

David DeKok  
113 Conoy Street  
Harrisburg, Pa. 17104  
July 5, 1989

U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services  
attn. Freedom of Information Unit  
200 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION  
ACT REQUEST

*FOIA-89-446*  
*Rec'd 10-12-89*  
*Ref from HHS*

RECEIVED  
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Dear Sir or Madam,

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, I would like copies of all documents in the files of HHS or predecessor departments pertaining to departmental response to the March 28, 1979 nuclear accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Middletown, Pa. I am especially interested in documents that would show Secretary Joseph Califano's role during the accident.

Included in my request are all letters--both outgoing and incoming--reports, memorandums, telephone call logs or memos, chronologies, and any post-event audits relating to the department's efforts to protect public health and safety during the accident. I have submitted a separate request to the FDA for its TMI documents.

If Mr. Califano has relevant personal papers from this period not accessible through the FOIA, I would be grateful if you would indicate that and where I might contact him.

I would also like copies of any departmental plans that existed prior to the TMI accident for responding to nuclear accidents, and copies of any current plans and related documents developed afterward.

I am also asking for a public interest waiver of all search and copying fees. These documents will be used in a book I am writing about the TMI accident and its impact on the world, a book that I hope

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will be the definitive history. These documents will contribute significantly to public understanding of the most serious U.S. nuclear accident, to the role played by HHS during the accident, and whether the department was prepared for such an accident then and now.

To establish my professional credentials, I would call your attention to the enclosed review of my previous book, *Unseen Danger*, which appeared in the Sunday book review section of The New York Times on Jan. 4, 1987.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (717) 234-5662, mornings.

Thank you for your kind assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David DeKok", with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the left.

David DeKok

The New York Times

# Book Review

January 4, 1987

Section 1: The New York Times



William Carlos Williams's poems, reviewed by Robert Pinsky, Page 3.

## Hell's Upper Story

### UNSEEN DANGER

A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire.

By David DeKok.

Illustrated. 299 pp. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Cloth, \$29.95. Paper, \$17.95.

### SLOW BURN

A Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania.

Text and photographs by Renée Jacobs.

152 pp. Philadelphia:

University of Pennsylvania Press. Paper, \$24.95.

By Ben A. Franklin

**Y**OU are surrounded by all the tremendous forces of nature, straining against your effort to extract this coal. You are in a continual struggle. Nature is out to protect its resources and you are there, wresting 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 angry 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 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 Renée 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 snails in the depressed, largely mined-out hard-coal region known to miners as "the anthracite" was smoked and chuked 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.

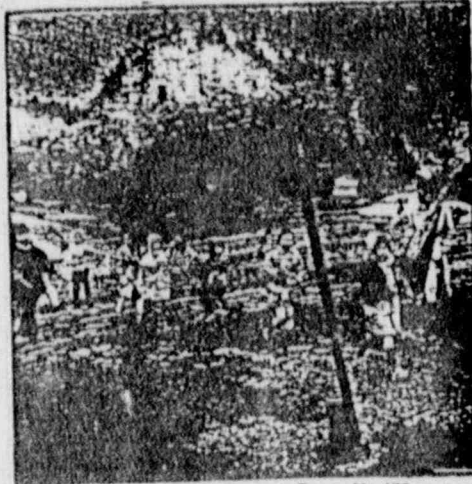
Ben A. Franklin, a correspondent in the Washington bureau of The New York Times who has covered the coal industry in Appalachia, is writing a history of coal and coal mining.



In Chrissie Kogut's home in 1987 a machine monitors carbon monoxide emissions from the underground mine fire in Centralia, Pa. Photographs from "Slow Burn."

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 1970's. 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 1960's, 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,



On Memorial Day, 1984, Brownie Troop No. 175 passes a bore hole that vents steam and smoke from the underground fire.

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 red 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 Charnbury.

In "Slow Burn," the gallery of stark Works Progress Administration-style photographs by Renée 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 schoolyards and churchyards, in sidewalks and intersections, and topped at ground level 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. □