

Dancing On The Ashes: Centralia, Pennsylvania



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*To those who lost so much more than just a house-
your memories have not been forgotten.*

Introduction

Once the ride attendant had firmly secured all of the riders into their cars, we were carried through the hollow tunnels inside of the structure. The metallic clangs ricocheted off the walls of the warehouse. The cars resembled coal carts, and transported us through the narrow passageways. Every so often, we'd come upon an illuminated scene that featured animatronic coal miners with their pick-axes hauling buckets of rocks. Their plastic faces were painted a sickly shade of grey and caked with dirt. Faint grunting and yelling seeped from a hidden speaker as the miners jerked back and forth in an unnatural motion. At about halfway through the 4 minute journey, a ragged wooden sign that said CENTRALIA protruded from the wall.¹ We were immediately thrown into a downward spiral through an apocalyptic scenario. The enraged earth split open to swallow decrepit homes. A miner who had gone insane underground grinned at us while setting off explosives. The rickety car pushed on to the end, where we exited through a fiery tunnel.

The Black Diamond quickly became one of my favorite rides at Knobel's Amusement Park after opening in 2011.² It was about a two-hour drive north of Elysburg, Pennsylvania. Tucked away between the mountains, it offers an appeal that no other park could hope to replicate.

Knobel's has kept its original, old-fashioned charm since its establishment in 1926.³ I remember walking past the beautifully antiquated rides while my dad pointed out things he recognized from his childhood. He had visited the park with his family just after hurricane Agnes, when Knobel's was underwater.

The Black Diamond is an indoor roller coaster made to resemble a coal mine, paying tribute to the long history of anthracite coal mining in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The props for this ride were custom made, drawing inspiration from Centralia, Pennsylvania.

¹ "Black Diamond." Knoebels. Accessed October 2019. <https://www.knoebels.com/rides/black-diamond>.

² Ibid.

³ "Black Diamond." Knoebels. Accessed October 2019. <https://www.knoebels.com/rides/black-diamond>.

What used to be Centralia is just southeast of Knobel's. My dad preferred the scenic backroads, so we'd take a detour to see what's left. Formerly known as US Route 61, Graffiti Highway wasn't in use anymore to the public, who now had to take an alternate road around the area. I had a vague idea of what had happened to this town, but was interested to see it in person. My dad recalled what he knew about the fire- how it started in '62 in an abandoned mine tunnel and was currently still burning. The only visible evidence being the sinkholes and steam.

Looking out of the car window, I couldn't even tell that a town had ever been here. No buildings, no other roads-nothing. Just what was left of the curb and decaying roads that lead nowhere. Uncut grass had reclaimed the land, but vegetation carefully avoided the areas where the ground had cracked to release smoke and various other toxins. The sinkholes appeared to have devoured the entire history that once laid there, leaving the barren land devoid of memories and nothing but a local tourist pit.

Today, one of the more popular sites in Centralia has been blocked off. Suddenly, visitors have begun flocking there as the town grew more famous over abandoned exploration Facebook groups. This burst of attention that Centralia received in the spring of 2020 prompted local property owners to enforce the no trespassing regulations. An employee from a local company described the graffiti as a "mess", saying that "it's all vulgar. People bring their kids here to see it".

I've watched Centralia slowly perish for years now over social media. What was once a cool place for locals to stop off and gently explore, has now succumbed to our compulsion to destroy and document our heinous behavior for the rest of the world to admire.



Steam rising from the underground fire at a quarry in nearby Ashland.

Centralia's Fate is Sealed

Centralia, Pennsylvania was established in 1866. During this time, a group of Irish laborers called the Molly Maguires were passing through. A priest in Centralia banned the Molly gang from one of the local churches. The Molly Maguires found him later and attacked him in a cemetery. The priest returned to the town and announced that the land was now cursed.⁴

One can choose to believe this tale, or chalk it up to local legend. Either way, many consider this real life ghost town cursed.

In the sixties, one of Centralia's many underground mine shafts caught fire. Fifty- eight years later, it's still smoldering under the earth. Sinkholes have swallowed up entire homes and sections of the roads. A former Centralia resident, Becky, remembers the day she witnessed a sinkhole devour her neighbor's cat. "We were swinging in the backyard, and this patch of grass suddenly turned brown. Their cat was standing there, and it suddenly became brown. It didn't make any noise, and we thought she had done something to make it all suddenly brown, like flipping a sheet over. But it was just another hole, and the cat went down."⁵

⁴ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. Introduction.

