





Andy Strauss has spent 25 years preserving land and creating trails to restore natural beauty to blighted landscapes. Now he has a vision for the hardscrabble coal country of northeastern Pennsylvania.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREY POPP



ON a register of Pennsylvania places least likely to harbor beauty, even the unconventional sort, Jimmy Thornton's Recycling in Carbondale would rank near the top.

Carbondale is a town of 9,000 people that straddles the Lackawanna River 15 miles upstream from Scranton. America's first deep-shaft anthracite coalmine opened here in 1831, and coal's legacy still weighs heavily on the valley long after the closure of its last deep mine in 1961. In the mid 1940s, a trash fire in Carbondale ignited an anthracite seam that burned underground until 1974, rendering 500 buildings uninhabitable and displacing 1,000 residents from the west side of town.

The surviving neighborhoods form a taut fabric that fans out around the town's brick-and-bluestone Romanesque city hall. Like the rest of the Lackawanna Valley, Carbondale exudes the scruffy dignity of a place that once generated enormous wealth and now bears the scars of its production.

Jimmy Thornton's junkyard contains the detritus. As the last half-hour of gray daylight leaks through an overcast October sky, Andy Strauss GCP'89 makes his way past a staggering variety of scrap. Rusted oil tanks rear up between industrial spools of thick-gauge wire and segments of iron pipes. A six-foot-tall stack of DVD players rises above dented rain gutters and stiff PVC tubes. There are orphaned motors, piles of lawn chairs, lightweight excavators, a cement mixer, and no end of jettisoned truck tires.

It is along the weedy back edge of this property, where the tea-colored river ripples through a 30-foot-wide gulch overhung with trees, that Strauss wants to bring walkers, joggers, and

cyclists on a 70-mile trail that will follow the river and railroad beds all the way to the New York border.

It's a fitting place to end our day. The slim corridor Strauss is interested in here—stretching about 400 feet from a century-old truss bridge already under his control—may be the thorniest deal he's tried to ink, but it is hardly the most quixotic.

In point of fact, it is the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (LHVA)—a partnership between government, businesses, and civic organizations established in 1991 to preserve the region's cultural, economic, and environmental resources—that's the main driver behind this 35-mile stretch of the trail. It hired Strauss to acquire the property rights for it—a brief that runs the gamut from negotiating with reluctant landowners to untangling legal title convoluted by a century of mergers, bankruptcies, abandonments, and quitclaims. But in Strauss, the LHVA's leaders found an advocate whose passion rivals or maybe even exceeds their own.

Our morning on the river had begun 20 miles downstream in Old Forge, where a cement borehole gushes 60 million gallons of contaminated mine water into the river every day, turning it orange for the remainder of its three-mile run into the Susquehanna. Later we tromped across the former home of Scranton's Marvine Colliery. Today it's a vast moonscape of fine-grained coal waste, known as culm, piled high enough to fill a major-league ballpark up to the first few rows of seats. Then we proceeded upriver to a second old coal-breaking site in Dickson City, another deeply degraded landscape where Strauss had hammered out a provisional agreement that would pave the way for a section of trail linking that town to its cross-river neighbor Olyphant, providing local high-schoolers a better way to get to school.

Almost everywhere we'd gone we'd seen people out walking, as Strauss insisted we would. They often favored quiet rail corridors, and on the edge of Dickson City teenagers were hauling backpacks across an open culm wasteland instead of taking a more roundabout route along city streets.

"These are little coal towns that existed for the mines," Strauss had told me about the compact communities of the Lackawanna Valley. "They're full of older people. People who keep their houses up pretty well but don't have a lot of money. A lot of them walk. They follow these old rail beds. These old people, they're not out there in Lycra, but they're walking all seasons of the year."

"You have all these little towns clustered along the river," he continued. "They're old, beat-up little towns. But they're solid. They have a good planimetric street grid. There's not a lot of highways. The downtowns still have a center. And the trail that's built here would be enormously popular for people who want to ride and eat, ride and stop."

