

# The Lessons of Locust Gap: An Allegory

by Howard F. McGinn

**T**he Appalachian Mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania are forest covered now. The pine trees, oaks, and maples that have grown over the past decades give a lush texture to the ridges. Wildlife is abundant. Bears, mountain lions, deer, and other animals have proliferated. The appearance is that of virgin forests. But if you were to walk through the forests you would soon discover beneath the trees the scars of the past. The trees cover the remnants of the beginnings of the industrialization of the United States because out of these hills came the coal that powered electrical plants, fueled steamships and steam engines, and heated homes and factories across the country. Abandoned mine shafts litter the forest floor. Every now and then the foundations of long-abandoned houses or factory buildings appear in the form of mounds overgrown with vines. The trees themselves are anchored in the "strippings" of earth, shale, and coal that were brought up out of the mines and piled almost as high as some of the hills. And if you had been in the forests when the mines were working, and the sounds of warning sirens and dynamite, shift whistles and church bells filled mountain sides and valleys, you would find the present silence frightening.

These mountains and their company towns were also the first homes for thousands of European immigrants seeking the fulfillment of all immigrants — a better life. The people arrived from Poland and Ireland, from Croatia, Bohemia, Germany, and all of those long-forgotten countries that are now finding resurrection in the destruction of the Soviet Union. In the migration process to these mountains, family members were divided. Those with the most skills remained in Philadelphia or New York; the least skilled were lured by the coal companies and the railroads

into the mountains by the promise of cheap housing and jobs. Most eventually discovered that the housing and jobs meant a lifetime indenture to the Reading Railroad or the United States Steel Corporation.

My grandfather was the son of immigrants whose parents had migrated from Ireland to the coal fields. He was born in the Northumberland County town of Locust Gap, Pennsylvania, in the 1880s. His parents had been among the earliest immigrants to be hired by the Reading Railroad. The railroad owned Locust Gap. In fact, the Locust Gap that he first knew disappeared in a massive mine explosion when he was an infant. The railroad company simply selected a new site, rebuilt the houses and mine buildings, and called the new settlement Locust Gap. Life went on.

My grandfather's life as a miner began at the age of seven. His two years of elementary education were considered to be sufficient by the railroad so he was sent into the mines as a child, as a muleskinner. His job was to drive the mules that pulled the loaded coal cars out of the mines, empty the cars, then drive the empty cars back into the mine. One day, whether through fatigue or carelessness, he never said, he caught his right arm between two cars loaded with coal. Instead of trying to separate the cars, the company doctor simply amputated his arm at the elbow. He lost his arm at the age of ten. He returned to his job once the wound healed and he never left the mines until the day of his retirement.

My grandfather and grandmother had four sons. My father was the oldest. When he was born in 1910, the conditions in Locust Gap had begun to improve. The market for coal was growing, the influence of the unions was beginning to be felt, and the town had entered into a sleepy, if dangerous,

adulthood. A few of my grandfather's uncles had been members of the infamous Molly Maguires, an Irish terrorist organization that fought the coal companies in the towns around Locust Gap in the 1870s. This aspect of family history was not openly discussed in those days. Town life was improving. The Reading Railroad, of course, still owned most of the homes and leased them to families. Most of the leases were for ninety-nine years. But privately owned homes had begun to be built. These were usually owned by retired company officials, physicians, or attorneys. The company did allow the Catholic Parish to own its own church, school, convent, rectory, and cemetery. The Lutheran Church was afforded the same privilege.

It might be well here to describe the topography of Locust Gap since the location of the churches defined the town. Locust Gap was built on two hillsides enclosing a valley. The Catholic Church was on the northern hillside; the Protestant Church was on the southern hillside. The Railroad ran through the center of the valley. Most of the Catholic families lived on the northern hillside and, of course, the Protestant families lived on the southern hillside. The Protestant families lived on the southern hill because the mining company officials were Protestant and the company's offices, in fact the entire mine complex, was on the southern side of Locust Gap. Denominational intermingling rarely occurred outside the mine. Most of the bar rooms, and there were many, were on the northern hillside.

As I noted, though, Locust Gap was changing. A new public school was built in the 1920s for grades K-12. It attracted few students because most of the children were Catholic and went to the parochial school and were taught by

nuns. State child labor and education laws had sharply decreased the school dropout rate and in the 1920s most students were achieving at least an eighth grade education. The Great Depression of the 1930s wrought its severe effect on Locust Gap as it did in every country in the world and a few families left to find work in Philadelphia or Scranton. Locust Gap's salvation arrived through the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The war transformed Locust Gap in ways not experienced during World War I or other wars. The demand for coal grew enormously. The company, in order to keep laborers, kept improving wages and living conditions, and the population grew as people moved back to Locust Gap to work in the mines to "help the war effort." My father, though, decided he would fare better in the army and became a tank commander. He never returned to the town.

