

In the Shadow of Steel

In the 1950s and '60s, the Bethlehem Steel mills of Sparrows Point were the largest integrated steelworks in the world. Fed by an unprecedented economic boom, the industry gave a generation of working-class Baltimoreans a chance to live the American Dream

by [Deborah Rudacille](#)

For her book *Roots of Steel*, *Urbanite* contributing writer Deborah Rudacille returned to the community she'd left behind: Dundalk, the proudly blue-collar Baltimore County suburb born of Baltimore's industrial boom years. Many of the tens of thousands of workers employed by the mammoth Bethlehem Steel mills of Sparrows Point settled nearby, including Rudacille's father, born in one of the Point's tiny workers' bungalows. But Rudacille, unlike many postwar sons and daughters of Dundalk, went to college and moved away. "I never wanted to move back," she recalls. "And every time I went back to visit, I got anxious."

Part of the reason was that the Dundalk she remembered—a stable, if insular, community of hard-working middle-class families—wasn't the same. The collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and '80s and the disappearance of well-paid manufacturing jobs left the suburb reeling with some distinctly urban ills: blight, homelessness, crime, unemployment. Gone was the company-town security of cradle-to-grave health care and pensions; left behind was the toxic legacy of a century of industrial pollution—and an equally toxic sense of betrayal. During the 2004 presidential elections, Rudacille resented how that blue-collar bitterness was frequently invoked in the media as a kind of unthinking populist rage. "There was all this talk about how the working class always votes against its own self-interest, and [it] basically made them out as dunces," she says. "I knew the story was a lot more nuanced."

So she returned to Dundalk to talk to retired workers about the industry and the jobs that once defined them. Many sources were friends of family members who had built a living in the mills. The story she emerged with is a kind of people's history of the American industrial era—a warts-and-all portrait of a vanished age of labor. The jobs that these men and women did were difficult, dirty, and almost unimaginably dangerous, at least from the perspective of a 21st-century cubicle dweller: If you weren't maimed or burned amid the Dickensian coke ovens and blast furnaces, you could anticipate a post-retirement life cut short by asbestosis, meso-thelioma, or a host of other work-related diseases. (Indeed, Rudacille says, several of her interviewees died before the book's publication.) But the pay allowed steelworkers to raise families in relative comfort and prosperity.

The absence of that secure employment, as manufacturing cities such as Baltimore have discovered, has left a terrible void. The book's title, Rudacille says, "is both literal and metaphorical. There's this steely will and work ethic. On the other hand, roots of steel will bolt you in place."

—David Dudley

"You are a little harder when you come out of a steel mill than when you went in."

—Austin McLelland

When I think of my late baby-boom childhood in Dundalk, I remember penguins and POW bracelets, the Christmas train garden at the fire station, the summer parties at shore homes where you could win dolls and games by spinning a big wooden wheel with numbers set up in the covered pavilion behind the house. I remember my father letting me pick his teams on the weekly football pools that circulated in the mills, and giving my brother and me coins to put in the jukeboxes in various taverns when we hung out with him on Sundays after he and my mother were divorced.

When my father picked us up on Sunday mornings, my mother told him to take us to Mass, but we often skipped it. Instead, he took us to circuses and ice shows at the Baltimore Civic Center, and he even took us to see the Beatles movie *Yellow Submarine*, though he himself had been a '50s teenager who styled his hair in a DA, wore pegged pants, and believed that rock and roll started and ended with Elvis.

It was an enchanted childhood in some ways. Take the penguins. They were housed at the Eastpoint shopping center on the northern border of Dundalk, just below the city line, in a refrigerated department store display window. No trip to Eastpoint was complete without a visit to the miniature penguins at Hochschild Kohn, frolicking in their little pool. Then we would walk to Hess Shoes, where live monkeys jabbered and climbed a tree inside a cage in the middle of the store, and salespeople took X-rays of your feet to prove to your parents that your toes had room to grow. Eastpoint was no mere shopping center for us Dundalk kids; it was a place of magic.

For our parents, the beautifully landscaped shopping center—a proto-mall with a long double-facing row of shops—symbolized something more vital than magic. It was the emblem of their newfound prosperity. "When Eastpoint opened in 1956, people from all over the city shopped there," recalled Harry Young of the Dundalk-Patapsco Neck Historical Society. "It was the number one shopping center in the area for a long time."

Eastpoint and the busy car dealerships that sprung up across the street on Eastern Avenue were like neon signs advertising an economic revolution. Released from the shackles of depression and war, the American people went on a buying binge the likes of which the country had never seen. Working-class Baltimore families like mine both produced and consumed the products that fed the postwar boom. An astounding 85 percent of all consumer goods at the time used steel in one form or another, from tin cans to household appliances.