⁵ Vercetti44. "I Live In Centralia, PA: It's America's Creepiest Ghost Town." Cracked.com. Cracked.com, October 23, 2017. <https://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2537-i-live-in-centralia-pa-its-americas-creepiest-ghost-town.html>.



Centralia before the fire. www.centraliapa.org.

In May of 1962, the town of Centralia (population 1,100) was preparing for its annual Memorial Day festivities. It was common practice to burn the trash sitting in landfills to keep it contained. Before the holiday weekend kicked off, a section of the landfill was set ablaze to destroy a section of garbage. The only issue with this practice was that Centralia was constructed on top of an intricate series of mine shafts. This area of Pennsylvania housed 95% of all anthracite coal in the western hemisphere.⁶ This rare coal can burn as hot as 5,255 degrees if oxygen is provided.⁷ Town officials believed that if the landfill was lined, it would keep the burning trash from penetrating into the abandoned mine shafts surrounding it.

They were wrong.

What began as a seemingly manageable fire, soon brought the town to its death nearly 60 years later. The fire has the potential to continue burning beneath the 3,700 acres of land surrounding Centralia. This includes strip mines, as well as above ground coal beds.⁸

Those in charge of handling the fire were not equipped to deal with it. The state was slow to react and the issue became entirely too expensive. The U.S Bureau of Mines and the PA Department of Mines and

⁶ Ivory, Karen. *Pennsylvania Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2015. 107- 108.

⁷ "Pennsylvania DEP." Department of Environmental Protection. Accessed January 2020.

<https://www.dep.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁸ Ibid.

Mineral Industries were called in. They labeled the fire a serious problem and recommended that it must be put out before it became uncontrollable. Several efforts were made, including unearthing the town dump to inspect the damage. It was nearing Labor Day by this time, so work was paused for the holiday. This gave the fire more time to continue along its destructive path. The next step was drilling over 1,800 boreholes that were used to suffocate the fire with sand and gravel. The temperature inside one of those boreholes was found to be just over 700 degrees.⁹

Eventually, the state could not dedicate any more money to the cause. 7 million dollars later, the Centralia mine fire extinguishing project was abandoned.¹⁰ Unable to put a stop to the ravaging inferno below, residents were forced to continue on with their daily lives as if nothing was wrong. The fire didn't seem to be too intrusive at first, just the occasional smoke seeping through cracks in the ground. It would be almost 20 years after the start of the fire that citizens of Centralia would realize how atrocious the situation really was.¹¹

Over time, citizens began to develop health problems from the gases building up in their basements. Gas monitors were installed in homes to ensure that if the levels spiked to an unsafe level, families could evacuate before the carbon monoxide got the best of them. During the day, residents would just leave windows open to release built up gases. These gases almost brought Mayor Coddington to an untimely death when his gas meter didn't alert him one night. Along with the gases came headaches, terrible coughs, drowsiness, and nausea.¹² Becky, a former resident, said "If you went to a nearby store and you heard the cough, odds are they were from Centralia."¹³ While most would say today, "that's no way to live", the residents were continuously assured that everything was under control.

Growing up in Centralia post- fire came with some experiences that were certainly unique. According to a few former residents, the sinkholes became so bad that if you went walking in the woods, there was a good chance you'd return with a broken ankle.¹⁴

A resident recounts the day in 1981 where her son, Todd Domboski, was playing outside. A sinkhole had opened underneath him and he was dropped 100 feet deep into a Hell- like crater. Fortunately, he was able to be rescued. Witnesses claim to have seen the flames underneath Todd in the gaping pit after rescuing him. After the story was released, the entire country found out about the town that was on fire.¹⁵

Another resident said "Every once in a while, you would come across a deer sticking out vertically with steam billowing out. They looked like they were crawling out. The poor deer had fallen into a sinkhole

⁹ Ivory, Karen. *Pennsylvania Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2015. 110.

¹⁰ "Pennsylvania DEP." Department of Environmental Protection. Accessed January 2020.

¹¹ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

¹² DeKok, David. *Fire Underground: the Ongoing Tragedy of the Centralia Mine Fire*. Guilford, CT: GPP, 2010. 2- 9.