Businesses could also be drawn back to the valley, or at least persuaded to stay there, by such a trail. "The next wave of trails is not just about recreation," Strauss likes to say, voicing a sentiment that's become something of a catechism among trail advocates.

Among the handful of cities that have used trails to promote economic development, Chattanooga, Tennessee, bears perhaps the most similarity to the Scranton area. In 1969, on a national evening news broadcast, Walter Cronkite named that one-time hub of railroads and heavy industry "the dirtiest city in America." Since then, walking-and-cycling trails have played

a key role in luring and retaining such companies as Volkswagen and the French energy giant Alstom to the city, according to former mayor Ron Littlefield, who held office from 2005-2013. They were at times a hard sell for the city's business community. "There were those who said that the smoke smelled like money to them," Littlefield recalls. "I actually heard people say that—and that any efforts to clean up the city was really just going to destroy the city's economy." Yet the "long and expensive" process paid off. Alstom, Littlefield told me, actually conditioned its quarter-billion-dollar proposal to renew a decrepit downtown industrial complex on the extension of the city's riverwalk trail to the property.

"There are a lot of places that are still wrestling with the transition from an old industrial city to something new," Littlefield reflected. "The Lackawanna Valley is a beautiful valley. I think it's got a quality that will attract a lot of people ... The industrial cities of Pennsylvania can learn a lot from Chattanooga."

Be that as it may, it still took some mental gymnastics to imagine this valley becoming the pedestrian and cyclist paradise Strauss and the LHVA seemed to envision.

The Lackawanna River could lay claim to having suffered more industrial despoilment than any other waterway in America. Wide swaths of earth along its tributaries have at one time or another been scraped clean down to the coal. Mine caverns so thoroughly riddle the earth beneath the river that, before the ongoing catastrophe of their flooding, it was possible to travel from one side of the valley to the other entirely underground—a distance of several miles at depths reaching 700 feet. And the riverbanks themselves were for decades the near-exclusive preserve of coal-breakers, pig-iron and steel works, heavy manufacturers, and railroads, which drained wetlands and rerouted the river's course to suit their interests.

What kind of tourist would want to come here—what company would think of moving here—to take advantage of a rail-and-river trail?

And now we were standing amid Jimmy Thornton's prodigious mounds of junk. Strauss unrolled a site plan to show the affable salvage operator his latest proposal: a linear easement divided into two adjacent strips. Strauss proposed to purchase both, but give Thornton an option to reclaim the strip closest to his warehouse if he ever decided to build a loading dock that required the extra clearance. Thornton hemmed and hawed, changed the subject to improving his access to some other property further upriver, and contorted the conversation into a sort of Mobius strip that insistently bent away from a definitive answer. At any rate, the land had passed into his mother's possession from his late father, so her signature was the one that mattered. But son would need to lobby mother, so Strauss was working his angle.

As the two men nibbled around the edges of a deal that had eluded consummation for two-and-a-half years, the sun slipped into a narrow strip of clear sky between the clouds and the

valley's western ridge. Deep orange light spilled across a riot of autumn leaves. The length of the Lackawanna Valley glistened and burned to the limits of our field of vision. Then a shaft of sunshine transformed the old iron truss into an even more sublime sight. It was still a modest crossing, but brawny and beautiful in this molten light, its only decorative extravagance the pinhole stenciling above a portal strut commemorating the year of its construction: 1909. Weed-tree saplings had taken root in the derelict timbers of its floor beams, but now Strauss's vision grabbed hold of me as well. It was hard not to get caught up in the prospect of this structure's resurrection as a path for human feet.

“It’s easy saving farmland. It’s easy to save upstream wetlands. It’s hard saving land where people live.”