"Steel was being used for everything under the moon," said Young. "And everything was being replenished. Mom needed another pot because the one she'd been using for five years was wearing out. After the war, all the industry around here changed over from war production to civilian. Then Korea breaks out, so you're back in war production again."

In Sparrows Point and Dundalk, many World War II veterans, now young men with families to support, re-enlisted when the Korean conflict broke out. Bob Strasbaugh left a wife and three-month-old daughter when he shipped out to Korea as a Marine Corps medic in 1950. "I was with that bunch that was cut off at Choisin Reservoir," he told me. "Fourteen thousand against 150,000. It was tough. Forty below. Summer gear." Less than half of the U.S. forces survived. When Strasbaugh returned, he went back to the Point, where he was promoted to foreman a few

years later.

My father dropped out of Sparrows Point High in 1951, after getting caught smoking, and enlisted in the Air Force. He finished high school while stationed at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas and then served as a military policeman in Germany and later Morocco. One night he was set upon by a group of thugs and stabbed. He survived to return home in 1954, joining his father, brothers, and cousins working on the Point.

By then, industrial employment in Baltimore was topping wartime highs. "The need for skilled workers is tremendous—tool and die makers, machinists, electricians, welders, shipfitters, and mechanics are in big demand," the manager of the Baltimore office of the State Employment Service told a *Baltimore Sun* reporter in 1951. "Virtually every high school and college graduate can have his pick of jobs this year." My father's friend Willy Cohill told me that in those heady days of the postwar boom, "there was so much work that when you were looking for a job you could go anywhere. If you didn't like this place, you could go next door. There was always somebody looking to hire you."

In this competitive hiring environment, Bethlehem Steel had a built-in advantage—the high school sitting in the midst of the company town of Sparrows Point. Few of the young men who grew up there expected to do anything else but follow their fathers and uncles into the mills. They could hear the din of their future as they sat in their classrooms. "When I started high school, they were building the number-ten blast furnace," my uncle Ray said. "You're in school, and all you hear is BA-BOOM, BA-BOOM 'cause they're driving piles day and night. They drove piles twenty-four hours a day to put this blast furnace in. And the high school is right there."

I asked him if most of the kids from his class, the last to graduate from "old" Sparrows Point High School in the company town before "new" Sparrows Point High opened 2 miles away in 1952, had gone to work for Bethlehem Steel. "Probably not as many as you would think," he said, pointing to competitive jobs at Western Electric, Lever Brothers, General Motors, and American Standard. Often, those who chose jobs off the Point had seen their fathers' health destroyed by steelmaking. "Some said, 'They're not gonna kill me like they did my father.'"

Still, the company did everything possible to bring those young men on board right after graduation.

"The company actually had an employment table set up in the gym while we were practicing for our commencement," Harry Young told me. "I knew kids who graduated at seven at night, had a little party afterwards, and reported for work the next morning. They didn't even take a day off."

Young said that he was one of only 12 students in a class of 146 enrolled in the academic track. "Most of the boys took shop," he recalled—and at Sparrows Point, that didn't mean making birdhouses. "You were training to be a machinist, a sheet metalist, or some other trade," he said. Bethlehem Steel hired machinists to teach the classes and provided equipment for the school, the same that was being used in the mills a whistle away from the classrooms—in effect, training its next generation of employees while they were still teenagers.

When he returned to Baltimore after World War II, Wendell "Wimpy" Doyle (so named by co-workers for his love of White Castle hamburgers) was determined *not* to become a steelworker. "I wasn't going to work for Bethlehem. I was tired of steel because my family was Irish and they all worked in the steel mills," he told me. Doyle worked first as a meatpacker and later as a salesman for the same company. But after he and his wife had a couple of kids, he concluded that "Bethlehem Steel is where the money is" and surrendered to his fate. He rose through the ranks, retiring as a general foreman in 1982.

In 1959, Sparrows Point officially claimed the title of the largest steelworks in the world. At that time, just about everyone in Baltimore knew someone who worked for Bethlehem Steel. Whole families in Sparrows Point and nearby Edgemere and Dundalk often worked there, their economic security entirely dependent on Bethlehem paychecks.