¹³ Vercetti44. "I Live In Centralia, PA: It's America's Creepiest Ghost Town." Cracked.com. Cracked.com, October 23, 2017. <https://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2537-i-live-in-centralia-pa-its-americas-creepiest-ghost-town.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and had either starved to death or suffocated to death from the fumes. My friends would claim to see smoke coming out of its mouth, like it had been burnt alive, but it was just the way the smoke came out.”¹⁶

To avoid the catastrophe of an entire house being devoured, brick support beams were constructed on the outsides of houses at risk. The beams looked like extra chimneys along the sides of the houses. This supposedly stabilized the building and kept the foundation as secure as possible.



A house with support beams belonging to a current resident.

Eventually, the town’s residents were split into opposing sides when talk of relocation was announced. Roughly half of the town was begging for the state to buy their homes and move them out. The rest of the locals were against the idea, claiming that this town has been their home and always would be. The government had slowly been removing people here and there since the fire’s start if they were too close to the burn zone, but in 1985, over 100 houses were demolished. After 1986, only a few buildings were still

¹⁶ Vercetti44. “I Live In Centralia, PA: It's America's Creepiest Ghost Town.” Cracked.com. Cracked.com, October 23, 2017.
[https://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2537-i-live-in-centralia-pa-its-americas-creepiest-ghost-town.h
tml](https://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2537-i-live-in-centralia-pa-its-americas-creepiest-ghost-town.html).

standing. In 1992, the state took over and moved out even more citizens. The entire relocation project spanned decades and cost the state nearly 41.6 million dollars. This averages out to about 52 thousand dollars per house.¹⁷ By 2002, Centralia's zip code, 17920, was redacted and the town on fire ceased to exist.¹⁸

Centralia, Pennsylvania is not the only town to suffer a coal mining disaster, but it is however one of the most infamous. Pennsylvania alone is currently home to 38 active mine fires. It's been reported by The Federal Abandoned Mine Lands Inventory System that the US is dealing with over 241 fires nationwide.¹⁹

¹⁷ "Pennsylvania DEP." Department of Environmental Protection. Accessed January 2020. <https://www.dep.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx>.

¹⁸ "Centralia PA Mine Fire." Centralia PA, September 2, 1970. <https://www.centraliapa.org/>.

¹⁹ "Pennsylvania DEP." Department of Environmental Protection. Accessed January 2020. <https://www.dep.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx>.

The Aftermath

"The fire has not destroyed this community. The government has."

-Helen Womer²⁰

In 1986, after the relocation project was well underway, the stress of moving took its toll. By this time, most of the houses were already condemned.²¹ For many, this was the only home they've ever known. They were raised here, started families here, and were life-long members of the community. Joseph Smolock, a former resident, claimed "If I leave I'll be going against what my voice tells me is right- my heritage, my past, and my soul."²² Helen Womer was a borough council member and worked at the local bank. She was on the side who opposed the relocation efforts. Womer stated that after the government buy- outs, "[Centralia] will be the most close- knit, dedicated group of people you will ever meet".²³ Helen's husband, Carl, was Centralia's last mayor. Helen later passed away in 2001, and Carl in 2014. Their daughter, Kathi, moved out of the town in 2016, leaving yet another reminder of the memories that were left behind.²⁴ They were well aware of the dangers beneath their feet, but this was home. It was difficult to watch the demise of not only your town, but your entire family history, childhood, and community.

²⁰ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. 81.

²¹ Ivory, Karen. *Pennsylvania Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2015. 115.

²² Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. 12.

²³ Ibid. Introduction.

²⁴ "Centralia PA Mine Fire." Centralia PA, September 2, 1970. <https://www.centraliapa.org/>.



A woman's last day in her Centralia home. Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania.

Residents were angry and had begun turning against the government. The state was slow to respond to the initial fire and reluctant to help people for decades, leaving them to deal with the sinkholes and vile gases alone. The residents were tired of feeling ignored and abandoned. The state couldn't just push the problem aside for decades and then decide the only solution was to uproot hundreds of families to erase their hometown. "They'll have to drag me out of here in shackles" said one resident, Joe Moyer. Moyer ended up being one of the last remaining residents of Centralia, and is still living there today.²⁵

Many felt that at this point, the government had surrendered any right to intervene. They survived this tragedy without much help from the state thus far, and would continue to do so.

