

A few years ago, I got to travel with a group of Penn State students to a farm in Costa Rica. We spent a week there, working on the land, and learning from our host and farm owner, Wade. The farm generated just about everything Wade's family needed for a self-sustaining, modest quality of life. They generated their own hydroelectric power, water supply, and grew their own food. I was amazed by their independence. Yet the part that stood out the most was Wade's endless detailed knowledge about the land that he owned and that sustained them. I left there thinking, "I know nothing about my place."

When I admit my concern about not knowing much about the vegetation, the history, the story of the place where I live, people have tried to reassure me that Wade has to know it for his place. His survival is dependent on it. But aren't all of our survivals dependent on knowing where we are and how to sustain our place?

With these thoughts in mind, history day for Leadership Centre County took on a deeper meaning beyond just learning about some cool historical sites in Centre County. Although, the class of 2016 was, indeed, treated to tours of quite a few of them on November 4. Surrounded by the rich character cultivated in the walls of the historic Bellefonte Match Factory, Lee Stout, PSU Head of Public Outreach and Special Collections, Emeritus, lead us through an abbreviated 250 year history of the county. We learned about the unique geography of the region, which, combined with evolving technology, made it conducive to a vibrant industry of continuous charcoal ironmaking through the mid 19th Century.

Stout's lecture came to life when we visited the Curtin Village and Furnace. There, John Romani, a volunteer on the quiet grounds, colorfully explained the process of turning iron ore and limestone into pig iron. We learned that it took a lot of trees, an acre a day, to make enough charcoal to keep the furnaces in the area running. This certainly had an impact on the physical landscape of the region, but politically and economically, Centre County was considered wealthy and influential by the mid 1800s.

Just as the ironmaking heyday was losing steam, a new opportunity arose in the county. The well-respected area garnered support for the funding of what would become the Farmer's High School of Pennsylvania in 1855. In the late 1870's, the name of this institution for higher education was changed, once it went co-ed, and became the Pennsylvania State University. It has since provided the foundation for the county's economy, but has not been the only source of industry.

In a small group discussion, LCC members discussed the booms then busts of the 20th Century. First there were manufacturing industries, like that represented by the Match Factory, and then in the 1950s and 60s, high tech industries represented by places like HRB Singer, Corning and C-COR. All have now greatly downsized or closed. It appears we rely more and more heavily on the continuing strength of the education industry. We know from history, that it is a mistake to depend on such a centralized source of economy and thankfully, many of our leaders are already

planning for the future when higher education may look very different than it does today.

Just as Wade utilizes the strengths of his place in Costa Rica, it is crucial for us to recognize and build on the strengths of this region. A suggestion in the small group was to focus on leveraging existing resources, such as the university, to promote entrepreneurial development that both diversifies economic development and attracts employees outside of pre-existing careers.

For more information about current initiatives in the county and how to help preserve our rich history, visit www.centrecountypa.gov and get to know our place.

Submitted by Morgan Wasikonis, Development and Community Relations Coordinator, Housing Transitions and member of the Leadership Centre County Class of 2016. For more information about Leadership Centre County go to www.leadershipcentrecounty.org.