It lived with me forever. Till today I could feel it. You never get over that. But it gets easier as the years go by. It comes to you sudden, all the time.

Then I was a widow for ten years. Michael Pavloch had buried a wife too...[It was] about ten years after his wife died that I got to know him. He worked at the stripplings when his wife died, and then he worked in No. 6 or No. 4 colliery and then worked in the Coaldale colliery. After Coaldale shut down, that's when we were married. He said, "We're leaving. We're not staying here. There's nothing here."

[My husband's] factory, [Phelps Dodge], worked about fifteen or sixteen years. I think, and that's when they shut down. That's when my husband got another job—Squibbs and Union Carbide, where they made these big, enormous cable wires for ships and these big elevators for these highrises in New York City. It was Okonite and then it was Squibb's.

Our son Michael went to Rutgers University, [to study] communications, for radio and TV. He was going to be a sports announcer. In that field you had to go to college. That's when they drafted him for Vietnam. He never made it home. He got killed.

We built that ranch home, we had a twenty-year mortgage, and we were there for twenty-two years in Edisen [New Jersey]. The home was paid for. We only got a twenty-year mortgage because we were too old for a shorter mortgage. The home was paid for and Michael was buried in Summit Hill—up here. My husband said, "We're going to go home. We're going back home." And that's what we did. We came here and bought a home. Sold our home overnight, no problem. Moved out and that was it.

[When I first worked in Kiddie Kloe's my thought was to] get married and have a life of [my] own and get out of here. I loved the people. I loved the togetherness. The people were wonderful—everybody got along. But you wanted better. Because you saw better. As you got older, you had more money and you could go to New York City, you went on vacations. You'd see people with campers and all, you have nothing. That's how it started. Then the boys got educated; they left; they got jobs and now the grandmothers and great-grandmothers are traveling all over.

[Those who never left didn't] know no better. You live like that and you don't know no better; you're happy with what you have. You're glad that you have a roof over your head. You have a table to eat on and a bed and you're clean and you have your church. And they're happy, very happy.
My father’s name was John Ferrence. He came to this country from Humeno, Slovakia, in 1887, a young man. He landed in the town of New Philadelphia, about twenty miles west of here, and he worked for a dollar a day for some coal company out there. After he worked here about a year then he sent for his wife.

My father lived in Nesquehoning for ten years before he bought this place in 1906. In Nesquehoning he and his first wife—which wasn’t my mother, my mother was his second wife—had seventeen boarders in a small house. They slept on straw-tick mattresses on the floor and his wife cooked and washed clothes for those miners, washed their clothes on a washboard. You didn’t even know what wash was in there.

So they saved—they had seventeen hundred dollars in gold in the Mauch Chunk bank—by having all them boarders and my father had good pay. The firemen had good pay, you know. They worked steady all the time. Seventeen hundred dollars in gold—that’s the money they used to buy this place.

I learned Slovakian first. My mother came from Cerrove-Leskev, near Bratislava. They didn’t know each other over there. I kept talking Slovakian to my mother till she passed away in ’59. I used to come down here everyday to my mother’s, because when I got married I lived in Summit Hill. She had a wood-burning stove, and coal, and I always saw that she had a decent, comfortable living.

My father spoke sort of broken English, like the old-timers did when they came from Europe. He couldn’t read or write. My mother used to be able to speak English. She couldn’t write English, but she wrote and spoke Slovakian. When she’d write me a note for the store, it would be in Slovakian. I understood it, and sometimes I’d give the note to the storekeeper. I’d say, “What’s this?” “I dunno!” I did that just for the hell of it.

Some of the first strippings were up here, top of the mountain, and my father saw where some of the veins were. We used to pick coal, not only us, but a bunch of the neighbors here. We used to go up there and pick coal.

We’d haul it down with a horse and a wagon. As a boy, picking coal—hard work, boy! We had to carry it up out of a stripping hole, pick a path up along the side of the hill, and carry it up, and we’d hide the coal in bags in the woods. Covered with brush. We’d accumulate about twenty bags, about a ton or more, and we’d go up with a horse and wagon, haul it down.

My brother and I got caught up there one day. We were picking coal and saw these two hunters coming. We’re down there picking coal, putting it in bags and right in a solid vein. Here was coal and iron police of the Lehigh Navigation Company [LNC]—Harry Chester and Jack Williams, oh, them two bastards. But they were doing their job. So they came down and they had shotguns. We thought they were hunters, you know. It was hunting season. They were hunting us! They asked us, “Any birds around here?” Ha! We were the “birds” they were looking for.

My father had to pay a fifty dollar fine for picking coal on company land. Stolen coal, they called it. They weren’t even paying taxes on that land. Yeah, we got caught. They used to take it off his check, so much a pay, and they had written, “Stolen Coal.” It was awful. Back in the 1920s, you know, Depression days. I was only twelve years old or so.

