

I am a sixth generation West Virginian. My family has been farming the same patch of land in Roane County since decades before there was an entity known as West Virginia. While the name of our state is often spoken in the same sentence as Coal, we didn't have that where I grew up, at least not so's anyone ever noticed. What we had in its place were the oilfields.

Now that's not to say that we depended on the oilfields for our economy, or at least that we used to. Jobs on the drilling rigs or pipelines were usually viewed as a last resort for young men who had nowhere else to go. A place to make some money, establish a name for oneself, and get one on their feet before they found a real job.

As I was growing up, my father worked in the drilling industry through much of my childhood. I was always told, as all children then were, that if I went to work on the rigs he'd kick my..well, yanno. That's what we all told our children, for generations, and most of them listened unless they had no other choice. That being good advice, I of course ignored it and went to work on the rigs.

I worked there for the better part of twelve years. It's a hard, brutal way to earn a living. The hours are long, usually 80-90 a week, the conditions are whatever the weather is that day...because whether it's negative ten or 100, the rig never stops running. It wears at your mind, takes you away from your family, and it breaks your body. It's fast-paced, and entirely centered around production, with safety and environmental concerns an afterthought to appear to be in compliance with regulations. As I was once told though, when safety and production butt heads, production has a lot bigger head.

I entered the industry just before the Marcellus Shale Boom, and I watched it go from a series of small operations which would clear a tiny piece of land just big enough to set a small rig and some tubs on to the behemoth it is now, with well pads ranging from 5-20 acres. When I first started, on the surface at least, there wasn't a lot of impact if a well was drilled on someone's farm. I saw that change, as people leased their farms with that old knowledge of what gas drilling, and instead watched them destroyed, with entire ridges removed, massive roads running every where, and huge artificial ponds of toxic chemicals littering the landscape.

In the twelve years I worked the rigs, I saw it go through several miniature boom and bust cycles, and as our state's economy waned and other job options did as well, I saw what those boom and busts meant to communities increasingly dependent on fracked oil and gas work. Every time a family would, through mankilling labor, build itself up, get a mortgage, a vehicle, a home, the bottom would drop out from under them. Bankruptcies, unemployment, and economic devastation locks the counties dependent on extraction in a never-ending cycle of poverty they just can't get ahead of.

All that time, the conversation around the oilfield changed as well, driven by industry spokesmen, industry politicians, and industry advertising. Looking at the future ahead terrifies me, because as the industry gains a stronger hold here, their propaganda is changing the message around these brutal and exploitative jobs. Now, instead of the worst possible resort for our children, working on a drilling rig is being pitched as their bright, shining future...and it's not, it's really not. This extractive industry is the latest in a long line of industrial overlords coming to grind our state and our people beneath its boot.

I'm terrified that we'll buy this line, that we'll spend tens of billions of dollars building toxic infrastructure that is going to be obsolete in a few decades, and that the industry behind this will abused us for those intervening years, then laugh when the entire thing goes belly-up as coal is now, as they trot out the door from a state that will be poorer, sicker, and deeper in debt than ever.

We have to stop this, and we have to stop it now.

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