

A Pipeline Threatens Our Family Land

By ANN NEUMANN

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The Tucquan Creek flows through the Tucquan Glen Nature Preserve on its way to the Susquehanna River.

Credit Casey Kreider

LANCASTER, Pa. — MOUNTAIN LAUREL, tufted with pink blooms each spring, and leathery emerald rhododendron line the Tucquan Glen, a steep hollow in southern Lancaster County, Pa. The Tucquan Creek, home to towering tulip poplar and oak trees and the occasional red fox, rushes over natural rock dams and plunges into secluded swimming holes before it meets the Susquehanna River and continues to the Chesapeake Bay.

I know this creek, the way it tastes and sounds, because I grew up with it, playing in the ferns and wild columbine along its banks. My father moved to the hollow as a single parent in 1976. When he died 30 years later, my sister, Malinda Harnish Clatterbuck, decided to raise her two daughters in the home where we were raised.

This spring a man with a clipboard knocked on Malinda's door. He wanted permission to survey her property for a [natural gas](#) pipeline. My sister asked what would happen if she didn't sign. Williams Partners, an Oklahoma-based natural gas transporter, would prefer to negotiate, he cheerily said, but the company would invoke the federal right of eminent domain if she didn't.

The Atlantic Sunrise pipeline is planned to be up to 42 inches in diameter, buried three to five feet beneath yards, fields and woods. It will connect two existing lines, and is cheaper for Williams to build than upgrading what the company already has in the ground. During construction, set to begin in June 2016, a path up to 125 feet wide will be clear cut with chain saws and bulldozers, destroying the trees we've always known, the dainty trillium we've looked for each year. "Horizontal directional" drilling could be used to run the high-pressure pipeline beneath the Tucquan Creek's fishing holes and falls.

A permanent 50-foot-wide path will have to be kept clear of buildings and trees — and maintained not by Williams, but by landowners. Pumping, meter and deodorization stations will be built along the route, although Williams has not made a final determination of how many or where.

The Central Penn Line will slice through 178 miles, eight counties and hundreds of properties. Once it is operational, Williams will have access to the pipeline indefinitely, for maintenance and upgrades — and for cleanup after leaks or explosions. Like all major gas transport companies, Williams has a long list of violations and disasters.

Fracking, I once thought, was something that happened to other people, not mine. Hydraulic fracturing may be confined to the shale regions of the country, but the wider effects of the natural gas boom, and the [pipelines being built to support it](#), include the feverish development of wilderness and private property.

FIRST granted 300 acres of property in 1734, my Mennonite family has lived in the same area for hundreds of years. A ninth-generation Lancastrian, Dad chose to leave farming and the church to settle in the Tucquan Glen a handful of miles from the family farm.

When a housing development threatened the township in the 1980s, he and his neighbors organized. My Reaganite father found himself shaking his fist at township meetings and selling sandwiches to raise money, all to save the hollow he loved. Today, 336 acres of the glen are in

preservation. Dad's legacy is a hiking trail that bears his name, watched over by a flock of wild turkeys, and a hollow free from the subdivisions and big-box stores that now characterize much of the northeastern United States.

Preservation, however, can't stop companies like Williams, with the complicity of federal agencies, from seizing public and private land. The natural gas industry is creating a vast infrastructure for processing and transport, with 89,000 miles of pipelines currently proposed or in the approval process.

In Pennsylvania alone, where [2012 gas production rates](#) increased by 69 percent over the previous year, thousands of miles of new pipelines will have to be built to support gas production. After the pipelines have bolstered corporate profit margins — many experts predict that gas reserves will last only another 35 years; the United States Energy Information Administration says 90 years — they will be left to molder below family fields, forests and streams.

Many banks, afraid of liabilities, are reluctant to refinance mortgages or provide loans for properties with pipelines. My sister asked USAA, the financial-services company that insures her home, about her policy and was told that the pipeline would change her insurance category from residential to commercial, with a higher premium.

The pipeline approval process is neither democratic nor transparent. The [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission](#) works with local, state and federal agencies to produce an environmental impact statement, which determines project approval. But the statement doesn't guarantee safety; many interstate pipelines that have leaked or exploded received an environmental impact statement beforehand. The Atlantic Sunrise Project's impact statement has not yet been published.

Williams is required to host public meetings, but these are not exactly town halls; residents at a meeting in Lancaster last month were left to wander among information tables. Detailed maps of the route are available for inspection there, but the maps available online don't contain property lines or owners' names, so communities find it hard to organize. There's a financial incentive to work with the company. A Williams representative told me that if a landowner negotiates, she is likely to be paid two to three times the assessed value of her property. If she fights, judges typically award eminent domain at only the assessed value.

I heard deep resignation in Steve Groff's voice when he told me he had allowed Williams to survey his land. Steve and I grew up together. He now farms the rich corn and produce fields his father once did. As kids, Steve, Malinda and I picked baskets of tomatoes from sun-baked fields. Steve knows farmers in other parts of the country who have spent their entire savings in an unsuccessful attempt to stop pipelines. "You know how much this farm means to me," he said. "They have all the power, and I essentially have nothing."

On June 10, Williams proposed two alternative routes that the pipeline could take through the township. Both would bypass the lower end of the glen (and take a bigger bite of Steve's farm). But the next day, Williams submitted its pre-filing report — essentially a formal proposal that

gets a project onto the schedule — to the regulatory commission with the glen route listed as the primary one.

A project like this will always harm someone, and it's easy for the protestations of those in the path of the pipeline to be dismissed as a Nimby — not in my backyard — lament. Residents could indeed have squabbled over whose property the pipeline should run through, but instead have banded together: The industry's short-term economic benefit is not more important than the Tucquan watershed. The question, they say, is not where the pipeline should run, but whether the pipeline should run at all.

As Malinda, my two nieces and I walked through the Tucquan Glen last weekend, broad white rhododendron blooms with pink stamens brushed our shoulders. Why do thousands of hikers visit the glen each year? Why do we sisters, who know it so well, spend our time together there? It's our home, yes, as much as the farm is Steve's home, as much as this kind of preserved land belongs to all of us — until it doesn't. "I love this place more than anywhere else," Malinda said. "It doesn't have a price."

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