

Mine fire engulfs community spirit

By Terry McCarthy

Beneath the town creeps a disaster. A fire is leisurely burning away within the coal veins until man or nature finds a way to extinguish its flame. The fire has left a scarred path over the past twenty years. The constant haze from the burning coal lurks over the town like a poisonous rain cloud that wilts plant life and takes an unknown toll on human health. Industry has abandoned the area and along with it goes the youth and a dream for the town's future.

According to sociology professor, Dr. Stephen Kroll-Smith, the real tragedy of Centralia is above ground. Centralia has become a "fragmented community." The town is fragmented because there are many choices as to what to do about the fire, but due to the social structure of the town they cannot get together and make a unified decision. Kroll-Smith stated that there are basically three interest groups in

Centralia. "One group is totally apathetic. They couldn't care less if the fire burns. There is another group that is actively concerned with putting out the fire. The third part is politically concerned with making as much money as possible from the predicament."

The obvious question is why can't the citizens combine their forces and act as a lobbying group in government. This lack of cohesiveness appears to be a typical problem in many coal-mining towns. Kroll-Smith feels that "Any community that is ethnically alive and family active, combined with a lack of local leadership, is very difficult to bring together and mobilize collectively for contingencies such as the Centralia mine fire. There is a strong subcommunity but a very weak overall community."

The lack of community spirit in Centralia was a problem before the fire even started. When one looks back to the history of Centralia, he will not find any celebration of the Fourth of July,



The mine fire has caused damage to vegetation around Centralia.

Veterans' Day, etc. Other holidays such as Christmas and Easter, celebrated only by the subcommunity, were much more popular.

Dr. Kroll-Smith has been involved in sociological research in Centralia for the past two years.

The research will be in this participant observation setting where the researchers will be participating in community life. Kroll-Smith stated, "We are interested in

people's own perceptions of life in this town and their commitment to the community, their commitment to their religious groups. We want to know how they organize their lives in a human settlement that is steadily declining."

The study of Centralia is unique in the fact that it is the study of the death of a community and not its growth and development. "There is

very little research on the dying community," stated Kroll-Smith. "The town has reached its peak and is on its way down. It is also losing much of its young people and is retaining a disproportionate amount of old people. Many of the services central to living have relocated outside of town, and its tax base is weak, so things like a public library and police protection are affected."

As the fire burns beneath their feet, the citizens of Centralia will witness the death of their home town. The true tragedy, the fragmented community, will continue not only in Centralia but all over the world unless man can join hands.

Editor's note: Anyone having contacts in Centralia in the form of relatives, friends, business associates, etc., may have information that Professor Kroll-Smith can use to further his sociological research. He has asked that anyone with this information contact him.



Centralia has been threatened by an underground mine fire that has been burning for close to two decades.