



LHVA's role is to 'tell our story'

Preserving heritage provides 'authentic' tourist experience

By Natalie Gelb Solfanelli

The Lackawanna Heritage Valley (LHVA) is a state and national heritage area, created to preserve, promote and celebrate the region's heritage, culture and natural resources. It's geographically defined area encompasses the Lackawanna watershed — all of Lackawanna and parts of Wayne, Susquehanna and Luzerne counties. The designated management entity is the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (LHVA), operating under the auspices of a board of directors appointed by the Lackawanna County Commissioners.

A heritage area is a type of conservation and development organization that enhances the appreciation and understanding of the natural and built environment, the culture of the inhabitants and the area's special history and culture. The themes of LHVA are land, people and industry. It is our industrial past, enabled by the abundance of anthracite coal and the entrepreneur-ship and work ethic of an immigrant population that makes the Lackawanna Heritage Valley particularly notable.

Scranton, the hub of the railroads, was one of the most important and affluent cities in the nation. The LHVA theme is, "They came to build a new life and ended up building a new nation," because this region fueled the industrial revolution, both literally and figuratively.

Unlikely as it might seem, northeastern Pennsylvania was the Mid-East of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Below the landscape lay 95 percent of the world's supply of anthracite, the hottest, longest and cleanest burning type of coal on earth. It also was home to major railroads that carried the coal to the cities of the northeast and to the Great Lakes, the water route to Minnesota and beyond. The synergies of the natural resource of anthracite, the manufacture of T-rails and textiles, and the rivers, canals and railroads that provided the means of transportation for these valuable commodities, created fertile ground for the industrial complex that thrived in the Lackawanna Valley.

This area was an incubator for industrial growth, attracting tens of thousands of immigrants drawn to the job opportunities in the mines, on the railroads, and at the mills and factories. As a result, Scranton became the urban center, surrounded by unique and cohesive ethnic communities, and a culture that was noted for magnificent edifices for residential, religious, commercial and civic purposes. At the same time, the disparities between the living conditions of the new captains of industry and the hard working laborers created tensions that exploded in violence and led to the beginnings of the American labor movement.

The Lackawanna Heritage Valley has a rich and complex heritage. "Telling our story" is the main task that we have set for ourselves. Our history is a proud legacy, and it is our goal to assure that it is recognized and appreciated by residents and visitors alike. Heritage tourism is central to LHVA's mission.

Tourism is the largest industry in the world and the second largest in Pennsylvania. Heritage tourism is a growing phenomenon within that category. More and more people are including visits to historic and cultural sites in their travel plans.

Visitors to the Lackawanna Heritage Valley can enjoy authentic places and experiences, not mere replications. From the original rail yards and roundtable of Steamtown National Historic Site to the depths of the Lackawanna Coal Mine, from the Electric City Trolley Museum to the Scranton Iron Furnaces, tourists can ride a steam train or hop on a restored trolley, visit the Everhart Museum and the Gorge at Nay Aug, Park or enjoy the Pennsylvania Anthracite Museum at McDade Park. They can tour the Scranton Cultural Center, the Catlin House of the Lackawanna Historical Society, the Radisson at Lackawanna Station, the Albright Memorial Library and/or Lackawanna College, magnificent buildings designed by renowned architects.

Those with local ties can visit the towns where their ancestors lived, experiencing the traditions and delicious ethnic foods of the diverse communities throughout the valley. They can choose to attend concerts, art exhibitions, plays, lectures and other performances at historic venues, colleges and community centers throughout the area. Or, if they like outdoor activity, they can ski, skate or hunt in winter, hike, swim or boat on the lakes, or fish for trophy trout in the restored Lackawanna River in spring, summer and fall.

In 2005, tourists spent \$13.5 million dollars while visiting Lackawanna Heritage Valley sites. The direct and indirect economic impact resulted in 387 jobs, generating nearly \$7.9 million in personal income and \$12.4 million in total value to the economy. These are the only quantifiable benefits! Please watch for future columns to learn more about the many other ways in which LHVA's work impacts the region.

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