Review Essay:
Steel Communities and the Memories of Race

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By John Hoerr. *And the Wolf Family Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry.*


By Curtis Miner. *Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town.*


In 1946, John Dos Passos wrote, “What is steel? Steel is America!” Steel is no longer America, but steel certainly was Pittsburgh. As employer, industry, and way of life, steel dominated the city and the entire Western Pennsylvania region for more than a century. Pittsburgh is still shaped by steel, but it is the industry’s absence that influences the region today. The tremendous outmigration of the young and middle aged, the slender paychecks of those remaining, and the abandoned mills along the Monongahela’s riverbanks are mute reminders of steel’s former power.

Steel’s importance is also reflected in a rich body of historical research on steelworkers and steel communities in Western Pennsylvania. Each author under review makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the relationships
among steelworkers, the industry that employed them, and the communities they sustained. Building on the work of early sociological studies of Margaret Byington, John Fitch, and Philip Klein, these historians address the significance of ethnic and racial identities among steelworkers in shaping experiences at work and in the community. Serrin investigates how Homestead and its workers were shaped by the steel industry as well as by ethnic sensibilities. Hoerr seeks to understand how workers interacted with management in the workplace; Miner examines workers' community life and especially the role of ethnicity there. Dickerson focuses entirely on the discrimination that black workers faced for one hundred years in steel. Gottlieb analyzes the experiences of black migrants from the American South who came to work in Pittsburgh in the interwar period.

Each author uses oral histories to analyze ethnic and race relations. As we all know, the selective memories of those being interviewed are very important, and what is not remembered is sometimes as important as what is. Significantly, the workers Serrin, Hoerr, and Miner interview remain largely silent on the role of racial identities and racism, whereas black workers studied by Dickerson and Gottlieb put racial discrimination at the fore of their recollections. These differing perspectives provide important clues to understanding both working-class experience and the way that experience is remembered.

William Serrin takes Homestead, Pennsylvania, to represent America's industrial working class, now vanishing under the impact of corporate greed, union incompetence, and governmental indifference. Homestead was once the site of the world's most advanced steel making plant as well as epochal struggles between labor and capital; contemporary Homestead is deindustrialized and its people are defeated. Serrin hopes that by "writing the story, I could make the Homestead workers and the people of Homestead—by extension, working-class people everywhere—important" (xx). By his account, Homestead is a "storied place" (xx), although the story he is most concerned with is the rise and decline of steel. In the course of telling this story, he shows how steel shaped the lives of its workforce and the town. Homestead, Serrin writes, ultimately reveals "the heroism of ordinary people in the face of the strongest adversaries, [and] how America uses things—people, resources, cities—and then discards them." (25).

Serrin combines interviews and a variety of primary and secondary sources to make Homestead a remarkably readable work. (The absence of footnotes, however, is unfortunate.) He argues that while steelmaking made Homestead a place that its residents could be proud of, steel also took its toll on workers. In particular,
Serrin suggests that the failed strike of 1892 irreversibly stunted the independence of Homestead’s workers and their town. The brutal suppression of workers’ attempt to unionize in 1919 only underscored the power of men like Judge Elbert Gary, who ran U.S. Steel. The rise of industrial unionism in the 1930s finally gave workers a decent standard of living, but Serrin insists that since control over their union remained in the hands of labor’s leaders, workers never regained their independence. After World War II, Homestead’s workers, by this time arch pragmatists, tolerated the pervasive corruption of the company and union. Although radicalism reemerged in the 1970s, Serrin points out that many New Left activists came to Homestead with tactics and values incompatible with the town’s conservative milieu and were therefore isolated. He describes an exception, Ronald Weison, president of the Homestead local of the United Steelworkers of America (USA) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as “something that many of the others were not—a genuine article. Weison was a Homestead man” (336). Activism did not save Homestead, which Serrin argues has succumbed to the forces of planned obsolescence. The closing of the mill undermined workers’ fortunes and identities and resulted in a dramatic increase in suicides and broken marriages.

