

***Interview with Jean Boggio, author of “Stolen Fields: A Story of Eminent Domain and the Death of the American Dream***

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Jean Boggio, who is here to talk about her new book “Stolen Fields: A Story of Eminent Domain and the Death of the American Dream.”

*Jean Boggio has been writing in one form or another throughout her life but this is her first attempt at a book-length publication. Jean is a graduate of Allegheny College in Pennsylvania with a BA in Drama. She also has a Master of Education degree from City College of New York in education, as well as Bachelor and Master degrees in Nursing from Rutgers in New Jersey. She has had multiple careers including teaching both in elementary school in the South Bronx, and private piano at home, as well as nursing management and psychiatric nursing. She currently resides in Maine with her six cats.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Jean. I’m very interested to learn more about your book, which I understand is really a memoir of your family and how it was affected by eminent domain. Before we discuss the details of the book, will you define eminent domain for us just so our readers are clear on its meaning and will understand its impact on your life?

**Jean:** Hello Tyler. I want to thank you for inviting me to this conversation.

Eminent domain is the process by which the government can seize private property for public use to serve the public good. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor is quoted as saying, “The specter of condemnation hangs over all property. Nothing is to prevent the state from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton, any home with a shopping mall, or any farm with a factory.”

**Tyler:** Eminent domain affected your family by the loss of their prosperous farm on Neville Island in Pittsburgh. Will you tell us the details of how the family lost the farm?

**Jean:** It was at the time of World War I and patriotism ran high. The government—I believe national as well as state of Pennsylvania—chose Neville Island in Pittsburgh as the site of a proposed munitions plant that would rival the mighty German Krupps Works that supplied the German juggernaut with munitions. It was ideal. It was a small, flat island in the middle of the Ohio River. It was built up of alluvial deposits over centuries making the soil rich and fertile for farming. But it also sat high above the river, making it easy to roll munitions products down to wharves that would be built all around, then floated to a port for shipping to the war front in Europe.

The farmers were served with eviction notices and a committee was formed to oversee the construction of the groundwork for the proposed plant which would involve the first 10 million dollars of the proposed 80 million. The committee was headed by John Reis, a New York based vice president of Carnegie Steel. He was assisted by William Whigham, a Pittsburgh based vice president of the same company. The rest of the committee was made up of high executives of other companies that, like Carnegie Steel, were subsidiaries of U. S. Steel. Most of the other farmers soon gave up and left the island. My grandfather, Everson Porter Cole, and his mother—my great-grandmother—Mary Ann Dickson Cole, along with my Uncle Bob who was then a teen-ager, remained on their farm, patrolling at night with rifles, to hold off the men that would come to set fires and otherwise try to frighten them away. When the front porch was bull-dozed off, by then leaving a clear drop to the river out the front door, they finally had to leave. My grandmother, Helen Henderson Cole, and the rest of the family had already been sent north to Sandy Lake to my grandmother’s Henderson relatives.

The issue, in most cases, was not so much the losing of the land—everyone was for the war—it was the pittance that the government paid the farmers for land of high value.

Six months after the eviction, before the munitions plant was actually begun, the war ended. The farmers were happy as they expected to be able to get their farms back and rebuild what had already been destroyed. They would be happy to exchange the money for their farms. However, emissaries to the government were informed that they would be welcome to bid, but the land was being put up for public auction.

Still determined, the farmers went to the Moose Temple on the December morning of the auction in 1921, my great-grandmother, Mary Ann Dickson Cole among them. She was then 77 years old. The newspaper account tells of the old woman in black in the front row, relentlessly nodding to her bidding agent when her family farm came on the auction block. In \$25 increments, she forced the bidding up so that her opponent had to pay double what was paid for the other farms. But she could not outbid him. He represented Carnegie Steel.

**Tyler:** How long did your family own its land on Neville Island?

**Jean:** The five Cole brothers arrived on Neville Island from Maine in 1814. Eminent domain was invoked in 1918. The family had lived on the island, been prominent and successful there, for over 100 years.

**Tyler:** What is Neville Island like today?

**Jean:** The farms are long gone—not even a memory of the present residents. Some recall hearing that there were once big asparagus farms there—asparagus that was served at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City as asparagus a la Neville Island, but they know nothing else about them.

