

# Huber Anthracite Park would preserve our history

**W**hy study history? It's a simple question, but few of my students can find a persuasive answer to it. More shocking is the realization that they know little about the important national history that occurred in the Wyoming Valley: The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, the rise of the United Mine Workers under John Mitchell's leadership, and the Avondale Mine Disaster. Few even know about Dan Flood, a figure who is largely responsible for shaping the existing economic infrastructure and political landscape of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Their ignorance of local history underscores not only how much historical memory has been lost over a single generation's time, but the fact that they cannot see any personal relevance in studying the past. Nor are they alone. I've seen the same pattern among my students at a state university and in urban private schools.

To be sure, history does matter, and not just in the dry, vocabulary-controlled textbooks of our classrooms. History is important because it teaches judgment in matters of human and civic affairs. It teaches us to ask critical questions about who we are as a people and what we value as a culture as well as how we relate with the people who come from different parts of the country to live and work in our community.

In order to enjoy these advantages, any community must take the process of historical memory-making seriously. Historical memory-making involves determining what artifacts, records, and documents are significant enough to a peoples' past to be preserved, interpreted and shared with the public. Just as important are the buildings



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and structures where that history took place. Here in Northeastern Pennsylvania, once home to more than 500 coal breakers, only three remain: Locust Summit, near Mt. Carmel; St. Nicholas, between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City; and the Huber breaker in Ashley.

Huber, constructed in 1938, is an irreplaceable industrial landmark. Its steel frame structure sheathed in bays of vertical glass panels and corrugated metal is representative of a unique "International" architectural style that continues to influence the industrial building designs of today. One of the most technologically advanced operations of its time, Huber, which sits on a 6.8 acre site, was a large-scale breaker that processed and distributed coal across the East Coast.

More important, however, is the legacy of the breaker, which serves as a silent testimony to the thousands of coal miners who worked in the Wyoming Valley and whose labor fueled America's Industrial Revolution.

Recently, the Huber Breaker Preservation Society, The Earth Conservancy and The Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor proposed the transformation of the Huber site into an Anthracite Museum and Park. They hope that such a cultural resource will become a premier regional heritage attraction, where the history of anthracite can be interpreted through a variety of educational and public programs.

Together with the current heritage attractions in the region – Steamtown National Historical Park, McDade Park and the Eckley Miners' Village – a national anthracite museum at Huber has the potential to become an "Industrial Williamsburg." Not only would such an enterprise bring more tourist dollars and jobs into the region, it will also allow Northeast Pennsylvania to stake its rightful claim as "America's Anthracite Heritage Corridor."

But stabilization of the existing breaker and colliery buildings, as

well as the construction of a museum, exhibits and public trails will cost as much as \$6 million, according to a recent feasibility study.

While it would be wonderful if the local historical community – the educational institutions, museums, libraries and historical societies – could raise that revenue as the stewards of historical memory-making from one generation to another, the financial constraints and limited human resources of those institutions make it an impossibility.

Historical organizations necessarily rely on public officials, community leaders and business people, who negotiate the amount of funding allocated for the preservation of historical sites. We can only trust that they possess the wisdom and judgment – the historical sense – to make those decisions in a responsible manner.

If not, Luzerne County, like so many other counties across the nation, will not only lose touch with its past, but its direction for the future.

## THE CITIZENS' VOICE

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