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The Singing Mailman, Mr. Peabody, and Kentucky's Lost Paradise

Fellow Athenaeum members, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you this evening. This is my second presentation in front of this esteemed society, and although I am still very much honored to stand in your presence, I would have to say you are not as terrifying as you were the first time. I promise to keep this paper fairly brief as I am sure that my fifty-minute long presentation during my introductory appearance probably did not convince anyone in this room to eat more vegetables or eat pork brains frequently. I've also got some dancing to do this weekend because I will be the third member of our group to grace the Alhambra stage competing in the annual Hopkinsville Dancing with Our Stars competition. My lovely wife would like for me to sharpen my pirouettes.

With that being said, tonight, I'd like to stick storytelling. Telling a story that is rooted in our pocket of the world. One that is mired in controversy. One that makes you think, due to the fact, things are not always as they seem. Choices often have outcomes that are both positive and negative, and it is not always easy to weigh these consequences. This evening I'd like to share with you the tale of the singing mailman, Mr. Peabody, and Kentucky's lost paradise.

In the fall of 1970, a young songwriter took the stage on open mic night at Chicago's Fifth Peg club. Little did he know that a critic of the *Chicago Sun Times* was in attendance. This was not any ordinary individual. This critic was a renowned movie reviewer, the late Roger Ebert, who had earlier left a dreadful film to take in the scenery at the local club. After listening to the amateur musician perform his set, Ebert went home to his typewriter to write a review. Not of

the movie he had walked out on, but of the US Postal Service mail carrier who had taken the stage that evening. In his op-ed titled, *"Singing Mailman Who Delivers a Powerful Message in a Few Words"*, he wrote about the generational talent he had witnessed firsthand stating "He starts slow. But after a song or two, even the drunks in the room begin to listen to his lyrics. And then he has you." This review was not penned by any ordinary author and it was not about any ordinary songwriter. The performer that graced the stage that evening was none other than the legendary Americana folk artist John Prine.

After Ebert's review was published Prine witnessed his popularity soar. He had written songs for many years, but only started performing the year prior when his friends convinced him to start playing during open mic nights at the Fifth Peg. Quickly after his new found notoriety Prine came into contact with Steve Goodman, a legendary writer in his own right. Goodman penned Arlo Guthrie's 1972 top 20 hit "City of New Orleans". Willie Nelson's recorded version of the tune won him a posthumous Grammy in 1985 for "Best Country Song." He may be most well-known for holding the songwriter credit for David Allan Coe's 1974 country superhit "You Never Even Called Me By My Name" where he detailed the ingredients to a perfect country and western song. John Prine actually helped him write the song, but didn't want to be listed on the credits because he didn't want to be thought of as spoofing country music. The song was highly successful and Goodman gifted Prine a jukebox from the publishing royalties, which probably didn't compute mathematically, but I'm sure John didn't care.

In 1971 Goodman introduced Prine to Songwriter Hall of Famer, Country Music Hall of Famer, and All-American renaissance man Kris Kristofferson who helped him receive his first recording contract with Atlantic Records. Later that year he released his debut self-titled album

produced by Jerry Wexler, who had worked with artists such as Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, the Allman Brothers, and Led Zeppelin. Rolling Stone ranked this album number 458 of the greatest albums of all-time, which is lofty praise considering all of the music that has been composed over the past century. After the release Prince was referred to as the next Bob Dylan. Despite the fact his musical composition and lyrics were much simpler and to the point than the aforementioned artist, his songs' messages did have a weight behind them even if they were unassuming. Dylan actually anonymously backed up Prince on the harmonica during his first New York City Show, and recorded many covers of his songs. That is a true honor coming from one of the greatest lyrical geniuses in the history of Earth.

Prince's debut album included folk staples such as "Angel From Montgomery", "Illegal Smile", "Spanish Pipedream", and "Your Flag Detail Won't Get You Into Heaven Anymore". My personal favorite is "Sam Stone". This tune shares the story of a Korean War veteran who took a shrapnel wound to his knee. Morphine eased his pain and he came home "with a purple heart and a monkey on his back," giving way to the famous lyric "There's a hole in daddy's arm, where all the money goes", referring to the wounded soldier's subsequent addiction to the painkiller.

