

**L**ORAIN, Ohio – There’s life in this dying city. It’s on the hunt for a job when the sun breaks and at the end of the bar for some liquid therapy in the afternoon. It’s at the free food pantry in the evening and stumbling into the arms of a hungry family at night.

There’s life in this dying city. It’s fighting to keep the lights on when the hours and checks from the steel mills stopped coming. It’s praying for safety when firefighters were laid off after the city’s budget gap became a canyon.

There’s life in this dying city, but it’s hanging by a thread that’s getting thinner by the day.

“I’ve seen it go up and down,” said Suzie Hartman, a bartender at the Crystal Rock Inn as she was serving up brown liquor and cold American beer on a recent afternoon. “But I haven’t seen this right here in a long time.”

This right here – the recent shutdown and idling of two steel mills, more than a thousand laid-off workers and a devastating economic ripple – is the troubling milieu to which this onetime hub of industry is slowly coming undone. Lorain, a city of more than 60,000 people about 30 miles west of Cleveland, has seen its share of economic decline and loss of industry over the decades.





In Lorain, Ohio, shuttered steel mills like this one are symbols of a bygone era when manufacturing was king. Today, Lorain is struggling. Lorain is a town in Lorain County with a population of 64,097 and 28.2% live below the poverty level.

The Ford assembly plant – gone. The National Gypsum plant – gone. Johnson Metals – gone. The shipyard – long gone. The list of shuttered facilities goes on and on.

But in the past year alone, the city has lost two of its largest employers – U.S. Steel and Republic Steel. After months of layoffs, both finally halted operations this past spring.

The local economy has been devastated as a result of the shutdowns. The city’s budget is currently running short by about \$3.6 million, mostly due to lost tax revenue, which has resulted in drastic cuts to city services.

Most of the parks have been neglected. City employees, including 22 firefighters, were laid off and Lorain had to scramble to secure federal grants to replace them and to save the jobs of many police officers. Officials are also considering a tax increase, and things have gotten so bad that the city has started turning off traffic lights to save on its electric bill.

There was a time when the steel mills in Lorain employed some 15,000 workers.

“If I could get a guarantee of a thousand jobs out of there I’d take it tomorrow,” Mayor Chase Ritenauer said. “Certainly there’s the impact to those who lost their jobs and are struggling to get by. That’s felt throughout the community.”

In 2015, local agencies in Stockton, Calif. counted 1,209 people in homeless shelters. Another 515 adults and 26 children slept on the streets, double that of two years earlier. Stockton is a town in San Joaquin County with a population of 291,707 and 25.8% live below the poverty level.

Lorain's economic plight is not unique. It illustrates the fate of many forlorn cities and towns across the region, spanning deep into the old industrial enclaves that dot the so-called Rust Belt, a vast stretch of post-industrial towns that once turned natural resources into economic wealth. Railroads from Baltimore, Maryland to Gary, Indiana carried coal, oil, meat and livestock, providing Americans with sustenance.

But with advancements in automation and the expansion of the global

economy and trade, many of the industrial towns that once served as the country's economic heartbeat are now on life support.

“We’ve had to make some really tough decisions,” Ritenauer said. “But what we’re going through is par for the course in terms of what you hear from the Rust Belt. Lorain was built on steel and automotive and a lot of these industries have been outsourced or swapped for cheaper products. That has wreaked havoc on Lorain.”

The mayor isn’t alone in his assessment. Shuttered companies have blamed their fate on international market forces out of their control. Because of low energy prices, there’s a surplus of gas and oil in the market. That glut has meant less drilling and fracking, and subsequently less demand for the steel pipes and other equipment that companies like Republic Steel and U.S. Steel manufacture to help extract that oil and gas. Another factor is what labor unions, economists and industry analysts call “dumping,” when foreign steel-producing countries, such as China, produce inferior steel and sell it in America well below market value, cutting into the domestic market.

