

Suggested questions for

Sid Shroyer, Author

When Once Destroyed - A Historical Memoir of the Life and Death of a Small Town

1. What is the source of the title?

"When once destroyed" is a phrase from an Oliver Goldsmith poem called "The Deserted Village," (1770) that "condemns rural depopulation and the pursuit of excessive wealth" (Wikipedia). A lead critic of the project, Cliff Funderburg, cited the poem in one of a series of letters he exchanged with Fifth District Congressman John Beamer between 1955 and 1957. Funderburg was a farmer, former Huntington County school superintendent and a former state legislator.

2. What inspired the idea and guided the book?

Most directly, the profound impact of our grandson receiving the name of my father led me to the thought that I ought to write my grandson a letter about Dad. Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* is a model for that and the voices of writers Wendell Berry and Paul Auster were guides. My training as a Holocaust educator gives me insight into how history might better be told as the story of lives rather than the story of nations. As I finished the book, I discovered a commonality with Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *The Left Behind* by Robert Wuthnow.

3. What surprised you about your discoveries?

I was surprised at how little of the how and why I discovered had been told. I was surprised at the openness of the people I spoke with about the matter. I was surprised by the ease at which one person and one story led to the next.

4. What might surprise readers?

Perhaps it's the degree to which the Somerset community in particular and post-war rural American communities in general can be viewed as "marginalized communities." "Marginalized communities:" Google it.

5. The US Army Corps of Engineers coordinated the Upper Wabash Valley Flood Control Project with Indiana's Flood Control and Water Resources Commission that submerged 25,000 acres and destroyed your father's place, among others. It also has been preventing flooding ever since it was completed in 1969. Are you able to say it was a mistake?

It's a mistake not to consider the lives of those most negatively affected in large-scale government and corporate projects for "progress" in the name of a "greater good."

6. The story you tell occurs mostly over a 30 year period from 1939 to 1969.

What contemporary events might you expect readers to relate to the destruction of Somerset, Indiana?

In the community where I taught high school for 27 years an Amazon data center and a General Motors battery factory are under construction that also threaten a way of life and the area's natural resources in the name of progress. The ability of citizens to counter this kind of encroachment is greater now than it was 80 years ago, but the privilege assumed by wealthy and powerful people to unilaterally determine the "greater good" remains. When Somerset's congressman John V. Beamer said no "substantial opposition," to a congressional hearing in 1956, I think it had more to do with status than numbers.

Often, the ramifications of "progress" on the people whose lives are most directly affected are hidden by a lazy, cut and paste, media until it is too late to do anything about it. In *When Once Destroyed* I also encountered the editorial compliance of the press in supporting the ideas that opposition to "progress" is connected to "troublemakers" and that the economic benefits far outweigh any harm. It's not hard to find other instances that are familiar. I'd like my students to pursue it.

sidshroyer.com

sidshroyer@mac.com

574-360-8038