

Palmer



THALIA JUAREZ | Herald-Standard

Fayette patch town a good place to grow up

Small Town Life

A story about home

Editor's note: The following story is part of an occasional series of articles that examine the people, culture and history of the small towns that dot the landscape of Fayette County.

By ERIC MORRIS
emorris@heraldstandard.com

There was a time, when the coal mine was still in operation, that residents of

Palmer didn't need to leave the patch. They had it all right there: a school, a store, a post office, a tavern, a church. The doctor made his rounds. The men made a short trek to work. Longtime locals remember the small riverside community was a good place to grow up, to settle down and to raise a family. Third generation Palmer

PALMER, Page C6



THALIA JUAREZ | Herald-Standard

"I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. Where else would a boy want to grow up at, where you can get muddy and dirty, play in the creek (and) in the woods."

— L.C. Otto, Palmer resident and Adah fire chief

Top: River Street was once home to families of coal miners working at the Palmer mine and coal docks in the first half of the 20th century. Today, a small number of original residents remain, and some of the riverfront properties serve as vacation homes for people from out of town.

Above: Once a pillar of the community, the former St. Albert Catholic Church in Palmer was closed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Greensburg in 2008. Resident Tom Karpency converted the space into a training gym for his three sons who are professional boxers.

Left: Adah Fire Chief L.C. Otto has spent most of his life in Palmer. Over the years, his family has helped coordinate many community events such as the fire department's annual hog roast and 'Adah-palooza' benefit. Otto says he couldn't think of a better place to raise his 3-month-old son.



THALIA JUAREZ | Herald-Standard



Left photo: Firehouse Road in Palmer in the late 1920s; the building on the far right once served as a boarding house for coal miners. Right photo: Firehouse Road in Palmer in 2017; the building on the far right now serves as the fire hall for the Adah Volunteer Fire Department.

PALMER

Continued from C1

resident Lou “L.C.” Otto contends that it still is.

The 29-year-old has spent most of his life in the patch, where he bought a house five years ago and recently began a family.

“It’s just amazing what this place was at one point. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else,” said Otto, who serves as chief of the town’s Adah Volunteer Fire Department. “Where else would a boy want to grow up at, where you can get muddy and dirty, play in the creek (and) in the woods.”

Tom Karpency has lived in Palmer for 71 years.

He attended Palmer Grade School through eighth grade while his father worked the mine. He recalls 25 to 30 kids in each classroom, midday lunch breaks at home and spending much of his time outside as an adolescent in the 1950s.

“When I was a kid, we’d play baseball all summer. Everybody stayed out until it was dark. It was a good life. The coal mine shut down and people started drifting away,” he said.

In the decades following the mine’s closure in 1957, many left, some returned and several were there all along.

Louise Manchas moved to the patch that year at age 25 and newly married. Now at 85, she still resides in the River Street home where she raised four children in a safe and friendly community.

“I think it’s nice. I really think it’s a beautiful patch and a good place to raise a family. A long time ago, we’d go sit on our front porch and gab until two in the morning, laughing and talking,” said Manchas.

“I never wanted to go anywhere. I always wanted to live here. It’s a safe place.”

A proud past

The community of Palmer isn’t laid out like the coal patch towns that dot the Fayette County landscape.

One of its long narrow streets begins in one township and ends in another, with the bulk of the patch located in German Township and a few properties extending across the Antram Run boundary into Luzerne Township to the north.

Situated on the banks of the Monongahela River, the small town is divided between an upper and a lower section, “the hill” and “the bottom,” connected



Left: Louise Manchas, 85, has spent six decades in Palmer, where she raised a family along with her late husband, who worked in a local coal mine. Right: Tom Karpency grew up in Palmer and still lives there today, where he coaches his three sons who are well-known throughout the area for their professional boxing careers.

by Palmer Road running north and south through the community.

While many surrounding patches sit atop the hills and in the valleys of western Fayette County, Palmer is planted on the water-front, which was integral to the town’s coal mining operation.

Palmer Mine opened in 1908, a venture of the H.C. Frick Coke Co. And its location on the river allowed for a large coal dock operation that was built in the late 1920s.

For nearly 50 years, Palmer was home to a community of coal miners and homemakers raising large families in duplex company houses with white picket fences. Men walked to the mine for their shift, children attended Palmer Grade School on the hill, families attended Sunday mass at the Catholic church.