The double whammy of low oil and gas prices and dumping has put Lorain’s workers in a precarious position. Laid-off steelworkers are struggling to find work and provide for their families. Many had spent years if not decades in the plants, neglecting formal education for the school of hard work. Cars have been repossessed. Homes have been forced into foreclosure. Proud breadwinners have been reduced to depending on family, public assistance and the goodwill of others.

“We knew it was coming,” said Tom Kelling, a steelworker who spent more than two decades working in Lorain’s mills before being laid off by U.S. Steel in November 2015. “We had a feeling. We just weren’t sure when it would come. Finally it came, and they said on this day we’re done running. But when they tell you that you’re done, it kinda shocks you at first. It’s like, ‘Now what?’”

# Journey Through the Heartland

Follow photographer Matt Black's 2015 and 2016 routes as he explores and documents America's impoverished communities on [Instagram](#).

Salinas,

CA

Salinas is a city in Monterey County, Calif. The population is 150,441 and 20.5% live below the poverty level.



## STEEL CITY

**T**here's a saying in this part of Ohio and across struggling old Rust Belt cities: "The threat is real from foreign steel." It slips easily from the mouths of grizzled union guys and laid-off steelworkers without any hint of hyperbole.

You hear it at squat little bars like the Crystal Rock Inn or in casual conversation with workers who've been around the block a few times,

fellows seasoned in the catch-as-catch-can world of layoffs and rehires.

Most of the men sidled up to the bar at Crystal Rock, just up the road from the massive U.S. Steel complex on East 28th Street, had grown up in the shadows of the city's once bustling, now broken steel industry. They followed their father's footsteps into the plants and fed their families on factory paychecks. An imprecise head count showed a majority of them were former employees of the steel mills or other manufacturers in town.

The Industrial Valley neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio is among many relics across the Rust Belt where the fate of families and entire cities were tied to big industry. Cleveland is a city in Cuyahoga County with a population of 396,815 and 35.9% live below the poverty level.

“That’s what we were brainwashed to do,” said Audi Rodriguez, a former factory worker at U.S. Steel in the 1980s and 1990s, of bypassing educational opportunities and other career options for work in the plants. “What is the future? The people who govern our country, what are they doing with all these people that they just threw away? What are they going to do with all the people? Most of them only have a 12th grade diploma, if that.”

“You talk to people and you can still see the strain on them of not being educated enough to grow,” Rodriguez said. “It has impacted a lot of people and it still is. But we’re just small people.”

Hartman, the bartender, nodded softly in agreement. She’s seen the toll that dependence on the mills has taken on people over decades of layoffs, strikes and closures. What’s going on now is just more of the same, she said.

“You know what you do? You start cooking big pots of spaghetti. Food you know will last for a few days,” she said.

The city’s nicknames, “Steel City” and “International City,” once spoke to a place that had been a beacon of industry with the power to draw residents from around the globe. Today, in a cruel twist of irony, those monikers speak to the formula by which the city is being choked out of the steel business – the loss of industrial luster in a cutthroat global economy.

“China is our biggest foe. Then Korea, India and a little bit of Italy,” said Kelling. “They’re subsidizing their companies to make weak steel. Then they sell it so cheap we can’t keep up.”

In downtown Canton, Ohio, the living march among the ghosts of times past. The skeletons of what had been are everywhere, from vacant warehouses to crumbling storefronts. Canton is a city in Stark County with a population of 73,007 and 32.4% live below the poverty level.

In July 2016, the U.S. Commerce department set new anti-dumping duties on certain kinds of steel products being shipped into the states by a number of countries. The taxes range from 3.7 percent to 34.3 percent over the next five years and are aimed at Australia, Brazil, Britain, Japan, South Korea and Turkey. While the new import taxes could still be overturned by the U.S. International Trade Commission, it's the latest effort by the U.S. to fight a glut of steel imports.