My aunt Shirley Lewis, for example, went to work in the receiving office after graduating from Sparrows Point High School in 1956, joining her father, brother, and mother on the Bethlehem payroll. She and my uncle Ray were high school sweethearts; they married in 1960 after he served two years in the Air Force. He too found a job on the Point. "When I started in '56, they had thirty-five open hearth furnaces, ten blast furnaces, four soaking pits, four rolling mills, the plate mill, the skelp mill, the flange mill," Ray told me. "You had the coke ovens, benzoil plant. But they peaked out at about '59, and you started getting foreign steel coming in. After that it was just a gradual decline."

When I was born in 1958, my father worked in the tandem mill, a finishing mill where workers could earn big bonuses tied to production. But he was subject to frequent layoffs. He spent a lot of time selling insurance or flipping burgers at Gino's, a local fast-food chain. "The money was good, and they had good benefits, but every year he either got laid off because he didn't have much seniority, or they would go on strike," my mother recalled of my own father's years on the Point.

I asked my mother what good money was back then. "Your father probably brought home \$50 a week," she said—good enough to buy a brick townhouse in one of the new developments springing up in southeastern Baltimore County for its growing population of industrial workers. With the help of the G.I. Bill, my parents were able to secure a loan on a brand-new three-bedroom house with hardwood floors and a finished basement with knotty-pine paneling.

In 1947, the average family in Baltimore still rented, but by 1960, owner occupancy rates in the city's working-class neighborhoods were above 70 percent. In the county, acres of farmland between Sparrows Point and the city line disappeared as builders constructed rowhouse developments for the burgeoning population of young industrial workers. "That all started around '52 or '53," said Harry Young, who was by then working for the Baltimore County Bureau of Land Acquisition. The new developments became part of greater Dundalk, which in the 1950s expanded well beyond the original thousand acres purchased by Bethlehem Steel back in 1916. "When the rowhouses were finished, the population was about 115,000," he said. "If Dundalk would have been incorporated, it would have been the second-largest city in the state."

The Sparrows Point works exerted a kind of magnetic attraction, pulling young men away from less lucrative jobs. "I had an uncle who was a foreman at General Motors and another uncle in the police department. My dad was in law enforcement. So I could've went anywhere," Tom Capecci told me. But when he was offered a position in the rod and wire mill in 1966, he joined another uncle and two cousins on Sparrows Point. Melvin Schmeiser was trained as an auto mechanic at Mergenthaler High School, but two weeks after graduating in 1966 he found himself at the Point in the Penwood power plant. The reason was simple: "They were paying twice as much as the Pontiac dealer down Fleet Street."

Not surprisingly, Baltimore merchants and lenders treated Bethlehem employees like royalty. "People would say,

'Oh, you work for Bethlehem Steel!' We had the best benefits, the best health care," recalled Donald Lindemann, who worked in the tin mill. Pete Selhorst, a steelworker a generation younger than Lindemann, agreed. "Anytime you wanted to buy anything, people were like, 'You work at Sparrows Point, wow, come in.' It was like red carpet from then on," he said.

This crimson carpet was rolled out for not only managers, foremen, and skilled craftsmen, but for common laborers too—people who might not have much formal education or book knowledge, but who (in a phrase I have heard from more than one retiree) "knew the mill" and got regular raises according to the terms of the United Steelworkers contracts, just like everyone else. "It was bull work, hot bull work," said worker Bill Knoerlein. "But it provided a living for a lot of people."

Knoerlein started working at Sparrows Point in 1960 and stayed for thirty-eight years, retiring as a turn foreman in 1998. "For a great many years," he said, "Sparrows Point was a badass place." The number one rule was to keep the lines running, no matter what; health and safety ran a distinct second to tonnage.

Working in the machine shop next to the coke ovens, Austin McLelland often saw workers carrying out injured men to the dispensary or the hospital. "They'd bring them through our shop," he said, "and you'd see their bones hanging out of their legs or fingers chopped off, and they'd take them to the hospital to try and put them back together." He told me about an electrician he called Uncle Herb who was electrocuted on the job. "Fifty thousand volts were running through the line, but they didn't like shutting down the electric when there was a problem because then they'd have to shut down all the coke ovens." When Uncle Herb and two other electricians went up into the scaffolding to repair the problem, "that fifty thousand got him," McLelland said. "They carried him out in a basket."

Shift work was brutally hard on the body. In the tandem mill, Ed Gorman said, "one week we worked Sunday and Monday four-to-twelve, off Tuesday, come in Wednesday, worked Thursday midnight, off Friday, daylight Saturday. Your bowels don't get a chance to be functional. They don't know whether they're coming or going."

In the tin mill, almost everyone worked rotating shifts. "One week you'd work two daylight [7 a.m. to 3 p.m.], two three-to-eleven, one eleven-to-seven. Or you could work three eleven-to-seven and two daylight and then go back to three-to-eleven," tin flopper Phyllis Moskowitz recalled. "You never knew how you were going to work."

