

Pennsylvania

Harrisburg remembered

By Margaret Carlson

What a jolt. The City Council of Harrisburg, my hometown, voted last week to file for bankruptcy. The state may prohibit the move, opting to force the city into receivership instead. Either way, it's quite a comedown; Harrisburg has joined the list of casualties of fiscal crisis and economic transformation.

When you are young, a place doesn't have to be Paris to be grand. Yet, even correcting for nostalgia, Pennsylvania's state Capitol, with its dome modeled on St. Peter's Basilica, was majestic. Harrisburg combined the power of a government seat with the comforts of a small town — an important asset to my parents, who needed a village to help care for my older brother, who had suffered severe brain damage in an epileptic seizure at birth.

You could lead a rich life in Harrisburg without being rich. It cost little to rent a boat on the Susquehanna River, where I learned to water ski, or go to Hershey Park — like Disneyland plus all the chocolate you could eat — just 20 minutes away. The annual Farm Show, billed as the largest indoor agricultural event in the United States, was an extravaganza of milking cows, shearing sheep, picking "Best Doe in Show," and stuffing down funnel cakes

and fried mozzarella. Parking cost \$1.

Who needed a country club with so many parks where swimming, tennis, and golf were free? To visit the elegantly landscaped Italian Lake Park after Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral felt like going to Europe — at least to a 9-year-old. Graduating from my small, suburban parish school and heading to Bishop McDevitt High School, with its Gothic towers perched on a hill above the city, seemed like going to Harvard. The governor would drop in at assembly once a year to teach us how a bill becomes law.

The children of doctors, lawyers, and bankers attended McDevitt alongside those of steelworkers and police officers; the nuns leveled all. If you had a soul to be saved, you also had a brain to be honed. They taught as if each of us, with a little prodding, might win a Nobel Prize. (We might have, too, if Nobels were given for conjugating Latin verbs.) Conspicuous consumption was so rare that when a development of McMansions went up on the city outskirts, the kid who moved there was forever known as Bob With a Pool in His Yard.

Wild West

Politicians roamed freely. I was having pizza and a cherry Coke with friends across from the statehouse when I first wanted to find

out what a group of lawmakers huddled in a leather booth in the back was up to. The scene propelled me toward journalism as surely as if my folks had had Walter Lippmann to cocktails every Saturday night.

All it took to tarnish this civic gem was deindustrialization and a couple of decades of reckless borrowing from banks in the business of loading up municipalities with debt. The proximate cause of the latest crisis was the city's inability to service about \$300 million in debt on an incinerator that was supposed to raise cash, not burn it. That followed \$143 million in debt amassed by a free-spending former mayor, Stephen Reed. In his 28 years in office, Reed revitalized the city center, but he didn't know when to stop. The city's pension costs were rising, its housing prices were falling, and its aging population was smaller than it had been in 1900.

For a symbol of spending run amok, look no further than Harrisburg's Wild West Museum. There is nothing wild, nor west, about central Pennsylvania, but Reed bet that he could revitalize the downtown area with a critical mass of theater, museums, and art. More than \$8 million was spent before cooler heads prevailed. In May, Mayor Linda Thompson, Reed's successor, began selling the stagecoach wheels and pistols at 20 cents on the dollar.

Weedy lawns

I got a close look at Harrisburg's decline last spring as I closed up the family home and moved my older brother into supervised living. I had to sell our four-bedroom, three-bath house with a two-car garage for \$139,000. With so many other properties on the market, "For Sale" signs rusting in their weedy lawns, I was lucky to sell it at all.

At our moving sale, people weren't browsing for collectibles or antiques the way they do in prosperous Washington. They were looking to pick up necessities like pots, dishes, and beds. When I went to the library to use the WiFi, there were lots of men there doing the same. Those in jackets and ties I assumed to be the newly unemployed; the ones in exercise suits, slumping in their chairs, seemed to have been at it a bit longer.

At 7.7 percent, unemployment is lower in Harrisburg than in many places. But you see 50-year-olds flipping hamburgers alongside teenagers. In this, Harrisburg has become like so many other American places.

Occupy Wall Street occupied Harrisburg last weekend. But the good jobs are gone, and the city is unlikely to escape its desperate straits anytime soon. It's a little late for protests.

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