

A company's coal town

From the Miners' Doublehouse: Archeology and Landscape in a Pennsylvania Coal Company Town. By Karen B. Metheny. Knoxville, Tenn., University of Tennessee Press, 2007, 305 pp., \$45/hardback.

Company-built towns are an interesting piece of American history. Usually created to serve the needs of a single employer, the towns were a utilitarian response to the need to house workers often in isolated environments. Karen Metheny starts with an exciting premise: even in company-built towns where firms controlled the physical environment, workers shaped and adapted the culture to fit their own requirements. To prove this point, the author looked at one abandoned coal mining town in Pennsylvania—Helvetia—and sought to understand this once thriving community.

While the town may no longer exist, some buildings are still standing and there is an extensive history of the town's owners, beginning with its original builder, Adrian Iselin, in the early 1890's. The author is able to trace the changes that occurred as the town became part of R&P Holdings and was later sold to the Kovalchick Salvage Company in 1947. The mine itself was closed in 1954.

During Helvetia's heyday, miners came and went. One of the more interesting facts found in the book was the large turnover of residents. Although some people may be under the impression that miners live isolated lives in the same geographical area, Metheny looks at the census and tax records to discover that a sizable portion of the population was mobile, while another portion of the

population put down roots that lasted for generations.

That a large percentage of workers moved regularly is less surprising when the reader learns that the majority of workers were immigrants, many from eastern Europe. After all, these people had already made the journey of thousands of miles to western Pennsylvania, so moving between places of employment was a relatively easy transition. Since coal mining usually occurred in isolated settings, changing jobs also meant changing towns, and so the miners, who had no special connection to the area other than for reasons of employment, moved to take advantage of economic opportunities.

The author points out that many workers hired on as miners because of the pay, not because they had experience in mining. It is safe to assume that as they changed jobs, workers drifted into and out of the mining industry, so not only did they display geographical mobility, they also showed occupational mobility. Given a limited set of skills and education, the immigrants took the best opportunities available to them regardless of the geographical or occupational changes required of them.

With this mobility, what remains in the archeological record becomes the substance of the book. Metheny has completed extensive analysis of census records, tax assessment records, published sources, unpublished sources, and oral interviews to reconstruct not only the physical environment, but also the culture as it existed from the 1890s to the mid-twentieth century. She also shows extensive knowledge of the literature related to industrial history in the United States.

Unfortunately, the cumulative ef-

fect of her work shows the limits of this type of research. Like all academic scholars, her findings are based on the record of evidence she can develop, but that record is skewed towards those who remained stable—the company and the longer term residents of the community. Those with long roots in the community tended to maintain written records. Those with shorter connections tended to leave less evidence behind. This becomes particularly true in a company-owned town where the residences were not owned by the residents, and their most cherished possessions were small and portable by necessity.

The result is a corporate history and a history of the “winners,” many of whom were native-born and working in the higher earning occupations at the mine. The artifacts found at the site give some insights, but the reader can assume that the immigrants brought few things with them from Europe, and those items that traveled that long distance continued to travel with the immigrants after they left Helvetia.

Although written and physical records are incomplete, in this situation, oral histories also prove disappointing, because the author gathered the oral histories from those who chose to remain living in the vicinity of the town. Those interviews miss the stories of the majority of workers who moved on to other opportunities. There is reason to believe that the remaining residents differed substantially from those who left the area both in their ethnic makeup as well as in their views.

Although the records show that the majority of workers were eastern European immigrants, their story disappears in the established record. Their feelings towards their native-

born co-workers, their spouses, and even towards their occupation remain unrecorded. The author notes that immigrants lived segregated from the native-born workers, but how did they feel about that situation? How did men and women adjust to this strange new culture which seemed to disparage their values but placed high value on things for which they had little regard? After reading the book, readers will find that these mysteries remain.

The book does an excellent job of detailing the development, and ultimately the decline, of a company-owned town. Those interested in learning more about how such towns prospered will find this book a worthy addition to their collection, but for those interested in how immigrants melded their values with a culture that was foreign to them, that story remains as silent as ever.

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Immigration on a global scale

Thinking the Unthinkable: The Immigration Myth Exposed. By Nigel Harris. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., London and New York, 2002. 183 pp., \$26.95/paperback.

This book is not a piece of standard economic research, but rather uses quantitative and qualitative data, anecdotes and a strong sense of indignation to argue that current immigration control measures are misguided, inefficient and inhumane. Nigel Harris is Professor Emeritus of the Economics of the City, University College, London. His book focuses on the costs and benefits of national

governments' attempts to control who is allowed to work within a county's borders, compared to an environment in which workers are free to seek jobs wherever they think best.

According to Harris, migrants can be divided into several categories: workers, family members accompanying workers, those reunited with family members already in the country, and refugees. Legal immigrants and illegal immigrants are distributed differently across these categories. Illegal immigrants are predominately workers, or would-be workers, drawn to their destination country by expectations of employment. Of course, individuals in the other three categories may, sooner or later, enter the workforce as well. In fact, Harris states that nations often are less than hospitable to refugees in the fear/expectation that they will swell the ranks of workers.

As has been documented repeatedly, immigrants to developed countries tend to cluster at the two ends of the skill distribution, with most sought-after high-skill workers admitted legally and unskilled workers more often resorting to illegal means to gain entry to more-developed economies than their own. One of the major costs of illegal immigration Harris points to is the loss of life associated with workers trying to enter countries through harsh environments or relying on smugglers who could abandon or kill them if things get difficult.

Once in the destination country, immigrants (legal and illegal) may be subject to racism and xenophobia on the part of the native population. Harris argues that the nation or state and its policies are based in part on this disdain for foreigners. Globalization, however, collides with anti-immigrant policies because developed countries need supplies of both

skilled and unskilled labor.

As the native-born populations of the developed countries skew older, the composition of demand shifts more toward personal services, often provided by less-skilled workers. The welfare of the elderly, Harris claims, could be adversely affected by restrictive immigration policies. More generally, he writes, "Governments are admitting for the first time that no country has a labourforce adequate to secure its future prosperity. The welfare of its citizens depends on the workers of the rest of the world, and sovereign self-sufficiency in terms of workers is nonsense." (p.116)

Harris separates the political issue of citizenship from the economic issue of migration toward jobs. By allowing free movement of labor, the profits of criminals and the costs of death and injury are reduced. Further, if economic immigration is freer, the incentive to falsely claim political asylum is eliminated, and refugees can be dealt with humanely.

Of course, such a policy prescription may be well beyond the limits of what seems politically feasible in many developed countries. But as economic realities weigh more heavily in the future, perhaps Professor Harris's book can influence the debate.

—Stephen E. Baldwin
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