Like many residents of the patch, Paul Zvolenski, 74, traces his heritage to Eastern European laborers who sought work in the coal-fields. His grandparents settled in Palmer around 1910 after immigrating the U.S.

“They didn’t have anything when they came over,” said Patty Zvolenski, Paul’s wife. “My grandmother told me all she came over with was a sewing machine. People that lived here had big families — 6, 7, 8 kids — and lived in four-room houses.”

The boom times came to a halt when U.S. Steel closed the mine in June 1957 having produced 16 million tons of high-grade metallurgical coal for civilian and defense use. That’s when the town began to change.

Residents moved away to chase other work. The company store closed, as did the school. Gone is the 100-foot-tall coal tippie, the miners’ bath house, the docks where ships would load coal to transport it up and down the Mon.

“It’s sad to see that because I think my children missed out on a lot,” said Karpency, whose daughter and three sons were raised in a version of Palmer that very little

resembled the town in which he grew up.

“I think they’re going to miss out on something that’s never going to be there again. It’ll never be the same.”

A changing of the guard

Once at the center of community was St. Albert Catholic Church, a parish dating to 1922.

“It was jam packed every Sunday,” said Otto. “It would take an hour to get back to your car because you had to stop and talk to everybody.”

Louise Manchas remembers when her senior citizen community group, the Palmer Pioneers, met regularly in the St. Albert basement hall, socializing and playing darts.

“We didn’t do nothing to make money, we just enjoyed ourselves,” she said. “I felt bad (when it closed) because it was right up here, that’s where we got to see everybody. They had 9 a.m. Sunday service.”

In a money-saving consolidation effort, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Greensburg closed the church in 2008, forcing Palmer’s Catholic residents to travel to St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Masontown for Sunday services.

A town that once had three churches of three different denominations is now down to one. The Palmer Community Presbyterian Church remains in operation as the patch’s lone worship hall with a small congregation.

“Closing the Catholic church took a lot out of the community,” Otto said.

The closure forced the community focus to shift to one of the patch’s last remaining operations, the Adah Volunteer Fire Department, which has served the areas of Palmer, Adah, Ralph, Hibbs and Gates since 1937, responding to emergency calls and holding social events.

“The fire hall has been backbone of town for many years,” said Otto, holding Easter egg hunts, trick-or-treat nights and breakfast with Santa events annually for the children of Palmer



THALIA JUAREZ | Herald-Standard

and the surrounding communities.

“We stopped having those activities for a few years because no one would show up. But we recently started them up again with the new generation of kids,” Otto said, referring to new children of the patch that have come along after people Otto’s age have chosen to remain and start families in Palmer.

The department’s hog roast, held annually for

and Karpency figure between the hill and the bottom, less than 100 remain. Population has dwindled from about 1,000 to just 200, Karpency added.

That’s the demographic of all coal patch towns, Otto said. But one thing that has helped the otherwise sleepy town remain vibrant during warm weather months, he said, is its proximity to the waterfront.

In a town with devel-

the river and eat dinner, come back and hop on a side-by-side (utility task vehicle) and go for a ride,” said Otto.

A place to call home

Paul and Patty Zvolenski are Palmer born and bred. Both of their fathers worked in the mine. Patty’s mother lived in the patch for 90 years. Before settling in their Firehouse Road home in 1969, the couple spent a handful of post-graduation years in Washington, D.C. The move only strengthened their ties to Palmer until, eventually, they decided to return.

“All of our people were here. Her mom and dad and my family were all here. This was home,” Paul said before adding, “D.C. is too quick for a country guy.”

Karpency shares the sentiment.

He’s lived on the hill for most of his life. So has his three sons, Tommy, 31, Jeremiah, 26, and Dan, 25, all of whom are professional



THALIA JUAREZ | Herald-Standard

Palmer lies on the banks of the Monongahela River and was home to dozens of families when the Palmer mine and coal docks were in operation. After the mine closed in 1957, many families left the area in search for jobs. A small community of original Palmer residents remaining in the area are joined by newcomers who have converted homes along the river into summer houses.

upwards of 40 years, is the bash of the summer, attracting anywhere from 100 to 150 people, Otto estimates. “It’s when the community gets together and everyone from surrounding communities comes down. People drive from all over to come here, and you can’t find a parking spot.”

Former Adah fire chief and longtime Palmer resident Calvin Masters Jr. compiled volumes of pictorial histories of the town, local mines and surrounding communities until his death in 2011. Described by Otto as having “the most pride in the patch,” Masters willed the scrapbooks to the fire department to safeguard the town’s history.