A few residents attempted to stay behind and fight the relocation, but were pushed out anyway. Two of them suffered heart attacks and died while packing up their belongings.²⁶

One retired miner and resident had made it clear that he was not budging. The day he heard that the government was taking his land whether he liked it or not, he had reached the end of his rope. Unable to cope with the state's endless failures pertaining to the fire, he pulled out his gun and murdered his wife. She

²⁵ "Centralians Resist Relocation Plan." UPI. UPI, July 22, 1996.

<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/07/22/Centralians-resist-relocation-plan/3566838008000/>.

²⁶ Ivory, Karen. *Pennsylvania Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2015. 115.

had wanted to take the buyout, but the retired miner did not. He immediately fled and set his body on fire, killing himself.²⁷

A town that's been ravaged by fire, noxious gases, and seized by the government has left deep scars in the minds of those who've survived it.

Some of the current and former residents don't like to discuss the tragic results of the fire and relocation. Helen Womer had suggested that the state intentionally handled the situation poorly. One theory is that the government wanted to remove all residents so they could mine underneath the land without worrying about the properties above. Joe Moyer believes that there isn't even any legitimate threat. "We're in no danger. Tourists come here and ask where the fire is. I tell them, if you find it, let me know." Joe says.²⁸

²⁷ "Centralians Resist Relocation Plan." UPI. UPI, July 22, 1996.

<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/07/22/Centralians-resist-relocation-plan/3566838008000/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

Concealed in Spray Paint

“Oh my God. It was beautiful back then. The huckleberries, yeah, Christ. We’d go back there; it was all huckleberry bushes and laurel bushes. That’s all destroyed now. They destroyed this town, all right.”

- Anthony Gaughan²⁹

Everyone who’s grown up in Pennsylvania is aware of Centralia- the mining town that’s been on fire for over five decades. In 2020, it’s seen more as just another spooky attraction. Like the abandoned York prison, Concrete City, Pennhurst Hospital, and the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philly. Just another haunted house- like place for thrill seekers.

If you were to search *Centralia, PA* online, the top hits have consistently been “*can you visit Centralia?*”, “*is it trespassing in Centralia?*”, “*is Centralia safe to visit?*”. The majority of the online articles I’ve read portray this place similarly to how many Gettysburg ghost tours are marketed. They’re treated as a tourist trap. They just want to capitalize on the tragedy.

There are also several Facebook groups geared towards those interested in exploring abandoned parts of Pennsylvania. While these groups can serve as a community for those with common interests, they invite more issues than they’re worth. They help expose the locations of places such as Centralia much faster than before. Every day in these groups I see identical photos of graffiti highway being uploaded by people who’d like to think they’re unique for going there.

²⁹ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. 7.

It can be argued that partaking in these things is just how the younger generations relate. We were raised with cell phones and social media. We document every moment of our lives with selfies, Facebook posts, and Snapchat stories. It's only natural that we'd want to capture these spooky adventures too. But when are we crossing the line from harmless curiosity to blatant disrespect?



Graffiti Highway, Centralia's most popular site.

In 1993, Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation (PennDOT) abandoned US Route 61.³⁰ A new road was constructed that goes around the outskirts of Centralia, or what's left of it anyway. PennDOT gave up ownership of what's now commonly referred to as *Graffiti Highway*. Since no one bothers to shoo away visitors, it's become somewhat of a local landmark. This area has little to no police coverage, and even though there's a few warning signs posted, no one actually cares. Residents can only report something if it happens on their own private property.

Graffiti Highway is entirely enveloped in a thick layer of brightly colored spray paint. With massive fractures throughout it releasing steam, it makes for quite a stunning photo. I can certainly see the appeal of wanting to visit here. I myself must admit that I've fallen for abandoned places and visit them as well. While being interested in places such as this one is innocent enough, it's the execution of it that's the deciding factor for me. If one were to be passing through the area and wanted to pull over and take a look around, that's perfectly fine. When the individual decides to damage the land, behave ignorantly, or aggravate the remaining citizens- that's where the situation begins to bother me. It all comes down to understanding the history behind such a place and to respect it.

