

from Mattias Legnér and Sven Lilja, eds., *Living Cities: An Anthology in Urban Environmental History*. Stockholm: Swedish Research Council, 2010, pp. 148-160.

Every one is desirous of making money out of every one else, than which nothing more promotes urbanity.[1]

Pithole City: Epitaph for a Boom Town[2]

Kenneth Kolson
Alexandria, Virginia

The very title of the present book—"living cities"—powerfully conveys the idea that cities are organisms, and that their constituent units are akin to "cells" of living tissue. Imaginative writers, such as Lewis Mumford, derived from this organic metaphor the principle that cities are not immune to disease, even urban cancer, and that there are natural limits to growth. "Actually," he wrote in *The City in History*, "cities are like trees: once established, they must be destroyed to the roots before they cease to live: otherwise, even when the main stem is cut down, shoots will form about the base, as happened in Jerusalem even after its complete destruction in A.D. 70." [3]

Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella[4] recently have reminded us that cities, like other organisms, are remarkably resilient, and yet they cannot be counted on *always* to recover from catastrophe. However much we might wish to avoid the subject of urban mortality,[5] we all know of cities or towns said to have been destroyed by divine intervention, natural processes, human volition, or some combination of these. Cities can be long-lived or short-lived. The ones that expire can go gracefully or violently. Settlements associated with extractive industries, such as mining, typically have been abandoned "when the vein 'ran out' or when water flooded the workings." When that has happened, "miners left for other regions, leaving behind piles of tailings, gaping shafts, and collapsing huts." [6] The present inquiry, undertaken with the conviction that causes of death can be revelatory of ways of life, concerns the brief but sensational history of a town called Pithole—or Pit Hole, or Pithole City—that flashed like a meteorite across western Pennsylvania in the mid-1860s.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, illumination of city streets was provided by torches or gas lamps. At home, people burned tallow or whale-oil lamps after sunset, or they went to bed. In the 1840s, techniques were discovered for recovering as a coal byproduct an oil that was called kerosene. Later, kerosene was successfully produced from petroleum that bubbled up out of the ground in some places—"rock oil"—and which previously had been of interest only to those intent on exploiting its real or imagined medicinal uses. In the mid-1850s, a Yale chemist demonstrated petroleum's commercial potential, but no one knew how best to refine it for use as a lubricant or illuminant. For that matter, no one knew how to locate petroleum that lay underground, or how to coax it to the surface. No one knew how to store it or move it. There was a constant danger of uncontrolled fire, and finally, there was the issue of petroleum's powerful and noxious odor.[7] Given all this, no one could have anticipated—in, say, 1851, the year that Herman Melville published *Moby Dick*—the blow that would soon be

administered to the whaling industry, let alone the social revolution to be ushered in by the internal-combustion engine.

In 1859, Colonel Edwin L. Drake successfully drilled for oil on the outskirts of Titusville, Pennsylvania, and this part of the world, known as “Petrolia,” gave birth to the world’s petroleum industry.[8] The surrounding forests were flattened for the wood to build houses and derricks, and the fields and roads became mired in mud and spilt petroleum. The producers were dependent on teamsters, most of them transient Irishmen, to haul the oil through the muck to refineries and market. And the teamsters engaged in price-gouging to a degree that inspired producers to devise alternative methods of transportation. There ensued a frantic competition among the railroads to connect their main lines to the oil fields, a project that was essentially concluded by 1862. Before long, a man named Van Syckel was working on a two-inch pipe designed to move oil from its source to the nearest railhead, a distance of about four miles; it was the world’s first oil pipeline. Subsequent technological improvements made it possible for oil to be conveyed longer distances through bigger pipes by fewer pumps. Before long, the Pennsylvania oil fields were the scene of the world’s first incidents of pipeline sabotage, committed by enraged teamsters who saw their lucrative business inexorably slipping away. By 1861 the Pennsylvania oil fields were producing 5,000 barrels a day, and the kerosene craze was attracting the attention of prominent capitalists.[9] But more oil was being produced than the market could bear. Efforts were made to control the supply, but few of these were successful, since there seemed always to be—then, as now—a few producers willing to undercut prices set by the cartel. In 1859, oil had sold for 75 cents a *gallon*; by 1861, the price plummeted to 10 cents per *barrel*. Production naturally declined, and then prices recovered. By July of 1864 the price was up to \$14 a barrel,[10] and the stage was set for a wild boom.