There is not a bad song on this album, but I'd like to focus this paper on one in particular. Its story focuses on a place only about fifty miles from where we sit. The song is titled "Paradise," which is the name of a town that existed about ten miles northeast of Greenville, KY in Muhlenberg County. John Prince's parents, William Prince and Verna Hamm were from this place before they moved to Maywood, Illinois where he was born and raised. The lyrics of this song speak about the effects that strip mining by the Peabody Coal Co. had on the landscape of this community and how it contributed to the residents being forced to move from there in the 1960's

due to the environmental impact caused by the Tennessee Valley Authority's Paradise Fossil Plant.

Prine spent the summers of his childhood with family in the town and its fate spoke hard to his ancestral roots. Here is an excerpt from a piece Lydia Hutchinson wrote in 2013 for *Performingsongwriter.com* detailing the backstory behind the song. These are Prine's words.

"...I wrote it for my father mainly so he would know I was a songwriter. Paradise was a real place in Kentucky, and while I was in the Army in Germany, my father sent me a newspaper article telling me how the coal company had bought the place out.

When I recorded the song, I brought a tape of the record home to my dad; I had to borrow a reel-to-reel machine to play it for him. When the song came on, he went into the next room and sat in the dark while it was on. I asked him why, and he said he wanted to pretend it was on the jukebox..."

The song is a little controversial because he did take a little artistic liberty with exactly how the demolition of Paradise took place, but the spirit of the song encapsulates the negatives associated with strip mining, and served as a rallying call for environmentalist who fought for federal strip mining legislation in the 70's and 80's. It has been covered by many artists, such as Johnny Cash, The Everly Brothers, Dwight Yoakum, and Tom T. Hall to name a few. Before we dive deeper into the fate of Paradise, KY I'd like to play the first verse and chorus of the song. It goes as follows:

When I was a child my family would travel

Down to Western Kentucky

where my parents were born

And there's a backwards old town that's

often remembered

So many times that my memories are worn.

Chorus:

And daddy won't you take me back to

Muhlenberg County

Down by the Green River where

Paradise lay

Well, I'm sorry my son, but you're

too late in asking

Mister Peabody's coal train

has hauled it away.

The founding of Paradise, KY dates back to the early 1800's. Originally, a river trading post on the Green River It was first named Storm's landing after Leonard Storm who founded the ferry there. Later, A drift-mine was founded in the 1820's named McLean Drift Bank, one of the first coal mines in the state of Kentucky, and on March 1st, 1852 a U.S. Post Office was established at Paradise. The story behind how the town received its name is kind of mythical. It may have been

called Monterey at one point, but there are several folk tales as to why it was named Paradise by the residents. One is that early settlers considered the setting to be paradise.

Another tale has to do with a pioneer family who had been traveling up the Green River during the 1830's to the 1840's. During their travels one of their youngest children became ill. They stopped multiple times on their path, but were unable to find assistance. At one of their stops at a trading post some residents spoke of a place where Native Americans had left a spiritual aura that could cure the sick. With the child on the brink of death they unknowingly stopped in the town, and the child recovered fully within in a couple days. The parents stated "this place must be paradise" and decided to make it their home.

In Hutchinson's background story Prine stated "(Paradise) was a real Disney-looking town. It sat on the river, had two general stores, then the bulldozers came in and wiped it all off the map." This quote explains the inspiration behind the next verse of his song.

Well, sometimes we'd travel right down

the Green River

To the abandoned old prison down by

Airdrie Hill

Where the air smelled like snakes and

we'd shoot with our pistols

But empty pop bottles was all we would kill.

These words reveal the fond memories that he had of this town. You can tell that he imagined it as he said "A Disney looking kind of place" where times long forgotten were very much so still in the present.

After the establishment of its post office the community continued to grow over the next hundred years before Muhlenberg County became one of the largest coal producing locations in the entire world. In the 1960's a large push to expand coal production took hold in the United States. This was exacerbated more after the Arab Oil embargo of the early 1970's. Coal was thought to be a viable alternative and a tool of energy independence as twenty-five states at the time mined the natural resource. A 6,000-acre deep vein of bituminous coal existed in the landscape of Muhlenberg County and three mining companies were present in the area, Amax, Pittsburg & Midway, and the Peabody Coal Company.