I've seen Centralia in person, but have always avoided Graffiti Highway. There's still something unsettling to me about how it's just so...overdone? Aside from the names, couples' initials, and the occasional penis, most of the spray paint is basically harmless. There is however, some that disturbs me. A few common themes I see reappearing throughout this deserted section of road are "666", "Hell", "Silent Hill, PA" (we'll get to the Silent Hill reference later). I can certainly see why one would describe Centralia as "Hell", but the residents who've fought for years for their right to continue living there do not. To all of those who've grown up there, moved there, moved away from there, died there, raised a family there- Centralia was not "Hell", it was home. Perhaps I am just overly sensitive, but I don't feel that it's right for some kid with no understanding of its past to visit Centralia, spray paint "Hell", trespass on residents' properties, leave behind trash, and then move along to the next local "spooky attraction".

While these kinds of places can be a fun day trip for anyone in the area, it hasn't been easy for the remaining residents of Centralia. The remaining citizens aren't too fond of graffiti highway. Spray paint-wielding- tourists often spill out onto private properties and streets that are still in use.³¹

When visiting Centralia to collect photos and research, I spoke to an employee who was working for a local company that owned part of the surrounding land. This employee's job was to guard parts of the land from trespassers. They described the trespassers as "nasty and ignorant", adding that "state police don't want to mess with them either". I can certainly see their point. I was only there for a short time and had seen

³⁰ Beauge, John. "The State No Longer Owns Centralia's 'Graffiti Highway.' Who Does?" pennlive, February 15, 2018. https://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/02/centralias_graffiti_highway_no.html.

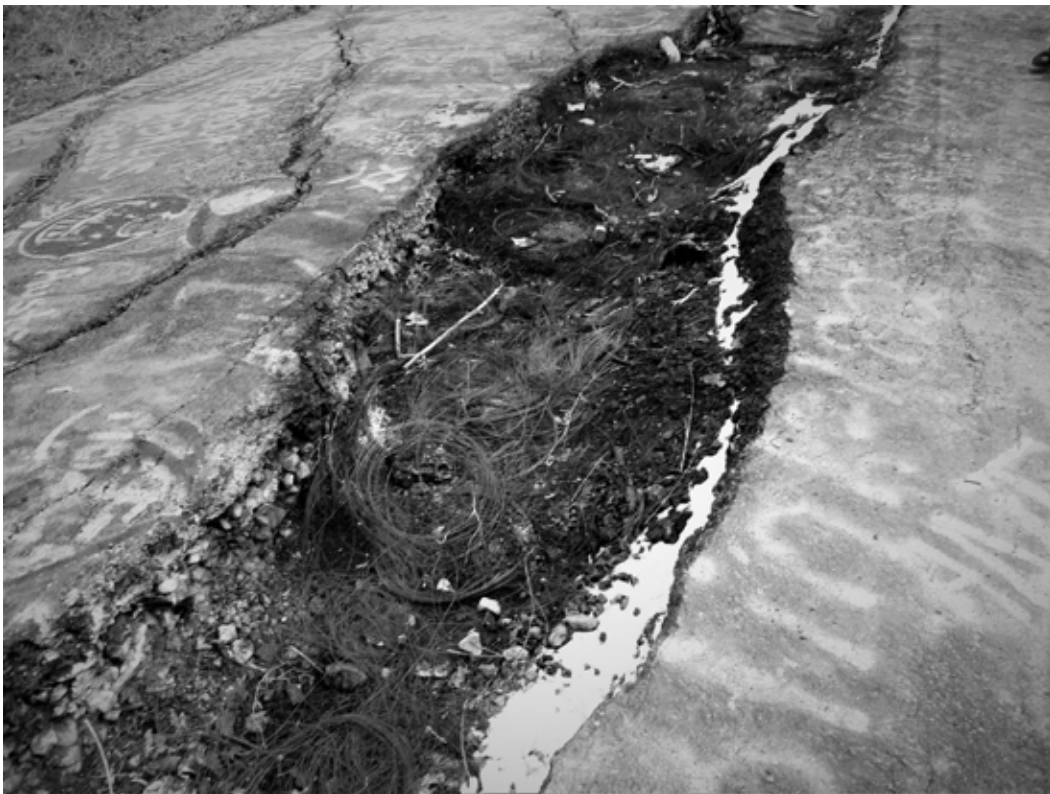
³¹ Beauge, John. "The State No Longer Owns Centralia's 'Graffiti Highway.' Who Does?" pennlive, February 15, 2018. https://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/02/centralias_graffiti_highway_no.html.

numerous people on four wheelers and dirt bikes ripping through the land. Many of them had their trucks blocking the entrances of the cemeteries.

