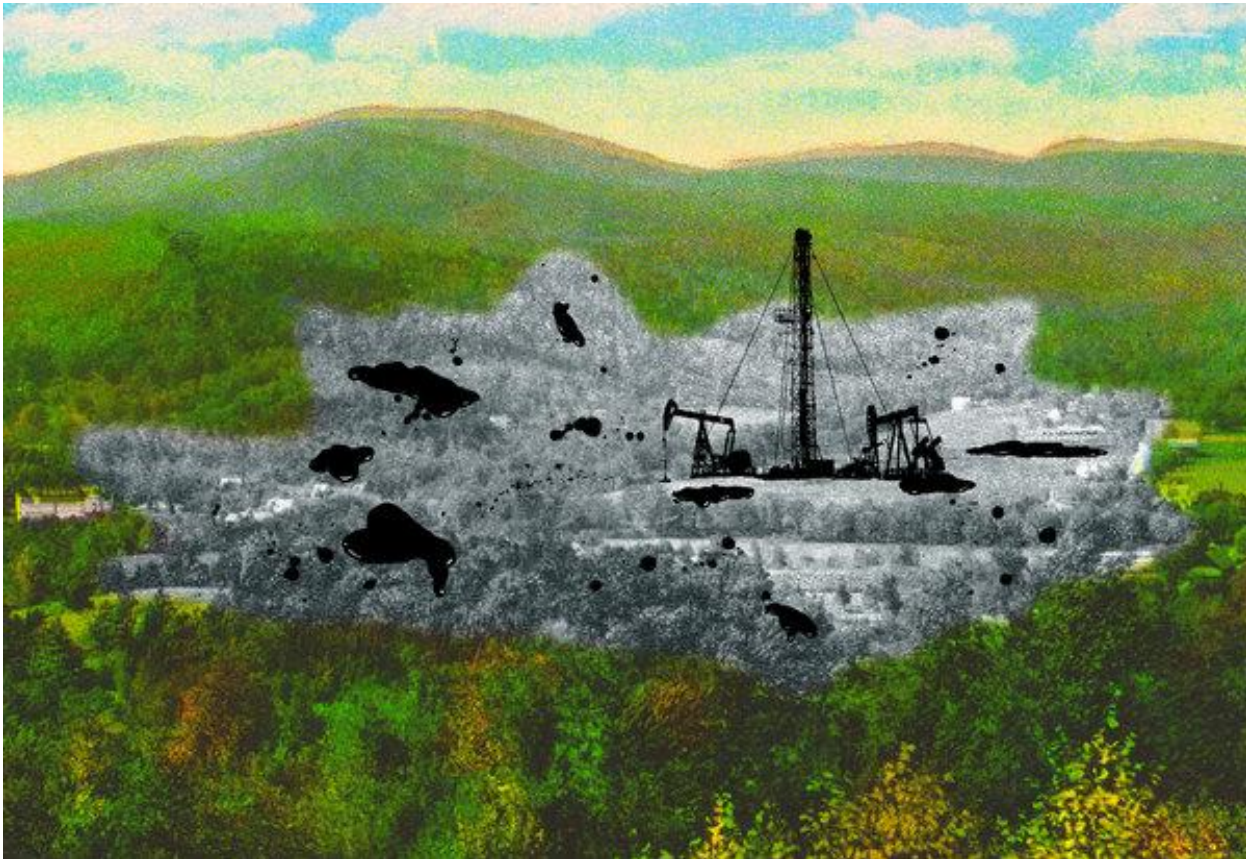


The Resource Curse of Appalachia

By Eliza Griswold

Ms. Griswold spent the past seven years reporting in southwestern Pennsylvania.

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Credit Justin Renteria

Jason Clark has lived near Amity, Pa., in the southwestern part of the state, since he was born. He likes to call urban Americans “hypocrites.” At 38, he’s the president of the Pork Association in Washington County, which sits at the edge of Appalachia. City dwellers are consumers, as he sees it; they gobble up resources like meat and coal and natural gas without knowing where they come from or thinking much about the toll that rural Americans pay to supply them.

There’s a term for that toll. Economists call it the resource curse, or the paradox of plenty. Since the 1990s, political scientists and development experts have used the resource curse to explain why countries

richest in fossil fuels tend to remain poor. The problem, they contend, lies in the toxic impact of large influxes of cash: Easy money displaces more productive economic activity and fosters weak governments.

Typically, scholars apply the term to poorer continents, yet it affects America also, and nowhere more so than Appalachia. Oil was discovered in western Pennsylvania in the 1850s. And for more than a century, coal companies have clear-cut hollows to burrow into the earth below.

Corporations influenced local politicians and owned local businesses. They set the price of bread and the

number of hours in a workday. For a time, these companies also supplied jobs and, by extension, built communities as churches and schools grew up around mines. Yet education wasn't really a focus. For laborers, the best-paid positions were underground. They required high levels of specialized skill best learned on the job.

