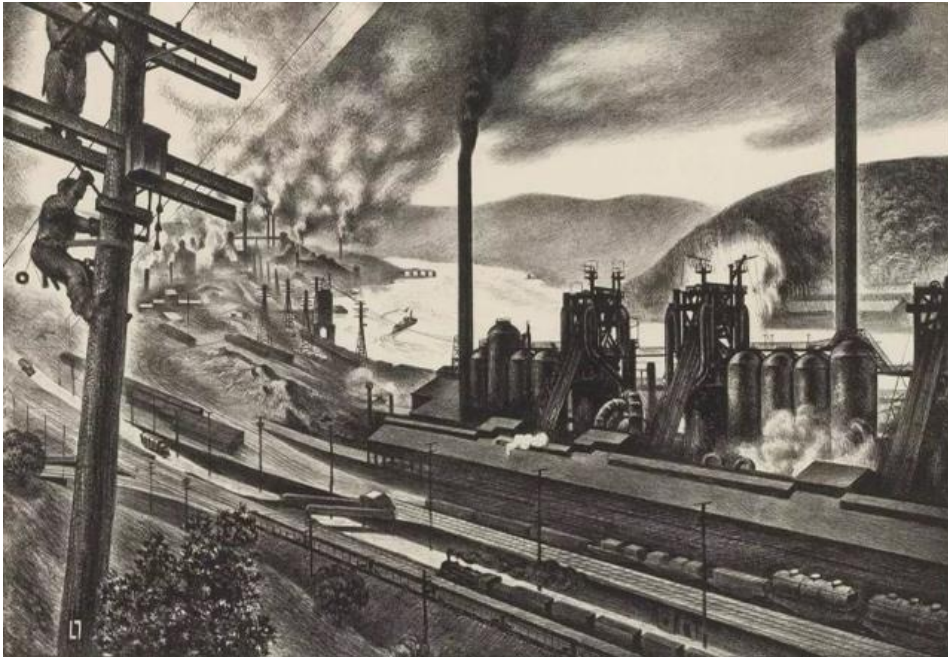




**How (Not) Green Was My Valley**  
The Rise and Fall of Pittsburgh Steel  
By Jerry James

*Well, we're living here in Allentown / And they're closing all the factories down  
Out in Bethlehem, they're killing time / Filling out forms, standing in line*  
—Billy Joel, “Allentown”



*“Steel Valley,” by Louis Lozowick (1936)*

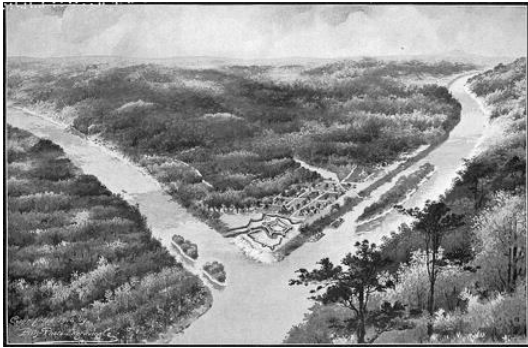
In the 1950s, if you drove the river road along the Monongahela from Elizabeth, PA, towards McKeesport, as you neared the Wilson Bridge, you could look up and see cliffs of white rock, bare as New Hampshire granite. The effluent from the mills that lined the river valley saw to that. Today, the cliffs are completely green, reclaimed by nature, because the mills are gone. Gone with them are the jobs the bare rock represented.

The fate of the jobs of those who worked in Pittsburgh steel does not provide an exact parallel with the workers at the other end of the state, either in Allentown, or in the Berks County of *Sweat*. But the experiences do rhyme. After a long struggle, each area had a brief moment that could, if you squinted, pass for a workers’ paradise. Then, in the blinking of an eye, it was over.

How did steel come to Pittsburgh? Where did the workers come from? How did they live? What were their struggles? What did they win? And what happened when the jobs went away?

## Iron

In 1758, the British took Fort Duquesne from the French and renamed the post Fort Pitt. A borough grew up around it, Pitt's Borough. Pittsburgh. (Hence the "h.") Located where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet to form the Ohio, it would be the gateway to the interior of the continent. Railroads? They wouldn't arrive until 1852. There weren't even any roads. But to use the rivers, people needed iron.



*Fort Pitt, 1759*

The smelting of iron required ore, charcoal (later replaced by coke, made from coal) and limestone, all of which were readily available. Steel, more expensive to produce, was used mainly in edged weapons. Pittsburgh ironworkers created those—and every iron cannon ball and bullet the army carried—to accompany Anthony Wayne, as he ended the Northwest Indian War (1794). The resultant ethnic cleansing of the Ohio Valley opened it for white settlers.

## Steel

Industries set up along the rivers to furnish the vessels headed west, with more iron needed after the invention of the steamboat.

The Civil War filled mill owners' pockets, confirming their version of Calvinism: Money is the consequence of virtue; no money is the consequence of its lack. Consequently, they paid their workers

enough for food, clothing and shelter, but not a penny more. After all, the workers would only waste it. Alas, the war ended. Now what? Enter Andrew Carnegie.



*Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)*

Carnegie had emigrated to the US from Scotland when he was only 12. By 1872, diligence, skill, luck (and sharp business practices) had made him rich. That year, while visiting England, he toured mills that used the Bessemer process of making steel. Forcing hot air into a sealed vessel of boiling iron caused a violent chemical reaction. The result? Large batches of steel at low cost. Carnegie's biggest customer was the Pennsylvania Railroad, whose soft iron rails wore out too soon. Bingo!