Now, the Reading Anthracite company owns a lot of the nearby land. They allow people to apply for a membership pass to legally ride ATVs and bikes on their property. However, this does not include graffiti highway and the cemeteries. According to this employee, a man is looking into purchasing this land and turning it into a local tourist attraction, but I cannot confirm this theory.

When a former resident returned to Centralia to visit her childhood home after moving away, she was disgusted by what it had turned into. Her old property was littered with garbage. "It's one thing to do the highway, it's another to do it in the town, It's disrespectful. People live here," she says.³²

Like many places in Pennsylvania I've been to, Centralia is becoming just another trash dump site. People don't know what to do with their antiquated household appliances. They're too big to leave out with the garbage cans, so they discard them in the woods. Other visitors just leave food wrappers, cups, beer cans, spray paint, cigarettes, and whatever else they don't feel like pitching in a trash can. You might as well just spit in the face of everyone who's loved that town.



Metal wiring left inside a crevice on Graffiti Highway.

³² Strawser, Justin. "Centralia Sees 6th Annual Cleanup." *The Daily Item*, 19 Oct. 2019, www.dailyitem.com/news/local_news/centralia-sees-th-annual-cleanup/article_f72d8d9c-e175-5b49-9179-28c1fd41fc97.html.

About a hundred volunteers (many of which are former residents) are dedicated to the survival of Centralia's charm. They join together for a trash clean up each year. In 2019, they removed over 1,500 lbs. of spray paint cans.³³

A Centralia informational organization (www.centraliapa.org) has asked visitors to respect the land. Although some of the houses may not be in use anymore, they were still at one point somebody's home. They want to remind visitors that trespassing, vandalism, and leaving trash is illegal in the borough.³⁴ There are still cemeteries in use, roads still being driven on, and houses still being lived in. A few people have spoken up about tourists walking through their yards. The tourists assume it's either an abandoned property, or just don't care if it's someone's house. Some of these tourists will even pester residents and ask questions about the fire.

In April of 2020, graffiti highway met its demise. Early in the morning, trucks hauled in piles of dirt and partially buried the infamous route 61. Supposedly, local companies had been considering doing this for years. During late March and early April, Centralia received a massive influx of visitors. This led to a gathering of over 200 tourists and people on ATVs and dirt bikes swarming graffiti highway. Local police claimed that the group was drunkenly starting bonfires and getting out of hand. When they arrived to break it up, they were greeted by a hoard of uncooperative trespassers. This was the nail in the coffin for graffiti highway. Since the highway's death, police have now begun issuing citations for trespassing.

³³ Strawser, Justin. "Centralia Sees 6th Annual Cleanup." *The Daily Item*, 19 Oct. 2019, www.dailymitem.com/news/local_news/centralia-sees-th-annual-cleanup/article_f72d8d9c-e175-5b49-9179-28c1fd41fc97.html.

³⁴ "Centralia PA Mine Fire." Centralia PA, September 2, 1970. <https://www.centraliapa.org/>.

The Real Life “Silent Hill”

“The mine fire is disgusting. I don’t like to think of it. It ruined Centralia. We had a beautiful church, school, and covent. They tell me that has to go.”

- Elizabeth Gillespie, in reference to the mass demolitions³⁵

With a history like this, Centralia was bound to spark some kind of eerie creation. The town that’s on fire was later used as the inspiration behind the movie/ video game franchise *Silent Hill*, the *Centralia* video game, and even the Dean Koontz novel, *Strange Highways*.

Silent Hill was originally a video game that was released in 1999. Later in 2006, it was turned into a movie. Writers Roger Avary, Nicolas Boukhrief, and Christophe Gans were looking into ideas for a location. Roger Avary remembered back to when his father, a mine engineer, described Centralia. Avary thought it’d be the perfect place to showcase his script.³⁶ However, the actual filming was done in Canada, not Pennsylvania. *Silent Hill* is a horror film about a mother traveling with her adopted daughter through a small town. After a car accident, the mother realizes that her daughter has gone missing. The mother must then fight her way through a series of evil spirits and cults to retrieve her child.

