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The “bridge fuel” of Carrollton County

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Miranda C. Spencer, Shalereporter.com | 0 comments

As noted in my July 7 blog, I spent four days last month traveling through western Pennsylvania, New York's Southern Tier and eastern Ohio with the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources. There, we got to see the gas industry up close and meet the people affected. This is my second report from that journey.

Carrollton, Ohio is a primarily agricultural town about an hour and half south of Cleveland, with a population around 3,000 and 227 producing oil and gas wells. Since energy companies came to tap the Utica shale beneath its rolling green meadows a few years ago, it's been the epicenter of a fracking boom. According to Amy Rutledge, head of the town's Chamber of Commerce, there are at least 600 new millionaires county wide. There are also rising rents, unfamiliar faces, and growing inequality.

When I visited, it quickly became clear that there are winners and losers here. But even among the winners, there is discomfort at what it means to let your rural home become someone else's place of business.

Let's meet a couple of Carrollton's farmers.

The Booster

Keith Burgett is tall, folksy and appears about 70. He raises beef cattle on a farm he's owned for 30 years. He also leases part of this land to Chesapeake Energy. There are six natural-gas wells there now, including the area's most productive yet. That's meant a big payday: The locals call him “J.R.,” like TV's oil magnate.

Speaking over dinner at the recently reopened Atwood Lake Resort, Keith candidly listed both “negatives and positives” of shale development in a small town.

On one hand, traffic is awful, store lines are long, and you just “can't make a left turn anymore.” On the other, his own experience has been good: His livestock graze safely around the wells, there have been no pollution incidents, and his home is far enough from any noise that he can't hear it. The company even agreed to protect a tree that has sentimental value for his family.

Also, working with the industry has made him “a movie star.” The trade group ANGA (America's Natural Gas Alliance) filmed a promotional video about his farm for its “Think About It” ad campaign. Keith can be heard saying: “I'm very confident the land is being protected by the industry....My grandchildren will have that farm in the future to make a living on.”

[Watch it here:](#)

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Miranda C. Spencer, a researcher with the online news sites Environmental Health News and The Daily Climate, is a freelance journalist and media critic based in the New York metro area. Her writing over the past 25 years, including eight magazine cover stories, has appeared in The Daily Climate, Extra! (the journal of FAIR), E magazine, American Forests, and many other publications. Miranda's investigative work has been honored by Project Censored. Her website is [Red Panda Communications](#).



Suzie Gilbert is a writer, a state and federally licensed wild bird rehabilitator, and the founder of Flyaway, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of injured and orphaned wild birds. She has written an award-winning environmental column for Taconic News Media, and has published the children's book “Hawk Hill” (Chronicle Books, 1996), and her memoir “Flyaway” (HarperCollins, 2009.) Her articles and opinion pieces have appeared in various

He was not paid for the spot, but said he doesn't feel used. And he's excited about the future. "This industry is like a three-month-old baby," he maintained. "There may be 100 years' worth of fuel" left to tap.

Still, he admitted he has to constantly "keep after Chesapeake" to make sure all the lease provisions are enforced. He gave that job to his two sons, because "it all got to be too much for me."

The Disillusioned Couple

John and Elizabeth Neider, who appear to be in their 60s, run a beef and dairy farm on which they also grow timber and raise hay. Like Keith, they have six producing wells on their bucolic property, both wet gas and oil.

Speaking on the lawn behind their house, the Neiders recounted how they began leasing their property to an energy company called Mason Dixon in the early 2000's. They got extra income and free gas out of the deal, and figured the land would never be drilled. Or if it was, they'd wind up with the type of low-impact, shallow, vertical well that has been drilled for decades in Ohio.

Then, in 2008, when their most recent lease was about to expire, a man drove up and told them it had been sold to Chesapeake. The new owners wanted to frack the farm. After what Elizabeth describes as scripted strong-arming straight out of the movie "Promised Land," the Neiders signed a new lease. They weren't told a much more complicated process, horizontal drilling, was about to happen.

Development began in the fall of 2011, and they've regretted it ever since. First there were constant battles to keep well infrastructure away from their woods and water supply. (Like most everyone in Carroll County, they rely on well water and springs.) Then, the company kept asking for more concessions.

Now that the wells are in, industrial activity continues. John said the motor from a compressor station runs "24/7," and Elizabeth misses hearing the wind in the trees.

newspapers, including the Washington Post. She blogs for "The Crooked Wing" and "10,000 Birds" and has been profiled in both the New York Times and on Andrew C. Revkin's New York Times blog, Dot Earth.



Tara's academic work and pursuits are focused on eco-feminism and ethics. Tara has been featured on AOL's Patch.com as a weekly columnist, Moxie Momma, exploring social concerns and parenting strategies. Writing articles on lifestyle, entertainment and local travel, Tara has been a regular contributor to the Bethlehem, Hellertown and Upper Saucon Patch. As a research and investigative journalist, Tara's work is regularly featured in the Elucidator Magazine. A specialist in the technical fields of psychology, philosophy and theology, Tara also teaches classes on Ethics and Moral Dilemmas, Death and Dying, World Religions, and Introduction to Philosophy.



Mike Butler serves as Executive Director of Consumer Energy Alliance (CEA) Mid-Atlantic, where he leads activities to educate and engage consumers of energy from every sector of the economy - large industrial natural gas users, small business, retail owners, hospitals, transportation, and local consumers. By focusing on the importance of responsibly accessing available natural resources and the need for stable energy prices for business, agriculture, manufacturing, and other energy consumers, CEA Mid-Atlantic aims to expand productive, sensible discussion on energy policy across the region. Prior to joining CEA Mid-Atlantic, Butler served as Finance Director for the re-election effort of U.S. Senator Bob Casey. After leading efforts to raise over \$16 million for the Senator's campaign, Mike's was named to PoliticsPA's "Top Operatives of 2012." Additionally Mike served as District Director for Congressman Jason Altmire, Finance Director for Dan Onorato for Governor, and fundraiser for State Treasurer Rob McCord.



“When they’re fracking, then it gets REALLY loud,” she said. They must be constantly vigilant: Company reps and their subcontractors come around all the time, wanting to do this or that...right now!

The Neiders may be stuck with the wells and equipment indefinitely. Technically, Chesapeake’s lease doesn’t expire until every drop of fuel has been produced. They feel manipulated.

“We’ve made a lot of money,” said John, who earns from \$50 to \$400 per working acre per month. “But as I told a guy the other day that wanted me to sign another pipeline agreement, ‘That doesn’t buy you happiness, or peace, or anything.’... When that land man comes knocking, you must remember that he is not working for you. He’s working for [the company].”

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