*The Bessemer Process*

Carnegie Steel would soon build plants all up and down the Monongahela, handy to barges bringing in iron ore, coke and limestone. But where would the manpower to run those mills come from? For that, Carnegie looked to Europe.

## Workers

The new workers were Slavs, from the nations of East Central Europe. Illiterate in English, speaking many languages, they were perfect laborers for the most menial, lowest-paying and dangerous jobs in the mill, jobs that required only that one show up, work and not complain—or organize.

There would come to be three kinds of people in Pittsburgh—the “Americans,” mostly Scots, Welsh, Germans and Irish, the last included grudgingly; the “Foreigners,” mostly Slavs, with Italians at the bottom; and the “Coloreds,” last hired and first fired, so that the Italians had someone to look down on. The “Coloreds,” ignored by union organizers, were often used as scabs—strikebreakers. Members of all these groups referred to members of other groups by various rude names, none of which will be quoted here.

The work was long, hard, dirty and dangerous, 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, as the mills changed over from Bessemer converters to open-hearth furnaces. The men wore inch-thick wooden or cork sandals, because the floor was so hot, a spilled drop of water would hiss as if it had landed on a hot stove.

Dale Richard Perelman wrote, “Steelmaking proved a veritable house of horrors. Boiling steel dangled precariously in giant cupolas above the heads of the workers, hissing like a coiled snake ready to strike. Escape valves seethed with lethal steam, threatening the careless. Train cars overloaded with coke and lacking protective guardrails dropped slabs on unprotected limbs. Long hours and heavy lifting made for exhaustion. Tired men got hurt. Accidents occurred—slips, falls, drops, torn muscles and death... Few who worked in the iron and steel industry survived past 60.” In the year beginning June 1, 1906, 195 men were killed in Pittsburgh’s steel mills.

The wife of the steelworker had as hard a day as her husband—and longer. Jobs could be found for children as young as 5. By 15, the boys would be in the mill. Mercedes Sowko Crispin noted, “Pooling the entire family’s earnings, the typical Slavic steelworker family earned a weekly income of \$13.88. This modest sum covered only the bare essentials, such as rent for a two-room frame house (\$2), food (\$5.98), fuel (\$.38) insurance (\$.88) and other expenses, which included clothing, medicine, household supplies and carfare (\$3.86). The remaining \$.78 went into savings.”

By way of contrast, in 1901, J. P. Morgan created US Steel (USS), merging Carnegie and seven other companies. It was capitalized at \$1.4 billion, nearly 1% of the country’s total wealth. Morgan now controlled 50% of US steelmaking capacity.

## Union



*The Homestead Strike*

Steelworkers had been forming unions since 1858, but organized labor’s successes were few. The Homestead Strike (1892) is famed in song and story. But the outcome of this strike—and every other strike engaged in by Pittsburgh steelworkers—was the same: The company won and the workers lost. 1901, 1909, 1912, 1916, 1919—always the same result. The men staggered back to work, and the organizers were blacklisted.

Then, in 1937, the Supreme Court held that collective bargaining was constitutional. By a curious coincidence, in that same year

USS signed a contract with what would become the United Steelworkers of America (USW). The contract established the 8-hour day, the 40-hour week and time-and-a-half for overtime. In addition, the USW was racially integrated, even if only 6.5% of its postwar members were Black.

Life after World War II wasn't heaven for the steelworker, but it might have seemed that way to his father. Now, he could move his wife and kids from a 2-room tenement with the toilet in the basement that he rented to a 3-bedroom house that he owned, in a suburb 20 miles south of the city with trees and grass. His wife didn't need to work, and his kids could think about college.

In 1950, Pittsburgh was the 8<sup>th</sup> largest city in the US. The city's very name meant steel, in a country that produced more of the stuff than the rest of the world combined. Cold War expenditures saw to that. Postwar, the steel industry and the USW reached an unspoken agreement: Management would manage, and workers would work.

This meant there was no one to call attention to the fact that this great, big, beautiful arrangement was only possible because almost every other steelmaking center in the world had been destroyed in WWII. That these other nations might rebuild—better—was not considered. Oh, what a paradise it seemed! Until the Strike of 1959.

The strike lasted 116 days, just enough time for steel imports from Germany and Japan to get their nose into the tent. Few noticed. But slowly, the owners followed the money, while the steelworkers stayed where they were. The regional unemployment rate peaked at 17.1% in January 1983. By the late 1980s, over 75 % of Pittsburgh's steel-making capacity had closed. Between 1970 and 1990, the region lost 30% of its

population. In 2000, Pittsburgh had the second-oldest population of any US metropolitan county, just behind Dade County, FL. But therein lay its future.

### Aftermath



This Pittsburgh building is called the US Steel Tower. But the signage identifies its largest tenant, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. One could hardly imagine a more perfect symbol for the displacement of one industry by another.

The workers left behind when steel departed were old and sick, but they were also insured. UPMC saw its chance. Through a combination of expansion and consolidation, it assembled a medical conglomerate J. P. Morgan would have admired.

UPMC is the largest private employer in Pennsylvania, with more than 85,000 employees. Except many of them are not, according to UPMC. Rather, they are independent contractors. Bad for them, but good for UPMC.

These "new Slavs," the new poorest-paid, are overwhelmingly women and people of color (yes, still). If these workers should organize, what might that mean to the City of Steel? We shall see. Because this January, five hundred of them voted to join a union—the United Steelworkers!

History rhymes...

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*Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.*