We all helped. All us kids worked on the farm. Picking weeds and potato bugs and then helped the harvest, picked corn, take the corn off the cob for the chickens. We always had chickens and ducks. I milked cows from when I was twelve years old. That’s why I have big strong hands. I always had two, three cows, and the horse to care for. And my father always kept a couple pigs.

I was the only one in our family that graduated from high school because there was no jobs anyway for young people around here. [After graduating] I got a job cutting timber for Eckman Lumber Company. We made about twenty cents an hour. Then I got a job at WPA because there was no work around here. We worked on the highways here; we put them stone gutters in.

I married an Irish girl in ’38, Rose Campbell from Summit Hill. I started work on the stripping right after that, when I was, let’s see, about twenty-four years old. I spent practically fifty years on strip mining jobs, mostly operating big giant draglines that dug rock and coal. I dug millions of tons of rock and coal through the years.

[I worked first] for a stripping contractor, Fauzio Brothers. They were strip mining on the Lehigh Navigation Coal Company land. I was loading mine cars from a big chute. The trucks would dump the coal into this big long chute that held maybe fifty ton of coal or more. Down under the chute there was a railroad. Steam engines would bring the mine cars up from Nesquehoning mine and we’d load them up. I done that for a couple years.

Then I got a job oiling on a power shovel. I greased the machine, lubricated the machine, checked the oil in the engines
and water, oil, water, gear cases and stuff. Winter time would be something. Machinery always interested me—like my father the same way. I learned to operate the power shovels. I got on with some good operators. We aren't allowed to run the machines because the contractor didn't want any breakdowns, because some of the fellas were rough with the machines. But I always was gentle. I always listened to the operator, how to work the machine without doing any damage. I learned to operate the machine—diesel engines. They had three-cubic-yard buckets and 85-foot booms on them. I was known as one of the smoothest operators that they had.

I broke in quite a few fellas to run draglines. When I first started working on a shovel, they didn't want you to run the machines, because the contractors were small and they couldn't afford any breakdowns. Some of the young fellas were too rough and they would break the machine and then it cost a lot of money to repair it. But I got with some operators that left me run and I was one of the first ones to learn to run. Some of the older men didn't like it because I could run the machine and they couldn't, but they were with men that wouldn't leave them on the seat. I took advantage of the operators left me run the rig and they took advantage of me, also. They'd leave me run but they'd get a break. I was only getting oiler's pay but I was glad to get the experience.

While being a dragline operator I was known as "The Bomber," because I "bombed" large rocks into smaller pieces so they could go into a six-cubic-yard-bucket. Sometimes a large rock would be encountered in my coal pit, hindering the removal of coal. So I would select a hard rock, as large as a refrigerator (one that would slide out of the bucket easily). Then I would hoist it up eighty feet and drop it down onto the large rock in the coal pit, thus cracking the big rock [into] manageable pieces.

When World War II broke out, they were glad to have me. I was married and had a couple kids. I didn't have to go, so I got a job operating a shovel steady in '41 or '42 in this little area called Little Italy, about one and a half miles southwest of Nesquehoning. There's no town there anymore....

After the mines shut down, the ladies working in the factories helped to keep the home fires burning. Clothing factories we had here, quite a few in Panther Valley. Many men left this area and went to New Jersey for jobs—some lucky ones got jobs at Bethlehem Steel. As far as changes are concerned, only changes was the big strippings of Summit Hill, the Bethlehem Mines and now the LNC company continuing stripping yet, but they're slowed down something terrible.
I was born in Lansford, December 15th, 1928. My father’s name was Frank Uher. He was a miner—worked for the company for forty-two years. He started as a slate picker [at] eleven. He’d be going to work, picking slate at No. 8 colliery at that time. His lunch bucket was hitting the ground, that’s how short he was—5'6" or 5'7". He had to go to work at eleven, so what can you do?

As a child I went into the mines] once. I was scared so I couldn’t even tell you about it; I didn’t appreciate it. I was scared, because I thought it was illegal.

I can remember my father picking coal. He always picked coal. He’s go on the coal bank at five in the morning, come home with a couple bags, and then go do his shift at work. On a Saturday or when they were off work, he would also pick coal. I’d cry to go pick coal with him, and he’d say, “Okay, okay.” So I’d go up the bank with the bucket and there was a pile. One pile of coal was shaped like an egg; the other was cracked anthracite coal. I just thought that was how all the coal grew—on piles! I thought you’d just go up and fill your bags or buckets. I was never aware of the fact that my father used to do that for me, so I could fill my bucket and I’d just get out of his way. He’d do that before I even got up there. Oh, God—that to me was a big treat!

