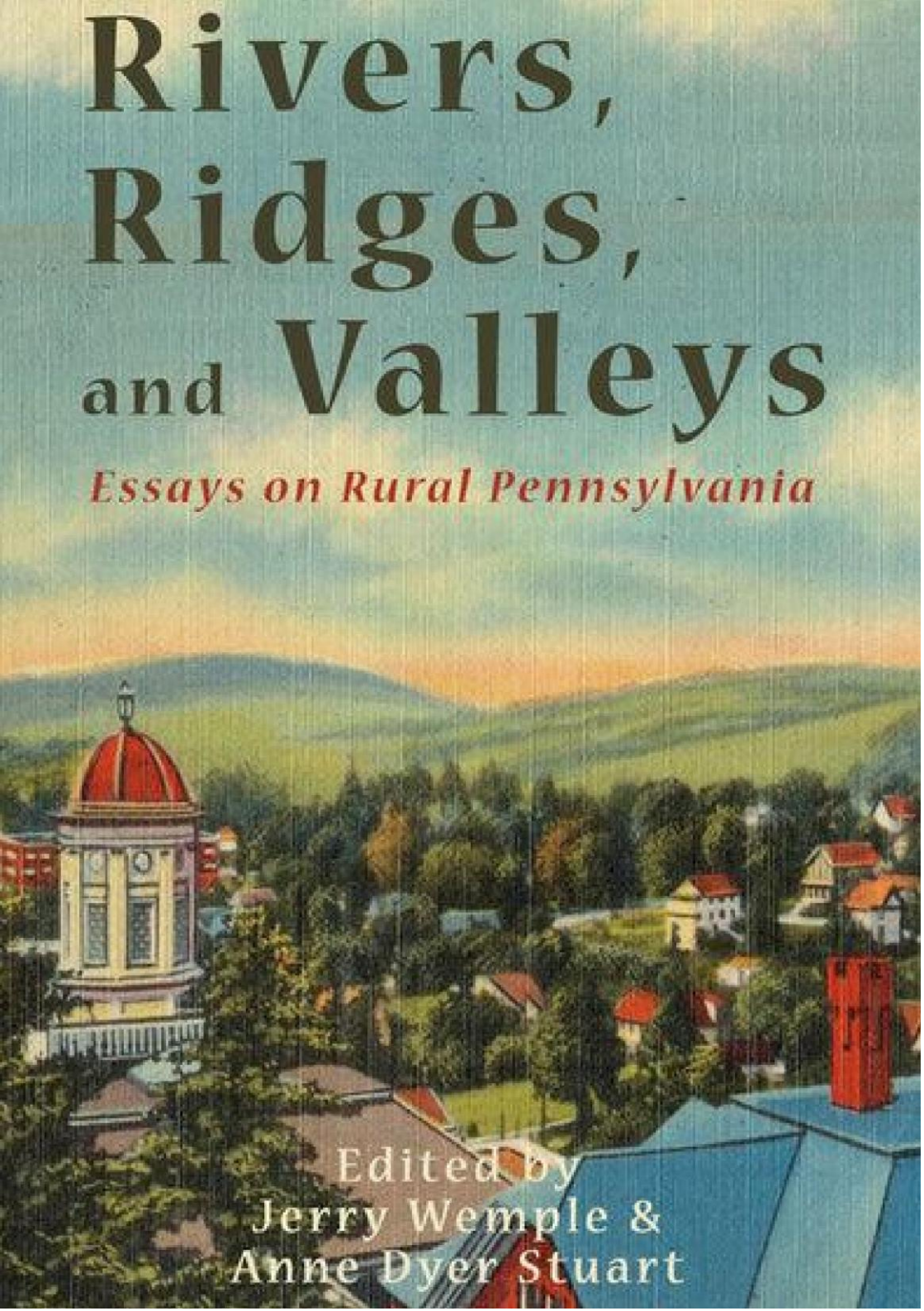
Rivers, Ridges, and Valleys

Essays on Rural Pennsylvania



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Anthracite Country

Part One - Coney Island Special

You wander down the street across the railroad tracks that you gaze down and see a girl trying to ride her bike across so she doesn't fall into the sharp-side gravel, but she ends up just carrying it trying not to trip. You hold the door for an old gentleman who doesn't say a word to you through his fifth cigarette of the day. You walk in and see no menu. The lady behind the counter — she's been working here longer than you've been alive and now she owns the joint and her grandson is working the register and getting drinks and has to work this Thursday to pay for new tires for his truck — she asks you what you want and you say, "Two Dogs," and she asks, "Everything?," and you say, "Yup." She takes a long thin spatula and smears mustard and ketchup on the bun and places the hot dog in the cradle of condiment and smothers chili and onions on top, suffocating it. Her deft movements done without thinking creating the Coney Island Special. Her hands somehow stay clean. She wraps it in paper that grows translucent with silent grease. You thank her, pay, and walk back to your truck. The girl on the bike is gone, she must have escaped the avalanche of gravel. You can't remember exactly where your dad grew up, so you drive across the train tracks and take the first right. Your windows are open and the humid haze of July mixes with the dust of an old town making it hard to breathe. You hit a dead end at Shamokin Creek — named "place of eels" by

the Lenape — that still runs burnt orange with acid mine drainage, lifeless, all the insects and fish drowned in chemicals. Your pap told your dad, who tells you, that back in the day when they heard a Prohibition Agent was on their way, F&S Brewery would open all their valves for all their tanks and there would be a three-foot head of beer on the creek as it ran through town. You wonder what the color of the creek was back then. You turn around in the parking lot of a closed corner store. A ripped tarp covers an open window. Siding is torn down, the houses row upon row in a stuttered line where the ground has begun to cave in or the roofs have started to sag, each street narrow enough just for one car but no One-Way signs. Some porches have people on them, some the banisters are falling, some are full of broken refrigerators and AC units. It's hot. There's a bar on each street, but also two churches. One used to be a Polish Catholic church that's now a Mosque. The hills are so steep your father must have been so damn strong to ride up them to the top to the coal mines where he used to play with the other kids.