There are quite a few similarities between the setting of this video game adaptation and the real location. In the film, the town of Silent Hill is plagued with massive cracks releasing steam, and a heavy layer

³⁵ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

³⁶ “Centralia PA Mine Fire.” Centralia PA, September 2, 1970. <https://www.centraliapa.org/>.

of ashy fog. The town sign that reads *Silent Hill* is even similar to photos of Centralia signs I've seen. It's revealed later on that Silent Hill is a ghost town that was devastated by a fire 30 years earlier.³⁷

The lesser known video game, *CENTRALIA*, was obviously inspired by the real life location as well. This game had low ratings, and just appears to be a poorly made knock-off of *Silent Hill*. Released in 2019 by Indie Games Studios, this game features a similar plot to *Silent Hill*. The game begins with a man who is also searching for his lost daughter. Years earlier, his wife had passed away in Centralia. Supposedly the miners had unleashed something rotten and evil under the ground, so they set the tunnels ablaze to cover it up. Everyone who lived nearby eventually went insane, leaving it a ghost town. The man's daughter travels back to the town in May, 1992 to find her mother.³⁸

I found the date here intriguing, because it can't be a coincidence. The actual fire in Centralia is believed to have started in May of 1962. Both the game and movie takes place after a majority of the relocations and just before Route 61 is closed. The game makes it appear as though this is when Centralia died, but really, it's been dying since the government stepped in. There was something else that I found problematic with both games' portrayal of the abandoned town. The residents in *Silent Hill* and *Centralia* were depicted as lunatics. Why? If one were to choose to stay in their home, despite potential safety issues and a painful past, does that really make them psychotic? The Residents to Save the Borough of Centralia put it best when they said "When one speaks of 'home,' they love it, even with all of its imperfections, and are reluctant to leave it without serious reason."³⁹

³⁷ "Centralia PA Mine Fire." Centralia PA, September 2, 1970. <https://www.centraliapa.org/>.

³⁸ "CENTRALIA on Steam." CENTRALIA on Steam. Accessed November 2019. <https://store.steampowered.com/app/1122110/CENTRALIA/>.

³⁹ Jacobs Renée, and Margaret O. Kirk. *Slow Burn: a Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. 43.

Conclusion

My dad visits the area quite often now. His friends and him ride dirt bikes near it, and sometimes he'll send me a photo of steam rising through cracks in the earth and of old buildings. He tells me that they're still mining some of the land around there. The mining companies use these massive dump trucks called "euclids". The eucs use wide, dirt roads, and they drive on the left side. Centralia and the land that surrounds it is pretty barren now. It's mostly woods and smaller towns.

When I was younger, my dad would take my mom, brother and I up North to Tower City, which is slightly below Centralia. It was a great place for riding dirt bikes and ATVs because it was a mix of wooded area and empty land, only really used for quarries and mining. I remember riding past the desolate land, seeing nothing but trees and heaps of old euc tires. The tires were large enough that you could stand inside of them, which we naturally did as kids. Every so often, we'd stumble across quarry pits or piles of junked out machinery left to rot on the side of the euc roads. I found it fascinating. Like I was witnessing something dying in front of me. We take perfectly good land and strip it of its life, leaving remnants of our time spent there, only to move on to the next piece of fertile property. Places like these have an abundance of trash dumping. There wasn't really anyone policing the area. There'd be random heaps of moldy couches, busted stoves, and various other items that garbage trucks refuse to take. People really like leaving old home appliances in the woods. When we'd finally come home, we were covered in nothing but black coal dust.



Euc trucks in the nearby town of Ashland.

When I see photos of Centralia now, or drive through it, I can't help but to think of Tower City. It's a landfill for outdated home appliances and rusting machinery. It's a wasteland of abandoned memories. *The Place That Used To Be* is now just another decaying site for trash dumping and vandalism. That's what it has become to a lot of people. If I had no previous knowledge of the town, I wouldn't be able to tell if it had ever even existed. What happened to this quaint mining town in northern Pennsylvania was truly devastating. As the years go by, more and more people are forgetting that this town once- and still does- mean something. These residents didn't just lose a town, they lost their home. All that's left to see in Centralia today is overgrown weeds and crumbling sidewalk curbs. The empty skeletons we leave behind are the only evidence of our existence.

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