The advocacy for increased coal production in the United States came right along the exact time that the Tennessee Valley Authority had shifted their focus to the production of coal-fired electric plants. Coal was a cheap fuel that could produce a reliable base-load electrical output. The decision was made by TVA in 1959 to build a coal powerplant in Paradise, KY. Units 1 and 2 were put into service in 1963, both being able to generate an output of 704 megawatts each. Unit 3 was fired up in 1970, and had the capacity of 970 megawatts. Once unit 3 was placed into service the Paradise Fossil Plant was considered the largest coal powerplant in existence.

The idea behind building the plant in this location was that it would be in close proximity to the thousands of acres of coal deposits nearby that could power the plant for years to come. Due to the shortened transportation route this would help keep fuel costs relatively low. The

powerplant would be a catalyst for economic development in the area by supplying inexpensive electricity to its surrounding grid, as well as to power distributors beyond TVA's territory. The Peabody Coal Company earned the contract to supply the TVA with that fuel.

In the 1960's surface mining was not very well regulated in the United States and even more so in Kentucky. The techniques Peabody used to extract coal from these seams heavily impacted the landscape and waterways of Muhlenberg County. In 1978 a Bowling Green newspaper reported that some odd 50,000 acres of land was ruined by mining operations. In order to mine with the highest efficiency possible, the company manufactured the largest mining machine in the world, nicknamed "Big Hog."

Then the coal company came with the

world's largest shovel

And they tortured the timber and stripped

all the land

Well, they dug for their coal till the

land was forsaken

Then they wrote it all down as the

progress of man.

Big Hog was a mining shovel so large that it had to be built onsite by the Bucyrus-Erie Company, who was contracted to build the shovel. It took eleven months to build. After

completion three hundred of its massive parts were transported to the Sinclair Strip Mine near Drakesboro by a railroad that was constructed for this sole purpose. The machine stood twenty stories tall, weighed twenty million pounds, and housed a 250-foot boom. It cost seven million dollars in 1963.

Each bite of the shovel could dig out 115 cubic yards of coal, more than a football field, equaling 173 tons. Big Hogs shovel left massive barren pits in its wake resembling a scene from a post-apocalyptic world. The daily required electric load needed to power the equipment would be enough to meet the needs of small town of 15,000 residents. It was indeed the world's largest piece of coal extraction equipment at the time.

Once Big Hog completed a dig, trucks would transport the coal, up to one hundred tons at a time, straight to the Paradise Fossil Plant, unload their cargo in massive storage bays, and return for another load. Big Hog was in service until 1985 at Sinclair and mined roughly 80 million tons of coal over 5,000 acres. Due to this capacity, Muhlenberg County was the state's top coal producing county in the 60's and 70's, and at times the largest in the United States. Mining created an economic lifeline in the area and brought many families out of poverty with well compensated work.

In John Prine's song about the destruction of Muhlenberg County's landscape he was correct in his assessment that the Peabody Coal Co. was very much so responsible for the environmental impact strip mining had on the countryside. However, he wasn't exactly truthful in describing the fate of the town of Paradise. Once TVA's fossil plants were placed in service coal ash was pumped into the sky and subsequently that ash fell on the neighboring community

of Paradise. Accounts from the time stated that when the town folk hung their clothes out on a clothesline, the garments would turn gray from the ash. There was a deep concern for the health and well-being of the town's residents and many began to leave. In 1967, TVA bought out the rest of the town and it was razed to the ground. Paradise, Kentucky would cease to exist.

It wasn't Peabody that decided the fate of Paradise, but rather the Tennessee Valley Authority. His song became a rallying cry for environmental activists and the Peabody Coal Co. took offense to Prine's claims. In 1973 they released a rebuttal named "Facts vs. Prine," stating "we (Peabody Coal Co.) probably helped supply the energy to make that recording that falsely names us as 'hauling away' Paradise, Kentucky."

