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FROM BOOM TO BUST: 
THE DECLINE OF THE MON-RIVER VALLEY

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Growing up in southwestern Pennsylvania, I am no stranger to the coal mines and steel mills that define the heritage of Pittsburgh. As a child I would often go with my father and brothers fishing along the Monongahela River, between the towns of Elrama and Monongahela. We would park in an abandoned parking lot just outside of a steel plant and walk down to the rivers edge, where we would then set up our equipment to fish. As the hours passed I would sit watching the countless barges, loaded high with coal, carry their loads down the river to the steel plant and eventually return up river, empty of its cargo to repeat the cycle. I would hear the trains chug by on the railroad tracks on top of the hill behind me and watch them pass by on the opposite side of the river in front of me. Both my brother and I would try to count the seemingly endless number of railroad cars, but in the end losing track and giving up. I would also watch the tall smokestacks of the mill as they emitted the artificial clouds that obscured the blue sky. Then as the sun set and night descended, I would look at the steel factory, glittering like a metropolis in the dark; an odd sight of beauty. As a child I could never of understood the importance of that steel mill to the the townsfolk of Monongahela, who somewhat strangely, consider themselves lucky to have it there. They say this because the mill provides jobs to the area and keeps the population from incessantly dissipating, as it continues to do in many of the neighboring towns due to the closure of the steel mills and coal mines there. This deindustrialization began in the 1980s as globalization was taking root, and its consequences are still visible and felt today by the residents of the Monongahela River Valley.

The Monongahela River Valley is an area that includes many of the southern suburbs of Pittsburgh that once contained a vast number of the steel mills and coal mines that made Pittsburgh famous. It spans the towns as far south as Charleroi and Donora and continues north along the river unto the towns of Duquesne and Homestead, just outside the city of Pittsburgh. Today, however, many of these suburbs are in decay with a declining and aging population as well as increasing poverty, crime, and drug abuse rates. To thoroughly comprehend the situation these towns are facing and have real firsthand experience, I drove, on more than one occasion, for hours through the valley localities along the river, heading south to north and then north to south. While driving through many of these towns I saw everywhere low-income housing in disrepair, abandoned houses with broken windows, boarded-up store fronts, and rampant graffiti. Often I did not feel safe driving through the neighborhood streets of such an environment and was sure not to linger or appear lost. I wondered how this could be if Pittsburgh was “the most livable city” (Pittsburgh). I didn't have to research the history of Pittsburgh on the internet to answer my question, I needed only ask the people who lived through it. Anyone who grew up here during the 1970s or lived here in the 1980s can tell you all about the closing of the coal mines and steel mills.

My grandfather, Louis Campbell Sr, worked for many years—since being a teenager—in the coal mines of southwestern Pennsylvania, around the area of South Park and Thomas Jefferson. When the mines closed in the 1980s, due to the low demand of coal which was the result of the collapse of the steel industry, he told me, “I didn't know what to do” (Interview). “The mines were my life. I spent almost ten hours a day, everyday except Sunday in there and just like that, I was out of work and my life changed. I
didn’t know what else to do, mining was all I knew” (Interview). These feelings were experienced by many men of my grandfather’s generation and are best exhibited in the song “Steel Mill” by David Berkeley;

There’s a steel mill, shut down when spring came
My dad worked his life there,
I was doing the same.

Now I don’t know what to do with my days.
The kingdom comes to workmen,
So the preacher he says.

And there’s voices, sometimes well you know.
And the devil comes a knocking,
When the money gets low.

Cause it’s a story
Heard round each bend.
A man works his heart out,
And is broke in the end. (“Steel”)

My grandfather didn’t have a college degree or work experience outside of the mines and so was left to a lifetime of making money at whatever he could do. After being forced to leave the coal industry, he spent many years at odd jobs to make money including: running a christmas tree sales business in the winter and a lawn motor repair and cutting service in the summer. Then after that for many more years, until recent retirement, he was a janitor at South Park High School. He now works at flea markets as a keysmith and sells paintings he made on slabs of grey slate, similar to the coal that once defined his life. He grew up preparing to enter the mines, as his father did. My family, like many working-class American families of the time, worked for generations in the steel mills and coal mines. It was there way of life, which they passed down to their children who graduated high school with the usually limited options of work in heavy industry or join the armed forces. Also like many families of Pittsburgh, my father’s great-grandfather emigrated to the United States to work in the steel factories here, so that he may have a better life for his family. From there on my family worked in the industry until the mines were closed and the factory doors shut in the 1980s. This is a history not exclusive to my heritage, but that of the region whose residents will tell similar stories time after time when asked about the closing of the steel mills; an infamous occurrence here in Pittsburgh.

