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# Town With A Coal Past Is Leery Of Trash In Its Future Throop's Mines Became Dumps. Now A Landfill. Some Worry What Will Happen When There's No Land To Fill.

By Michael E. Ruane, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER  
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THROOP, Pa. — Joe Dexter is standing in the modern computerized office of the Keystone Sanitary Landfill trying to tell Diana Bruno-Nelson, of the Borough Council, what a clean, scientific operation he runs.

Amiable and articulate, Dexter reels off data and benefits of the \$30 million, state-of-the-art landfill scooped out of the Moosic Mountains east of here. From his perspective, he says at one point, the borough should look at the positive side.

Bruno-Nelson, 35, the descendant of Italian immigrants and the daughter of a coal miner who died from black lung, quickly responds: "Depends on what you think the positive side is."

For through the office windows she has been seeing another side of the operation: Trash trucks. Battered, 10-ton pack masters and long, 20-ton tractor-trailers, parading in from places such as Hazleton, Scranton, Brooklyn and Philadelphia. And bearing acres of trash.

This was her dilemma, she said later. Even state-of-the-art, trash is trash.

And this is the dilemma of Throop, a town of 4,200 people that this year celebrates its centennial, that already has grappled with grave environmental

mishap, that despite a 1911 mine disaster was long beholden to coal, and that now, for better or worse, has become thoroughly beholden to trash.

The exchange between Dexter, the landfill manager, and Bruno-Nelson, the skeptical public official, was also, for the time being at least, meaningless. The latest skirmish in the ongoing battle of the Keystone Landfill already was over.

Two days before - after a multimillion-dollar lawsuit filed against town officials - Throop's new mayor vetoed a new zoning ordinance that could have blocked the landfill's expansion. He had to, he said later; otherwise, the town faced bankruptcy.

Just how the fate of Throop, which is pronounced Troop and is outside Scranton, became entwined with a landfill - and how some in the town tried, and have so far failed, to find a future that diverged from the landfill - is a tale that goes back years.

But it is a story that has produced little change in attitudes.

Some maintain that Throop's future ought not be mortgaged to a landfill; others say the landfill, which supplies 90 percent of town revenue, is a benefit, and still others argue that, like it or not, Throop and the landfill are inextricably bound . . . well into the next century.

The battle over the landfill, which is owned by local trash and scrap magnate Louis DeNaples, began in the late 1980s when Keystone sought to expand

from its base in adjacent Dunmore onto some of the 458 acres it owned in Throop.

But Keystone had problems. It had been cited for violations in 1986 and 1987, had been penalized \$500,000 and had been closed down for over a year by the state Department of Environmental Resources, DER's regional director Ed Shoener said last week.

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So, while partial expansion to Throop was approved by the DER and the borough, the borough, supported by the local property owners' association, sued to limit the expansion to a little more than half the area Keystone owned in town.

Then, on July 17, 1989, a deal was struck.

It was an agreement between Keystone, the borough, and the property owners' association. Keystone agreed to operate so as to "protect the public's safety, health and welfare, and to enhance the environment of the borough."

It agreed to pay the borough \$1 for every ton of trash dumped at the facility, over and above the 74 cents a ton it would pay under state regulations. It agreed to pay \$50,000 of this money in advance.

And it agreed to give the borough free trash disposal for the life of the landfill.

In return, the borough and the property owners' association agreed to drop opposition to the landfill - "including any claim regarding that use of the area . . . as described in the permits . . . conflicts in any way with the borough's zoning."

It was the closing, awkwardly worded phrase that would later lead to trouble.

At the time, it seemed like a fair deal. In exchange for limited operation, for which Keystone already had the proper permits, the borough was getting big money. The thinking was, "It's here, let's make the best of it," landfill opponent and former Borough Council member Sharon Soltis-Sparano said last week.

The borough planned to bank much of the money in a "Sunny Day Fund," she said, and use it for public works projects. The landfill's permitted acreage would be filled in 15 years, she said officials were told, and after that the borough would "say goodbye" to Keystone. But that was not what Keystone had in mind.

\*

Trash is just the latest industrial commodity to affect the people of Throop.

