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"The play is finished, but the echoes remain." - Arbit Blatas

Alvira: A Town Destroyed, A Landscape Forever Altered

Would you believe me if I told you that there are places all around us that time seems to have forgotten? Scattered across the countryside, sometimes even interspersed among new buildings, lie vibrant memories of the past. One such place can be found by traveling north for approximately twenty minutes on State Route 15 from Lewisburg, PA. Upon arrival in the small town of Allenwood, a left-hand turn at the traffic light will redirect travelers onto State Route 44. After a ten minute drive on this road, the countryside will begin to be transformed into farmland, and you will find that the hustle and bustle of society has been left behind. A sharp right onto Mill Road will bring the final destination one step closer. After several more miles on this road, you will leave the farmland countryside behind and a steady transition into a forested landscape will begin. At the conclusion of this road, a right turn will send you on your way down an unpaved stretch of lonely road for one and a half miles, where your journey will abruptly end in the same fashion as the road. You have arrived. At this point, even just a cursory walk around the area surrounding the road will reveal various signs that something existed here in the past. A short walk will lead to a cemetery, old foundations, and more interestingly, a grid-like pattern of overgrown trails that lead deep into the forest. Even more mysterious discoveries are in store down those paths for the intrepid few who will choose to proceed, and a rich environmental history surrounds this land. The journey has begun.

As we begin taking a closer look at this area, we are about to embark on a trek that not only leads us through several hundred years of rich history but also takes us across the country as

well. Although it is but one minuscule location in a vast landscape, this area, known at one point in time as Alvira, reveals a more troubling problem about the nation as a whole: the pervasive ideology of American leadership at a government level as well as by American military leaders. In the quest for answers in this remote and forgotten location, we will be able to see how it serves as a powerful example of human destructiveness and gives us a glimpse of just how deeply entrenched the struggle for dominating power has become in the very fabric of our society.

Evolution of a Land

It is the year 1820, and the first formations of a village begin when a farmer and land entrepreneur by the name of Benjamin Pawling purchases a large tract of the land.¹ Prior to this, the land had been owned by John Eason, who was chiefly responsible for clearing some of the land in preparation for farming practices. Eason purchased the land from John Hanna, who was the first commissioner of Lycoming County.² Physical alterations of this land by human activity can be traced as early as 1776, when Hanna obtained a Letters Patent from the Commonwealth, which certified him as the rightful owner.³ A Letters Patent, which is also called a land patent, is a legal document issued by the government in which an individual is granted the title to a land, which can be passed on to the individual's heirs forever.⁴

¹ Huddy, Stephen C., and Paul C. Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordinance: An American Dream Denied." *Montgomery Area Historical Society*. Spring (2012): 1-48. Print.

² Hunsinger Jr., Lou. "Williamsport Firsts." *Williamsport Sun Gazette* 7 July. 2011. Print.
Lycoming County was established in 1795; at the time, Hanna was the owner of a majority of the land in the area.

³ Artman, D.B., "Now and Then." *Muncy Historical Society*. 1900. Print.

⁴ "Letters Patent." *TheFreeDictionary.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2013.
<http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Letters+patent>.

Pawling continues the pattern of subdividing the land and selling some of it off, and by 1825 a village was shaping into existence as more settlers purchased land. Over the next 75 years, the community grew steadily. In 1880, the census records for the town indicated that there was a growing diversity of occupations in the community, as there were farmers, a physician, a painter, a grocer, a bartender, a merchant, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a shoemaker, and more.⁵ This could be seen as evidence of some of the first major environmental changes on the land, as houses and shops were being created and large swaths of trees were cleared to make room for this expansion. The original village was named Wisetown after one of the earliest settlers to live there, but was renamed Alvira around 1864.⁶ By 1900, Alvira was home to one hundred citizens and many traditional buildings such as churches, a general store, a school, and a post office.⁷ Thus, since the initial land purchase in 1776 by John Hanna, the landscape can certainly be seen to have already begun to be drastically altered by human activity during the growth of the town. However, the greatest change to the area occupied by the recently formed town and the surrounding lands was yet to come.

Forced Changes

It happened during the winter months of 1941 into early 1942. Just like that, the lives of the townspeople would never be the same, and neither would the land. The Pearl Harbor attacks had just happened on December 7th of that year, and the United States was now officially at war.

⁵ Jamison, William A., (census taker). 1880 Census Data. Gregg Township, Pennsylvania. *Montgomery Area Public Library*.

⁶ Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 3. Print.