Andy Strauss is 55 years old. He has an ice-skater's legs and thick, tarnished-silver hair that often flares out curly in the back below the impression of a bicycle helmet, which rarely leaves his head for long. One of the keenest memories from his childhood on the east side of Manhattan is a week he spent home from school with the flu. He was 10 or 11 years old, and his mother occupied him with a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle depicting Grant Wood's "American Gothic."

"I remember doing that puzzle, and just staring at it for the longest time," he recalls. "Not just the austere look of the old man and his wife, but the stylized background of the hills, the trees, and the stuff in the back of it—and I thought, 'Is there really such a place as this?'"

By the time he was a teenager, Strauss was riding his bike up Broadway Avenue and following Route 9A through the Bronx to Tarrytown and other places along the Hudson River. He discovered the open country of Wood's iconic painting after a visit to the University of Chicago, when he detoured to Iowa's Grinnell College on the recommendation of a friend's father. He fell for the plains.

"I thought, 'Well, I could go to school in Hyde Park—or I could go to this area where I could do a lot of bicycling.' And that was really my decision."

He led bicycle trips during Grinnell's extended spring breaks, and took a yearlong hiatus between his junior and senior years to ride from Iowa to Alaska. He crossed the high prairie to Montana, veered north over the Canadian Rockies, and left the asphalt to traverse the Yukon via dirt roads to Fairbanks.

"People always ask me my favorite part," he says. "I rode 4,700 or 4,800 miles, and my favorite part was the prairies and high plains. West of the 98th Meridian. I could ride all day, and just switch my brain off, and totally get into the rhythm. I love prairies and high plains. I guess that whatever made me comfortable riding through that emptiness also makes me comfortable plying northeast Pennsylvania, and seeing the good in it."

His interest in open spaces carried him to Penn's Department of City and Regional Planning, where Robert Coughlin G'64, Ann Strong, and John Keene GCP'66 (who remains an emeritus professor) were then at the forefront of scholarship on the use of legal, regulatory, and financial tools to preserve undeveloped land.

Strauss emerged from his training gripped by two epiphanies. The first was a love of the Delaware Valley—born of hundreds of hours in the saddle, distance-touring and eventually racing for a team sponsored by a Center City bicycle shop. The second was a determination to preserve open space where it was least available and hardest to do—in densely populated cities and towns, and especially in places where working-class people lived and labored.

"As a planner, you're taught about efficiency and equity. At least those were the two concepts that I took away from my time down the street," Strauss told me over coffee near campus before our trip to coal country. "Society should support its weakest elements, and it's the planner's role to do that. And when I see these areas that are underserved—especially environmentally, or from the perspective of a bike trail or a recreational trail or a park—I want to fill that void. And it's just never left me."

In a roundabout sense, that ethic had first been planted by his father—if more by osmosis than design.

"My father sold yarn for a living. He had nothing to do with the environment," Strauss mused as we drove to Scranton. "And he never thought I should ever work for government," he laughed. But parents have incomplete control over the lessons their children glean from them. And though Ed Strauss believed in the primacy of business in American life, Andy remembers him as "sort of a New Deal Republican" who regarded the grand public works of that era as emblems of civilization's forward march.

"Robert Moses was a god," Strauss said, recalling childhood car trips with his father. "We'd go under a highway and he'd say, 'That's a Robert Moses highway.' 'That's a Moses work.' 'That's a Moses park.'"

"He was very proud of Jones Beach," Strauss continued. "Moses built Jones Beach, which was an incredible public work. It was a marsh. The guy was brilliant—he pumped all this sand up, created a massive public beach open to everybody. The problem was you needed a car to get there—but middle-class and lower-middle-class New Yorkers could suddenly go to the beach, and have a healthy day at the beach as opposed to swimming in the Gowanus Canal or some of the shitholes where my father had, growing up."

