WAITING FOR MORNING

By John W. Miller
A West Virginia town looks for a new start in Trump’s America

IN MOUNDSVILLE

Moundsville, while in decline, has never been nearly as bad as the opioid-riddled picture of hell Mr. Trump painted in his inauguration address.
No matter what time of day it is, Phil Remke, the ebullient vice mayor of this West Virginia river town of 8,700, salutes every constituent the same way: “Top of the morning to ya.”

It is still early enough in Trump’s America for supporters like Mr. Remke to hope that the president can satisfy more of the fantasies he spun into triumph, and late enough to get a sense of what is actually happening.

For Mr. Remke, a burly 64-year-old lifelong resident of Moundsville, W.Va., father of three, husband, churchgoer, businessman and politician, Trump remains a godsend. “He’s a businessman, like me,” he says. “I just wish the media would leave him alone, because what he’s doing is working.”

Moundsville’s mythology of a mighty economic past rings so true that it is obvious why Donald J. Trump, and his special brand of nostalgia, crushed Hillary Clinton on election night here, 73 percent to 22 percent. And President Trump, says Mr. Remke, is validating his vote. “Look at the stock market since the election,” he says. “He’s all about business.”

The question for Mr. Remke, Moundsville and thousands of other small American towns dreaming of a better life under Mr. Trump, is what kind of business. Moundsville, while in decline, has never been nearly as bad as the opioid-riddled picture of rusting hell Mr. Trump painted in his inauguration tirade about “American carnage.” There is life here. Things work. Unemployment in the county is a palatable 5.7 percent.

But, a year into the Trump era, town leaders are facing the truth that, even with Mr. Trump’s pro-business policies, they will never be able to turn back the clock to a community built on stable, lucrative factory jobs. Instead, their fight is making sense of the economy they have and how it is upending people’s social, cultural and spiritual lives.

That reality is a less stable and smaller economy based on the three pillars of energy, services and tourism. The Moundsville area has a coal mine, gas wells, a Wal-Mart, a prison, a hospital and two tourist attractions—an old state penitentiary and the native American burial mound for which the town is named.

Job offerings at those places are a tough sell to many young people with skill and ambition. “At some point, they started leaving, or going into the military,” says Stan Stewart, a former school administrator and teacher.

With fewer skills in the workforce, companies hesitate to invest in manufacturing plants and instead create service jobs that require minimal job training and skills. Many workers are transient, which makes it harder to maintain social clubs and church communities. Newspaper readership in the United States is in decline; there is less shared knowledge, creating openings for divisive politicians.

**A City of Commerce**

The roots of commerce run deep here. Moundsville, nestled along the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, is named for a 60-foot high burial mound built by the Adena, a prehistoric people that roamed the Ohio Valley 2,500 years ago. Archeological digs suggest they imported marine shells from the Gulf Coast, copper from the Upper Midwest and flint to make spears from all around Appalachia.
In the 19th and 20th centuries, ease of access to lumber, coal, limestone, clay and other raw materials boosted new businesses catering to the rich markets of a booming young country. The list of things once made here is eye-popping: steel, aluminum, shoes, brooms, whips for buggies, bricks, cookware, glass, pottery, guns, clothes, fencing. Even airplanes. After the Fokker Aircraft plant closed, Louis Marx and Company in the 1930s turned it into the world's largest toy factory. There were so many jobs here that old-timers like to say you could get laid off at the steel mill on a Monday and get hired at the toy factory on a Tuesday.

Then, starting in the late 1970s, it all came crashing down. Families got tired of running their shops and factories, or they could not compete against the chains moving in. Markets dried up or became saturated. Foreign competitors made goods more cheaply and gained access to U.S. markets by new trade deals. Since 1980, Moundsville has lost an estimated 7,720 jobs, according to the local Chamber of Commerce.

Catherine Frame, a retired middle school teacher, watched her three children leave. One is an artist in Kansas City, one an F.B.I. agent in eastern West Virginia, and one works in technology in California. “If you go to Kansas City for art, or California for high-tech, you might be the same person, but you’re going to lose your community roots,” she says.

As in other small towns, it was hard in Moundsville not to feel betrayed by company managers in Pittsburgh, bankers in New York and politicians in Washington.

Then came Donald J. Trump, pitching a message of economic restoration.

His vows to bring back factory jobs to places like Moundsville were mostly unrealistic, say economists and business leaders. “Places like that just don’t have a comparative advantage in making stuff anymore,” says Ken Troske, a professor of economics at the University of Kentucky. “Often, the right economic thing to do is for young people with skills to leave and find the jobs they want in bigger cities.”