⁷ Hastings, Kate. "Alvira: Village is just a memory now." *The Milton Standard* 8 Oct. 1987: 1-2. Print.
Also, see Fig. 1 for mapped evidence of expanding town.

While the war effort was sweeping the nation, mysterious land surveyors were seen in Alvira.⁸ Only a few months later, government officials called for a meeting at the local Stone Church in Alvira. On the evening of March 7th, 1942, the 400 citizens who came to the meeting were given the news that approximately 165 properties would need to be evacuated and turned over to the government in order for a war plant to be constructed on the site.⁹ Plans for the site were very secretive, but the only thing that was made very obvious was that the citizens of Alvira would have no say in the decision. However, speculation grew about what this “war plant” would entail, and during the same week that the meeting was held in the Stone Church, the United States Rubber Company announced that it had been awarded a contract by the U.S. War Department to operate a new plant for the manufacturing of TNT.¹⁰ They also announced that it would be located somewhere in Pennsylvania, so connections could be easily made as to the purpose of the plant. Residents were given base-price settlements for their land, and were afforded six weeks to pack up all of their things and leave their properties.¹¹

Only seven days after the fateful meeting at the Stone Church, work began on the war plant, which became officially known as The Pennsylvania Ordnance Works. By March 26th, 1942, a petition was filed at the Federal Courthouse in Scranton, seeking the right of immediate condemnation of 7,604 acres of the White Deer Valley¹² and possession of all properties within the footprint of the Ordnance Works as well as other buffer properties outside the Ordnance

⁸ Interview with Darlene Kiefer, by author. Personal interview. Kiefer Home, October 2013.

My mother recounting what she had been told by her grandfather, John C. Moyer, about the government seizure of the land. John C. Moyer owned land in Alvira, until it was “bought” for the war effort.

⁹ Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 18. Print.

¹⁰ "White Deer Valley Residents Learn How Farms to Be Taken." *Williamsport Sun-Gazette*. 10 Mar. 1942: 1. Print.

¹¹ Interview with Darlene Kiefer, by author. Personal interview. Kiefer Home, October 2013.

¹² including all of Alvira

fences.¹³ The petition was granted almost immediately, without any contention or comments about its' passing. This could be seen as an example of the sheer power exerted by the government during these wartime days. On April 9th, 1942, one of the local newspapers ran an article describing the final few weeks of worship at the multiple churches that would be effectively closed and destroyed. It described how the town cemeteries would remain undisturbed throughout the process, but would be restricted from visitation during the construction of the plant. For me, the ultimately most telling line from this article was the very last sentence: "Remember Pearl Harbor."¹⁴ This came right after a lengthy article about how the government was claiming everyone's land and closing the churches, shops, and essentially destroying the very livelihood of 400 people. It was almost as if it was serving as a justification for their actions. In reality, no legitimate care was taken to preserve the purity of the land; it was merely a casualty of the war effort, made for the good of the people.

While the landscape was being transformed into a war factory, there were other similar sites across the country where the government was conducting the same type of procedure. Thus, the mysteries held by this area were duplicated in different parts of the country, serving to show how government intervention into the lives of Americans was driven by a need to prepare for impending war. Commanding obedience and no questions asked, the government exercised their authoritative power to make sure they were able to decide what was best for everyone. This resonates on a similar spectrum with the subsequent DDT scandal in later years. This additional case once more showed the prevailing belief of the time period, since again the government sought to control the decision-making of the entire country. By allowing for the spread of DDT

¹³ Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 18. Print.

¹⁴ "Visitors Toured White Deer Valley Easter Sunday." *Montgomery Mirror*. 9 Apr. 1942. 1. Print.

on fields, they hoped farms would be able to produce pristine products in larger volume.

However, as seen in many instances, this harmful spread of chemicals in fields led to countless side-effects on people exposed on a regular basis. This incident in American environmental history parallels what happened at Alvira, especially in how it impacted the lives of the people living in the area.

Altered Lives

As the residents were leaving, construction was beginning. Some of the townspeople of Alvira were forced to watch the demolition of the only home they had ever known. As a young boy living in Alvira at the time, Kenneth Blessing now recalls the coming of the Ordnance as being synonymous with sadness for many people. Some people were forced to sell their farm equipment and livestock at public sales, and Mr. Blessing vividly remembered one such sale where one farmer's livestock was bringing very little money, because "it was the first time I saw a man cry in public."¹⁵

As seen in some of the memories held by the residents of Alvira, much of environmental history lies in the examination of the deeper connections that can be formed between humans and the environment as well as the interactions that are facilitated between the two. However, another integral part of this relationship also lies in how these interactions shape human understanding of their surroundings. Thus, an intriguing avenue to pursue would be how the localized effects of the PA Ordnance Works impacted surrounding communities. One of the biggest impacts in surrounding communities in the 1940s were seen in rising land prices after the