The unions blame trade deals for much of their pain, in particular the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed in 1993 under President Bill Clinton. Another trade deal vexing many in the industry is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a deal with a bloc of Asian countries that is close to being passed. Some say the international agreements have made it harder for American manufacturers who are burdened with myriad regulatory, labor and environmental requirements that other countries don't have to contend with. Presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton oppose the TPP, the latter voicing her opposition after initially supporting the trade deal, which is favored by the Obama administration.

"I oppose it now, I'll oppose it after the election and I'll oppose it as president," Clinton said in a recent speech.

The massive deal includes a dozen Pacific Rim countries and getting it finalized will be one of President Obama's last major efforts before leaving office.

At the same time, the International Trade Administration says the TPP will be a boon for Ohio and will strengthen international partnerships. The group

says that Ohio exported goods to TPP countries to the tune of \$30.6 billion, most of which came from small and medium-sized companies. But according to the Economic Policy Institute, the TPP could mean the dramatic loss of domestic jobs. According to a recent report by the group, the U.S. trade deficit with TPP countries cost 2 million domestic jobs in 2015.

At this year's Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Trump said that under his presidency he'd get Americans back to work building highways, bridges, airports and railways. He said he's visited laid-off factory workers and "communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals."



Tin structures beaten by weather and time prove the resolve of the small towns that stitch America together.

“These are the forgotten men and women of our country,” Trump said. During his nomination speech, Trump blamed regulations and taxes for choking American energy production and promised to produce more than \$20 trillion in “job-creating economic activity over the next four decades.”

While President Barack Obama won Lorain County in 2008 and 2012 with 58 percent and 56 percent respectively, Trump has made strategic inroads there. He was the only Republican candidate to open an office in town and has time and again appealed to industry interests.

Still, the national unions that represent workers at both Republic Steel and U.S. Steel have endorsed Hillary Clinton. Last month during a stop in Cleveland, Clinton detailed her economic plan. She said her plan would create 10 million jobs in four years, 376,000 of which would be in Ohio.

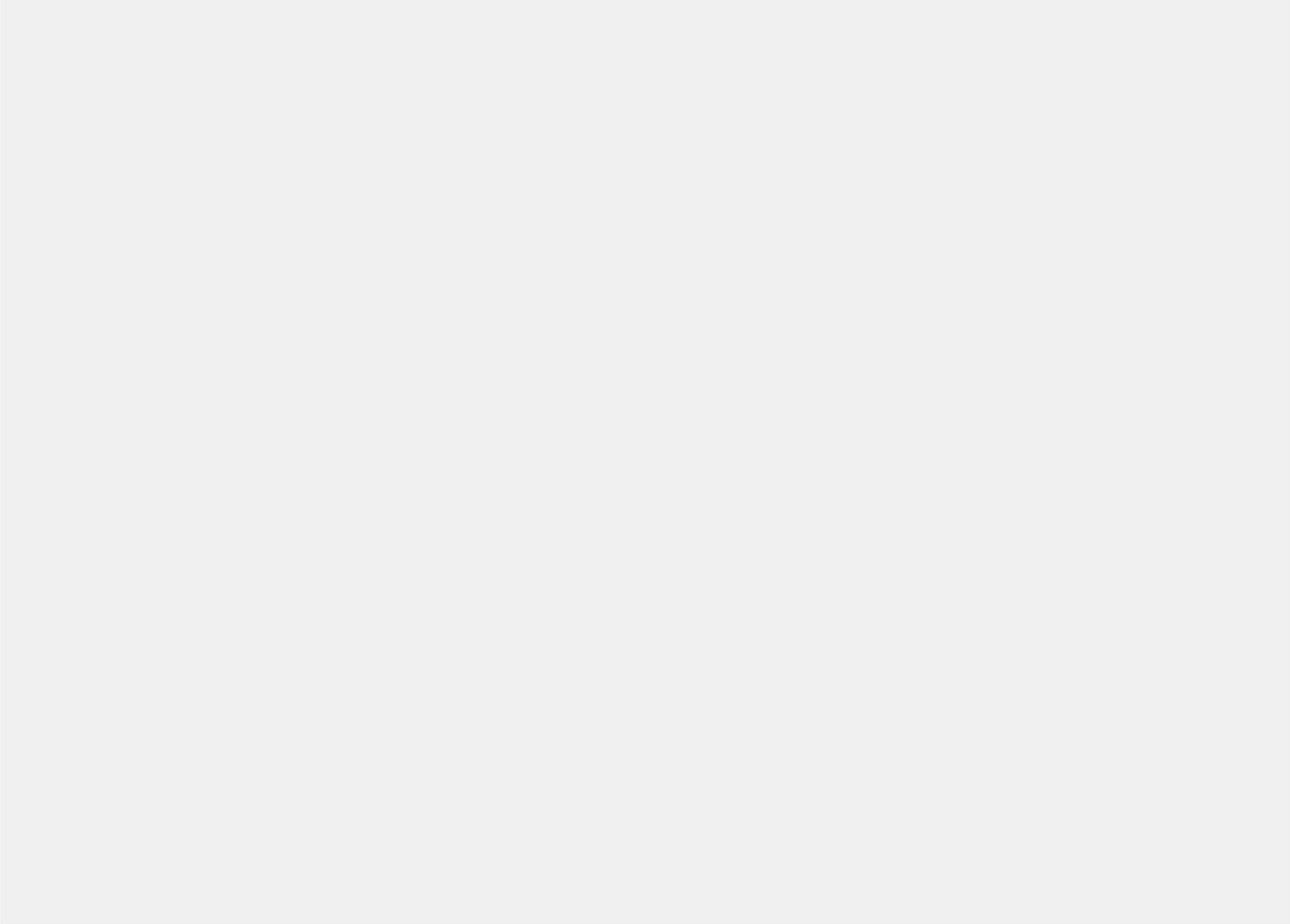
“I am proud to be the granddaughter of a factory worker and the daughter of a small businessman,” she said.