A new patch

At the height of the coal era, more than 500 houses stood in the town, said Otto. He

opment stunted by surrounding State Game Lands and little economic opportunity, the saving grace is the riverfront property being bought by out-of-towners to use as vacation homes and summer recreation on the river.

“We’ve had a little renaissance due to the riverfront. It’s our driving force. Half of the bottom summer homes are out-of-towners. The housing market is better here than other patch towns,” said Otto, who also serves as a German Township supervisor.

As a result, Palmer turns into a resort town in summer, enlivened with boating, swimming and deck parties. It’s common to see residents driving golf carts through the town’s narrow streets.

“It’s the only place in the world where you can hop on a boat, go up

boxers. Karpency, who serves as their trainer, converted the basement of St. Albert Catholic Church into a gym for the fighters to train.

As the family travels to compete in matches, so does the community.

“We take pride in our community. We wear our Adah T-shirts everywhere when we travel,” said Karpency, who admits that he hates to leave home, even for the bright lights of Las Vegas, Chicago or Toronto.

“I’ve talked to old friends who wish they’d never left and who wish they could come back. Sometimes when I’ve talked to people, they’ve asked why do I stay here,” Karpency said.

“Because I like it. Right here is everything I ever want to have. Everything I’ll ever need is right here. I walk into my house, I’m at home.”

Brier Hill



KELLY TUNNEY | Herald-Standard

Small Town Life

A story about home

The town is quiet, quaint and has a lot of history

Editor's note: The following story is part of a monthly series of articles that examine the people, culture and history of the small towns that dot the landscape of Fayette County.

By MIKE TONY
mtony@heraldstandard.com

It's quiet," James Manchas says from his house perched next to Route 40. "There isn't anything going on in Brier

Hill."

At 59, the retired coal miner lives in the same Brier Hill house where he grew up and hasn't wanted to follow several of his siblings who have moved out of the area.

Brier Hill, wedged between Brownsville and Uniontown along Route 40, has been a vitally important refuge for centuries in one way or another. It is believed that during their flight from the south, runaway slaves hid in the basement of the



KELLY TUNNEY | Herald-Standard

Top: The Brier Hill honor roll (right) stands in a stretch of road with the former "smallest post office in the world" and the Peter Colley Tavern, a 1796 stone structure (center). Above: The 1796 Peter Colley Tavern (center with a whitewashed foundation) is one of a small portion of remaining original structures of Brier Hill, after the mining operation closed up and the majority of the abandoned homes and buildings were razed in the 1960s. Bottom left: A commemorative plate features Saint Hedwig Catholic Church, which used to stand on Route 40 in Brier Hill, serving the hundreds of residents of the village when Brier Hill still housed an active mining operation. The church's cemetery remains, but the church itself was closed in 1977 and razed since.

Peter Colley Tavern, which was constructed in 1796 and still stands on Route 40. In Brier Hill's early years as a coal mining community in the 1900s and 1910s, St. Hedwig Church on Route 40 provided the community's large contingent of Polish immigrants with pastors of Polish heritage and a namesake saint who cared for the poor and sickly in 13th-century Poland, closing in 1977.

On a chilly January afternoon, Manchas points out from his front porch part of a stone wall constructed around the church by Reverend Michael

Kowal and the men of the parish circa 1950. There are reminders like that here and there of the Brier Hill that used to be, but its current residents are able to find a different kind of refuge in the Brier Hill that still is.

It's a peaceful place for resident Mike Defino, Jr., who said that as a magisterial district judge, he appreciates being able to come home and enjoy some quiet. Brier Hill has given resident Ibrahim Toury a private lake and a nice place for his friends and grandchildren to visit on



KELLY TUNNEY | Herald-Standard

Magisterial district judge Mike Defino Jr.'s family moved to Brier Hill after it was divided up in the 1980s.



KELLY TUNNEY | Herald-Standard

TOWN

Continued from C1

Route 40.

Redstone Township Supervisor Michael Cetera recalls several family members buried in a cemetery near the former location of St. Hedwig Church, where his parents got married 45 years ago.

And resident and Brownsville Area School Board President Rocky Brashear boasts about the high elevation of his property, enjoying living in a community where he knows “every nook and cranny.”

“It really hasn’t changed much,” said Defino, who has lived in Brier Hill since 1985.