¹⁵ Interview of Kenneth Blessing, by Delores Smith. "Kenneth Blessing Remembers a Great Life". June 1988.

entire village of Alvira was displaced. Those individuals were forced to move elsewhere, and for many, it was not feasible to just up and travel to another state in the blink of an eye. Thus, the most obvious place to begin looking for land was in the surrounding communities. However, this massive uptick in demand for land also caused prices in the area to skyrocket, and the minimal prices paid by the government for their land in Alvira was not nearly enough to purchase land elsewhere.¹⁶ It also created a strain on the economies of other local communities, as the main focus now shifted to the creation of the TNT plant as well as the war effort and not the past traditional agricultural mindset. The U.S. Government drafted an “Option for Purchase of Land”, which indicated that the land as a whole was to be purchased for a small sum.¹⁷ This paltry sum of money would be calculated based on acreage and paid to landowners. In the interview with Darlene Kiefer, she sadly remembered that her grandfather was paid just \$75 for his entire farm.¹⁸ During these transactions, Colonel T.C. Gerber (the commanding officer of the PA Ordnance works) was quoted as saying “Every effort will be made to retain buildings, barns, and live trees...should land be resold, it might be that many families may return to their homes and again use this land for farming.”¹⁹ This was almost in direct discordance with the initial construction, as homes were steadily being leveled as residents left. Would the second portion of Col. Gerber’s proclamation be as hollow as the first part?

Interestingly enough, in the previous “Option for Purchase of Land” the date of the contract was January 25th of 1942, a full month and a half before they finally told the residents.

¹⁶ from informational lecture by Stephen C. Huddy at the Public Library for Union County

¹⁷ "Option for Purchase of Land between the War Department Office of Engineers (Real Estate Branch) and the citizens of Alvira, Pennsylvania, 25 January 1942," found in Huddy, Stephen C., and Paul C. Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." *Montgomery Area Historical Society*. Spring (2012): 21. Print.

¹⁸ Interview with Darlene Kiefer, by author. Personal interview. Kiefer Home, October 2013.

¹⁹ “Visitors Toured White Deer Valley Easter Sunday.” *Montgomery Mirror*. 9 Apr. 1942. 1. Print.

The plan had been in place for months, and the people of Alvira were kept in the dark. Then with the false statement about preservation by Col. Gerber, it seemed as if nothing the government said could be trusted. As briefly discussed earlier, it even turned out that this site was one of approximately sixty other similar ones across the country. This striking similarity between the story of Alvira and other locations throughout the U.S. allows deeper connections to be made when researching the effects of these places upon the environment. It also adds relevance to the specific site of Alvira, as it can now be seen as one of many. Thus, the effects seen in one place can be translated into solving some of the mysteries of other locations. And maybe even more importantly, it provides very substantial evidence of an environment laid to waste by the machinations of a progress-driven society with little care for adverse ecological and localized effects. Unfortunately, this perfectly documents the mindset of America in the early 20th century, as government and the military were seen as the unquestioned decision-making entities during that time. Land became something that could be seized on a whim in the guise of government claiming to know what was best for the American public. In the case of Alvira, it was simply because the area met the desired characteristics, which will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

The Ordnance Works and the Environment

The reasons for locating the TNT manufacturing facility in this specific place are often varied as well as speculative, but one may venture several ideas. First, the Reading Railroad line ran right along State Route 15 and could be easily accessed to transport materials into the facility and the finished TNT out of it. Support for this was seen as workers were commissioned to

construct a rail spur off of the main Reading Railroad line that would serve as direct access into the facility.²⁰ This was one of the first installments of the new TNT plant. Additionally, since it was such a large amount of land, it was very conducive for placing a large, secretive facility on it where no one would be living close by to know what exactly was going on. A large acreage of land was also necessary for placing the 150 concrete TNT storage bunkers on site, as each one mandated at least a 100 foot radius around it. This was so that if one bunker exploded, a domino effect would not occur and the rest of the bunkers would be safe from exploding. The 8,000 acres of land were ideal for these reasons. Finally, one more reason for choosing this location was evident on the journey to get to the place in the form of the Susquehanna River. The Susquehanna River runs parallel to Route 15 as well, and would have been a fantastic source of water for the TNT plant.²¹ Evidence for this could be found in the construction of a river Pump House and dam that were constructed on the east side of the highway near the river. The ruins of these structures still stand today, and serve as a reminder of the environmental changes that were facilitated by the creation of the PA Ordnance Works.

