Hell’s Upper Story
By Ben A. Franklin
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“You are surrounded by all the tremendous forces of natures, straining against your efforts to extract this coal. So you are in a continual struggle. Nature is out to protect its resources and you are there, wrestling the bowels out of the thing. So you are in constant danger in a coal mine.”

Many urban Americans may view the coal fields of Appalachia as lethal and remote. The risks of mining coal underground are well enough known. But what went unsaid in the eloquent testimony above, given by a miner to a Congressional committee a generation ago—and what these books demonstrate anew that Government still finds ways to overlook—is that the perils of the subterranean battle for coal between man and nature extend upward to the surface.

The United States Bureau of Mines reported in 1979 (and has said little on the subject since) that more than 2 million people in 19 states—80 percent of them in Pennsylvania—were suffering damage to their health and property from some 250 uncontrolled fires in abandoned underground coal mines and surface culm (coal waste) banks, a number of which have been burning for years. “Particularly during the first half of this century,” the bureau said then, coal mining was “accomplished without today’s technological, social and environmental insight.” But as “Unseen Danger” and “Slow Burn” show, the bureau’s self-satisfied inference that things were getting better in the second half of the century was premature public relations.

In these books, David DeKok, a reporter with The News-Item in Shamokin, Pa., and Renee Jacobs, a freelance photographer, provide postmortems on the slow death of the little Pennsylvania town of Centralia, 125 miles northwest of Philadelphia. This village of 1,000 souls in the depressed, largely mined-out hard coal region known to miners as “the anthracite” was smoked and choked for 24 years by a runaway inferno in the abandoned mine tunnels beneath it. The fire’s origin is still officially a mystery, although Mr. DeKok points out that it may have been ignited when the town set fire to a landfill.

By now, all but about 40 of Centralia's 500-odd houses have been razed. More than 900 people have been relocated at Government expense in a program that cost far more than the efforts, now aborted, to fight the fire in the 1970s. Relocation money was wrung from Washington only through the prolonged agony of grassroots political activism. And other Pennsylvania towns may be next. Throughout the region, Mr. DeKok writes in "Unseen Danger," "the potential for new mine fires is as great as ever."

In the 1960s, when Centralia's houses began filling with lethal fumes, the Interior Department supplied monitors that detected them. The underground mine fire spread. Some residents were knocked unconscious by the noxious gases that rose to the surface. Windows had to be kept open during the winter, and snow melted on the steaming ground. In kitchens and bathrooms, water ran hot from the cold faucets. Roads were made impassable by smog. A filling station's gasoline tanks were pumped dry to keep them from exploding. And in 1981 the ground gave way beneath a 12-year-old boy, who was swallowed into the mine pit. As he dangled from a handhold on a tree root, his read cap was spotted through the fumes and steam. He was yanked back from hell. Centralia was not.

Using unpublished documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Mr. DeKok accuses officials of passing the buck and of cynical indifference to the people of Centralia. Former Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt is quoted as saying in 1981, the 19th year of the Centralia mine fire, "There is not a threat to health and safety. [The fire] goes down deep; the deeper it burns, the less risk there is to safety. Eventually, it will burn out."

But there are enough bureaucratic villains here to fill a Dickens novel. Mr. DeKok describes Richard L. Thornburgh, the former Republican Governor of Pennsylvania, as being evasive about the Centralia fire. The governor's predecessors, William Scranton and Milton Shapp, share the blame, the author says, along with a large cast of lesser state and Federal officials—particularly Mr. Scranton's Secretary of Mines and Mineral Industries, a professor of mining engineering named H. Beecher Charmbury.

In "Slow Burn," the gallery of stark Works Progress Administration-style photographs by Renee Jacobs portrays with poignancy a Welsh, Irish, and Slavic Roman Catholic community as it once was, poised in stubborn bewilderment. Describing the hundreds of deep bore holes, drilled during the

years of futile efforts to track the course of the fire, Margaret O. Kirk, a freelance writer, in a brief introduction to the book, writes that the test holes—dug in sidewalks and intersections, and topped with man-high smokestacks for the steam exhaust—seemed stuck in the ground “like freshly lit cigarettes.”

What “Unseen Danger” and “Slow Burn” have to tell us is that smoking coal mines are dangerous to your health.