So even though Brier Hill is too small to be a U.S. Census-designated place today, it still offers ample reminders of the community’s past as both a coal and coking powerhouse in the early 20th century and the target for a planned community revitalization in the 1970s that would have made Brier Hill the most populated town in the tri-county area.

A landscape of landmarks

Today, Brier Hill consists of only a few residential streets, and its most defining features are structures that have abutted Route 40 for generations.

“The new, younger population, they kind of just pass through on their way from Brownsville to Uniontown, not really thinking about what they’re going through,” Cetera said.

The Peter Colley Tavern was a major stagecoach stop and hotel in the early 19th century, featuring what was known as the smallest bar east of the Mississippi River: a miniature bar closed off because guests kept their valuables there until they left. Next to the tavern is the Brier Hill Honor Roll, dedicated in 1942 as a tribute listing the names of men from the community serving in the military during World War II.

Toury owns the Brier Hill Reservoir that sits on the eastern side of Route 40, where Manchas used to fish for bass and hunt rabbits growing up. The St. Hedwig rectory overlooked the reservoir, where in the evening older residents rowed boats and kids dove off a limestone wall.

Near the honor roll is a 10-by-12-foot building that served as Brier Hill’s post office after a fire in 1944 destroyed the company store, which had housed the previous post office. The building is dilapidated now but throughout its lifespan has prompted many travelers along Route 40 to stop and photograph it. Brier Hill residents still refer to it as the smallest post office east of the Mississippi River.

Brashear still gets his mail from the current, larger Brier Hill post office that sits nearby on Route 40, although he says few residents still do. He also remembers Smoky Row, a company housing area a little further removed off the west side of Route 40 lined with coke ovens where kids older than him used to play growing up.

“I was never allowed to play by the mine shaft,” Brashear said.

Near Smoky Row used to be several houses situated unlike those in “patch” towns because they were separated and surrounded by trees.

“It was a whole different world (then), all smoke-stacks, coke ovens,” Defino



James Manchas, the most senior inhabitant of Brier Hill, describes where his grandparents lived just a few houses up from where he lives now.

said.

Defino wasn’t there then but knows Brier Hill’s early-20th century landscape anyway thanks partly to a panoramic picture of Brier Hill during its mining days in his office that he says makes people stop on a dime when they see it. The undated picture shows a Brier

it and operated it through World War II, according to the Virtual Museum of Coal Mining in Western Pennsylvania.

Then Brier Hill’s long industrial decline began.

“As jobs moved away, so did the people,” Defino said. “No mine, no money.”

Josie Voytek, 75, whose

eyesore in Brier Hill along Route 40 by 1967, so the deep mining shaft was filled that year, the crumbling mining tipple was torn down and Parker aimed to make Brier Hill, whose population had dwindled to 49 by 1971 per the Uniontown Evening Standard, bigger and better than ever.

plan,” Toury said, adding that Parker nevertheless had extended himself too far financially.

Parker was left \$500,000 in debt, the Pittsburgh Press reported in 1976, and federal officials deemed the project economically unfeasible.

Parker’s Redstone Central Railroad company also owned the Brier Hill Playhouse, a 225-seat venue located in a century-old, renovated dairy barn at the eastern entrance to Brier Hill that opened in 1971. In 1976, David and Bonnie Wargo bought the property and renovated part of it into an antique shop. The property was torn down in 1991 after the couple sold it to Eli Shumar, owner of Shumar Welding and Machine Services, Wargo said.

“I do miss sunsets on top of the hill (at the theater),” said Wargo, who now lives in Lakeland, Fla. “That’s one thing I miss a lot.”

Easy to miss

Shumar’s company has an industrial site in Brier Hill that provides testing and development for government and commercial purposes, so the community’s manufacturing contribution continues.

Brier Hill residents have been content with looking elsewhere for almost everything else for a long time. Manchas shops at the South Union Township Walmart once a month, and he and Defino both still know the phone number for Pizza Wagon in Smock by heart.

Still, memories of Brier Hill were compelling enough to bring back dozens of former residents who had moved to Ohio, Maryland and elsewhere in Pennsylvania for several Brier Hill reunion dinners organized in recent years by Voytek, who now lives in Menallen Township.

“I’ll always think of it as home,” Voytek said of Brier Hill.

And Manchas has advice for anyone traveling through the community along Route 40.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Manchas said. “If you blink, you’ll miss it.”

“The new, younger population, they kind of just pass through on their way from Brownsville to Uniontown, not really thinking about what they’re going through.”