The facts are that after a long decade of decline, by the end of the 1980s, above seventy five percent of the steel production in the Pittsburgh area was closed (Dietrich). The Pittsburgh Quarterly described the situation by stating, “Sprawling facilities running along the Monongahela and Ohio rivers toppled like ten pins... The demise of the steel industry in Pittsburgh played out with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy” (Dietrich). By the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s the steel industry in Pittsburgh collapsed as the city and its surrounding areas faced massive deindustrialization (History). Japanese and Korean companies provided strong competition and even destruction to the Pittsburgh economy by flooding the market with cheaply produced metal from overseas (Saporito). The closing of the steel mills was the first domino to fall in a long chain of failing industry. Soon after the fall of the steel industry came the decline of the railroads and mines that depended so heavily on the production of steel. Coal mines, just as with the steel
mills, were forced to cut back and initiate large-scale layoffs, putting many men who had been working for generations in the mines out of work. The decline of heavy industry also had an adverse affect on local businesses as the population of Pittsburgh and its suburbs decreased due to the decline of jobs (History). No business and no jobs meant that the unemployment rate of the Pittsburgh area reached above a soaring 18% during the 1980s (Briem). Modern day Pittsburgh, in a stark contrast to the past, has no steel mills within the radius of its city limits (History). The economy of the city itself has for the most part rebounded. However, the suburbs of Pittsburgh, primarily the Monongahela River Valley, are still recovering from the downturn experienced from the closure of the steel mills and other heavy industry factories, which was for Pittsburgh, the ending of an era. The deindustrialization of Pittsburgh has caused lasting social and economic effects on the Monongahela River Valley such as population loss and a rise in unemployment, but with most attention paid to the rise of poverty and its effects.

One of the most noticeable effects deindustrialization has had on Pittsburgh and its surrounding areas is population loss. The population of McKeesport, once an industrial hub and city of pride for Pittsburgh, was 55,355 in 1940, whereas in 2010 the population was recorded at a mere 19,731, with a continuing steady decline (McKeesport [city]). This negative trend of population can also be seen in another suburb of Pittsburgh just down the river from McKeesport, the community of Braddock. The population of Braddock during the 1950s reached a peak at more than 20,000. However, after the industrial decline that affected the Pittsburgh region in the 1980s, the population as recorded by the US Census Bureau in 2010, was only 2,159 (Schnarrenberger). The city of Pittsburgh itself faced similar population devastation. The population of the city peaked at 676,806 in 1950 (History). During the decades following and especially after 1980, the population began to decrease so that the population as recorded in 2000 by the US Census Bureau was 343,600, or in other words almost half of what it was during Pittsburgh’s industrial heyday (Dietrich). The population loss of Pittsburgh and its suburbs during the second half of the twentieth century was a direct result of the deindustrialization of the area and also had adverse affects on the economies and social aspects of life for residents there.

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However, it is arguable that the most severe effect deindustrialization has had upon Pittsburgh and the Monongahela River Valley is the rise of poverty. The loss of employment opportunities, population, and business associated with deindustrialization has created a rise in poverty in Pittsburgh, particularly among the suburbs located in the Monongahela River Valley. Braddock, home to Andrew Carnegie’s first steel mill, was once bustling with people and life. However, today it is now described by many people as “Hell” (Future). The situation of Braddock is best described by one journalist who visited there in the statement; “Once an envied example of what U.S. industrial prowess could do for the lifestyle of workers, Braddock’s main street is now a stretch of boarded up storefronts and crumbling houses, lots filled with garbage, and ghosts of warehouses and factories that stopped humming long ago” (Future). I recently drove through Braddock to witness first hand how deindustrialization has affected the community and can personally attest to the previous statement about Braddock’s main street. Braddock today is the poorest town in Allegheny County. According to John Fetterman, the mayor of Braddock, “Today the poverty rate in Braddock is three times the national average with half the town on public assistance and a murder rate, up until a few months ago that was at least six times the national average” (Future). He also goes on to state that “While you can purchase a house in Detroit, on average, for $19,000 in Braddock homes go, if they go at all, for $6,000” (Future). This is a profound statement because many people tend to think of Detroit as an area where real estate is near worthless due to unfavorable living conditions,
and in comparison to the selling prices of a house, it seems that Braddock fares even worse. According to the Heritage Community Initiative, which seeks to improve communities dealing with poverty, there is currently no grocery store, pharmacy, bank, or ATM machine located in Braddock (Schnarrenberger). This is most likely due to the high levels of crime and violence that occur there and can be associated with poverty. In 2009 it was reported that 57.9% of people in Braddock had an income below the poverty level, in comparison to 16.4% for the state of Pennsylvania (Braddock). That means that over half of all people living in Braddock do not have the adequate income to support themselves. Similarly in McKeesport, a city near Braddock, the poverty level, although not quite as extreme as in Braddock, has reached a significant level. McKeesport was once the fifth largest city in Western Pennsylvania, during a time when the streets were lined with busy store fronts. It was even once host to a debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, and was later visited again by John F. Kennedy in 1962 (Cloonan). Today McKeesport is a place most people try to avoid. When driving through the streets of the small city, most of what one sees are vacated, vandalized, deteriorated, and boarded up houses often overgrown with weeds. Many of the cars parked along the streets are old models that have dents or rusted-out spots in the bodywork. In McKeesport the per capita money income in the past twelve months, based on an average of the years 2008 to 2012, was $16,749 in comparison to an average of $28,190 for the state of Pennsylvania, a difference of almost $12,000 (McKeesport [city]). The median household income for the same time period for McKeesport is $26,608, whereas the average for Pennsylvania is $52,267 (McKeesport [city]). That is a difference of $25,659, or almost half of what the majority of Pennsylvanians make. The average household income for McKeesport is less than what the average person in Pennsylvania makes. This means that whereas the percentage of persons below poverty level for Pennsylvania is 13.1, in McKeesport it is 28.8. That is over double the state average. The high rates of poverty among households in McKeesport also means that 42.2% of children there are below the poverty level, in comparison with 16.8% for the state of Pennsylvania (McKeesport). How can it be that a once sprawling center of industry and activity can have such outstanding conditions of poverty? The answer is deindustrialization, which created high unemployment rates, few employment opportunities, and increased dependence on government assistance among many other factors. The deindustrialization of Pittsburgh that occurred during the 1970s through the 1980s has had many lasting negative effects on the region, particularly the Monongahela River Valley.