In January of 1865 prospectors using a witch-hazel twig struck oil on the Holmden farm near Pithole Creek. In May, two speculators, Col. A.P. Duncan and George C. Prather, decided to put their money in a town-building venture, rather than investing directly in petroleum. They purchased some land near the well on the Holmden farm for \$25,000 and proceeded to lay out a town—a “drawing board city”—and to sell short-term leases to those wishing to build homes or businesses.[11] The lessees were in effect purchasing development rights, typically for 3-5 years, and they were permitted to keep whatever improvements they made to the property during that time. This is a key point, as we shall see.

By July, the population consisted of “2,000 males, 11 females, and 1 colored person.”[12] Within the next few months, the population swelled to roughly 15,000. The *Pithole Daily Record* began publication in September. In the same month, Duncan and Prather sold their town for \$2,000,000.[13] At its height, Pithole produced two-thirds of the world’s oil supply. The sudden flood of oil caused a tremendous excitement. Crowds of speculators and investors rushed to Pithole from all over the country. The civil war had just closed, soldiers were disbanding, and hundreds of them found their way to the new oil field. In six weeks after the first well was struck Pithole was a town of 6,000 inhabitants. In less than a year it had fifty hotels and boarding houses; five of these hotels cost \$50,000 or more each. “In six months after the first well the post-office of Pithole was receiving upwards of 10,000 letters per day and was counted third in size in the state—Philadelphia, Pittsburg, and Pithole being the order of rank. It had a

daily paper, churches, all the appliances of a town.[14]

The opportunity to turn a profit seemed to be everywhere at hand. “So confident of enduring prosperity were the throngs on Pithole’s busy street that merchants and investors competed with one another for the choice building sites and rental leases. Lots were sold again and again.”[15] “Drinking water, scarce from the first, sold at fifty cents a barrel, ten cents a pitcher, but prices advanced until they reached fifty cents a pitcher, ten cents a cup.”[16] It is no wonder that Pitholeans preferred other beverages. “When Pithole had but 2,000 inhabitants, there were twenty establishments selling whiskey.”[17] Police protection was wholly inadequate. In Pithole, as in so many frontier towns, the “legitimate entertainment business merged at a fuzzy boundary with prostitution.”[18] Darrah estimates that by December, 1865, when the population numbered around 10,000, there were 400 prostitutes in Pithole.[19] According to Paul Frederick, “Every day at noon there was a scene unique to Pithole—the daily prostitute parade. Every day, 30-40 of the town’s ladies of the night would mount horses and ride down the streets, garbed in their best high-necked gowns, hats, and gloves.”[20] This is all the more remarkable when one considers the condition of those streets. “Most streets were paralleled on both sides with hand-dug ditches about eighteen inches deep. These proved a futile attempt to manage water runoff and to try to control the mud problems.”[21] Sanitation left much to be desired: “The whole place smells like a camp of soldiers with diarrhea.”[22]

A newspaper reporter named Charles C. Leonard published an account of Pithole under the *nom de plume*, “Crocus.” His account is dryly comic—in some places, hilarious. For example, he wrote that Pitholeans favored an architectural style he called “golgothic, i.e., all the genius of the architect being laid out on the front or figure head, while the rear—like a regiment of conscripts—is closed up any way.”[23] Leonard writes eloquently about the constant threat of fire in a town consisting entirely of flimsy wooden buildings, where water was in short supply, and where everything was marinated in petroleum. According to “Crocus,” an inventive Ohio cheese-maker built a kind of catapult, or trebuchet, designed to smother a fire by scooping mud off the ground and flinging it at the conflagration.[24]

Depending largely on one’s opinion of capitalism, Pithole was either the epitome of the “creative destruction”[25] that typically accompanies progress, or it was a mad carnival of roguery and sinkhole of depravity. “If Pithole’s rise was phenomenal, its fall was even more rapid. As oil production declined and parts of the town burned to the ground, the exodus from Pithole began,”[26] and it was led by the teamsters. Brian Black reports that by Christmas 1865 more than a thousand teamsters, rendered redundant by the pipelines, had departed.[27] “By the end of 1867 the town was, for all practical purposes, dead. That portion of the Holmden farm that Duncan and Prather had bought for \$25,000, then sold at the height of the boom for \$2,000,000, was bought by the Venango County Commissioners for \$4.37 in 1878.”[28]

