

# Area loses civic reminder as Huber falls

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," wrote George Santayana, a Harvard philosophy professor, in 1905. The aphorism was given new meaning last month when Paselo Logistics LLC began to demolish the Huber Breaker, one of the country's last anthracite coal breakers.

Ironically, the demolition began only a few weeks before Robert May's documentary film "Kids for Cash" is scheduled to premier in Wilkes-Barre on Friday. I can almost hear Santayana crying from his grave: "I told you so!"

Huber represented the last tangible link we had to our anthracite heritage. It was a reminder of century-long exploitation suffered by thousands of miners and their families at the hands of the coal barons who profited from their misery.

Like the many other breakers that once dotted the region, Huber was also a warning to the present generation to remain vigilant of those in positions of authority — those who should be concerned about the public welfare, but instead exploit it for their own financial gain. Those like ex-judges Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan.

To be sure, the Huber Breaker in Ashley had to come down. Since the late 1970s when it ceased operation, the structure had fallen into such disrepair that it presented a danger. The Philadelphia-based company, which purchased the breaker for \$1.2 million in bankruptcy proceedings during 2013, is justified in demolishing it for scrap.

But the blame for failing to save the historic breaker lies squarely

with the county, which should have invested the revenue to renovate the structure and re-open it as an anthracite museum years ago. The failure of county officials to do so, speaks volumes about their inability to understand relevance of the past.



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It's that very same lack of historical sense in Luzerne County that resulted in the "Kids for Cash" scandal. The parents of the young victims are products of an anthracite culture that emphasizes deference to public officials and retribution for those who challenge authority. They had a responsibility to ask why Ciavarella did not allow legal counsel for their children.

If they couldn't afford counsel, they should have demanded that the court appoint a public defender, which is a constitutional right. And they should have appealed when their children were incarcerated for what didn't even amount to a misdemeanor. Instead, they deferred to the authority of a corrupt judge.

Why? Because many of those parents, like their poorly educated immigrant ancestors, either placed their trust in the legal system and the public officials who ran it or feared retribution if they challenged it.

The trust was cultivated by earlier generations of congressmen, state representatives, teachers, priests and judges, who were the most

important authority figures in the lives of the miners and their families. Wielding significant influence, those figures helped the immigrants navigate the challenges and uncertainties of their new home.

The fear of retribution also came from earlier generations of less virtuous authorities: greedy coal barons, judges on the take, corrupt party bosses and pedophile priests. Among the worst were public officials who looked the other way when organized crime violated state laws, leading to the Knox Mine Disaster of 1959, virtually killing the anthracite industry and putting thousands out of work.

Aspects of this mentality still prevail in Luzerne County. Ciavarella and Conahan realized that and preyed on it.

They established a smoke screen by packing the courthouse staff with relatives and shielding others on the bench from juvenile court proceedings. They knew that school administrators and teachers' unions, who encouraged their "zero-tolerance policy," would mute any criticism. And when they were caught, the disgraced judges tried to hide behind the doctrine of judicial immunity.

While I am grateful that May has produced a film that encourages us all to be more vigilant of our public officials, I continue to be deeply disturbed by the demolition of historical structures that were once daily reminders of that important civic duty.

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