But there remains some trepidation on the ground as to who could best lead the industry out of the muck of the downturn.

There’s deep resentment among many workers who see countries like Mexico syphoning off jobs and little being done by Washington to protect the livelihoods of American workers.

“I see the rank and file divided. And I can’t blame them,” Glenn Loughrie, president of the Lorain County AFL-CIO, told MSNBC in July. “Because systematically over a 10- to 12-year period, jobs have left this country. These guys are mad and I think a lot of them have given up. Because no matter who you put in Washington, the same thing happens.”

## **‘Everything Has Changed’**



The main strips in downtown Lorain are pocked with shuttered buildings, ragged streets and crumbling infrastructure. Many businesses have held on over generations of decline. Many others haven't.

“**J**ust look around, look at this street,” said Gloria Perez, who lives on a potholed road not far from Lorain’s main industrial drag. “Lots of damage to the houses. Empty lots. Nobody can afford to fix anything.”

Perez sat on her front porch, lording over a pair of grandchildren and a yard sale of old tchotchkes, dishware, clothing and toys that stretched from her steps to the sidewalk.

“Everything has changed,” she said, opening her arms wide. “It’s not like it used to be.”

You can see it in the eyes of town folk, hear it in the old stories of Lorain’s

heyday and feel it in the calloused handshakes from men who grew up in a time when a union card was more valuable to them than a college ID.

There was a time when the Ford automotive company and the steel mills ran multiple shifts a day and employed some 15,000 workers. But 2016 is a far cry from that heyday. Downtown is pocked with neglected and crumbling commercial buildings. Many of its residential neighborhoods are equally deteriorated as the population continues to shrink. Those who do remain feel every bit of the weight of the city's economic struggles on their shoulders.

In nearby Cleveland, once a major force in American industry, deep rivets of poverty are entrenched in the shadows of forlorn rail yards and abandoned warehouses and factories. Since the 1960s, Cleveland has lost several dozen factories and countless jobs. The long-term effects have been staggering. According to reports, the number of people in the Cleveland metropolitan area employed in manufacturing has dropped by 50 percent over the last 25 or so years.