Before that, it was lead.

For the last two decades scientists have been finding lead contamination in the environs of Throop near the site of the old Marjol Battery & Equipment Co., which was shut down in 1982.

Lead was found in the earth and in houses. Tons of contaminated dirt from back yards had to be carted off. Trees and houses had been tainted, and the area was declared a federal environmental Superfund cleanup site.

Further, in 1990, despite years of official assurances to the contrary, specialists began finding elevated levels of lead in the bones of Throop's residents. It was alarming, doctors said, but some in Throop had suspected it all along.

And before lead, there had been coal.

Indeed, Throop was born a coal town.

Incorporated in 1894, the town was named after Benjamin Throop, a prominent physician who had substantial coal lands.

This was when coal was king: Jagged veins of anthracite rose and fell like spikes on a business chart almost everywhere beneath the surface of the Lackawanna River valley. Each little town seemed to have a mine.

Throop's was the Pancoast Colliery, which was located in the heart of the town and employed scores of the eastern and southern European immigrants who were pouring into the anthracite fields.

There was a company store, near where the borough building is now, and rows of two-story, wood frame company houses: "Red Row" on Sanderson Street; "Brown Row" on Murray Street.

As often with coal, though, came catastrophe.

On April 7, 1911, fire broke out in the engine room at the bottom of the main shaft and spread smoke and fumes for hours. Later, in the deepest part of the mine, in an area the men called "China vein," rescue crews would find more than 70 bodies.

"The majority of the victims are foreigners, known to the company by numbers," The Inquirer reported the next day, "and for this reason, it has been difficult to secure their names."

To prevent unrest, the authorities waited until dark to bring out the dead. The place became known as the "Tunnel of Death."

Still, for 40 more years people from Throop returned to the mines, balancing danger against the source of their livelihood.

Until, by the 1950s, mines were dead and Throop had to look elsewhere for survival.

Over time, one of the products that came to replace the void left by coal was trash. A surprisingly lucrative commodity for both businesses and municipalities, it began to pour into landfills and empty mines until some people feared the area was becoming a national dump.

What they found, though, was that once hooked on trash, it was not so easy to quit.

Last month, the borough government concluded several months of work on a new zoning code designed in part to block the expansion of Keystone's dumping to the other section of its land in Throop.

Keystone protested, objecting at length in a Dec. 17 letter about "procedural defects" in the law and about what it believed was a violation of the 1989 agreement.

When the borough pressed forward with work on the new law, Keystone turned up the heat.

It sought a court injunction to keep the borough from enacting the law, and filed a \$16 million civil suit against the borough, the mayor and each member of the Borough Council and planning commission.

Keystone argued, among other things, that in the 1989 agreement the borough "waived any claim" that Keystone's use of its Throop acreage conflicted with borough zoning laws. The new zoning law was a breach of the agreement and the actions of the town officials were an "outrageous, willful and deliberate" conspiracy.

Keystone also asked the court to excuse it from "any further obligation" under the 1989 agreement.

The court actions made local headlines. There were charges and countercharges. Keystone said Throop officials were motivated by "personal and political ambitions." Keystone's actions smacked of "communism," opponents replied.

The Borough Council, which contended it had not waived such claims, passed the new ordinance on Dec. 27, days before most of them were to leave office.

But then, on Jan. 3, new Throop Mayor Stan Lukowski, in one of his first official acts, vetoed the ordinance. He and a new borough solicitor were worried about the suit, about the contract, and about the money from the landfill.

What if the landfill stopped the payments? What if it tried to recover its \$4 million in past payments? Besides, the matter could always be reconsidered.

"It was an agonizing decision," Lukowski, 62, said. "But something had to be done. From being one of the more prosperous communities, we could have been thrown into bankruptcy. It was a matter of economics."

But Bruno-Nelson believes it comes down to a matter of progress - from coal to the 21st century.

"There's been no progress in this borough since the mines closed," she said. "And sure it's nice to have a landfill and it's nice to have this earned revenue.

"But it's time to move Throop into the 21st century . . . In 15, 20 years when (Keystone) closes, that's still a landfill."

"Then what do we do?"

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