There were other “drawing board cities” in Petrolia. “It is amusing and instructive in these later and more quiet times,” Leonard wrote,

to gaze upon the incipient towns which adorn almost every farm in the vicinity, and see the elaborateness and care displayed by the “founders of the cities” in surveying the streets and giving them such names as Broadway, Morey Avenue, Chestnut street, and

others no less grand and visionary. It is perhaps needless to say that the air castles and ambitious hopes oft indulged in by those who dealt in 'city lots' were never realized, and many of the supposed business thoroughfares through which it was hoped would tramp busy crowds of men, or whirl the elegant barouche of the oil millionaire, never presented a more lively scene than—a flock of geese feeding, or the passage of a solitary oil team.[29]

Students of urban history will ask what, exactly, caused the downfall of Pithole. Conventional wisdom holds that Pithole became a ghost town when the oil ran out. [30] This is true in a sense, but it is entirely too glib, as it does not begin to explain why the town disappeared so utterly from the face of the earth. We have only to consider the survival into the 21st century of Titusville, Oil City, Franklin, and other municipal vestiges of Petrolia[31]—or, for that matter, New Bedford in the post-whaling era—to be reminded of the adaptability of cities and towns. It is to be hoped that our posterity will wonder at the rejuvenative powers of post-Katrina New Orleans.[32]

. Sometimes one hears a secular version of the same argument—that Pithole was done in by the absence of public spiritedness and the resulting feebleness of the public sector. It is hard to deny that the single-minded pursuit of private gain was rampant, and that the list of all the services the municipality failed to provide is long and instructive. Certainly, that list would include such basics as law and order, potable water, sanitary sewers, garbage removal, and fire protection. Many of the town's "appliances" to borrow Tarbell's term, existed in name only. Not a few of the fifty hotels, for instance, depended on tents set up behind an imposing façade.

It is on the one hand true that the decision to develop land based on short-term leases reflects "a triumph of individualism" and the "commodification" of land as real estate.[33] On the other hand, it would seem fundamental that lessees lacked the ability to make even routine assertions of basic property rights.[34] If investors had owned their parcels of land outright, they would have had an incentive to hold onto them and to make durable improvements. As it was, it mattered only that buildings be thrown up quickly. There were as a result no stone or brick houses in Pithole, only wood ones, and construction techniques were slapdash to say the least. According to "Crocus," "Buildings were erected so rapidly as to extort expressions of surprise from every lip." [35] "The very first building, the balloon-style Astor House, took one day to construct." [36]

And as short-term lease-holders had the right to remove whatever they had built when their leases expired, all the incentives impelled them to construct buildings that could easily be taken down and moved. Many Pithole buildings were later dismantled and transported to other boomtowns (including the marvelously named Shamburg). Consider the fate of the Bonta House, one of Pithole's toniest hotels, which had cost \$80,000—a small fortune—to build. The structure "was raffled off in June [1866] at \$10 a ticket, and abandoned in September." [37] The estimable Chase House was moved to Pleasantville in 1868. "The Presbyterian Church building was rebuilt in Oil City and used later as a grocery store." [38] The Danforth House survived in place until 1885, but then it was sold as firewood for \$16.

Many Pithole structures had been "built from green timber; as the wood dried, large gaps

were left between the boards, making these hotels and boardinghouses infamous for their draftiness. The dried, unpainted wood also became highly flammable.”[39] That the leaseholders had no long-term stake in the success of the town might help to account for a phenomenon that otherwise might seem inexplicable: people who lived in a tinderbox nevertheless shrugged off the danger of fire. “Pitholeans,” William Culp Darrah reports, “may have needed firemen but they seemed indifferent to provide support.” Everyone wanted to be a “free rider.” At one point, the city council felt obliged to pass an ordinance “levying a fine of five dollars on any able-bodied person who refused to join a fire-fighting crew when requested.”[40] Again, the problem seems to inhere as much in the absence of private property rights as in the absence of civic spirit. Black has estimated losses due to fire in 1866 alone as roughly \$3 million.[41] Evidence cited by both Darrah and Black suggests that many of the fires were set by arsonists, in some cases by the lessees themselves. Evidently, collecting on fire insurance was more convenient than dismantling the buildings or selling them as firewood.