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The high rates of poverty in the Monongahela River Valley, as a side effect, have fostered the presence of rampant drug-use and sales, in addition to increasing crime rates. The ever-increasing manifestation of the drug business and ensuing rise in property and violent crime rates are trends that pervade the former steel communities of the Mon-Valley. An associate professor of criminology at the University of Pittsburgh, Emily Owen, believes that there is a direct correlation between the deindustrialization of the region and increased crime. Although there may be an initial brief stage of decreased crime after industry collapse, she states that, "...if unemployment remains steady and new jobs don't fill the place of the loss of industry, crime can increase, especially as people leave the town in search of jobs" (Guza). Since 1980 crime, both property and violent, has experienced exacerbation. Monessen, a town situated in the Monongahela River Valley, in 2003 reported 89 cases of violent crime, which equates to 104 per 10,000
people. This is in contrast to the Pennsylvania state average of 40 violent crimes per 10,000 people. Property crime there was also above average at 312 per 10,000, whereas the state average was 243 (Guza). This example is reminiscent of many communities of the Mon-Valley, not just Monessen. The problem is accurately described by Daniel Zyglowicz, a professor at California University of Pennsylvania, who during childhood lived in Monessen; “There’s less opportunities. Even for young people, there is very little for them to do in town. But still now, there is a lack of jobs in the area. Many people feel there is no other alternative” (Guza). This lack of opportunity for employment influences a rise in crime rates and drug-use rates because people have more time, less hope, and see no other available options (Guza). Selling drugs allows them to readily earn money with perhaps less difficulty than it would be to find a legal job. According to Owen, the criminology professor at Pittsburgh University, “As opportunities dry up, opportunities in crime increase” (Guza). Drugs are “the Valley’s fastest growing business” (Grata). The widespread presence of drugs is also seen in Monongahela, although considerably less due to a crackdown by the police. The Police Chief there, Brian Tempest, has stated that “Drugs were pretty rampant. Heroin was everywhere. There was police officer who worked here who was selling drugs while on duty. You could drive down the street and see the drug dealers” (Guza). The subsistence of a drug industry in the region can also be described by Carroll Township Police Chief, Paul Brand, who has stated “Almost every time we solve a personal theft, forgery, credit card fraud, shoplifting, burglary or robbery, there’s someone behind the crime with a drug issue” (Grata). It is reported in a TribLive article published online that a major company located in the Mon-Valley region once published a need for employment and correspondingly, had several hundred applicants for the positions. Of the applicants, “two-thirds were disqualified because they couldn’t pass the drug test, because they had an arrest record or because they had both strikes against them” (Grata). This drug epidemic that permeates the Mon-Valley degrades the communities there and increases crime. Such an environment only serves to further discourage people from moving to the region. Therefore it is necessary to focus efforts on eliminating poverty, because by doing so one is cutting off the head of the monster and so injuring the extremities that derive life from it. When the root of the problem is gone then the outgrowths of it are also diminished and have the possibility of being eliminated.