— Michael Cetera, Redstone Township Supervisor

Hill teeming with railroad tracks, soot and at least four dozen houses in view.

“Just about every one of those houses has been removed,” Redstone Township Supervisor Larry Williams said. “It is the coolest picture of all time.”

But Defino says that Brier Hill eventually lived up to its name after its mine ceased operation and its population dwindled since the community is now 90 percent briars. Blackberry and strawberry-filled dense woods have attracted bears into Defino’s and Brashear’s yards recently.

When Brier Hill was booming

Brier Hill’s name wasn’t blackberry-related, though.

The community was conceived when H.M. Stambaugh of the Brier Hill Coke Company of Youngstown, Ohio purchased 115.5 acres of coal land in Fayette County for \$400,000 on June 29, 1901, according to a copy of the Wilkes-Barre News from two days later. The company constructed houses the following year, and Brier Hill had a company store by 1904.

Brier Hill eventually had 475 beehive coke ovens and what the Uniontown Morning Herald said in 1969 had had a mine shaft plunging to a depth of 736 feet before the mine closed in 1935.

The Brier Hill mine was reopened around 1942 after L.D. Perry acquired

father was a coal miner and mother bore 15 children, remembers growing up in Brier Hill in the 1950s.

“People were going to Ohio, where there was work,” Voytek said, adding that even by the 1950s, not too many people lived in what was nonetheless still a very close-knit Brier Hill.

And in 1959, Voytek left for Cleveland herself after graduating from Redstone High School. By the time she moved back into Fayette County in 1970, Brier Hill was preparing for a major transformation.

The ‘big thing’ that wasn’t

At 9 a.m. on Sept. 9, 1968, Allison No. 1 volunteer firemen set fire to a house in Brier Hill, starting a weeks-long blaze in the community.

They burned down some 45 houses in Brier Hill to clear a path for development in the area, a decision made by Kalamazoo, Mich. business executive Charles E. Parker. Parker had married L.D. Perry’s daughter in 1947 and became owner of 235 acres in Brier Hill in 1967 following the death of L.D.’s widow Ruth, according to the Uniontown Evening Standard.

“No more will you hear ‘that town is as bad as Brier Hill,’” columnist Jim Yadamec wrote in the Uniontown Morning Herald the same month as the burning.

The decaying homes and junked cars had become an

“He had a lot of plans, I saw them one time,” said Brashear, who worked for Parker as a Redstone Railroad Corporation employee in the early 1970s. “I thought ... ‘Well, this is going to be a big thing.’”

Pennsylvania’s governor at the time agreed.

Some 300 people gathered near the Peter Colley Tavern on Oct. 26, 1970 to watch Gov. Raymond P. Shafer drive a pick into the ground to mark the beginning of a “new town” for Brier Hill.

“It is you who will bear testimony to the fulfillment of Brier Hill as well as your children and their children,” Shafer said to the Brownsville Area High School Band, according to the Uniontown Evening Standard, which reported the following year that a large commercial business district, industrial park, tourist complex and modern housing for all income groups were planned.

Expectations continued to build for the project, which was to be placed under the Department of Housing and Urban Development but was still reliant on Parker’s financial support. By March 1972, the new town was projected to have an estimated population of more than 25,000 when completed in 1992, per the Morning Herald.

Brashear said two houses were built for the project – and that’s all Brier Hill ever gained from its designated status as a “new town.”

“It was a very ingenious

Join the Herald-Standard

on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat





Get HeraldStandard.com delivered to your inbox.

Call 724-439-7530

GO! Magazine

Theater. Music. Movies. Festivals. Art. Museums.

Every Thursday in the Herald-Standard.

Shoaf



REBECCA DEVEREAUX | Herald-Standard

Some of the patch houses inhabited by coal miners off Shoaf Road still stand in the village of Shoaf in Georges Township.



Village built on coal that lives a simple life

Editor's note: The following story is part of a monthly series of articles that examine the people, culture and history of the small towns that dot the landscape of Fayette County.

By MARK HOFMANN
mhofmann@heraldstandard.com

A village created and built on coal mining continues to live on in semi-solitude and outdoor enjoyment.

A rich, hard history

Like many patch towns that sprung up in western Pennsylvania, the village of Shoaf

was created for coal mining. Built around 1902 by the H.C. Frick Company, it contained rows of uniform company houses for employees working at the Shoaf No. 1 Mine & Coke Works and their families.