Urban development by short-term lease-holders explains, too, why no one ever cleaned up in Pithole.[42] The lessees had no particular incentive to do so, since the cost of environmental degradation transferred back to the land-owners when leases expired. People simply had no good reason to be tidy, to husband their resources, or even to protect “their” parcels from being despoiled by others. A good anarchist would say that Pithole affords a glimpse at what happens when people are not invested with the most basic rights attached to individual land ownership, either because someone else holds title (as with the parcels in Pithole), or because no one—or everyone—does (as with Petrolia’s air, creeks, and rivers, not to mention its underground crude oil reservoir). If the lessees had had an interest in making durable improvements, the town might have had a chance of surviving the downturn in demand for oil—which was, after all, only temporary, as we well know and lament.

Together, the shoddiness of construction and the frequency of fires conspired to destroy physical evidence of the existence of Pithole City. The historic site now is managed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which maintains an exhibit of archaeological material and a fascinating scale model of the town—the crocus in full bloom, as it were. Pithole has otherwise reverted to a verdant hillside that is mowed by the maintenance staff in the pattern of the town’s street grid. Here and there are shallow depressions that astute visitors will recognize as cellar holes. Wooden pylons and placards identify the streets and the locations of the main buildings.

As Vale and Campanella have demonstrated, cities do not typically roll over and die, even when devastated by war, terrorism, earthquakes, tsunamis, or other catastrophes. The loss of a principal industry is a serious blow, but it is not invariably lethal, not even for a company town. As we are learning now in New Orleans, it’s hard to kill a city. It seems to me that Pithole was doomed by the law of supply and demand and the absence of the rights normally associated with private property. Together, they explain the flamboyance of Pithole’s brief life, the suddenness of its failure, and the completeness of its erasure—far better, certainly, than the canard that “the oil ran out.”

Black, with a nod to John Brinckerhoff Jackson, refers to Pithole as a “sacred landscape,” i.e., a place that has “been imbued with a deeper cultural significance than what is

immediately apparent from mere physical appearances.”[43] That is undeniable, though just saying so does not settle the question of what, exactly, its deeper cultural significance is. My most vivid memories of a recent August visit—aside from the solitude—are of clouds of annoying gnats and the monotonous drone of cicadas.

References

- Black, Brian. *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Darrah, William Culp. *Pithole, The Vanished City*, privately published, 1972.
- Fisher, Steven. “Pithole: A Tragedy of Dynamic Inefficiency,” B.A. thesis, Gettysburg College, 2003.
- Frederick, Paul. “Venango County—Birthplace of the Oil Industry,” published by the Venango Historical Society, no date.
- Garreau, Joel. “A Sad Truth: Cities Aren’t Forever,” *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2005, p. B01.
- Giddens, Paul Henry, ed., *Pennsylvania Petroleum, 1750-1872: A Documentary History*. Titusville: Drake Well Memorial Park, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1947.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage, 1961.
- Leonard, Charles C. (“Crocus”). *Pithole: Its History*. New York: Morton, Longwell, and Company, 1867.
- Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.
- Pithole: Oil's Vanished Boomtown, 1865-1867*, a brochure published by the Drake Well Museum, Titusville, Pennsylvania, no date.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1976, orig. 1942.
- Stilgoe, John R., *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Tarbell, Ida M. *The History of the Standard Oil Company*. New York: McClure Phillips and Company, 1904.
- Vale, Lawrence J. and Thomas J. Campanella, *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[1] From a correspondent to *The Nation*, I (September 21, 1865), 370-372. Reprinted in Paul Henry Giddens, ed., *Pennsylvania Petroleum, 1750-1872: A Documentary History* (Titusville: Drake Well Memorial Park, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum

Commission, 1947), 291.

[2] Prepared for delivery at the August 2006 meeting of the European Association for Urban History in Stockholm.

[3] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 245.

[4] Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[5] Like the rest Jane Jacobs' magnum opus, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), its title is well worth pondering.

[6] John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 278.

[7] "Fires in the Oil Regions were as regular a feature of the business as explosions used to be on the Mississippi steamboats, and no regular fire insurance company would take the risk." Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York: McClure Phillips and Company, 1904), 26. The challenges were formidable, but the oilmen were astonishingly resourceful. "As men and means were found to put down wells, to devise and build tanks and boats and pipes and railroads for handling the oil, to adapt and improve processes for manufacturing, so men were found from the beginning of the oil business to wrestle with every problem raised. They came in shoals, young, vigorous, resourceful, indifferent to difficulties, greedy for a chance, and with each year they forced more light and wealth from the new product." Tarbell, 21. The author of this famous work, who also was John D. Rockefeller's first biographer, was raised in the Pennsylvania oil fields. See notes 14 and 37, below.

