

## Drilling, Mining, Water, and Money: Transcript to Audio

Me: Welcome to WateringDown.wordpress.com's first audio installment to the blog. In this interview (with my Uncle Steve Fleckenstein, who is really my father's cousin), I'm in my grandma's kitchen. We met halfway here, since he lives in rural PA. Consol Energy owns the earth beneath Steve's home, and when they drilled under his land, he started having problems with his water supply. I've heard vague things about this at Thanksgiving dinners, but I want the whole story. Steve starts at the very beginning.

Steve: In fact, there's coal all over Pennsylvania at that depth. It's called the pittsburgh coal seam. The coal mines went to all these farmers years and years ago and said, we'll buy this coal from you. The coal mine owns all that dirt underneath my house, something about 900 ft deep, and they'll own it forever; they'll never get rid of it, they'll never sell it back. So they started testing my water in '89. They were planning on coming through there a long time ago.

Me: My uncle owns five acres of land--on it stands his old house and his new one, which he build himself--a workshop, a chicken house, some open space, and some woods. The coal company first came to him in 2008, right after he'd moved into his new house.

Steve: Since they didn't go right under me, I didn't have any physical damage. Luckily, they quit right under me. And I thought everything was clear, I thought I was done--till like a couple months after that, then all the water went away. When I first built the house, my water was great.

Me: Consol had to build Steve a new well, which doesn't work as well as the old one.

Steve: The structure of the underground water system, they changed it somehow when they went through: it just doesn't go the same way it did before. Once they came through and ruined my well, they tested it, and since it was so hard, the coal mine said, you have to give this guy a water softener. And they had to give me a water purification system, too. So then you say, hey coal mine, Mr. Coal Mine, now I have a pump in my well, now I have this other holding tank, this coyote system, I have another pump in there, and I have to have an alarm system to tell you now if the water's low, or if it's working or not, and I said, I'm using electricity for that. And I have a water softener, so I have to buy all this salt--so the coal mine, they pay you. And a couple of times I still ran out of water, with this new well and the new coyote system, and I had to buy water. So luckily I ran out of water while it was still on their dime. And that happened to me five times one year, because it was a real bad drought. So before they settled, I said wait a minute--I ran out of water five times. I want ten fill-ups per year.

Me: Although the coal mine constituted a hassle, it wasn't all bad, as I, being environmentally inclined, would have easily believed.

Steve: It ended up they took care of you. But you have to--

Grandma: But you, they wouldn't suggest it to you--

Steve: Oh, no. You have to tell them what you want, you have to tell them this is why you want it. If you just say okay, that's good, they won't say anything, they'll say okay, we're done, bye. So you kinda have to know what to ask them. If you're nice to them, and you're reasonable, they're usually reasonable with you. Because they let you know, they let you know when they're right under you. They call you up and say we're getting close, we'll be coming through here.

Me: In fact, for a lot of people in my uncle's area, coal mining or even gas drilling under their land is a good thing.

Steve: Some of these farmer around where I live, that have a hundred acres, they're rich. For all these farmers that were hurting, all these people in my area, they're way happy to have this.

Me: And so is my uncle--he settled with the coal company just after he broke his ankle badly, forcing him to retire early. Now, he's signed the deeper parts of his land with Range Resources, hoping for them to frack beneath him and provide him with some more income. There are environmental and economic factors at play here, and they're more complicated than a lot of environmentally-minded people know. Sustainability is still important, and I'm still for finding solutions that don't wreck natural resources--but this is an important side of the story, too.

Steve: You hear horror stories some times and you hear great stories other times, it all depends on the company that's doing it, which outfit's doing it, you know. Some of these guys, they're supposed to be getting rid of this fracking water and treat it--they go dump it somewhere.

Grandma: Farmers have to learn how to be plumbers now, don't they?

Steve: Farmers, they have to learn how to work on big equipment--

Grandma: Yeah.

Steve: It's hard to be a farmer now. I mean, I'm not a farmer, but anyone that lives in the country, you have to know about pumps and valves and water--you have to know a little bit of everything.

Me: Thank you for tuning in to Watering Down. Keep reading.