The eastern end of the island where the farms once stood is now covered with factories and other businesses. The once fertile soil, formerly known as “the Market Basket of Pittsburgh,” is now paved over. A large smoke stack looms where the Cole farm once stood. Toxic waste contaminates the once-fertile soil, and a piece of land that was given to the town for a park by one company was returned when soil tests revealed a high level of toxicity, and it became known as “poison park.” Smoke stacks pollute the air.

At the western end there are small houses that were built for the factory workers who came to work for Carnegie Steel. Other factories and businesses have since come in and taken over the old factory sites, but the little houses remain and life goes on. Only one old house remains on the island but it was not one of the big farms. The people are warm and friendly and interested in knowing what happened so long ago.

**Tyler:** Do you know why the government chose Neville Island over any other location. Wouldn't it have made more sense to build a munitions plant on land that was not prime farmland or really valuable land for any other reason?

**Jean:** Neville Island was the ideal location. It was the only flat area for miles around. Pittsburgh is built on hills. The island sat above a navigable river and the Dravo Mechling Corporation, the largest inland boat works, had already established itself at the other end. It would be easy to move the product down the banks to the planned wharves below, from there ship it down the river to a Gulf port, and from thence to the war front. These factors also made it attractive to Carnegie Steel.

**Tyler:** Jean, how did the loss of the farm affect the family short-term, in the first few years?

**Jean:** Some were happy to move north to Sandy Lake where the new farm was bought. My grandmother, Helen, had grown up in that area so to her it was like going home. My mother and my Aunt Gladys also enjoyed the change, although they missed the status of being part of the Cole family of Neville Island. Aunt Gladys was already in college and no longer living at home. Uncle Ned was really too young to be much attached to Neville Island and would have bloomed anywhere he was planted.

My great-grandmother (Mary Ann), my grandfather (Everson Porter Cole) and my Uncle Bob never got over it. My great-grandmother lived for a number of years afterward, but her life really ended when she left Neville Island. She lay in the little back bedroom at the Sandy Lake farm, looking out the window over the fields, still seeing the boats going down the river.

My grandfather carried on with the new farm with his eldest son's help, but spent much of his time and resources on a lawsuit against the government to try to get just remuneration. He became preoccupied with the loss and focused on trying to regain the family fortune through other investments. He had a history of poor judgment in this

area but this intensified after the loss and the desperation to recoup. The time of the Depression was fast approaching and he put good money after bad.

Uncle Bob, who had planned to inherit the Neville Island farm as the eldest son, and who was always a bit of a bully, became even more so with the bitterness he felt. The new farm in Sandy Lake became his entire focus, and for him, everything revolved around obtaining sole ownership.

**Tyler:** Jean, would you explain what you mean by the loss of status as part of the Cole family of Neville Island? Did your family hold an affluent or leadership role in the community?

**Jean:** They were moderately wealthy, perhaps more so than some of their neighbors, although it was not a poor area by any means. My great-grandfather, Augustus Cole, held nearly all the township offices at one time or another. His wife Mary Ann Dickson Cole did not hold any formal office, but her advice and opinion was sought on many matters of daily life. They were highly respected social leaders on the island.

**Tyler:** Do you have any memory of Neville Island—even by visiting it after the family lost it, or are your memories based on your family's memories and oral stories? What is your memory of Neville Island? What generation of your family lost the land, and how does that loss still affect your generation and even those generations after your own?

**Jean:** Growing up, my sister and I and some of our cousins, were fed an idealized view of life on the Neville Island farm. We saw it as Paradise Lost through the treachery of the government and the villain Carnegie Steel. When my oldest cousin retired, she and her husband traveled to Pittsburgh and the island, did some research at the Carnegie Library, and wrote up a booklet for the family with their results. I was able to use much of this information in my book. They took Uncle Ned with them to visit the island, and interviewed both him and Uncle Bob about their memories. That was when most of us knew what had evolved on the island. I did not actually see the island until I was writing this book and it was indeed a far cry from the image I lived with as a child. Except for a municipal park with a gazebo, and the little Presbyterian cemetery on the riverbank, it was covered with factories and other businesses at one end, the end where the farms once were, and with the little houses, built close together, on the other. There was nothing left of Eden.

