

## It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it

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By Annie O'Neill, Post-Gazette Staff Photographer

**W**e all know about the life of grime led by coal miners. If we didn't, we all do now. Watching the Quecreek rescue and the miners emerge covered in black coal dust, who among us didn't shudder to think what it must be like to work amid the mud, the muck and the coal?

Yet, coal miners and many other laborers face dirt and filth as part of their job descriptions. Some of them love it; many just tolerate it.

Vincent Cioppa of Rankin wouldn't have it any other way.

He paves tar roads for Tresco Paving on weekdays and does construction demolition on weekends. Relying on a century-old North Side house for renovation recently, he swung his sledgehammer and was covered in a shower of coal dust, from the many years coal was used as a heat source. No problem, he says.

"They tried to put me in the warehouse one winter," he recalls, "and I told them I'd rather collect unemployment."

The news business hasn't been spared its share of dirty jobs. Just ask any pressman about how literally the term "ink-stained wretch" applies to him.

The English must have a fascination for filth. The BBC TV schedule includes a show called "A Life of Grime," in which cameras follow workers in the areas of sanitation, pest control and, on one show, "Mike shows how to unblock loos. With 25 years' experience, it's not to be sniffed at." And National Public Radio is in the throes of a series titled "Doing America's Dirty Work: Profiles of Grimy, Slimy, Difficult Jobs That Still Must Be Done."

For this Labor Day, Post-Gazette photographer Annie O'Neill focuses on the folks in Western Pennsylvania who do the dirty work.



**Cleaning and maintaining port-o-johns takes a tough constitution and a keen sense of humor. Workers at Mr. John in McKees Rocks -- from left, Tim Pittman, Terry Metzger, Frank Farmer, Erik Metzger (Terry's cousin) and Jack Fletcher -- have both.**

Here's mud in your eye, and our thanks for a job well done.

## Nothing else he'd rather do



**After a day of renovating homes or paving roads, Victor Cioppa's soap of choice is GoJo gel soap. "It cuts through everything. Grease. Tar. Everything." It takes him about 15 minutes to clean up.**

Victor Cioppa, 34, of Rankin spends weekends preparing homes for renovations through Cioppa Inc., and weekdays, he can be found paving tar roads for Tresco Paving. That's about 70 hours a week of finding himself covered in dirt and sweat.

And loving it.

"I wouldn't trade it for an office job for anything," says Cioppa, who learned about gutting old houses by his father's side as a child and began getting paid for it as a teen-ager. At Tresco, "They tried to put me in the warehouse one winter, and I told them I'd rather collect unemployment."

On a recent job, he was preparing the third floor of a house on Palo Alto Street, among the North Side's Mexican War Streets, for renovations when century-old coal dust came raining down on him. (This is typical of old houses in Pittsburgh that used to burn coal for heat.)

Cleaning up has become so much a part of his daily routine that he shrugs it off. He's methodical and quick about it.

Cioppa, who is engaged, doesn't worry about work affecting his health.

"The job keeps you in shape," he says.

## Wanted: Workers who can stand the heat

Joe Spenillo, 37, of Elizabeth had been "working the battery" at Koppers' Monessen coke plant for three weeks when this photo was taken. Some workers don't last more than a few hours.

Plant manager Jim Burkhart tells of hiring "five guys on July 2, and by July 5 three had already quit. We hired five on Aug. 13, and two of them quit after three hours and one quit the next day. This is just not for everybody. I tell them when we hire them, this is a tough, heavy industry. You have to be very tough-minded."

Tough is an understatement. A battery, in this case, is



**Workers at Koppers in Monessen**

a series of individual coke ovens grouped together. To make coke -- a blast furnace fuel made from coal -- each oven is filled with coal on a round-the-clock schedule. There it bakes at temperatures of about 150 degrees. When it's done, the coke comes out and more coal goes in, 24/7. The process is done by a combination of machines and tough guys.

can feel the heat from the coke ovens as the stand on the roof of the plant. from front left, Joe Spenillo, Keith Martray, Joe Tillman, Todd Schmidt and Dave Boulanger. From back left: Lon Cooke, Doug West, Dane Hodgson and Bob Jurkiewicz.

It wasn't until Spenillo suited up for work that he realized "how hot and dirty the job was." And smelly, too.

But the process of making coke goes on, much as it has for the past 90 years. Dozens of industries depend on coke for blast furnace fuel and its byproducts (tar, creosote, asphalt, etc.). From the light oil recovered from the process, we get benzene, part of the compound that makes up gasoline.

"It's always been a dirty job," Burkhart says. "They've just added many safety and environmental precautions."

Workers wear head-to-toe safety suits that consist of flame-retardant jackets and trousers, steel-toed shoes, gloves, a respirator, a hard hat and a face shield. Underneath, most wear cotton long johns, which are insulating against both heat and cold. The workers are told not to drink milk products because it will sour in their stomachs, but, of course, they should drink a lot of water. And the plant has a nurse on staff.

Everyone takes a shower before they leave the plant, to remove any product residue.

When the suit comes off, Burkhart says, "It feels like the weight of the world has come off."

### **There's no sitting down on this job**



**Tim Pittman, Erik Metzger, Jack Fletcher and Terry Metzger are up to the physical demands of cleaning**

For a place that provides portable toilets, the Mr. John facility in McKees Rocks facility is surprisingly spotless and organized. But cleanliness can be elusive for Mr. John's employees.

