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In Coal Country, the Mines Shut Down, the Women Went to Work and the World Quietly Changed

By Campbell Robertson

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FLEMING-NEON, Ky. — In the pre-dawn hours when all is dark and quiet, Amanda Lucas leaves her house and begins the long drive to her job at a hospital an hour away.

In years past, it was the men who would empty out of the hollows of Letcher County before sunrise. All day long they would be underground, digging out coal as their fathers and often their grandfathers had done. Ms. Lucas's husband, Denley, had a job with one of the big mining companies, with good benefits and an income approaching six figures when all the overtime was added. She stayed at home to raise their four children.

"We had a good life," she said.

Then everything changed.

It has been a hot and mean summer in Letcher County, with a rash of coal mine bankruptcies and layoffs even crueler than the ones that came before. From the barstools at the American Legion post to the parking lot of the unemployment office, there was little debate: The coal business around here is going under. The only question was what would keep everyone afloat.

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