The loss of the farm was the most strongly experienced by representatives of three generations: my great-grandmother, my grandfather, and my Uncle Bob. My mother, my aunt and my uncles were born on that farm but lived most of their lives in other places after the loss.

The biggest effect on me and my generation is that we are here! If it weren't for the loss, none of us would have been born. Our parents would not have met their spouses and we wouldn't exist. The other effects were peripheral—the fallout from how it affected our parents and my grandparents. For my mother and my aunt, the loss of status was the biggest effect. My aunt's attempts to regain it revolved around her religion and her importance in her church. My mother's attempts revolved around her own self-image and her career goals, achieving eminence as a language teacher, but also in choosing a husband who adored her and was willing to live in her shadow but still holding the reins of our family's limited fortunes lest she run us amok with her grand ideas. Both my mother and my aunt had lofty goals for their children that they tried hard to impose on us.

Uncle Ned's children might have been the least affected by the loss as he was the least bothered by it. However, my cousin Ned Jr., (Tucker) was strongly affected by our grandfather and his obsession with regaining the fortune. Tucker was close to Grandpa and vowed as a child to regain the fortune for him. He succeeded in doing that, first and foremost, with a single-minded drive, at a possible emotional cost to his family. Darlene was negatively affected by what was possibly Grandpa's bitterness and self-pity seeking an outlet in damaging behavior.

Uncle Bob's children were the victims of cruelty that resulted from the bitterness and hatred that grew up in him. It was said in the family that he worked his sweet-tempered wife to an early death, thinking he had married a work horse only to find that ill health and his demands wore her down. He had been our grandmother's favorite, but when she saw the success her other children made of their lives, she carped at Bob relentlessly, throwing their successes up to him, fanning the bitterness within. His children were discouraged from associating with their cousins as it might somehow contaminate them so they ended up living insular lives. He used his Wesleyan Methodist religious heritage as an excuse for his cruel behavior, twisting it to justify his ends, ignoring its focus on love that his long-suffering wife tried to uphold. Everything was for the good of the farm at the sacrifice of all that should have been the most important in his life.

Our own children seem to be little affected except that they had to grow up with our attitudes about life that evolved from those of our parents. Most of them have achieved financial success and all of them seem to be fairly well adjusted as human beings.

**Tyler:** You just referred to your family's "attitudes about life." What would you say that attitude is, and does it vary among your family members?

**Jean:** Those attitudes certainly varied and covered many different things. Sometimes our attitudes were a reaction against those of our parents—as is often the case with children. My cousin Tucker completely turned his back on religion as a reaction against his father's strict approach (Uncle Ned). My sister Nancy and I rebelled in more subtle ways, changing over time. Nancy still has her religious beliefs whereas I have ended up an agnostic like Tucker. Aunt Gladys's boys identify more with their father's family and that heritage, whereas their sister Marian was always close with the Cole side. Uncle Bob's children—those I spoke with—have retained strong religious beliefs, but patterned themselves after their mother's views—a gentle, loving approach.

My children express no spiritual beliefs at all, although when they were sent by their father to Catholic school in their teen years, neither opted to switch from their Protestant upbringing. They also had to survive my laissez faire attitudes of child-raising learned from my mother, whereas my nephews had to survive the opposite attitude as my sister reacted against our mother's approach. They were closely monitored and protected.

**Tyler:** You mention how the loss of the farm created "hatred, greed, bitterness, and lust." Will you explain how these negative emotions grew from that loss?

**Jean:** Bitterness, hatred and greed were mostly what I saw in Uncle Bob. He lost his future when Neville Island was lost. As I've mentioned, his focus turned to the new farm and was driven by these feelings. He wanted it all and seemed to hate anyone who got in his way.

Grandpa was certainly bitter, obsessed with his never-ending and unsuccessful lawsuit against the government. He expressed his feelings to his young grandson, the child Tucker, who was so affected that he devoted his life to getting the money back, but not from the government. He earned it.

**Tyler:** On your website, it mentions that "Stolen Fields" also deals with the issue of incest. Will you explain that connection for us?

