

= Pittsburgh Town =

" Pittsburgh Town " , sometimes titled as " Pittsburgh " or " Pittsburgh is a Great Old Town " , is a folk song written by Woody Guthrie and originally recorded by Pete Seeger . The song was written during a Pittsburgh , Pennsylvania stop on an Almanac Singers ' tour ; both Seeger and Guthrie were members of the band at this time . The song speaks of the labor and environmental problems that the city was facing in 1941 , when the song was written . In the time since , environmental legislation has reduced the pollution problem that plagued Pittsburgh ; because of this , the song 's mentions of pollution in Pittsburgh have been sometimes been replaced with verses extolling the city .

= = Creation = =

There are several stories behind the origin of the song . Several historians trace " Pittsburgh Town " to the Almanac Singers ' 1941 national tour . According to the liner notes of Pete Seeger 's American Industrial Ballads , originally released in 1956 , on July 7 , 1941 , the group recorded fourteen songs for a small record label in New Jersey . The \$ 250 that they were paid was used to purchase a 1932 Buick in which they traveled on their subsequent tour . While stopped in Pittsburgh , Pennsylvania , the group decided to play for steel workers who were in the process of unionizing . They played two nights of concerts a steel patch , sleeping in between in a cockroach @-@ infested hotel . During the second concert , Woody Guthrie impulsively started to improvise lyrics to the tune of the folk song " Crawdad Hole " . The song 's entire body came out of this jam session . Millard Lampell continued improving and created the second verse of the song from that point .

The liner notes of Seeger 's Songs of Struggle and Protest , 1930 ? 50 tell a different story of the song 's creation ; they state that Guthrie wrote the song while airborne on a flight into Pittsburgh . While looking out the window at the smoky skies , he quickly jotted down the lyrics .

= = Lyrics and themes = =

The song 's verses alternate between ones that speak of the environmental problems of Pittsburgh and ones that speak of its labor problems .

The first verse refers to Pittsburgh as a " smoky ol ' town " , and the third complains that the speaker does nothing more than " cough and choke " because of the steel industry 's output . The smoke was an ever @-@ present part of life in Pittsburgh at the time of the song 's writing ; steel mills on the banks of the city 's three rivers made the sky glow red and continually released smoke . Modern environmentalist reviewers of the song believe that the pollution @-@ oriented verses show that the song was written to protest the environmental conditions in which workers were forced to live .

The second and fourth verses focus on the labor disputes that the city was experiencing at the time . The second verse uses a pun on the name of Jones and Laughlin Steel to ask what the company stole from its workers (" What did Jones and Laughlin steal ? ") , while the fourth and final verse ends with the statement that all of the mill workers are " joining up with the CIO . "

= = Recordings and adaptations = =

The song has been covered by several artists and community groups . Pete Seeger Released a studio version on his 1956 album American Industrial Ballads and a live version of the song on his 1964 album Songs of Struggle and Protest , 1930 ? 50 . Both versions by Seeger feature him singing and playing the banjo without any additional accompaniment . In the live version , the crowd 's clapping and singing along can be heard . Folk bands in the Pittsburgh area , such as the NewLanders , have both recorded and performed Seeger 's version of the song .

In 1959 , Vivien Richman released an adaptation of the song on her album Vivien Richman Sings Folk Songs of West Pennsylvania ; her version of the song includes several additional verses about

the landscape and geography of the region . The song has also been covered by students at Pittsburgh Public Schools , using verses that are less political than the original Guthrie composition and closer to the Richman version than the Seeger version . The change in verses was partly because by the middle of the 1950s , enforcement of the Smoke Control Ordinance of 1941 cleaned up the air . Lyrics about the smokiness of the town were replaced with the line " Pittsburgh town is a great old town . "

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