After completing his coursework at Penn, Strauss took a job in New Jersey Governor Tom Kean's office of policy and planning, where he focused on land-use and affordable housing. (He filed his master's thesis three years later in 1989, drawing from his work there.) Later he spent five years as the New Jersey project manager at the Trust For Public Land, working with private landowners and federal, state, and local governments to acquire conservation lands.

One of his best-loved projects from that period was a 1992 deal that preserved the lion's share of the largest island in Manahawkin Bay in its natural state. "If you ever take Highway 72 to Long Beach Island, there's a big green island, and everything on the south side of the causeway has been preserved," he says. "Millions of people see it. It was slated for 800 condos and a 20-story tower, and it's now part of the US Fish & Wildlife system, the refuge system. That was one that we paid \$2.5 million for, and it's worth considerably more. I'm very proud of that."

In 1995 he founded Strauss & Associates, a consulting firm he runs in partnership with his wife, Diane Strauss GCP'88. Their practice centers on the acquisition of land for public benefit, largely on behalf of municipalities, land trusts, and nonprofit organizations.

The financial aspect of land conservation involves a Swiss Army knife of skills. Preservation deals typically require half-a-dozen or more sources of financing—everything from federal transportation funds to local tax-increment financing, state and municipal open-space bond issues to tradable wetland-mitigation credits, and foundation grants to the generation of tax benefits for private landowners via mechanisms like conservation easements or "friendly condemnations."

"He's like a lawyer," says Natalie Gelb, executive director of the LHVA. "He's like an accountant. And he's a schmoozer—he's just very good with people ... We couldn't have accomplished probably 80 percent of what we've done without him."



Paul Downs EAS'85 met Strauss when both were students at Penn Design. Strauss noticed Downs' fixed-gear bike—then a rarity—locked up outside Meyerson Hall, and taped a note to it that said, more or less, “Nice wheels. Let’s ride.” Which they’ve done a great deal of over the years.

“If you look at the landscape, *you* see it as it is now,” Downs told me. “Andy sees everything as being what it was when it was pristine, before the Indians got there. And he understands the whole history of things. He never looks at what it is and says, ‘Okay, that’s what it is.’ He always sees it as what it was, what it is, and what it could be at the same time. And he’s found a way to get down into the nuts and bolts of what actually has to happen in order to fulfill a much grander vision.”

To Andy Johnson, who oversees watershed protection and trail development in the Delaware Valley for the William Penn Foundation, Strauss combines a planner’s ability to think 50 years ahead with the “critical mass of experience working in real-life situations” required to know what’s doable in the next two or three. Johnson largely credits Strauss, working in concert with architect and planner Bob Thomas C’69 GAR’73, for convincing the foundation to direct \$20 million in private grants toward the development of The Circuit, a 750-mile network of multi-use trails in the greater Philadelphia region that’s nearing the halfway point of completion.

Thomas, who is widely considered a legend in Philadelphia bicycling circles for his instrumental role in the development of the Schuylkill River Trail, among other paths, has his own way of summing up Strauss: “Andy defies description.”

Strauss characterizes his practice as the mood strikes him. He’s a “consulting land-acquisition manager for trail assembling” and a “specialist in the arcane field of railroad title.” He’s “part archaeologist” and “a good clutch between a planner and a real-estate developer.” He’s an authority on “odd corridors and problematic parcels.” Mainly, though, he’s someone who’s deepest in his element when striking a deal for land.

“I’m a carpenter of land deals,” he says. “I’m a land dog.”

Strauss is an easy guy to talk to and a hard guy to keep up with.

After a long day in the Lackawanna Valley tromping over culm piles, thrashing through riverside underbrush, and hopscotching over bridges marked with NO TRESPASSING signs, we woke in the Scranton Radisson at 5 a.m. We drove in the dark to Jim Thorpe, a former coal-shipping town on the Lehigh River originally known as Mauch Chunk, whose latter-day renaissance as a rafting-hiking-cycling destination informs one side of Strauss’s vision for the Lackawanna Valley. Our plan was to cycle the length of the Lehigh Gorge, by way of a four-year-old trail that connects the town center to the Lehigh Gorge State Park on property Strauss helped the town acquire.