**Jean:** Both Grandpa and Uncle Bob sought to self-soothe their emotional pain by following what can be termed as illicit lust, or even more plainly, incest. I knew nothing of this when I started writing the book, but discovered it along the way as one incident after another was revealed. My sister had told me about an incident with Grandpa when she was 15 and visiting at our Aunt Gladys's where he was then living. He had grabbed her and pulled her down into his lap and she, not being one to comply, was struggling and screaming. Grandma appeared and my sister thought Grandma over-reacted to the situation, carrying on and berating Grandpa. When she told me, I didn't believe the intention she implied.

When writing the book, I was consulting with Darlene, one of Uncle Ned's daughters. She told me the horror of her childhood when she was very young—8 or 9—and Grandpa was living with her family. He started by offering her money for small favors, seemingly innocent at first, but increasing in seriousness along with the amount of the offered bribe, until the demands reached a point where she refused to go on. She told her parents some but not all of what was occurring, and Grandpa soon moved on to Aunt Gladys's to live. Darlene, however, grew up with these experiences festering in her mind, feeding the guilt of a young child who didn't understand her innocence in the situation. It took her many years to overcome the guilt and shame.

I then remembered what my sister had told me of her teen-age experience and I questioned her about it. She then told me that she had mentioned it to our mother who told her that she herself had been warned away from him as a teenager by Grandma because of an attempt he had made toward Gladys. Grandma had not thought to forewarn her granddaughters in later years, however.

When Darlene, her sister Snooky and I met with Norine and Roberta, Uncle Bob's daughters, we asked them if their father had attempted anything similar with them. There were rumors in the family that he had. While they spoke of physical abuse toward them, they denied any direct experience of sexual abuse. However, Norine told

about how she learned from her sisters that he was “touching” his granddaughters, and that she then cornered him with this knowledge and threatened to “put him away” if he didn’t stop.

While it may have been in the nature of these two men to commit such acts (one cousin, a psychologist, said it was just something men did in those days), the question begs of whether they would have given in to such behavior if not for their embitterment over the loss of the Neville Island farm.

**Tyler:** I was struck that in the book you state, “Neville Island is who we were—who we are...As water ripples out from a pebble thrown into it, so is my generation shaped in the next ring. Whatever our present names, we are the Coles of Neville Island.” Why do you think your family retains this close connection and even bases its identity upon Neville Island?

**Jean:** While I don’t know that this feeling overflowed to my children’s generation, it was certainly evident in my generation and my mother’s. It was ingrained in us from childhood about the eminence of the farm itself, the grandeur of the house, and the family’s status as leaders on the island. The men had held offices on the island, and my great-grandmother was someone whose advice was sought by her neighbors on family matters—and probably business matters as well. They were leaders in the church. We were expected to live up to the family name even though there was no longer any particular accompanying status.

**Tyler:** In the subtitle of “Stolen Fields” you refer to the death of the American Dream. Why did you choose to use “the American Dream” in the title?

**Jean:** Like so many families, my ancestors had emigrated from Europe (Scotland) to build a better life—not only the Coles, but the other families who married into the Cole family. They came to make their fortune, and they were succeeding. That was indeed the American Dream. Then it was snatched away from them by serendipity. They had created their paradise in a place the government (and others) would eventually decide they wanted.

**Tyler:** Jean, can you see any good that came from this situation—can you in any way understand the event from the government’s perspective?

**Jean:** Are we attributing altruism to the government’s action? I look at the leadership and membership of the committee that was formed to direct the groundwork while it was still the government’s project. I look at who was the eventual winner. I rest my case.

**Tyler:** Has the government’s actions toward your family affected your own image of yourself as an American? Is the idea of the United States as the land of freedom something you and your family cannot believe in as a result?

**Jean:** No. Maybe the fact that none of my generation or the current one would be here if the loss hadn’t occurred influences our feelings about it. My cousin Tucker actually had a very successful career in the Air Force, switching to the reserves when he moved into private industry, and retired as a colonel. I think we do, however, recognize the increasing limitations of freedom as the government exerts more and more control over our lives. I think we still believe ourselves to be freer here than in most other countries.

**Tyler:** Why do you think a place can have such an influence upon a person, or is it more than just a place, is it home and the loss of home that is the issue?

**Jean:** It was certainly the loss of home—but more than that. It was the loss of status, a vicious thrust at pride that ate at family members. It was theirs. They had earned it. And the government came in and took it without asking and didn’t pay what it was worth. Money was certainly a big issue and the family had no say in the matter. The resulting feeling was the same as when a thief enters your house and steals your belongings. The victim feels violated.

