



## A proud day for NEPA natives

*Forget Obama's oath-taking, Scranton's eyes were on Biden*

By **Natalie Gelb Solfanelli**

Northeastern Pennsylvania celebrated its heritage with the world on Jan. 20, when Scranton native Joe Biden was sworn in as the vice president of the United States. I was fortunate to be an eyewitness to this memorable moment at the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Every day I work to promote the Lackawanna Heritage Valley, a geographic area that covers the Lackawanna watershed from the Stillwater Dam (Susquehanna County) to the confluence of the Lackawanna River with the Susquehanna in Duryea (Luzerne County). The Indian word Lackawanna means "stream that forks." Other than a few miles in each of our neighboring counties, most of the watershed sits within Lackawanna County.

Much of the work of LHVA, like that of our sister Pennsylvania and National Heritage Areas, centers on creating a sense of place. We tell our story by educating the public about the cultural, historic and natural resources of the place where we live. LHVA's theme is "Land, People, Industry" because one cannot tell the story of one without the other.

I often allude to the 1963 inauguration of John F. Kennedy when I speak about LHVA. I believe that the words of the late poet laureate, Robert Frost, "The Land was ours before we were the land's," speak to the history of the Lackawanna Valley. Anthracite coal, so abundant under our land, was here for the taking in the 19th century.

It was the product of that land that provided opportunities for immigrants by the thousands to work and build industries like coal mining, railroads, iron and textile production. As people came from all over Europe to settle in the towns up and down the Lackawanna Valley, including the cities of Scranton and Carbondale, they brought their ethnic traditions with them.

In replicating their towns and villages, their families came to identify this part of the world as their homes. Finally, they belonged to the land.

As we moved through the crowds of thousands in Washington on Jan. 20, everyone belonged to our great country. Despite the crush and the long waits, there was a sense of hope and joy and pride that linked us to each other. Everyone smiled and laughed and commented on how amazing it all was.

I had a ticket to the Capitol grounds but, due to a snafu at the security entrance to the Blue and Purple sections, I waited hours to enter the one small opening in the gate.

As hour after hour passed...from 8:30 in the morning until past 11 a.m., the crowd started murmuring that we were never going to get in. Someone near me said, "As long as we get in to hear Obama take the oath," and I responded to everyone within earshot, "No! I need to get there in time for Joe Biden. I'm from Scranton!" They all smiled in understanding. Lucky for me, I was one of the last people to get through and I arrived on the grounds about a minute before Sen. Biden became Vice President Biden. Thousands of disappointed ticketholders never made it.

Joe Biden was not only born here, he is from here. And he is proud of it! He has helped establish Scranton in the national...and international... consciousness as the quintessential, hard working American city. He doesn't forget his roots. He speaks about his parents and grandparents and neighbors and friends with great affection. And, in front of the world, he credits Scranton as the place where he learned his values.

When former Sen. Biden spoke at the Scranton Chamber of Commerce dinner a few years ago, I had a chance to speak with his sister, Valerie. She confirmed that all three Biden siblings "love Scranton" and that is why she and her other brother had accompanied him to the Chamber dinner. They enjoy visiting and try to get here at least once a year.

I hope that schedule doesn't change. But even if it does, our new vice president has made the job of LHVA much easier. Minds and ears that were closed before are now open to the positive things about our area. He has set the standard for all residents of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley to tell our story!

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