It was a gorgeous journey. The route paralleled an active railroad for the first few miles, followed it across the Lehigh on the Nesquehoning Trestle—whose original two rail lines have been reduced to one to accommodate the trail—and ascended the river’s gentle grade through stands of hemlock and rhododendron. The landscape had an unspoiled aspect



that belied its actual history. Many of these slopes had been clear-cut in the late 19th century to supply the Lehigh Tannery, one of the country's largest, and at one point we passed beneath a weathered suspension bridge that originally carried one of the nation's first long-distance oil pipelines across the river. But today that old conduit, like the remnants of trackside tender stations where steam locomotives replenished their water, graces the rejuvenated landscape as a romantic vestige of an industrial era whose scars have healed over. The 11,000 barrels of oil that once flowed daily through its two six-inch pipes have been replaced by fiber optic cables.

Our ride was also a 46-mile endurance test that began in an insistent drizzle and ended in driving rain. If Strauss had his pick of anyone in history as a cycling companion, he'd probably go with T.E. Lawrence, one of his personal heroes, whose diplomatic and guerrilla exploits in the Arabian Peninsula during the First World War derived from a commitment to deep cultural immersion and working low in the field. Suffice it to say that I was a distant alternative. When Strauss finally delivered me back home that evening, my wife concluded from the bounce in his step that our jaunt had been all in a couple days' ordinary work for him. I, on the other hand—and despite a 16-year advantage in youth—looked like a “limp dishrag.”

For our next trip, Strauss instructed me to find a folding

commuter bike that I could haul on an Amtrak regional to Newark, so that we could pedal six miles together to an industrial brownfield he was on the cusp of acquiring for a park. It was getting on November. I sat on my hands for a week, told him I couldn't find one, and suggested meeting him in a car. He then arranged for the overnight loan of a \$1,600 collapsible Brompton three-speed from Philadelphia's Trophy Bikes, where he bought his own many years ago. When our site visit approached—along with a forecast calling for near-record lows below the freezing point and winds exceeding 20 miles an hour—he cheerily emailed me a link to a pair of his preferred brand of “lobster gloves,” along with photographs of their designer's brother and Strauss participating in a 100-kilometer open-ice speed-skating marathon in Quebec.

“I love getting an email from him when we've had a prolonged stretch of cold weather,” Andy Johnson later told me, laughing. “He skates to work in Trenton from his house in Yardley—skates down the Delaware Canal to the Calhoun Street Bridge, and walks over to his office. He's an outdoorsman, but he's almost like an urban outdoorsman.”

Strauss's park project in New Jersey is a good example of how tortured land-acquisition can be—even if he didn't insist on cycling into the teeth of freezing wind to conduct site visits. (“The manager of public works up there has a betting pool on how cold it has to be for me not to ride my bike,” he laughed. “But I always roll up on my Broomie.”)

It's a 12-acre Superfund cleanup site that was formerly the home of Scientific Glass, a manufacturer of test tubes and mercury thermometers that closed in 1985. The factory was built on landfill atop a 100-year floodplain at the confluence of two tributaries of the Passaic River in the blue-collar township of Bloomfield. Half a century of intensive residential and commercial development, which has replaced permeable land with impermeable concrete, has swelled the water levels and increased the frequency of flooding.

Nicholas Joanow is a township councilman who lives next to one of the tributaries. “When I bought here 43 years ago, it was a stream,” he told me. “You could walk across it. In many cases, during the summer months it was at best a foot wide. Now it goes bank to bank, 20 to 30 feet wide and two feet deep. And we've had up to three feet of water over the bank during floods; the street is totally impassable.”

Joanow has been fighting plans for the residential redevelopment of the Scientific Glass site since 2001. Strauss put his shoulder to the wheel in 2005.