These negative trends that plague the Monongahela River Valley are not new to society and have the potential of being abolished and even reversed if effort and attention is directed to solving the problems. High rates of poverty, drug abuse, and violence among others problems can be forgone by actions, in a broad sense, such as creating jobs, spurring investment, giving tax breaks to businesses, investing in real estate, and terminating dependence on the government. The main problem, that is the seed of many attributive issues—aforementioned—is poverty, which generates drug abuse and violence. Therefore, poverty should be the main target of attack in the effort to rebuild, revitalize, and improve the communities of the Mon-Valley, so that the quality of life may also improve and restore pride to its constituents.

The first step that need be taken on the uphill climb to economic sustainability and social cultivation is the creation of jobs and economic opportunities available by spurring investment in the region. The best way to eliminate poverty is to help people help themselves by generating self-sustainment and eliminating government dependence. The creation of jobs, and more particularly those that require skilled labor, will increase the average income, and so reduce the poverty rate. This is a simple but essential and effective solution. Investment in a venture capital market will incite entrepreneurship and the opening of small start-up businesses. But more importantly is the increased employment opportunities available in the industries of advanced material and high-tech manufacturing as well as innovative materials that are usually the product of large companies. Availability of jobs in such industries will attract educated young adults and will also encourage others, those who have not already done so, to pursue further education in post-secondary institutions. The creation of jobs leads to the issue of the need to improve education, another topic of significance, which will in turn open opportunities to ascend the ranks of social stratification and create an environment less susceptible to violence and hard-drug addiction. Many of the communities in the Mon-Valley, including Monongahela, Charleroi, Monessen, Donora, and
Brownsville, experience low educational attainment levels, (measured by individuals who hold a bachelor’s degree), below the state level. According to information found in the 2000 U.S. Census, the percentages in some communities such as Donora, Brownsville, and Monongahela, being around 7%, are close to half that of the state percentage, being 14% (Mid Mon Valley). It is no secret that individuals who hold a college degree of some sort are more likely than individuals who only hold a high school diploma or GED to get a job. Therefore it is important to provide a quality high school education that prepares graduates to enter into college or post-secondary institutions, where they may receive training needed to fill the job opportunities of the 21st century industries like high-tech manufacturing or health sciences. This type of education is mostly absent from the school districts of the Mon-Valley due to the high levels of poverty which influences funding for their programs. School districts in poor neighborhoods are almost always lacking in necessary resources and are severely disadvantaged in comparison to schools found in affluent neighborhoods. Improving education means improving the chances of success in attaining a well-paying job which produces self-sustainment. The creation of jobs is of foremost importance and is comparable to a drop of water falling into a pool of water, where it initiates a ripple effect upon the once stagnate surface. It will allow population growth, which will spawn racial and economic diversity, which will help to stabilize the local economy and safety of the community, which will improve the standards of living and quality of life for the constituents of the community, which is the overall goal of the rehabilitation of the Monongahela River Valley.

A testament to the success of community revitalization and renewal is the relatively new Southside Works. The South Side of Pittsburgh was previously, during the pinnacle of industrialization, a landscape of steel mills and low-income housing for those who worked in the mills. Today the South Side is under development and has experienced much improvement from a decade ago. The Southside Works was constructed in the first few years of the 21st century on the land where Jones and Laughlin steel works once stood and now houses local companies, retail stores, up-scale restaurants and rental units (The Atlantic). The South Side is a rising neighborhood that continues to grow out of the shadow of the steel industry and into the spotlight of the technology industry. It is home to the headquarters of some major tech corporations and institutions like Carnegie Mellon’s Research Institute. The youth that fill Pittsburgh’s universities during the weekdays, fill the cafes and bars of the South Side on Friday nights and weekends. This is in stark contrast to the South Side before the turn of the century when former steel mills lay vacant and rusting and most people left the South Side for downtown or Oakland on the weekends. The South Side is not perfect, it still experiences higher than average rates of crime and violence in some areas, but rehabilitation is a gradual process and it is still occurring. The South Side is an example of the success that many communities in the Mon-Valley can experience if an investment of time and resources is made in revitalizing them.

During the 1980s Pittsburgh experienced unprecedented deindustrialization that led to an economic downturn and the degradation of its suburbs located in the Monongahela River Valley. The closing of steel mills and coal mines associated with heavy industry meant massive job loss and a rise of unemployment. It also meant the end of a way of life for many of the residents in the affected communities. The lack of jobs and opportunities for advancement in turn convinced, and often left people with no other option, than to move away from Pittsburgh and its steel towns to find better economic opportunity. The loss of employment opportunity led to an increase of poverty which, to this day, plagues the Mon-Valley and has also increased the levels of violence and drug use. These communities are in need of revitalization to reverse the negative economic and social trends. This can be achieved by spurring investment in the region—as happened with the South Side— creating job opportunities and opportunities for advancement, and creating self-sustainability. These solutions will help to restore the broken communities and make them safe environments for future growth.
Works Cited


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