The city's population has steadily diminished alongside the vanishing of blue-collar jobs. When the foreclosure crisis struck, huge swaths of the city were decimated, marked by abandoned and dilapidated houses. At the same time, Cleveland's municipal budget was slashed to keep the city's head above water. The economic pressure hit the city's most vulnerable residents especially hard.

Cleveland's downtown skyline is a blend of the new and the aged. The manufacturing-era structures stand in stark relief compared to the gleaming new buildings that shine in the light brought to the city by LeBron James and the resurgent Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team.

According to Claudia Coulton, a professor of urban research and social change at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, children and families have been crushed by the overall economic decline.

Coulton said that child poverty rates continues to increase in Cleveland and approximately 62 percent of children under the age of six live in families whose incomes fall below 100 percent of the federal poverty line.

While the percent of young children living in poverty outside of the city in the suburbs of Cuyahoga County is far lower, at about 31 percent, that means nearly a third of families in the county are confronting many of the same struggles faced by poor, urban families.

Beyond the expected uncertainty and struggle to secure food, clothing and shelter, many of the poor face even more insidious maladies directly correlated to their lot. The Poverty Center in 2013 found that almost 10 percent of children tested for lead in Cuyahoga County showed signs of elevated levels in their blood. In some neighborhoods that number climbed to 15 percent. Experts say that any exposure to lead can have irreversible, damaging effects on a child's health, including IQ, cognitive function and behavioral issues.

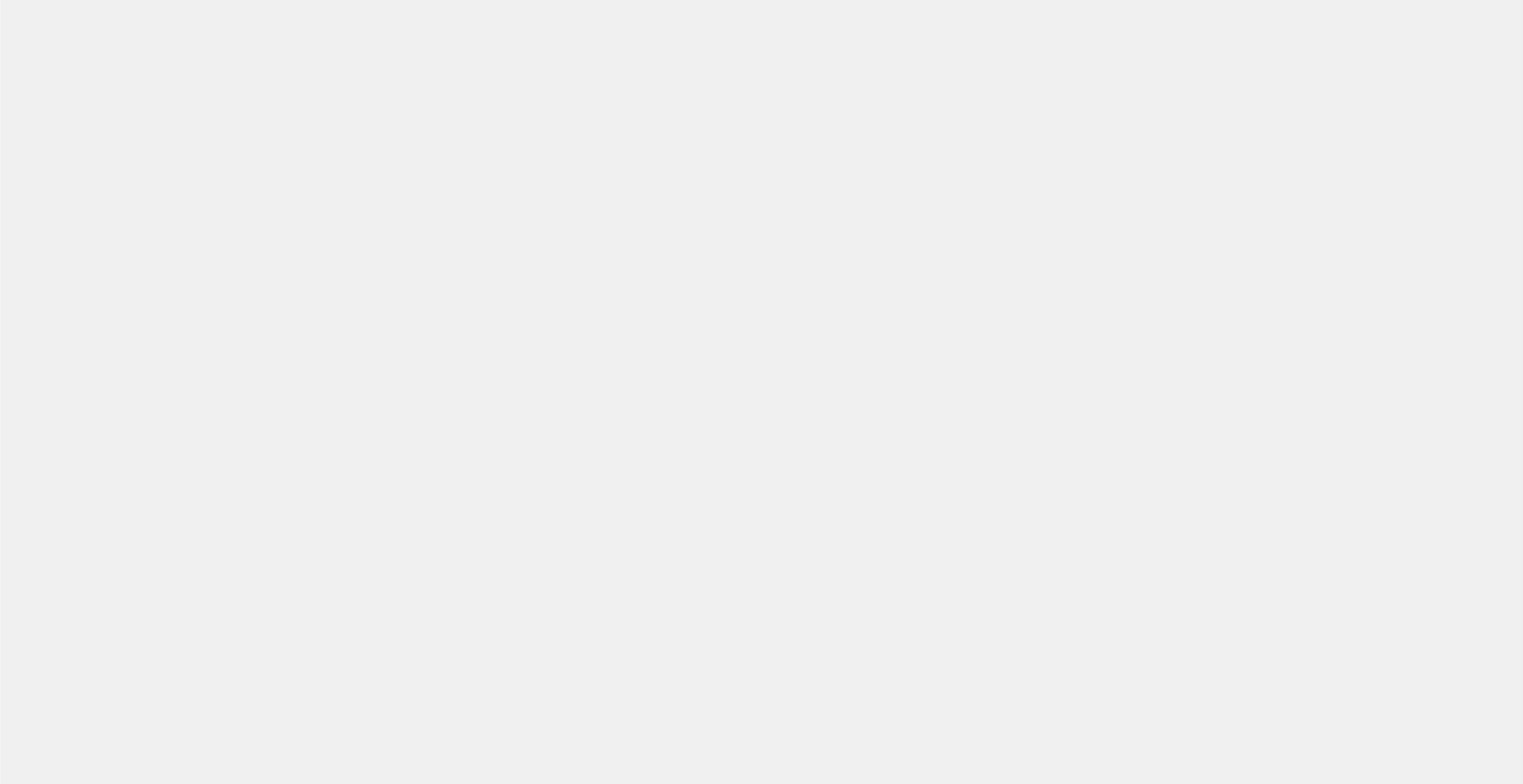
The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, another largely impoverished Rust Belt city, was caused both by inept local and state government officials who placed budgetary concerns over people's safety and deteriorating and corroding infrastructure. The latter is a hallmark of literally rusting post-industrial cities.