For a two-week fair last month at Coopers Lake Campground, Slippery Rock, Mr. John provided 350 units that had to be serviced twice a day by four two-man crews. Their workdays began at 6 a.m. and ended at 7 p.m. Jeff Wolfarth of Cranberry, the company's general manager, said the crews had to dispose of 60,000 gallons of waste, which goes to a sewage treatment plant.

Hoses, scrub brushes, safety glasses and heavy gloves are what stand between the folks who maintain the

**and maintaining port-o-johns for Mr. John in McKees Rocks.** toilets and the folks who use and abuse them.

It's not just the obvious cleanup chores. The units often are vandalized --in a recent case, one was dropped from a bridge -- and they have to be cleaned and fixed. Rarely are they abandoned as unsalvageable.

Of the work in the field, Wolfarth says, "It's the bottom of the bottom."

Wolfarth said he figured out that Mr. John uses enough toilet paper just at the Slippery Rock festival, called Pennsic War, to stretch from Pittsburgh to Indianapolis.

A sense of humor helps Wolfarth and his co-workers get through the day. But not everyone makes it in this job. Erik Metzger says can see it in people's eyes when they're not going to last. "They come in looking strong as an ox, but they get whipped."

The owners of Mr. John, Lynn and Michael McCarthy, try to keep their employees healthy and happy. Kim Charlton, in human resources, promotes camaraderie through outings to the movies, bowling and camping trips.

Frank Farmer of Braddock, a mechanic who's been on the job seven years and who services the trucks, said he's seen "a thousand people come and go through the business. It takes a special kind of person to stay."

### **'This is one job where you can't go out to dinner after, or meet the girls'**

Machinist Donna Guillen, 55, of Mt. Lebanon has been working at a Bridgeville manufacturing company for two years. She knew it would be a dirty job when she started --in fact, that was part of the appeal.

Guillen heard a woman machinist speak through New Choices/New Options at Community College of Allegheny County, and she thought, "I don't mind getting dirty. It sounded like a great job."

She signed up for training and got a job through the program.

Now, she's the one inspiring others to get their hands dirty.

"I give talks to women about being a machinist, and they always ask me if I get dirty. I say yes, but if that bothers you, you can go to [computer-operated machines]." Guillen enjoys the creativity of hands-on, manual work. The kind that requires heavy-duty soap.

For hands that are often blackened by residue from metal, her work site provides a special soap called Zep's Grip. The motto: Tough on dirt; gentle on hands.



**After a day of work as a machinist, Donna Guillen goes straight home to Mt. Lebanon to rid herself of residue from metals that blackens the skin. "I have to go home and shower. Then I look like a normal person," she says.**

"I just positively don't touch my face" before washing up, she said. "I just learned not to do it."

## And now, finally it's time to come clean



**Chris C. Bowman, back left, research engineer and director of the nanofabrication facility at Carnegie Mellon University, is very particular about the amount of particles in the "clean room." Others who suit up for the clean room include, front from left, graduate students Brett Diamond and Xiaochun Wu and staff technician Tim Fisher. Process engineer Carsen Kline is in the back row, right.**

Bob White, director of the Data Storage Systems Center at Carnegie Mellon University, has been trying to help a novice understand the nanofabrication facility, or "clean room," when he offers this juicy tidbit:

"The clean room occupies a place that was once the dirtiest place at CMU. It was where the coal furnaces were that used to heat the campus. I know an alumnus whose part-time job was shoveling coal there."

How's that for coming full circle in our dirty tales?

The researchers and students who staff the nanofabrication facility work on microscopic circuits and devices. As an example, White says that a computer chip the size of a postage stamp could contain a million of these.

The point of taking extraordinary measures to stay clean, down to the tiniest particle, is to avoid contamination of the circuits produced in the clean room. "You can imagine that the device we are working with is 0.1 micrometer in size," says facility director Chris C. Bowman. "A smoke particle is 20

micrometers."

How clean is the clean room?

It's so clean, that ...

- The air in the suit-up room is prefiltered twice through a HEPA (high-efficiency pleated air) filter, which is also used in the clean room. The air in the clean room is constantly being exchanged through filters.

- To be allowed in, you must first walk on tacky mats ("sophisticated fly paper") to clean the shoe bottoms. "It's our first line of defense," says Bowman. Then you put on shoe-coverings, then go over the tacky mats again. Next comes the "bunny suit" with a tucked-in hood. The suit helps faculty and students in the room keep their particles (from hair, skin, etc.) to themselves.

- No cardboard and very little paper is allowed.

■ Temperature is maintained at 68 degrees, plus or minus 1 degree, with one of the most sophisticated air-conditioning systems in the area. And it's always at 35 percent humidity, plus or minus 3 percent. White also explained the quest for clean this way: The rooms are characterized by a class number, referring to the number of particles in a volume of air. A normal room might be a Class 100,000; in a clean room, it's Class 1 or perhaps 10.

Other clean rooms can be found at Penn State University and at Seagate Technology's new Strip District facility. The room at Carnegie Mellon was created about 20 years ago, mostly to serve the Data Storage Systems Center. It is constantly being revamped to improve its level of cleanliness.

It isn't easy being clean. "The dirtiest thing in the clean room," Bowman says, "is the people."

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