Some of the reasons for placing the PA Ordnance Works in the location that was chosen can also be discussed as leading to some major primary and secondary changes in the environment surrounding the newly created war plant. To begin, the dam created on the Susquehanna River can be seen as causing some secondary ecological changes, as water was unnaturally diverted from the river into a diversion channel that led right into the Pump House. From there, the water would be pushed into the plant's two Raw Water Reservoirs. Authors Stephen C. Huddy and Paul C. Metzger aid this argument in their own discussion of how water

²⁰ Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 19. Print.

²¹ See Figure 2 to see proximity of Susquehanna River and Reading Railroad to Alvira.

was used in the TNT manufacturing process: “Every day, the plant used 51 million gallons of water, which was three times the amount of water consumed by the entire neighboring city of Williamsport.”²² This can certainly be seen as evidence of a massive change in the environment, as the plant was visibly altering the natural flow patterns of the mighty Susquehanna River. Next, the need for a transportation process to move the materials used to make TNT also led to ecological changes. Not even counting the rail lines that were situated outside the facility property, there were still 17 miles of railroad tracks laid primarily for incoming and outgoing freight. Once covered in thickly wooded forest and dotted with agricultural fields, the land was now gouged out and subject to man-made control for the sake of war-time production. Even the very layout of the landscape was altered, as the land was hacked into a series of efficient, grid-like paths and transport lines (See Figure 3 & Figure 4 for before and after comparison). Figure 3 displays the landscape prior to the introduction of the war plant, in which it can be seen that the land is mostly divided into farmland and forest. In Figure 4 however, the effects that the Ordnance Works had on the land are visibly seen, as the farmland has been altered into the aforementioned grid-like transportation patterns.

Furthermore, from an environmental standpoint the creation of the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works may have led to some adverse effects on the land itself. For instance, once the water was sent to the plant from the Pump House, it was utilized in the manufacturing and chemical mixing process to create the TNT. At that point, the water was “treated” with chemicals to remove toxic residue and then was discharged back into the Susquehanna River downstream. Some concern might be justifiably raised in this process, as it was now “treated

²² Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 25. Print.

water” that was being regurgitated back into the river from whence it came. However, without being alive at that time to be able to test this recycled water, I am left to only be able to speculate. Another unnatural consequence of the war plant came in the form of declining animal populations, as the high levels of human activity in the area drove deer populations, among others, to other more undisturbed areas in the region. As other areas became inundated with high numbers of native species, the effects of the nearby government facility were rapidly being seen in the surrounding countryside.

Best Kept Secrets

All in all, the entire operation was cloaked in secrecy from the very first moment. Perhaps the most evident indicator of this desire for secrecy comes from the labeling process on their wooden TNT crates. On the side of the box, it lists the “From:” location as being PA ORD. WORKS, WILLIAMSPORT, PENNA.²³ Yet the PA Ordnance Works was not located in Williamsport, PA. A more appropriate description might have listed Montgomery, PA or Allenwood, PA. This unspecific method of labeling their TNT crates is a prime indication of how cautious they may have hoped to be in revealing the true location of the site. Another instance of a desire for secrecy was in how the storage bunkers were disguised, as they placed layers of natural vegetation over the bunkers. This may have been to prevent them from being spotted by low-flying enemy aircraft. Even today, the area has been left shrouded in mystery and relative obscurity, despite having an obviously rich history. Perhaps it has been left this way so that people may try to forget how drastically the landscape was altered since humans began

²³ "50 lb. TNT box from PA Ordnance Works, dated Dec. 2nd, 1943. Item in author's possession."

inhabiting it. Alvira is such an important place to study, as it relates an overarching problem at a specific location to a more overall view of society and our government, as well as their interactions with the environment.