“It's easy saving farmland,” he likes to say. “It's easy to save upstream wetlands. It's hard saving land where people live.”

They envision a park with soccer fields (on an adjacent 6-acre site Strauss acquired two years ago), unprogrammed open space, and a reconstructed wetland habitat capable of sponging up heavy rains.

“We are presently at full build-out—where the rest of Jersey may be in 30 or 40 years,” Joanow said of his township. “So this is a good test tube for creating open space, passive recreation, flood mitigation.”

It's been an uphill battle. A pro-development mayor, a politically connected real-estate investment banker, and other actors effectively encouraged potential allies for conservation

to sit on the sidelines. The state Department of Environmental Protection declined to fund an updated study of the impact of development on local flooding.

“We got top-notch hydrologists, environmental lawyers,” Strauss says. “But it was like pushing against a Panzer tank. We had a pea gun and we were going against guys with Uzis—developers with money and political influence.”

In 2012, the site’s owners prevailed in obtaining final permits to build 104 townhouse units. But while they set about capping the site and constructing concrete barriers against rising water, Joanow’s political coalition gained control of council and the mayor’s office—which changed hands in 2014 for the first time in 12 years—and approved a measure to purchase the Scientific Glass site.

That set the stage for a deal that hits all of Strauss’s sweet spots.

“What’s unique about it is it’s a small, working-class community that’s taking the lead to buy it,” he said—at which point a red-tailed hawk materialized in the sky as though on cue. “It’s not being done by a foundation, it’s not being done by a wealthy exurban community. It’s really what we hope would be a harbinger, for other flood-prone urban communities to look at the potential for acquiring and restoring derelict sites that the development community says, ‘Oh, you can only develop this.’”

“The whole buzzword since Superstorm Sandy is *resiliency*,” he added. “This is a basic resiliency project. If we can get through the acquisition and restoration, the goal is to turn it into an award-winning project that has a real demonstration value. If Bloomfield can do this, there are any number of other communities who can.”

Which brings us back to the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Trail.

Our walk across the lifeless black field of Scranton’s old Marvine Colliery revealed a landscape that in some respects has changed little since it was sacrificed to power America’s industrial revolution. The main coal-breaking building is long gone, but a hulking two-tier coal conveyor still spans the river, and of course most of the land is covered in culm.

But not all of it. A 1922 aerial photo of this site shows the riverbanks utterly denuded of vegetation of any kind. Today a corridor of paper birch and alder trees lines the waterfront, ranging in width from about 20 to more than 100 feet. Strauss reckons it’s been 15 or 20 years since the riverbank was last stripped.

The entire property is owned by Louis DeNaples, a self-made tycoon whose landfill, waste-hauling, auto salvage, manufacturing, and real-estate empire is reported to be worth more than a billion dollars. He is widely regarded as the most powerful man in northeastern Pennsylvania, and it would be safe to say that he does not have a reputation as a particular friend of the environment.

Be that as it may, Strauss has come to regard him with a sympathetic esteem that sometimes, in conversation, seemed to border on affection.

“He reminds me a lot of my father,” he reflected at one point. “My father was small potatoes compared to Louis, but he’s a really humble guy who gets to know his customers.”

“DeNaples prides himself on doing the stuff that no one else will do,” he added later. “He has an incredible nose for finding the leverage in everything. I respect him a lot.”



Before cutting across the culm field, Strauss led me bushwhacking along a proto-path above the waterfront where he had reached a verbal agreement to bring the trail through DeNaples' land. In an opportunistic gambit, Strauss had picked up land situated elsewhere in the Lackawanna Valley, owned by a rival determined to keep it out of DeNaples' hands. In exchange for that property, DeNaples had provisionally agreed to a series of conservation easements that would preserve 3.1 linear miles of riverside woodland, on this site and two others, in perpetuity.

