

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, July 21, 2016: “Prepare for a future without coal.” Casper Star Tribune, July 23: “Coal reliance is costing us.”

At one time in my life my husband and I and our children lived a few miles south of Lopez Lake, California. A woman from town came to visit once. She did not stay long, saying she could not imagine dwelling in a place like ours. “I’d be scared the dam would break. The waters would rush down and sweep my house away, drowning everyone inside.”

Similar apprehensions appear to exist among the residents of Rock Springs, Wyoming, as concerns subsidence. At least that’s how J. J. Anselmi explains the hopelessness and despair of the many suicides and substance abusers in his autobiography, “Heavy.” He was nine years old when his dad’s best friend shot himself with a twelve-gauge shotgun. Another of his father’s friends killed himself in 2006. A couple of uncles did themselves in. Meanwhile, all through his and his sister’s childhood, Anselmi Sr., as described by his son, was a habitual drunk and pot user “stoned out of his head.” The friends were users of pot, heroin, and alcohol.

(A word to the squeamish: this author makes liberal use of the “f” word, beginning with the subtitle.)

After explaining that, between 1875 and 1930, Rock Springs produced more coal than any other town connected to the Union Pacific Railroad—Rock Springs “still proudly identifies itself as a mining boomtown,” and an old town sign describes the city as “home of coal”—Mr. Anselmi delves into the underbelly of coal companies’ take on capitalism: the subsidence holes that appear when mine shafts cave in.

These holes have showed up in Rock Springs since the early nineteen hundreds. They are still an issue because “mine owners often lied about the square footage of their mines.”

The companies sought to avoid tax increases that were calculated by the size of the mines. Their lies resulted in “unreliable and incomplete coal mine maps” that cause problems to this day.

“Built on top of an old mine shaft, the foundation of East Junior High cracked when the shaft caved in. The only solution was to destroy the school,” he writes of his schooldays. Earlier, “During Sunday Mass at the downtown Catholic church in January of 1949, a massive patch of street suddenly caved in, creating a sixty-by-eighty foot maw directly in front of the church. . . . Several voids opened under a small neighborhood in 1968, severely damaging ten houses.”

In the early seventies, the city tried to deal with subsidence by pouring massive amounts of sand and water into those mines it was able to pinpoint. “But the water destroyed the support beams in the mines, mostly just causing more subsidence holes. . . . In 2007, twenty- and thirty-ton weights were smashed into the ground to cave in mines, and thus avoid unforeseen subsidence.”

Unfortunately, the planners failed to consider the vibrations from this process, which damaged homes in nearby neighborhoods; additionally, previously unknown mines opened up beneath houses. “Peoples’ walls cracked. Floors and driveways sunk. Window and door frames warped. A few people got carbon monoxide poisoning from gas that was trapped underground.”

The latest attempt is injecting grout into several sections of a mine, which creates stabilizing columns. Of course, this can be done only insofar as a mine is known to exist.

In the past thirty years alone, Wyoming has spent over 160 million dollars on these efforts, observes Mr. Anselmi.

Did the coal companies who created the problem help finance the burden? I doubt it. The corporate way is to sell a company to a competitor who then claims that the problem was none of its doing.

Another ugly outcome of railroad-and-coal capitalism was the Rock Springs Massacre.

“In 1885, 150 white railroad workers slaughtered twenty-eight Chinese immigrants, wounded fifteen, and forced several hundred others out of town.”

Mr. Anselmi believes the reason for the pogrom was Chinese willingness to work for lower wages. Weren’t the pitiful wages were forced upon them by the railroad bosses? Immigrants with non-white complexions were cheated twice. Sometimes they were cheated out of their very lives. Yet still we celebrate the march of capitalism.

It’s high time Wyoming planned for a future without coal. “Relying on this industry is like booking a ticket on the Titanic,” writes Jackson Hole resident Griffin Post in a recent issue of “Powder River Breaks.” Coal mining is more than ugly. “Coal is one of the biggest sources of greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change and jeopardizing our bountiful snowpack, our winter tourism industry, and our children’s future.” He highlights renewable energy as the job-creating opportunity of the next several decades.

While electricity generated with coal may be the least expensive source of power, its damage to the environment—and to the human spirit, as detailed by Mr. Anselmi—is immeasurably costly.