My mother didn’t work when I was small. She was the typical housewife. You had dinner at noon; we went back and forth to school. I walked to St. Mike’s in the morning, [and] came home at lunch time. There was no brown-bagging it, because you were right in town even if it took you fifteen, twenty minutes one-way. Mom cooked dinner at noon, because my dad came home from work. He was a contract miner, well, any place from eleven to one, he would be home. He’d always say, “The coal’s running.” He was a very hard-working man. He said he’s not moving until they can run their chute or whatever it is. I’d go back to school and then come home and then supper was leftovers, more or less. We had the one cooked meal a day. Mom was very efficient as a mother—a kind, kind person.

I lived on West Snyder Avenue. It was a duplex, a part of a double block home. It had the basement kitchen, and of course your bathroom was in the cellar, and at one time, you just had the tin tub, you did not have a bathtub. You got your bath in front of the open oven. Then when I was in eighth grade, would you believe that I got a gift from my godparents! They bought us a bathtub so that was put in the cellar, a real, honest-to-God bathtub.

I can remember not having, which was par for the course. You’d
say, "Mom, can I have it?" "No, we don't have the money." Well, I got out of high school and I said, "Mom, I want to go in training." She says, "Oh, no, that's too much money." I wanted to go into nursing. "No, that's too much money." It was three hundred dollars, for three years. I would have gone to Sacred Heart in Allentown. That was the big thing at the time. I didn't say anything to my father, well, he had a fit when he found out.

"Cause Mom said no. So naturally I didn't apply and that was the end of that, but I made sure my two daughters had the opportunity to further their education.

I graduated in 1946 and there was no sitting around. I never had to pay my parents anything, never paid them board. I started working in the factory. That was Lansford Fashions; they made blouses. I was on the floor there, meaning I was a bundle girl. You gave bundles out and you took the finished work and gave it to the next girl.

[At first] I didn't know the front from the back of the machine. All I was doing was carrying the work to them and away from them. Then I wanted to learn how to operate a machine, and the boss said, "No, I want you on the floor." And I thought, "Baloney!" I knew I wanted to learn how to operate a machine. So I went across the street to Rosenau Brothers. They made all the Cinderella [and] Shirley Temple clothes. I worked there from about '47 till '52.

About three years after Grant and I got married, he lost his job; the mines closed. Then he got a job, when they first started the northeast extension for the turnpike, he worked on that for six months. Well, our fudge was just six months old when he lost his job. Then a new lamp factory came into town. Now they worked for nothing. You could register for unemployment, and Grant was getting thirty dollars a week, and we had two babies. We were renting a home, at that time it was thirty-five dollars a month rent. When the training period was over, he was getting paid a dollar and a quarter an hour. I swear to God, I thought everybody in this whole world got paid fifty dollars a week. I did, I really did.

When the mines did close down, I was traumatized. I just felt it was the end of the world. What do you do now? Not thinking, because all I knew was mines and sewing factories. Then my parents moved to New Jersey. They closed the mines down one week, and the next week, my father was in New Jersey as a super in an apartment building.

From the money allotted him he had to buy his meals and pay for laundry, also personal items.

He never sent the check; the check came from his boss in Lansford. Never once did we have an argument about who's going to get the check. I remember one time, he said, a long time ago, long before this, he said to me, "You're not going to get my checks anymore. I'll be damned. I'm going to get my checks." I said to him, "The day I don't see your paycheck, that's the day you go out the door with the old luggage." Because I wasn't drinking his money. I wasn't gambling the money. It was our money. We always have our money, we never had yours and mine.

Now I can say I'm glad the mines did close, because I can remember my father telling my brother, "Don't you ever go in the mines. You make darn sure you study and get out of here—go out of here!" Looking back, truthfully, I believe I would have played every political game I could to get my husband a job with the state. You better believe it."

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George Harvan, son of a Slovak-born coal miner and a lifelong resident of the Panther Valley, has documented the lives of area residents for the past fifty years. His photographs of anthracite miners have been widely exhibited. He is chief photographer for The Valley Gazette, a monthly publication devoted to the region's history and heritage.

This article has been adapted from When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times, written by Thomas Dublin and illustrated with photographs by George Harvan, recently published by Cornell University Press. During a three-year period, the author interviewed seventy residents of the Panther Valley area of Carbon County and twenty individuals who left the area as mining operations were closing. Their recollections provide a remarkable story of the agency of working men and women in the face of economic crisis. These excerpts reflect the coming of age in the anthracite region and people's responses to the decline of the region's dominant source of employment. For information about this book, telephone the publisher at (607) 277-2338 or e-mail afeh@cornell.edu.