Over the past several decades, as market forces and dwindling supplies have pushed coal companies into bankruptcy, they've abandoned towns, leaving behind the ravages of slag heaps and thousands of miles of streams and rivers polluted by acid mine drainage. Drive along the border between Pennsylvania and West Virginia and you'll see waterways that are the bright orange of hunters' vests. Neither the state nor towns can afford to pay the cleanup costs.

Fracking, however, promised to be different. When the natural gas boom arrived in the region more than a decade ago, it came with assurances that natural gas would burn cleaner than coal, releasing only half the amount of carbon into the atmosphere. Its proponents also argued that after a time, its environmental footprint would be so small that it would disappear into the rural landscape. For Appalachia's residents, who'd experienced generations of mining and drilling on their farms and were well versed in the language of mineral rights, fracking brought with it the possibility of finally profiting off their land by signing lucrative leases to the oil and gas beneath their feet.

In the seven years I've spent reporting in southwestern Pennsylvania, I've watched the oil and gas industry build influence in Washington County by buying up farm livestock at the 4-H competition at the county fair and placing favorable articles in local papers — paid content that featured “shaleionaires,” a handful of farmers who've profited mightily off drilling.

Such corporate tactics can sow discord among neighbors who find themselves winners and losers in a lottery driven by energy markets. With an influx of cash from signing mineral leases, some larger landowners have gotten rich, while neighbors with less land pay the price for oil and gas extraction. These hidden costs range from the expense of car repairs that result from roads ruined by truck traffic, to the more troubling health consequences of living

next door to leaking pools of industrial waste — including dying animals and sick children.

Struck by these and other forms of environmental injustice, many rural Americans have found they have nowhere to turn for protection. In Pennsylvania, government agencies and legal protections can do little to help. State environmental investigators, who are underpaid and inadequately trained, often abandon the public sector for more lucrative jobs in oil and gas. Federal agents, hamstrung by budget cuts and now under siege in the Trump administration's campaign against environmental regulation, don't have the mandate to hold drillers accountable for shoddy practices.

In Pennsylvania, a band of citizen activists has fought back. Among them are retired coal miners and steelworkers whose activism is rooted in the long history of labor unions in the state. Historically Democrats, most are also socially conservative hunters and fishers. Many were Trump voters who adhere to neither party and resist easy political classification. They view themselves not as environmentalists — a word that many see as carrying a dubious “liberal” agenda — but as conservationists, who believe in the wise use of resources for the benefit of humankind.

Since 2011, I've attended community meetings with these activists. At one such gathering, I met Stacey Haney, a single mother and nurse, and an avid hunter whose father, like many of the men in attendance, was a Vietnam combat veteran and an out-of-work steelworker. Ms. Haney, like others, was skeptical of corporate interests but far more suspicious of the federal government and of outsiders coming to Appalachia to wag fingers at poor people for signing mineral leases that helped them hold on to their farms.

Ms. Haney was proud to sign a lease on her small plot of land. She hoped it would earn her enough money to build her dream barn, but the act also had patriotic implications. She believed that as a daughter of a veteran, she had a duty to help keep American soldiers at home, instead of in the Middle East fighting foreign entanglements linked to oil. The promise of American energy independence would keep Americans safe and support an industrial resurgence in the rust belt. For all of these reasons, Ms. Haney was a staunch supporter of fracking.

Then an oil-and-gas operation began atop a hill about a quarter of a mile from her home. The industrial site included a vast open waste pond that leaked and sent noxious gases into the air. After her farm animals and her children developed mysterious illnesses, Ms. Haney grew fearful about potential exposure and abandoned the farm, which had once belonged to her great-grandfather. Ms. Haney became an outspoken activist. She sued the corporation that she believed had sickened her children; then she took on the state.

In 2012, along with a team of lawyers who represented small towns, Ms. Haney challenged a revision to Pennsylvania's oil and gas law. This law would remove the rights of small towns to determine where drillers could operate. The towns battled it, arguing they had a duty to protect their citizens. To bolster their claim, they relied on an obscure amendment to the Bill of Rights in the Pennsylvania Constitution, the Environmental Rights Amendment, which guaranteed all citizens the right "to clean air and pure water." The argument for the amendment was based directly on Pennsylvania's history with coal companies leaving citizens with poisoned air and toxic water. This, the amendment underscored, involved a basic violation of individual rights.

Although on its surface the Environmental Rights Amendment sounded like a "liberal" cause, its basis was essentially conservative: the belief that citizens and communities had the right to govern themselves and could not be steamrolled by large corporations or federal agencies. In a 4-2 decision, the conservative bench of the state Supreme Court found in favor of Ms. Haney's side. The small towns won.

"It's not a historical accident that the Pennsylvania Constitution now places citizens' environmental rights on par with their political rights," Chief Justice Ronald Castille, a conservative Republican and Vietnam combat veteran, wrote in his landmark decision. Pennsylvania's long history of resource extraction has given its citizens a sophisticated understanding of what energy really costs.

An abundance of coal, oil and natural gas has been, at best, a mixed blessing for rural Americans. This has helped to turn them against not only the federal government for failing to protect them but also their fellow Americans, whose appetite for consuming energy never seems to slacken.

Eliza Griswold is the author, most recently, of "Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America," from which this essay is adapted.

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