Ironically, that often leaves behind a labor shortage. There is one manufacturing plant left in the Moundsville area, a plant that makes caps for jars of cosmetics, pickles and other consumer goods. Even though pay starts at $20 an hour, “it’s a challenge to find labor right now because of the pipelines going in and people wanting to work in the gas business,” says Bob Macosko, local director of sales for Tecnocap, the Italian company that owns the plant. The
cap factory has 140 jobs. The pipelines jobs are farther out of town but are pursued by locals, Mr. Macosko says.

Coal Country
The area where Mr. Trump’s pledges are most rooted in reality is the state’s legendary tradition of mining coal, where looser regulations allow companies to cut costs and boost output. The Marshall County mine near Moundsville is the area’s biggest employer, with 832 workers, many of whom make annual salaries of around $80,000, says Gary Broadbent, a spokesman for Murray Energy, which owns the facility. The mine is now running at almost full production, he says.

West Virginia is producing around 90 million tons of coal this year, up from 80 million in 2016, an uptick most analysts and coal leaders credit to the Trump administration. But that is down from a peak of 156 million tons in 2008, and it is not expected to increase much.

To be sure, coal is not the employment bonanza it used to be. The implementation of automatic machinery, like so-called longwall machines, led to cuts in employment, from 100,000 jobs in 1950 to 25,000 in 2008 and around 14,000 today. Mines have become much more capital intensive and high-tech, says John Deskins, an economist at West Virginia University. “Miners became people who operated big pieces of equipment and machinery,” he says.

Coal mining in West Virginia in this decade has been challenged partly by the Obama administration’s enforcement of environmental laws, and also by the development of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, of natural gas in the late 2000s, which ushered in an era of abundant gas production, undercutting coal by price and forcing coal-fired power plants out of business.

Drive up into the hills and hollers surrounding Moundsville and you see the glint of pipes snaking gas from wells to processing plants. Town leaders say they dream of new foreign investment and hope to build an industry that makes subsidiary products. In November President Trump signed a preliminary deal with China to invest $83.7 billion in gas, power and chemical projects in West Virginia over 20 years, but few specifics have been released, so nobody knows if Moundsville could benefit.

There is also excited talk of a new plant that the Thailand-based company PTT has discussed building on a bluff across the river in Belmont County, Ohio. This would inject billions of dollars into the local economy and create thousands of jobs, say town leaders. PTT says it is interested in building a so-called cracker plant, which “cracks” molecules of ethane into plastic.

Despite all the hype, the cracker plant could also be just another fantasy. In an email, Dan Williamson, spokesman for PTT, writes that he must “emphasize that it is only a potential project at this stage,” although “the company is working diligently.” The “numbers that have been shared to date,” he adds, “are that it would employ thousands of people in the construction phase and hundreds of people on a permanent basis after the plant is operational.”

A Priest’s Ministry
Already, Moundsville is ringed by clusters of sleek camper vans housing “pipeliners”—engineers, maintenance men and drivers who travel around the country working in the gas industry.

Two pipeliners, Richard and Jamie Boudreaux, from Chacahoula, La., moved to Moundsville a couple of years ago. Traveling around the country, it is difficult to find community, says Jamie Boudreaux. “You don’t always get groups and churches welcoming you.” They found a community home at Moundsville’s St. Francis Church, and a friend in its leader. That is because Moundsville does have this going for it as it copes with a changing economy and community: a good priest.

Attendance at the church is down to a few hundred a week, mostly older people. They come to listen to Father That Son Ngoc Nguyen. The priest suggests turning the greying population of decaying American towns into a strength. “Young people could admire and follow how spiritual their older generation is,” he says.

The bouncy 56-year-old diocesan priest grew up in Vietnam during the war and, when he emigrated to the United States, was sponsored by a family in West Virginia. It was seeing human suffering up close during the Vietnam War that fostered his vocation, he says. Father Nguyen compares West Virginia to Vietnam. People in Appalachia “feel betrayed,” he says. “Companies moved out, and there was no infrastructure.” It was “up to churches to offer community,” he says.

Parishioners “are constantly telling me that the media should leave Trump alone so he can do his job,” says Father Nguyen. “I don’t really talk politics, I’m Vietnamese, and in a communist country we’re not used to talking about politics.”