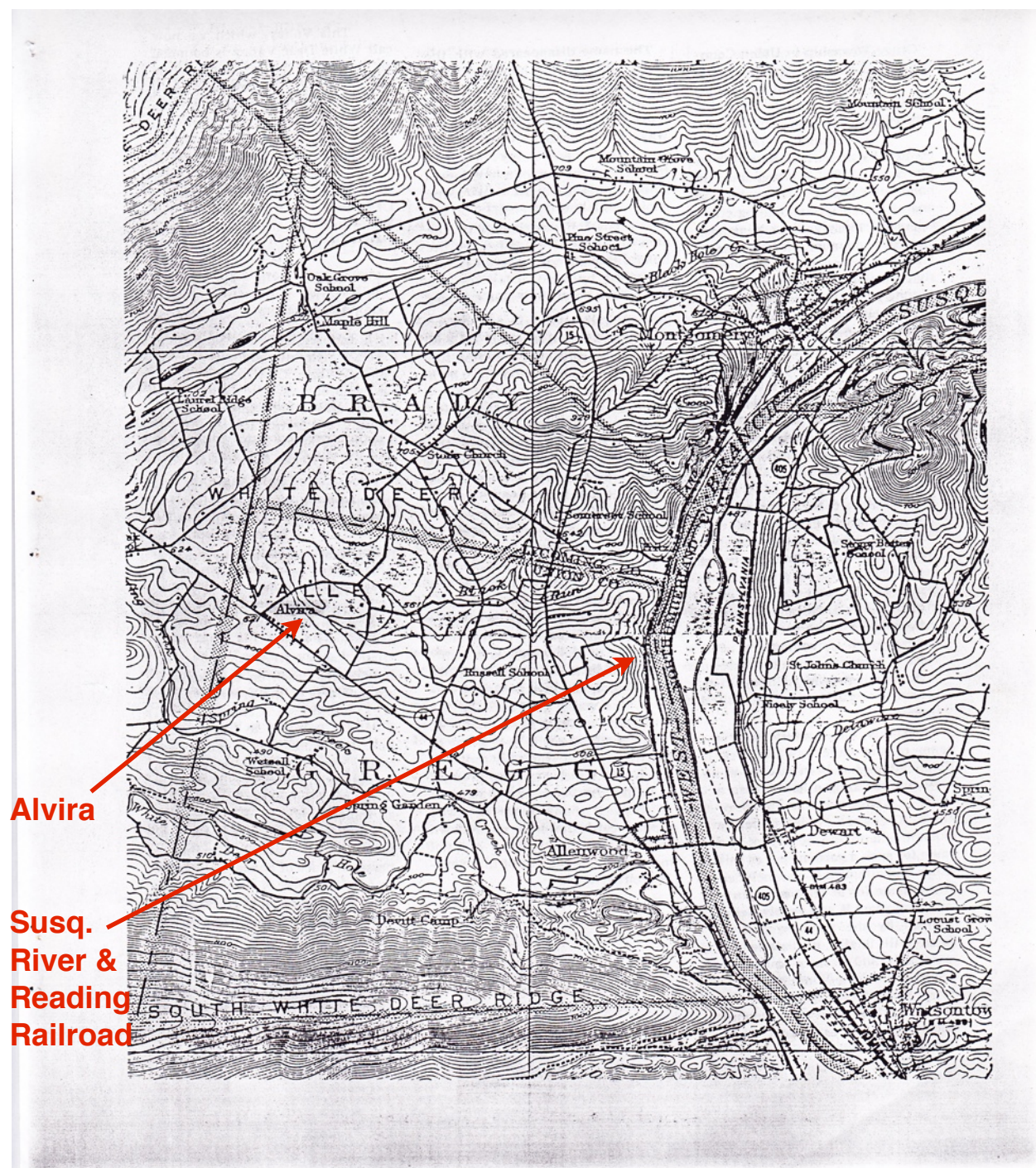
Thus, after researching the history of the landscape as well as the various environmental changes that took place over time, I have proposed several key conclusions that could be drawn from these examinations. Prior to World War II, the town of Alvira and the surrounding lands existed primarily as a small agricultural community, but the intervention of the United States government drastically altered the area. While the creation of a large-scale, secret weapons-manufacturing facility on the site can be seen to have affected the physical landscape, it also had drastic impacts on the surrounding environment and the lives of the people who made their homes there. In the span of just eleven months, 10,000 workers constructed the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works. During its' creation, 462 buildings were constructed on the site and it cost approximately 50 million dollars to build in total. During production, the plant was capable of manufacturing 720,000 pounds of TNT every single day.²⁴ It was the single largest public project of the time. And yet with all of this, it was open for less than one year until it closed with the introduction of atomic bomb testing. All it took was one year. In that one year, countless lives were uprooted, livelihoods were destroyed, and the entire surrounding environment was struck a maiming blow that left it forever altered.

²⁴ Preceding facts from: Huddy & Metzger. "Alvira and the Ordnance: An American Dream Denied." 29. Print.

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- ** "Appendix figures courtesy of "Alvira Revisited", a compilation of stories, maps, and photos from the time period. In family possession of author."

[Fig. 2 - U.S. Geological Survey Map of the Milton Quadrangle, circa 1924]



[Fig. 3 - Landscape Pre-1942]



[Fig. 4 - Landscape Post-1942]