California's cowboys lament the loss of the land and industry as a means of providing for their families.

The fate of communities and the people who inhabit them are often tied to industry, be it farmland and the cattle ranches of northern California, where migrant workers dredge out a meager living yanking fruits and vegetables from the earth, or in Indian Country, where oil and gas companies have pushed their pipelines onto sacred land on North and South Dakota's reservations, threatening the way of life of Native Americans while posing serious environmental risks. Industrial work, manufacturing and farming keeps some communities relatively resilient while the loss of those industries has pushed other communities into insolvency, including the largely African-American inner-city communities whose middle class had once been bolstered by factory jobs that no longer exist.



A farmworker in Salinas, Calif. splashes through the sprinklers as this field is being irrigated. Farm labor is dirty, grueling work that draws immigrants who risk life and limb for the opportunity to make meager wages. Ninety percent of California's farm laborers are undocumented. It costs \$3,000 to \$5,000 for a migrant to be smuggled across the U.S./Mexico border. The average income for a farm laborer in California is under \$10,000 per year. Salinas is a city in Monterey County with a population of 150,441 and 20.5% live below the poverty level.

Latino migrant workers, documented and undocumented alike, often live at the whim of policy makers. Those policy makers toe the line between reality – that migrant labor is vital to agricultural production in the United States – and public opinion that has cast the workers as villains. The run-up to the 2016 presidential election has shown just how toxic the rhetoric around the latter can be.

Chants of “Build That Wall” have been hurled countless times by supporters of Trump, who infamously said Mexico in particular sends its worst to work in America, including rapists and drug smugglers. The chant has been used along with racial slurs to berate and belittle the Latinos who come to this country to work and fill the demands of industry.

The fight on the Indian Reservations has been hostile as well. Members of various tribes have protested oil pipeline projects, including the Keystone XL

and Dakota Access pipelines, planned to cut directly through sovereign Native American land. In recent months, hundreds of mostly Native American protesters have faced off with workers and law enforcement in an attempt to thwart the construction of the pipelines. The pipes would cross rivers and precious water supplies, and tribal members fear the prospect of environmental devastation caused by their installation and what would course through them. The pipelines are expected to create thousands of jobs, but those who live on nearby land believe the damage will outweigh the benefit.

