

Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1992 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960." *The Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 652-653.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9703>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960, by Crandall A. Shifflett. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. xx, 259 pp. Illustrations, map, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PETER RACHLEFF, MACALESTER COLLEGE

What does a book on coal miners in southern Appalachia have to say to students of Iowa history? *Coal Towns* offers a fresh view of the emergence of industrial cultures, and it relies intensively on such primary sources as company records and oral history interviews. Historians of industrialization in the Midwest have begun to look closely at the relationship between the established agrarian culture and the new industrialized culture that developed in its midst. Is this best understood as a relationship between rural and urban, between traditional and modern, or between the static and the dynamic?

Coal Towns is at its best when probing the rural life out of which the first generation of American miners were drawn. Shifflett argues convincingly that this "traditional" culture was hardly "stable," and that miners straddled the rural and industrial worlds in creative ways that minimized disruption in their own values and world views. He stands on solid ground in arguing that earlier historians overstated the "wrenching" that miners experienced in leaving a subsistence life-style and entering a world of industrial wage-labor. The rural agrarian life-style was neither stable nor unchanging. Mountain folk and small farmers were increasingly pressured by population growth, land scarcity, and the expanding marketplace to alter their ways of earning a living. Miners sought "additive labor," leaving the family homestead for periods of time in search of wage-labor opportunities. This brought young men into "frontier" coal towns. The result was a process of back-and-forth migration, rather than a once-and-for-all packing of the bags and heading for a new life. "The metaphor of uprooting is misleading to describe the process of farm-to-industry migration" (23). The cycles of an agricultural calendar were never simply replaced by the neatly measured weeks and months of an industrial one, nor were the varying times and patterns of agrarian work replaced with the time clocks and repetitive motions of industrial labor. Even as "frontier" settlements evolved into "paternalistic" company towns in the years between World War I and World War II, the day of the "peasant" was never completely in the past, nor had the day of the "proletarian" come.

Professor Shifflett has based his entire analysis on a set of primary sources that he worked long and hard to locate. But he has not used them carefully, and his reading of them is disappointingly naive.

Coal Towns stands as a warning to historians about the use of such sources. Shifflett wants to replace the emphasis on corporate exploitation and class conflict in traditional labor historiography with a story of general satisfaction with company town housing and recreational facilities, of the company store as a community center, and of a lack of interest in the union. He uncritically bases sweeping conclusions about the company's intentions, the operation of company stores, and the role of the union on the primary sources he has used. He never stops to consider that it is no more surprising that company records should emphasize corporate beneficence than that oral history interviews should convey a wistfulness about a life gone by. Without careful analysis, one informed by secondary sources and critical thinking, such primary sources can be misleading. This, unfortunately, is the methodological lesson of *Coal Towns*, and it diminishes the value of the book's overall contribution.

Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts, by Richard V. Francaviglia. American Land and Life Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991. xx, 237 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID A. WALKER, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Mining areas, especially in the Mountain West, continue to attract the interest of historians and the tourist public. The recently formed Mining History Association brings together academics with buffs in a cordial spirit of inquiry. Although interest remains in the California gold camps and the Comstock Lode, historians are now studying mine safety, entrepreneurial leadership and lifestyles, and the diverse gender, racial, and ethnic environment.

Richard Francaviglia traveled extensively for more than three decades studying the nation's "underappreciated" mining landscape. Focusing on coal and metals mining in the eastern Appalachian highlands, the Mississippi River valley, and the western mountain states, he divides his book into three chapters. He identifies the visual clues of mining activity, interprets the major processes or forces that shaped the landscape, and develops various public perceptions of the mining legacy.

Few places provide a better laboratory to study the interactive impact of nature and society than the landscape of mining districts. Certainly the most visible landscape features are changes in the topography, including landform and vegetation. These changes reflect cyclical mining activity, the expansion of open pits and slag

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.