Elaine DeFrank, a retired oral historian, has not only researched the history of many coal and coke areas in Fayette County for the Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus, but also has ties to Shoaf.

"I think I felt a certain identity with Shoaf because my parents lived there,"

SHOAF, Page C4



REBECCA DEVEREAUX | Herald-Standard

"They have antique plates on me," says Tim Handlin, a mechanic at West's Auto for 25 years. "They aren't getting rid of me now." Handlin has been a resident of Shoaf for 24 years and has no intention of leaving.



REBECCA DEVEREAUX | Herald-Standard

Mostly hidden behind heavy vegetation is part of the long-retired coke ovens located off Hope Road in Shoaf.



AUTO PARTS

Please visit fayetteparts.com to find your nearest NAPA location

199

Scott Shop Towels

- Absorbs oil and grease
- Strong, works even when wet!



#75130



Frank Zentkovich, owner of Franklin’s Auto Body for over 30 years, stands outside his business in the village of Shoaf, Friday morning. Zentkovich has called the small patch town home his entire life.

SHOAF

Continued from C1

DeFrank said. She said growing up, both her father and brother worked in the mines. DeFrank said while Shoaf was a larger patch town compared to the neighboring Gilmore and Smiley mining towns, Shoaf didn’t have a bath house for the workers. “They came home dirty and you had to wash their backs,” DeFrank said. Because of conditions and an environment where people entered the workforce at ages as young as 14 and 15, DeFrank said home life was often difficult. But while few things came easy, people seemed to be content with what little they had. “The children were expected to work,” DeFrank said. “They had to work gardens in the summer time, pasture the cow. People kept animals in their back yards.” Like many mining families during that time, DeFrank said she and her family frequently packed what little belongings they had and moved from one patch town to another if there was a strike or a better opportunity. DeFrank only spent her early years in Shoaf, but would revisit it through her work as an oral historian when she interviewed Max Nobel in 1993 and 1997. Nobel, who passed away in 2000, purchased the beehive ovens in 1959 and became the third owner following U.S. Steel Corp after it became the H.C. Frick Coke Company. During Nobel’s operation at Shoaf, the company exported coke as far away as Pakistan and Germany as the coal coming out of Shoaf was classified as nine-foot low sulfur. That meant it was good for making coke for steel production because of the heat the coal gave off when burned. “Max was very interesting to interview because he was a self-made man,” DeFrank said, adding that the Fayette County native, like many, worked very hard at an early age to make something of himself. DeFrank added that Nobel even lived in Shoaf after taking over the business as he credited his success of being on the property to watch the day-to-day operations, which was rare for an owner to do. “He was unique in that way,” DeFrank said. “Often, the owners lived in other places.” Nobel continued the operations in Shoaf until 1972 when the ovens were forced to close because of new environmental laws.

Life gets easier and fun Eleven years before operations shut down, Frank Zentkovich was born and with the exception of two or three years, he lived his entire life in the small village. “A lot of people moved away,



Frank Zentkovich when he was in his adolescence growing up in the patch town of Shoaf.



The old coal mining village of Shoaf is located in Georges Township north of Smithfield in Fayette County.

but I had a great time here,” Zentkovich said. Zentkovich’s memories of Shoaf are that of a small community that was close and neighborly. One man with a large back yard, he said, would allow the neighborhood children have football games on that property. Zentkovich’s father was a coal miner, starting to work at age 15 with the Braddock Mine and later on, leased a mine outside of Masontown. Zentkovich, however, found cars more interesting, saying that he started working on cars at 14, and started to travel around in the comforts of the village in various modes of transportation. Such activities included Zentkovich and the neighborhood children sled riding down the hill of the larger home that once housed the coal company’s supervisor in the winter, or riding his motorcycle around the village and through the woods. Other than the work the mining operations promised, the other big attraction that brought people to Shoaf was the motocross track, that in the mid 1970s had off-road motorcycle racing.

“The children were expected to work. They had to work gardens in the summer time, pasture the cow. People kept animals in their back yards.”

— Elaine DeFrank, retired oral historian

“That was a big deal for Shoaf,” Zentkovich said. He still has an old souvenir T-shirt from the track. Zentkovich said the track would bring over 100 people and even once brought a celebrity to the area: the monster truck “Bigfoot.” Zentkovich remembers all that the area once had in its transition from a patch town to the village, including a gas station with a single pump, an honor roll, a bar that shared the same building as a