The post-industrial fallout goes beyond shifting economic drivers. The loss of industry has also changed the demographics of manufacturing cities that once fueled thriving white working class communities while also drawing African-Americans, particularly those who fled the South during the early 1900s in search of greater opportunity in the industrial North.



The West once represented America's great promise, before the fields and opportunities dried up in the drought.

## Struggles in the Suburbs

**W**hen Ann George opened the Parma Heights Food Bank in the suburb just outside of Cleveland nine years ago, she expected to see maybe 50 families a month. That number steadily grew over time. Today, about 300 families visit the food bank each month. Many come in the last week, when the bills are due and money is tight. A healthy number of them are laid-off factory workers. Year after year, she said, she's seeing more of her neighbors in this once solidly middle class suburb coming to her pantry for food and clothing – folks she hasn't seen in ages who'd been doing well until they weren't.

Folks spend more than an hour in her office talking through their problems. Sometimes people will come in to pick through racks of suits or dresses, curated for those going on job interviews.

“The families that we are seeing have been working, you know. [They] were used to having a paycheck coming in and all of a sudden they are not. That makes it really hard,” she said. “The jobs that they are getting are not paying what the jobs at Ford and General Motors were. My husband worked at Ford for 39 years and he retired early. I worked at the telephone company Ohio Bell and later AT&T.”

Folks spend more than an hour in her office talking through their problems. Sometimes people will come in to pick through their rack of suits or dresses, curated especially for those going on job interviews. Some, George said proudly, were donated by the mayor of Parma Heights. The walls are lined with shelves filled with food. There's a bin of toys, a treasure chest of trinkets plucked from the Happy Meals George and her husband like so much. And there are handmade blankets made by local high school students especially for needy veterans. Other times, people will come in for help getting

connected to various social services, or for job placement resources.

Despite the open door policy, George, 83, said so many of her clients are embarrassed to ask for help. “I’ll go up and hug them and say you know, I was at your place years ago,” she said.

“Jobs are going out and people aren’t being replenished,” said Mary Jonas Fertal, who worked at General Motors for nearly a dozen years before developing lung disease. She said that before leaving for good she’d been laid off, hired and laid off again. Now, she’s struggling to find meaningful work.

“I don’t want to cry. But it’s a drastic change. I’m not one of the few that had 30 years in there. At least I had 11-and-a-half [years] and I get partial pension,” Fertal said. “It’s like \$800 less than I’m used to. But that \$800 makes a big difference.”

Fertal said that she volunteers at the pantry but also benefits from the free food it provides. “Sometimes I come here if I really need,” she said. “I don’t burden my kids, I don’t burden my grandkids.”

The threat of shutdowns and layoffs were part of everyday life for years, she said. It loomed there like a thumb on every life decision.

**“Goals? I have short term goals and that’s it. That I make it to the next day. I always say, ‘Thank God that I woke up this morning.’”**

Mary Jonas Fertal

“My goal was to one day own my own house. Well, that never happened. Goals? I have short term goals and that’s it. That I make it to the next day. I always say, ‘Thank God that I woke up this morning. Thank God my kids are healthy.’ And it’s scary. It’s a scary thing,” she said. “We’re not settled. Some

people are settled. I'm not settled."

Sometimes, though, there's a silver lining amid the collective despair. There's some glint of hope that shines through even the most beaten person who walks through the pantry's doors.

"It's seeing the people that come in here," George said. "Seeing them and knowing that we can help them and especially with the job interviews and that type of thing, that's what drives me."

For George, helping her neighbors has been passed down her family line. Her father was a shoemaker in Cleveland and a World War I veteran. His work and pension meant the family could buy food, their necessities, and always had a little extra. George said her parents would use that to help others. She recalled the hard-luck guys who'd mark the railroad tracks behind their house so that others would know which porch to go up to for a meal.



LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers have brought hope back to Cleveland, but many downtown still struggle to make ends meet.