[8] Petrolia was "roughly a triangle from Titusville at the apex" to "Franklin and Tionesta at the base." William Culp Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City* (privately published, 1972), 3.

[9] Among them was Andrew Carnegie, one of the principal stockholders of the Columbia Oil Company. Another was John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller visited Titusville in 1860 and shortly afterwards went into the refining business. A few years later the Pithole boom convinced him there would be a regular supply of crude oil, and so he started investing in a major way. "Within a short time he was making his own barrels, making acids, buying crude directly from the producers and hauling much of his oil with his own horses and wagons." Paul Frederick, "Venango County—Birthplace of the Oil Industry," published by the Venango Historical Society.

[10] Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 3.

[11] Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 152.

[12] *New York Herald*, July 30, 1865. Cited by Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City* 32. According to one contemporary observer, Pithole was "one of the least desirable localities to be found, wherein to bring a wife or sister." Charles C. Leonard ("Crocus"), *Pithole: Its History* (New York:

Morton, Longwell, and Company, 1867), 92.

[13] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 157.

[14] Tarbell, 25. Alas, it must be reported that Tarbell sometimes borrowed a little too liberally from her sources, in this case "Crocus," who wrote, "For many months the Pithole post office was third in size in the State—Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Pithole was the order of rank." Leonard, *Pithole: Its History*, 49.

[15] Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 50.

[16] Ibid., 32.

[17] Ibid., 34.

[18] Ibid., 145.

[19] Ibid., 146.

[20] Paul Frederick, "Venango County—Birthplace of the Oil Industry."

[21] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 159.

[22] *Titusville Morning Herald*, July 29, 1865. Cited by Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 32.

[23] Leonard, *Pithole: Its History*, 69.

[24] Ibid., 36. Darrah, however, cautions that Leonard was "a born humorist who had a penchant for mixing fact and fiction in such uneven proportions that today we do not always know when he is recording the truth or teasing the reader." Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 89. The mystifying thing is that Leonard's account of the "mud machine" appears in the first, and by far the more factual, part of his book.

[25] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1976, orig. 1942).

[26] Paul Frederick, "Venango County—Birthplace of the Oil Industry."

[27] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 167.

[28] Paul Frederick, "Venango County—Birthplace of the Oil Industry."

[29] Leonard, *Pithole: Its History*, 100.

[30] A variation on this theme is Steven Fisher's "Pithole: A Tragedy of Dynamic Inefficiency," B.A. thesis, Gettysburg College, 2003. Fisher's study is a sophisticated econometric analysis supported by models and diagrams leading to the conclusion that the demise of Pithole was caused by uncontrolled competition. "The only way that Pithole could have extended its economic life," Fisher argues, "would have been through some sort of monopoly control over production or collusion between the oil producers." Fisher, "Pithole: A Tragedy of Dynamic Inefficiency," 15. The curious thing about this argument is that monopoly control was the essence of Rockefeller's achievement during the ensuing decades, and it earned him few friends among the chattering classes, then or now.

[31] Oil City, which came into being because of the boom, was periodically devastated by fire or flood, or both. In 1882, "several oil tanks that were struck by lightning gave way, and Oil Creek carried a mass of burning oil into the city, where some 60 lives were lost and property valued at more than \$1 million was destroyed." Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_City,_Pennsylvania.

[32] But see Joel Garreau, "A Sad Truth: Cities Aren't Forever," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2005, p. B01.

[33] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, Chapter 2.

[34] Such as the so-called and much-maligned NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) reflex, for example.

[35] Leonard, *Pithole: Its History*, 5.

[36] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 153.

[37] *Pithole: Oil's Vanished Boomtown, 1865-1867*, a brochure published by the Drake Well Museum, Titusville, Pennsylvania. Franklin Tarbell purchased the lumber for \$600 and built the house, still standing at 324 East Main in Titusville, where his daughter Ida grew up.

[38] Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 225.

[39] Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 155.

[40] Darrah, *Pithole, The Vanished City*, 163, 166.

[41] *Ibid.*, 167.

[42] Black, citing Garrett Hardin's concept of "the tragedy of the commons," says that such an incentive structure encourages "fouling our own nest." See Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*, 42.

[43] *Ibid.*, 170.