That kind of schedule made family life difficult. "I worked turn work for fifteen years. Three-to-eleven was tough for the kids and tough for my wife. You don't see them," Wimpy Doyle said.

"I would come home from working midnight and take the two kids to elementary school and come home and go to sleep," Gorman told me. "Then I'd wake up when they come from school and we'd have supper at 4:30. I'd get up early to eat supper with the kids. What other professions do you wake up to eat supper?"

Rose Marie Weller described for me a typical evening with her husband, Lee, when he was working daylight, the shift most conducive to a normal family life. After showering at the plant and leaving his dirty work clothes there, he would shower again at home, she said. Then, "he would eat his dinner and hardly talk, except to ask the kids what they were doing in school. And then he'd come in and watch television and read his newspaper and sit on the chair with the cat in his lap. I'd finish washing the dishes and come out, and him and the cat would be fast asleep. I wouldn't wake him up because I knew how little sleep he got. About ten o'clock, I'd say 'Lee, wake up and go to bed,' and he'd say, 'I want to watch the news.' So I'd sit in the chair with my book. And he'd watch the news and

then go to bed."

In her 2005 book, *Wives of Steel*, Karen Olson, professor of history and anthropology at the Community College of Baltimore County, noted the toll that steelmaking took. "Long hours and changing shifts left many steelworkers chronically exhausted and excluded from a central role in family life," she wrote. "These arduous conditions often fostered drinking after work as one of the few accessible ways to relax after a shift, and a pervasive bar culture encouraged drinking as part of a masculine ritual that was obligatory for steelworkers."

Most steelworkers phrase the fact more positively. "We'd sit there and drink our beers and shoot a little pool, and then here's the three-to-eleven shift coming in," said LeRoy McLelland Sr. "Maybe we spent a little more time there [in the bars] than we should," but drinking together "created more harmony and solidarity than the union hall did," he said, "because not everybody went to the union hall." Not all steelworkers drank heavily, and some, like my Uncle Ray, didn't drink at all. But for many others, stopping by the bar to have a few (or more than a few) beers with friends after work was a habit they were not inclined to break. "I had guys that would work eleven-to-seven, go out on payday to drink, and then come back to work for the next shift," Doyle told me. "They had a lot of alcoholics. Some were worth saving."

As children my brother and I spent a fair amount of time in the North Point Road bars with our father, begging him for coins to put in the jukebox and playing shuffleboard while he socialized with his friends. He was not alone in his habits; most of the men we knew lived similar lives. My mother objected to this lifestyle, and my parents divorced when I was a young child. They remarried when I was 12 years old, though my father didn't stop drinking entirely until I was in college.

Unlike many of the retirees I've interviewed, I don't think my father loved making steel. In his mid-40s, he enrolled at Dundalk Community College and then University of Baltimore, carrying a full course load while working full time at Signode, a Dundalk manufacturer of packaging products, with his friend Willy Cohill. He graduated with a BA in political science and for the last fifteen years of his life worked as a market conduct examiner for the Maryland State Department of Licensing and Regulation.

His new job required him to travel around the country, examining the pay-out records of every insurance company that did business in Maryland, checking to be sure that they were not defrauding their customers—work that sounded dull to me but that my father seemed to enjoy. He spent a great deal of time in New York City, where he became an avid theater patron, attending Broadway and off-Broadway plays two or three nights a week. Near the end of his life, he took pride in the fact that he had visited forty-nine of the fifty states (excepting only Colorado) and numerous foreign countries.

"Your father was a diamond in the rough," my mother says whenever she is asked to describe him. I believe that there were quite a few men like my father at Sparrows Point in its heyday, men who became steelworkers not by choice but by convenience. Once he found work that permitted him to indulge his love of travel and conversation, he became a much happier man than he was in my childhood. I regret that he had so few years to enjoy his new life. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1995 and died two weeks after his sixty-fifth birthday, after a four-year fight with his disease. His brother Ray, four years younger, was felled by mesothelioma at age 68. Their elder brother, Ben, a Sparrows Point bricklayer like Ray, died at 66.

When I think of the people who worked at Bethlehem Steel in the postwar years, I think of my father and my uncles. In some ways, they were a blessed generation. Born into depression and war, as adults they reaped the

benefits of the longest economic boom in American history in what now seems a golden age for working people. But they worked harder than most people can imagine working today. And in the end, many of them paid a heavy price for their good luck.

—Deborah Rudacille has been an Urbanite contributing writer since 2008.