**Tyler:** Do you know if the policy of eminent domain has changed at all? Could this exact situation happen again today or does the government at least have to pay a fair price for the land it takes?

**Jean:** My understanding is that there has been little reform in eminent domain. Witness the Kelo decision in Connecticut in the 1990’s that prompted Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s remark. Near Bucksport, Maine, not far from where I live now, a small family restaurant that had been owned and operated by the Dyer family for 50 years was taken just a few years ago to build a new bridge. The bridge was necessary, but the family was offered

approximately \$250,000 for their property. After protests, the price paid was doubled. However, private real estate appraisers placed its value at more than one million dollars. Once the bridge was built, it was found that the piece of land where the restaurant sat wasn't actually needed, but by then the building had been razed. The family is still fighting in court for just remuneration.

Eminent domain cases can occur any place, any time. Check Castle Coalition's blog site at <http://blog.castlecoalition.org/blog> This organization is an arm of the Institute for Justice.

**Tyler:** We have heard stories of other losses people have undergone—many in far more tragic circumstances than the events your family underwent, such as people forced from their native countries—would you compare your loss to that of other people who had to flee their homes or who lost what belonged to them? Why do you think your story will resonate with people?

**Jean:** That's a very good question. I think that losing a home and all a person has due to war and other political events is by far the greater trauma. And it's happening to everyone around you. It's on a different plane because your entire world is ending. Whatever one's personal tragedy, there is always someone else's whose own tragedy is greater. That's another story. But it doesn't minimize what is happening to you. This story is important to the reader because it's something that should be preventable, that's imposed by your own government who should be on your side, it occurs through no fault of your own (the same applies to war victims), and it's not happening to everyone—only you in some cases, or a small number of people. Remember Sandra Day O'Connor's words. It's like Russian Roulette with someone else holding the gun.

**Tyler:** Jean, is there anything you would suggest to our readers to stop the policy of eminent domain? Why is the government allowed this power, and is there anything a person can do to stop this traumatic loss from happening?

**Jean:** Apparently someone thought it seemed like a good idea at the time. I really don't know how it came into being. But to stop or control it, add your voice to Castle Coalition and join via their website at [www.castlecoalition.org](http://www.castlecoalition.org).

**Tyler:** What has been the response of other Cole family members to your book?

**Jean:** On the whole, the response has been very positive. My sister, and Uncle Ned's children have been a great help and wonderful cheerleaders every step of the way. Aunt Gladys's kids were, I think, mostly amused at first and probably didn't think it would come to anything. Once they held the finished book in their hands, their response was enthusiastic. Uncle Bob's children were understandably reserved. I received a polite note of appreciation from Roberta. From Norine I received an off-hand note that she had no time to read it, although she had been kept advised of its contents all along the way.

**Tyler:** Jean, I understand you are planning a sequel to "Stolen Fields." Will you tell us what that book will cover?

**Jean:** My next book is not necessarily a sequel to "Stolen Fields." It will not involve the Neville Island history of the family. It will deal with other aspects of my own life as an older woman, alone, moving to Maine and renovating an old cape house. Working title, "Under the Maine Sun." (Smile). It will be more humorous in nature, but will be an encouragement to other older single women to take life by the horns and follow their dreams. Or as a quote in a recent newsletter said, not to wait for the light at the end of the tunnel but to run down and grab it with both hands. The book will contain some advice for doing so, pointing out some of the pitfalls as well as the rewards. And the adventure isn't over yet. Watch this space for more!

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Jean. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information about "Stolen Fields" may be found there?

**Jean:** I have two websites: [www.jeanboggio.com](http://www.jeanboggio.com) and [www.colerithpress.com](http://www.colerithpress.com). Both contain links to my blogs, Jean's Memoirs (lighter in tone) and Incest. There are links to information about both incest and eminent domain issues. A reader can find the Table of Contents and the Prologue to "Stolen Fields."

I update the websites frequently with information about my book tours and speaking engagements, developments and future plans with my publishing company, Colerith Press, and links to purchase the current book. I invite visits to the blogs and comments, or direct comments to me through my contact page. I encourage dialog with my readers.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Jean. It has been a real pleasure talking to you. I wish you much luck with your next book.

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