Serrin’s important account of an archetypal milltown is marred by his inattention to race. Interviews apparently guided Serrin’s analysis of Homestead, but despite his training as a journalist, he fails to take into account the selective memories of his subjects. This failure makes itself apparent as early as chapter one, “The Day the Mill Went Down.” Over drinks in a neighborhood bar, he interviews that last crew of workers after their final day of labor in the Homestead Works. Serrin paraphrases Ray McGuire, a skilled worker, who recalls how workers from the mill showed up unannounced to help pour concrete for his driveway; Serrin notes, “You helped each other like that” (7). Another skilled worker, millwright Bill Brennan, returned to his job after an operation, and his friends did all his work. For Serrin this exemplifies the ethos of Homestead: “That was how it was in the mill, too. You took care of your buddies.” Serrin allows Brennan to summarize: “Everybody knew each other. It was like a family. Not like today. People don’t know you. There was no cutthroat then. Today’s it’s all cutthroat, everybody for themselves” (7).

But as the work of Gottlieb and Dickerson makes clear, the nostalgia that permeates Homestead primarily represents the memories of white males. Serrin’s only explicit discussion of African Americans (he devotes all of three pages to the topic) effectively dismisses racism’s role in the making of the workforce. He observes that
Homestead was “divided along racial lines, although it has probably been no more and no less bigoted than most other American towns” (21). This begs some rather large questions: did racism undermine workplace solidarity? Did white resistance to civil rights activism disrupt the Homestead “family”? Serrin's nod to the discrimination blacks faced in Homestead is followed by an enthusiastic and ameliorating discussion of the centrality of the Homestead Grays, one of the best baseball teams in the Negro Leagues, to Homestead's collective identity. Serrin's intriguing quotation from Buck Leonard, a member of the Homestead Grays, is suggestive of the sort of collectivity one was likely to find in Homestead's red light districts: “It was black women doin' business with white men. All the women were colored, but all the men were white” (23). But this tantalizing beginning of a discussion of race remains just that.

Serrin does not account for the fact that the Homestead Works, like all steel mills, was blatantly racist. Homestead, in fact, was worse than other mills. The first black was elected to union office in 1957, twenty years after most other steel locals. African-American workers justifiably believed that white unionists and managers conspired to deny blacks opportunities to move into skilled jobs. Until the mid-1960s, Homestead, like other area mills, had extremely few blacks in skilled positions such as millwright. The Homestead Works was indeed a place where “you took care of your buddies,” but from the perspective of black workers this afforded little reason to remember the past with fondness.

According to labor journalists, the period from 1960 to the early 1980s was characterized by labor peace. It is the burden of John Hoerr's *And the Wolf Finally Came* to undermine this view by uncovering bitter and extensive shopfloor confrontation throughout these decades. To understand Hoerr's argument, it's important to know that steel production resembled craft work more than an assembly line: knowledge about rolling steel, tapping a heat, or maintaining equipment was accumulated by workers over years of work and disseminated to newcomers in informal ways. Yet, in contrast to Big Big Haywood, who argued that “the managers' brains are under the workman's cap,” U.S. Steel assumed that knowledge was a one-way street from managers to workers. “White hats” directed workers, often badly, and in disgust, workers refused to share the skill under their collective caps. As Lawrence Delo, a foreman at the U.S. Steel Homestead Works, acknowledged, managers caused themselves trouble because they were “so hard assed” (23). Mike Bilisic, who became president of USA Local 1256, Duquesne Works, remembered that on his first day at work, he was told not to fix anything until told to do so by his
foreman. His response to this management style was that “after six months in the plant, I hated my job” (261).