Part Two - Culm Piles

My father, twelve years old and afraid of ripping holes in his only pair of jeans that his mother just bought him and would smack him good if she had to mend them already, tries to clamber out of the cascading, collapsing gravel of an abandoned coal mine. Surrounding the hole, valleys and ridges of anthracite butchered decades ago covered with ailanthus and sumac. His bitten down fingernails make scratches in the dried soil.

Every time he tries to grab hold, he slips a bit further and waits for the rock to settle until trying again — turning, grasping, chest

scraping, slowing him down. Stop. He knows if this takes too long, if he can't climb out soon, his mother will be after him with a wooden spoon when he gets home. If he's lucky, his dad will still be at work. If he can't climb out, the gravel will protect him from that sharp crack, but he'll be hungry and hunger, right now, is more appealing than rest.

Decades later, he took me on a tour of the mines when I was a kid, roughly the same age he was sliding into that hole. We visited his grandfather, Poppy, lying in a starched hospital bed, skinny with near death. It was dark on the roads and in his room. The beige linoleum was worn dim like those hills, covered in soot. My father asked him to tell us stories. He did. When he was my age, he was one of the boys that would rob the pillars, setting explosives in crevices deep in the rock of the last columns of anthracite holding up the mine. Their tiny fingers were perfect for the job. They'd run as the fuse crackled and the explosion ruptured the rock. They'd wait for the dust to settle, counting the seconds to see if the mountain was done collapsing or if they'd have to run. Birds, mules, and fires were the marks of oxygen, of life. "If they went, you ran," he whispered. He counted to sixty and in that silence he would wait. I was too young to ask what he did in that silent wait. But now I wonder — Did he play with the dirt between his fingers? Did he worry? Did rocks become toy trucks in those seconds of possible collapse?

My father inches up, dilates, holds still, waits again for the settle of the rock. Out of the corner of his eye he sees a copse of hemlocks he thinks, growing tall enough to cover the coal equipment of Cameron Colliery, at the base of what was one of the tallest manmade mountains now a blackness spattered by dark helpless

green. Tonight, if he doesn't get himself out, he will be left watching as Orion slides his way across a horizon cut with a rusted-out Bucyrus Erie dragline still reaching out, dangling its bucket over an open pit sore.

The coal and iron companies that once ran these collieries went bankrupt and left decades ago. They took the anthracite and the profit and left dead water and scraped hills. Some towns still burn, smoke comes up out of the cracked pavement. Some towns have museums opened once a week. Most roads became dead ends. Most people drive hours out of the valley for work.

My father's hands finally find solid ground at the lip of the airhole. He pulls himself up and stands. His knees, bloodied through torn jeans, burn in thick summer air like dried leaves languid in diesel smoke. His arms are dirty, his shirt will need bleaching. His mother, my Nana, will scold him for this with that wooden spoon, but he's not thinking about that right now. He's hungry and no dinner served in this town will satiate that. He's skinny, tall and lanky like a birch growing out of shallow soil, but he will put meat on those bones eventually, just not here. He lifts the ball cap off his head, the yellow "P" faded on sweat-stained black, and his head full of hair catches the evening sun. He wipes the dirt from his cleft lip scar. He leaves the gravel and walks down the steep silent hill towards Shamokin Street, towards their two-bedroom row house full of Catholic guilt and forgiveness.

Years later, he keeps walking to another industrial belt town to get his degree in business then halfway back to settle near the Susquehanna River. There he works for a company that nearly lays him off after thirty years, that makes him lay off his workers when they find cheaper labor overseas. I once visited his office. Two

windows, a few trees lining a parking lot, nothing on the walls, an office he worked in for decades that looked like it was ready for a new employee to start the next day. "Ready to go whenever they say the word," he said. Forever dragging himself out of that abandoned mine shaft, working endlessly to provide for his family, never buried under rock.

Part Three - Roaring Creek (above the Shamokin Reservoir)

I was downstream releasing a brook trout when I heard a dog collar getting closer, then finding a new smell and turning away. There was nothing for it to hear of me. I had no sound to offer, just water around ankles. I came back here, just a few miles upstream of where my father spent his childhood, to catch a native brook trout that held the genes of centuries in its little body. One of the last few wild and native things left in this place. I wanted proof that this place was once wild, that it could be wild again. That something had survived. I strand myself out in the middle of streams as often as I can. I think of my father climbing out of that abandoned mine and his father pulling the family out of that town and his father dying from black lung. My hands drop, one free, one lightly grasping my fly rod, and I close my eyes and listen to the crashing, collapsing water that covers, but does not bury, become a silence that settles onto me, onto the bank, onto the clouds of bugs, onto the deep canopy of wood gripping the soil. Everything becomes a silence if given long enough