As the decades have progressed the mining and power generating operations have morphed to look vastly different in Muhlenberg County, especially in stark contrast to the coal boom of the 60's and 70's. Due to increased environmental legislation, the addition of a barge loading facility at the powerplant, and dwindling reserves Peabody decided to slow operations. In 1986, Big Hog was tasked with its last job, to dig its own grave. All of the toxic fluids inside the machine were disposed of, the machine dug its final resting place, and it was buried by a dragline. The Sinclair Strip Mine was subsequently closed. Under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, Peabody would become responsible for reclaiming the large pits left from stripping the land. Today the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife operate the Peabody Wildlife Management Area.

In April of 2017, the Tennessee Valley Authority shut down the original two units of coal power production as a result of bringing online two new cheaper natural gas combustion

generators capable of producing a combined 1,100 megawatts of electricity. This resulted in cutting the coal consumption in half at their site. On February 14, 2019 the TVA board voted to shut down the last coal consuming unit at the Paradise plant, as well as a plant in Bull Run, TN. The former CEO of TVA, Bill Johnson, stated the closing of these plants would save consumers 320 million dollars annually. Since natural gas is much more efficient, at Paradise in particular the amount of people to operate the plant will reduce from 400 to 40 employees. President Donald Trump and Governor Matt Bevin lobbied strongly to keep the coal plants open due to the economic impact of the closures.

The song "*Paradise*" has always been influential in my life because it tells a significant story of Western Kentucky's history. Every time I would drive over the Green River on my way home from the University of Kentucky, I would blast it out of my car stereo with the windows down. When people think of coal mining in our state, they tend to think of the Eastern Kentucky mountaintops, but we have a rich history here in the Western Kentucky coalfields and this song gives homage to that even if it highlights the negatives.

When I began my research into the origins of the song years ago, I began to realize it is much more significant than a protest song. The song's lyrics embody the conflicting spirit of coal mining in Kentucky. For some of our population coal represents economic opportunity and for others it represents desolation of their homelands. Coal is deeply ingrained into who we are in a complex predicament of prosperity and destruction.

The Noffsinger side of my family hails from Muhlenberg County. My grandfather, Gaylon, was born and raised only a few miles from Paradise. Like Prine's parents, he left to find his way

out of the deep dark mines. My great-grandfather, , worked in the drift mines there. I've heard stories that he would walk three miles to the mouth of the mine and by the time he made his first swing of a pick he would be back at his home, but only underground. My grandfather speaks fondly of the town of Paradise and describes it like it was a "Disney looking kind of place." I often wonder if he shot at snakes with his pistol in the Green River or traveled to the old abandoned prison by Aidrie Hill. I've been told that they could see Big Hog towering proudly out of the trees from our family cemetery. There was concern our family resting place would lay waste in its path.

Fast forward almost a hundred years later from when my great-grandfather made a living shoveling coal. His great-grandson, me, is now employed at Hopkinsville Electric System, a power distributor of TVA. I have toured the powerplants that I have spoken about as a part of my duties in my line of work. The Paradise plants are substantial in ensuring we have a reliable transmission line load to power our city. The mining and power generating activities in Muhlenberg County have come full circle in providing work for my family over generations.

Coal mining in Kentucky gives and it takes. The economic prosperity it once gave to the region's inhabitants is now leaving, revealing stripped lands and poverty. Our national political parties are influenced by coastal elites who don't quite understand the intricacies of mining's impression on our state. They often use coal mining as a hot button issue and the miners themselves pawns. The environmental impact of coal is damning and obvious, but if you eliminate coal production the economies of mining communities all over the state will cease to exist. Although under not quite the same circumstances, these towns will succumb to the same fate as Paradise. Kentucky needs other economic opportunities to replace coal as our nation moves toward cleaner and more efficient power sources. Our politicians do not seem to

understand that the matters are multifaceted and they are woven into the framework that makes us Kentuckians.

Though our feelings are complex, and differ from individual to individual, the one thing you can say about our state's citizens is that we are proud. We are proud of our miners who power the nation and proud of our beautiful scenery that we want to preserve. We love our home, and with that I'll leave you with the last verse of John Prine's "*Paradise*". I think it precisely explains how we feel about our coal covered piece of land on this rock we call Earth.

When I die let my ashes float down

the Green River

Let my soul roll on up to the

Rochester dam

I'll be halfway to Heaven

with Paradise waitin'

Just five miles away from

wherever I am.