"This is probably 20 years of growth," Strauss said of the paper birch and alder. "You get other sites that are 50 or 60 years old, and can begin to support hardwoods. There are seeds that wash over. There's ash, there's hickory ... and the more trees you have over the river, the more you're cooling the water. The more you're dropping bugs in the river for trout to feed on."

In other words, the trail will buffer the river while increasing access to it. "It's my opinion that right-of-way today is like what open space was 25 years ago," he added.

Bernie McGurl, the executive director of the Lackawanna River Corridor Association, a local watershed conservancy, concurs.

"This was a dead river when I was growing up back in the '50s," he told me. "One of our goals was to restore people's contact with the Lackawanna River as a step in cleaning up the pollution. So we identified a lot of abandoned railroads along the river and

said, 'Hey, they'd make great hiking trails. Let's create a greenway and let's do conservation and let's get the river cleaned up.'"

They've had a lot of success. "Thirty years ago the river was a sewer," says Gary Smith, the president of the Lackawanna chapter of Trout Unlimited. "But it's gradually cleaning itself. If you don't interfere with Mother Nature too much, she'll take care of things." As of 2012, Pennsylvania's Fish and Boat Commission had designated 16 miles of the river, stretching from Scranton to Carbondale, as Class A trout habitat. In 2013, the Lackawanna made *Trout Unlimited's Guide to America's 100 Best Trout Streams*.

The Marvine deal would turn out to be a very heavy lift. Two months after our trip, Strauss still hadn't managed to get DeNaples to the closing table. A month after that, he expressed doubt that he ever would. The Scientific Glass deal had finally come to fruition—culminating nearly a decade of effort on Strauss's part. Jimmy Thornton was coming around, along with his mother, who'd promised to clean up the junkyard. So there was cause for optimism about gaining those 400 feet of riverfront right-of-way. But DeNaples, who was meanwhile courting an industrial buyer interested in some of the land in play, was demanding terms that threatened to scuttle Strauss's bigger deal to protect 3.1 miles.

Bob Thomas, a veteran of countless closely fought land negotiations, observes that acquiring right-of-way is at once the most arduous and least appreciated aspect of building a trail. "Probably the hardest one I'll ever do took 20 years" just to assemble the corridor, he says. "Then it was only five years of design, and about three months of construction. By the time the trail gets built, it's almost an anticlimax."

For Strauss, the endgame played out in the last week of March. In response to an eleventh-hour proposal from his counterparty that was a deal-breaker for the LHVA, he set out for Scranton at four in the morning on a Wednesday, determined to either negotiate through it or kill the deal once and for all. Two years of work were about to come to a sudden and dramatic end. By Thursday afternoon it was over. The signatures were in place to protect more than three miles of the riverbank forever.

With that victory, Strauss and the LHVA move one step closer to completing a job that becomes harder with every step toward the finish line.

"The easy trail segments have been acquired," he says. "A lot of my work is figuring out how to resolve these gap sites."

"Building a trail, the most challenging piece really is property acquisition," says LHVA director Natalie Gelb. "Most of the property was old rail line that had been acquired by various property owners. And first of all, tracing back the title is so complicated. We couldn't even get anybody around here to figure it out. The railroads have changed hands so many times, and there were bankruptcies, and up in the Carbondale area the river was rerouted—it's just very, very complicated. We actually had property owners that wanted to work with us and just couldn't figure out the chain of title."

Over the last 10 or 15 years, Andy and Diane Strauss have become specialists in the convoluted realm of railroad title. It's tempting to look at a railroad corridor and see a linear strip of ownership. But American railroads owe their development to hundreds of individual legislative acts that essentially enabled particular companies to wrest easements from private landholders in a defined area to establish efficient



rights-of-way. When rail companies removed lines from active service—which happened often when the demise of anthracite sent railroad profits into death spirals—the easements often reverted to the owners of the underlying property.