The priest names the erosion of genuine human connection caused by technology as the main culprit in declining church attendance and subsequent decisions, like the parish closing its last Catholic school this past summer. “Jesus didn’t say you’re going to have Steve Jobs to deal with,” he says. “People are becoming impersonal.”

Ministry in places like Appalachia poses particular challenges, says William Portier, a professor of theology at the University of Dayton in Ohio. “People in those regions have a massive and growing distrust in all institutions, except for the military,” he says. “Without community, belonging to a church and taking the sacraments becomes a series of isolated, individual choices, and that makes the church more vulnerable.”
The decline in community bonds is felt most painfully by socially active residents like Andrea Keller, the cultural program coordinator at the museum next to the Adena burial mound, the town’s grandest tourist draw. The conical hill draws over 12,000 visitors a year. The museum, located in a low-slung concrete building, houses West Virginia’s state archaeological collection, including tips of 10,000-year-old spears made out of rock, and the bones of mammoths, mastodons and giant ground sloths that roamed West Virginia 10,000 years ago.

Ms. Keller says she has noticed the disintegration of community in Moundsville in the three social organizations she belongs to, including a gardening club. “It’s becoming hard to get enough people to organize anything,” she says. “And there are barely any young people left at all.”

Across the street from the mound is the hulking fortress-like prison, built in 1866 and closed in 1995. Buses full of school groups and tourists parade through its cramped cell blocks and gawk at Old Sparky, its old electric chair.

Townspeople welcome the dollars that tourism draws in, but they worry about its volatility. “It’s not like a big factory, where you have jobs all year round,” says Susan Board, manager of the local airport. The transient nature of the new economy is jarring to a place like Moundsville, “where people lived on the land for generations, and want to really know who you are before they trust you,” she says.

Some in Moundsville say the burial mound could draw even more tourists by playing off tales of paranormal and alien influences, but Ms. Keller emphasizes the sacredness of the area. “We have to maintain our integrity,” she says. “It is a grave site.”

Wal-Mart Comes to Town
Moundsville faced another ethical commercial dilemma in the 1990s, when Wal-Mart sought to build a store. The winning argument was that it would bring in shoppers from Ohio and Pennsylvania. On a recent Tuesday night, the parking lot was packed with people streaming in to chase bargains like boxes of spaghetti for a dollar, tomato sauce for $1.17, and Christmas sweaters made in China for $7.49—all lower prices, when adjusted for inflation, than they could have dreamed of a generation ago. The Wal-Mart offers jobs for a couple of hundred people, who make $9 an hour to start, say employees. They describe it as an easy job to get when you first get to town. Wal-Mart did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Remke, the recently elected vice mayor intent on attracting new business, incarnates many the trends affecting Moundsville. A lifelong resident, his dad was a retail businessman and ran a furniture and appliance store that Mr. Remke took over in 1982, and closed in 2008, partly because of the arrival of Wal-Mart.

“At first we, didn’t support them moving in, but then we realized it was coming no matter what,” he says. “It really is great you can buy anything there.”

Mr. Remke helped turn the prison into a tourist attraction after it closed in 1995. In 2008 he started a medical supplies company he closed in 2014 because, he says, of the rising costs of Obamacare. And his son is a coal miner at
the Marshall County mine. “He’d be out of a job if it weren’t for Trump,” he says. Economists and coal companies say the assertion is partly founded. Mr. Broadbent of Murray Energy says the Trump administration “has taken several vitally important actions to protect” American coal jobs.

Mr. Remke, who wears a hat that says “FBI Jesus,” an acronym for Firm Believer in Jesus, has drifted away from the Catholicism of his youth. He now goes to church twice on Sundays, once at St. Francis and a second time at the Vineyard, an evangelical church in Wheeling. He likes the video screens and the “updated” music. The Catholic Church, he says, “just isn’t moving with the times; it’s an older generation and they don’t want the rock and roll types.”

As for Moundsville, even Mr. Remke does not think bringing back factory jobs is a realistic goal. “Everything is too automated these days; they don’t hire enough people,” he says. Mr. Remke says a more realistic proposition is bringing in hotels that will pay well enough to force Wal-Mart to raise wages, more gas-related projects, small businesses and high-tech firms.

His political idol, he says, is Richard Caliguiri, a mayor of Pittsburgh who in the 1980s saw the erosion of the steel industry and presided over the first conversations about transforming that city into something else.

“Caliguiri started the process of turning a steel town into a high-tech town,” says Mr. Remke. “I don’t see why we can’t do the same thing.”

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