Many of them, like those today, were hardworking people who'd fallen on hard times.

“That’s what’s scary to me. That we’re seeing it again and these folks aren’t used to it. They’re used to being able to provide for themselves and their families and all of a sudden they can’t do that,” she said. “And it really is hard on them. And you know people say, oh, they come there because they’re too lazy and they don’t want to work. That’s not true.”

## Life After Steel

**T**om Kelling, the laid-off steelworker, knows intimately the struggle of his industry brethren. Kelling said the future he’d imagined has been knocked for a loop, a reality that he hasn’t kept a secret from his family.

Family trips to McDonald’s and Friday night pizza have become rarities. Holidays are festive but with less emphasis on the superficial gift giving. Kelling has seen friends’ marriages crumble beneath the stress and strain of joblessness, and other couples who’ve had to sell their homes and move in with in-laws. Another close buddy had to sell his beloved pickup truck.

“It’s always in the back of my mind, what if I don’t get back on my feet,” said Kelling, 47. “Am I going to lose my house? I got three kids, a daughter who’s 17 and looking at colleges. Am I going to be able to put her in college?”

Tom Kelling, 47, worked in Lorain steel mills for more than 20 years. When he was laid off from U.S. Steel in 2015, it was a major blow. Like so many others, he wonders how he will provide for his family. “Right now I’m frustrated. It seems to be getting worse,” he said. “This town, there’s a cloud hanging over it.”

Kelling has become active and vocal in calling for assistance and policy changes that will bolster the prospects of people like him who’ve lost so much. At a county commission meeting back in March, he stood and made plain the town’s steel conundrum as he sees it.

He blamed cheap foreign steel and the ineffectiveness of high tariffs for the dumping of that steel into the U.S. market. He lamented the trickle-down effect the depressed steel market was having locally and how, after investing 21 years in the steel industry, he and so many others are simply at a loss.

That night, the commissioners agreed in sentiment but had little power beyond passing a resolution. One of the commissioners read resolution No. 16-196, which voiced the panel’s support of “taking all necessary steps to prevent foreign steel dumping and encourage any modifications or

enforcements or current trade laws that are necessary to stop this from occurring.”

The resolution was both a grim reflection of life in “Steel City” but also a bold, if toothless, call to action. It lamented the fact that the federal government’s bailout of the automotive and banking industries took no stand on the faltering steel industry.

These “unfair conditions are adversity [sic] impacting Lorain County steelworkers and their families,” the resolution read, concluding with a call to send the resolution to the President of the United States and Ohio’s congressional delegation.

The remains of what had been are scattered, stacked from the plains to the Rust-Belt and all through America's heartland. Hulking scraps of twisted steel and other detritus lay bare a sort of post-industrial epoch. In a junkyard in Laramie, Wyoming, rows of crushed automobiles represent the mangled economy of the city. Laramie is a city in Albany County with a population of 30,816 where 30.8% live below the poverty line.

Months later, Kelling was at a crossroads. He’d sat in on meetings with elected officials, held court at the local union halls and made a mission out of telling whoever would listen about the plight of laid-off workers. Yet, he’s seen little change.

Almost every week he’s sending out his resume online or marching into storefront office buildings looking for work. He went back to school to get his commercial driver’s license so he could get a job as a truck driver. He applied

for a manager position at a supermarket chain. Still, no bites.

“Right now I’m frustrated. It seems to be getting worse,” he said. “This town, there’s a cloud hanging over it.”

There was a moment recently that gave Kelling pause, but also a sense of pride.

His daughter began working at a local drug store. She knew how tough things have been for her family, so she took her meager earnings and bought her own school supplies for the upcoming year.

“At first I yelled at her. I said no, I will do that!” Kelling said. “But I thought about it and I’m very proud of her. Her job helps us a lot. My children understand our situation and they won’t ask me for a lot of stuff. Can I have this, can I have that. They don’t do that anymore. They understand that I just can’t do all that extra stuff right now.”



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