“In an urban area, every half mile, a rail line might be going through 200 separate properties,” Stauss notes. “So each one of those properties you have to negotiate with the owner.”

The hunt to simply discover who owns a particular rail line can just as daunting. The Strausses often start in the National Archives’ repository of historic Railroad Valuation Maps, proprietary documents used by the railroads when they bought and sold lines. These typically show the world of rail as it existed circa World War I. Then it’s a matter of figuring out what happened over the subsequent century—an era littered with railroad bankruptcies, mergers, and property swaps that typically employed quitclaim deeds, in which one party conveys property to another without assurance that the grantor owned it to begin with. The chain of title can get so twisted that occasionally Strauss discovers that a stretch of rail corridor is owned by an existing railroad that’s completely unaware of its ownership.

Wayne Michel is the president of Reading & Northern Railroad, a short-line railroad that controls about 320 miles of track in eastern Pennsylvania and has hired Strauss to clarify and perfect its property rights in recent years.

“I joined Conrail in ’85, doing line sales,” he told me. “And in all my years I have not met anybody as good as Andy at understanding the totality of the railroads in this region—the history, and being able to help you understand the ownership rights that you as the railroad may have, or the adjacent landowners may have, or that you may *not* have because it was all owned by the underlying coal company or canal company.”

The very complexity of all that industrial history is a big part of what keeps bringing Strauss up here.

“A lot of people put Scranton down,” he mused at one point. “But from 1879 through World War I, Scranton was the Kuwait of the United States in terms of BTUs. For five decades, Scranton had the highest per capita income in the US. Because you had the coal, you had the mining, engineering, people who were making steel, products, airplanes, machinery. And you had the textile plants that employed the miners’ wives. You can still see in the layout of Scranton how much wealth was there.”

Strauss also sees his father in that physical legacy. Ed Strauss died two years ago, but he surfaces frequently in Andy’s mind as he plies northeastern Pennsylvania.

“He knew every mill between Frankford and Kensington and Scranton,” Strauss said as we drove one day. “Toward the end, when he was retired and living in Arizona, I used to call him from the road. He’d say, ‘Where are you today?’ And I’d say, ‘Oh, you don’t know where I am.’ He’d go, ‘Come on.’ My father was a navigator in the Army Air Corps. And just to play, I’d say, ‘I’m in the middle of Bumfuck, Schuylkill County. You don’t know where I am.’”

“And he’d insist: ‘Come on, where are you?’ So I’d tell him, and he’d go, ‘Oh, yeah. I used to call on such-and-such a mill in such-and-such a place.’ And he’d tell me about a hotel that hasn’t existed for 35 years, 40 years.”

“So you ask me what inspires me. In addition to the social-equity element of planning, I also feel like I’m following my father a little bit.”



In time our conversation circled back to his vision of what could replace the vanished mills and collieries of his father’s day.

“I sort of toy with the idea of just buying a weekend house in Carbondale, because I think it’s going to be the next Jim Thorpe,” he confided. “It will take a few decades, because it’s still pretty depressed. Jim Thorpe was never as fully depressed as Carbondale. But it has these great hillsides, and it’s in a region with tremendous forest and lake assets that are in better shape than the assets uphill on the west side of Jim Thorpe.”

“And when the trails are connected—the D&H and the D&L Lackawanna Heritage Trail are connected—it’s going to really be a great time.

“If I ask Diane for permission, she’d be like, ‘Eh...?’ But if I went and just bought a house and came back with a recorded deed, she’d have no choice!” he laughed. “I spend so much time up here, I might as well. There are a few projects actually I could keep working on, on my own. I’d like to get more involved up here.”

After all these miles trailing him over nascent footpaths and bikeways, it was the easiest thing to imagine: Andy Strauss poring over site maps, clambering up river embankments, and scrambling across forsaken railroad spurs, pressing through the woods until the outline of his body merges with the landscape. ♦