When the war ended Locust Gap began to enter its "golden age." Compared to prewar conditions, the postwar life was prosperous. New civic buildings were constructed. Funded by the GI Bill, those men and women who did serve in the armed forces bought homes and continued their education. The great dance bands of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, both born and raised in a nearby town, performed regularly in Locust Gap. More sons and a few daughters went to college at Penn State or nearby Bloomsburg State College and returned to Locust Gap as teachers, nurses, librarians, and businessmen. The first television sets appeared and there was even a rumor that a new invention called the coaxial cable system, invented in a nearby city, would be installed to bring a better television signal to the town. There were annual Memorial Day and Fourth of July Parades, the mine was operating twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, more people bought automobiles, life was becoming good.

Life was good because the trains kept hauling tons of coal to eastern cities and ports. Every day, several times a day, trains of one hundred cars or more would pass through Locust Gap transporting the mineral to homes, power plants, and ships. The demand for coal seemed insatiable to the citizens of the town and to the officials of the Reading Railroad. The future seemed secure as Locust Gap dreamed through the early years of the Eisenhower Administration. Nobody noticed that the first signs of the town's death process had begun.

The end started quietly. In Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Boston, and cities throughout Northeastern United States, families had started switching from coal to cheaper, cleaner forms of energy to heat their homes. Natural gas, oil, even electric furnaces slowly began to replace coal-burning furnaces in old homes and in newly constructed homes. The first stirring of the environmental movement began across the state in Pittsburgh when the city, disgusted with its image of smoke and dirt caused by the steel mills, began a massive crack-down on air pollution. Even the venerable Reading Railroad began to show financial strains caused by the shift of freight from the railroads to trucks as the new interstate highway system began to be built. Technology, change, and shifting consumer habits were combining to slowly kill the hard coal industry and Locust Gap.

The death of Locust Gap was gradual. It was hard to discern a pattern of destruction. The first signs came when the mining company began to cut back on the work shifts. The people were told that the slowdown was temporary, that market demand for coal would increase, that people would always use coal. The cutback on production slowed the number of trains passing through the town. One day an announcement was made that the Reading Railroad would stop passenger service. Jobs started to be lost and a few families began to move to the cities in search of work. The town's college students stopped returning to Locust Gap after graduation. Better jobs and money were in the cities. Still, the town officials and representatives of the mining company assured the people that all was well; that they should not worry. After all, hadn't the town been in existence for over a century? Hadn't the town survived the great explosion, the Great Depression, and many mining accidents? Those leaving or not returning were just alarmists.

Then the public school was closed. The school board said it was part of a county-wide consolidation designed to reduce class size and improve the curriculum. Students would now be transported by school bus to various central school buildings in the area. The city officials and the mine owners praised the school board's action. It was a sign of progress, they said. During this time, business at the bar rooms and churches increased.

Soon another new technology arrived. A mine in a town down the road

closed and the mining company imported a massive mechanized shovel that stripped the coal out of the ground in enormous bites and dumped the coal in trucks. The railroad's freight volume suffered severely; the environmental impact was terrible; the loss in jobs was enormous. The mayor of Locust Gap assured the people that their mine would not close because it was the largest in the Pennsylvania coal fields. But other unsettling events began to occur. Because of the apathy, neglect, and lack of investment by the mining companies, frequent mine shaft collapses began. Roadways started to buckle; houses started to fall into the mines; my grandparents' graves started to sink into the collapsing mine shafts. A fire started in an underground vein of coal in nearby Danville. It eventually caused the federal government to move part of the city. And then the Locust Gap mine was closed.

The resultant rapid depopulation of the town forced the Catholic Church to close the school. The Protestant Church closed completely when the mining officials moved. The older people, caught with ninety-nine year leases that the railroad would not renegotiate, remained. Soon the Reading Railroad itself ceased existence and was absorbed into Conrail. The mine was sealed.

Three years ago I returned to Locust Gap after a fifteen year absence. I wanted to check on my grandparents' graves. It took a while to find the town because the Pennsylvania Department of Highways had built a road around the few remaining buildings. Locust Gap had become irrelevant. The Catholic Church still remained but was served by a priest only on weekends. Many of the homes on the north side had been burned or had collapsed. A few remained. All of the houses on the southern hillside were gone. My grandparents' graves had not settled into the earth any further but many of the roads in the town were impassable. And like a surrealistic symbol of the past, the sole remnant of the mine was the rusted steel tower containing the giant wheels that had held the cable that had lowered the cars into the mine shaft. Nothing else remained. I was struck by the silence and the beauty of the forests that were repairing the earthen scars. I was haunted by the ghosts of those buried in graves and mine shafts and by the ghostlike figures still sitting in front of the last houses in Locust Gap.