Management’s intransigent attitudes made trust or cooperation with unionists all but impossible. During World War II, the USA urged firms to grant workers a voice in production decisions in order to boost output. Steel firms refused, and the local unionists settled into trench warfare with management. In the early 1980s, when leaders of steel companies tried to convince the USA to grant wage and work rule concessions to stem the loss of profits, the initially receptive USA leadership was forced by its members to refuse. The end result of this combative relationship was shuttered mills, a tragedy for communities dependent upon the steel industry.

Hoerr came to these conclusions after covering the steel industry as a journalist for a number of years. Much of his analysis of shopfloor strife derives from a prodigious number of interviews, both those he conducted himself and those in the Historical Collections and Labor Archives at the Pennsylvania State University. Hoerr uses oral history primarily to gather information but spends little time analyzing how individuals organize it; his discussion of the racial and ethnic divisions within steel communities is thereby weakened. Hoerr argues, partly on the basis of his memories of growing up in the region, that the Mon Valley was a “unique social and economic environment,” which influenced the “conduct of work in the mills and the course of labor-management relations” (14). Workers' identities, he suggests, were a blend of ethnic, racial, and class roles, and intolerance of innovation and cooperation permeated the social fabric of the Mon Valley. Hoerr acknowledges that white residents subjected blacks to “blatant discrimination” (174). Significantly, he does not reconcile how profoundly antagonistic white unionists and managers nonetheless collaborated to maintain racial discrimination. A significant clue is that his own understanding of racism comes from Dickerson’s monograph and not from his own interviews with mostly white workers and managers. Blacks’ apparent invisibility in white workers’ memories suggests that the place of blacks in the workplace had been similarly taken for granted.

This shortcoming does not detract from this work’s importance in spelling out the role of deeply rooted class antagonisms in American labor relations. Hoerr reminds professional historians that just as steel production is not solely the province of white hats, writing history is not just the domain of academics.

Curtis Miner’s *Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town* is a sixty-seven page companion piece to an exhibit of the same name mounted by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in 1989. *The Story of a Steel Town*’s brevity, however,
does not detract from its success in integrating the words and, more importantly, the mental frameworks of Homestead residents into a thoughtful historical analysis. Miner does not quote his sources (an unfortunate drawback), but his work is well written and thoroughly grounded in the perspectives of Homestead’s white ethnic residents.

Although Miner’s analysis spans the years between 1880 and 1945, he is at his best discussing the interwar period. In contrast to many labor or working-class historians, he spends little time exploring the suppression of unionism, focusing instead on the rich community life “below the tracks.” Following the analytical categories laid out by the Homestead residents he interviewed, Miner emphasizes the importance of ethnicity in organizing social life. Ethnic churches, fraternal orders, and friendship networks dominate his discussion of the community, just as they dominated the memories of Homestead’s workers. Miner’s sensitive use of oral testimony also enables him to integrate Homestead’s ethnic character with its unsavory reputation as a “wide-open town.” Homestead’s Republican leader Jack Cavanaugh was a staunch anti-unionist who also tolerated the town’s notorious vice industries. Yet interviews with Homestead’s residents convinced Miner that Cavanaugh was not just a goon of the steel trust but a friend to the common man. Denied better paying jobs in the steel industry, many “hunkies” and blacks became upwardly mobile through the vice industries that Cavanaugh so carefully protected.

However, relying on the testimony of Homestead’s white residents led Miner, erroneously I believe, to argue that race relations in the interwar period were harmonious. Although Homestead’s pre-Great Migration black community had developed its own churches, fraternal societies, and businesses, Miner downplays the extent of racism in Homestead. His narrative clearly reflects the selective memories of older white residents; Homestead at this time, like all steel towns, was extremely segregated. Although Miner incorporates the oral histories of some black residents conducted in the 1970s, he overlooks others, such as that of Albert Reid who “was very disappointed to see that the racial conditions in Homestead weren’t much different than in Virginia.” Despite these criticisms, Miner provides an excellent discussion of the close relationship between the steel industry and one steel community.

In contrast to the works examined so far, Dennis Dickerson places race at the center of Out of the Crucible, arguing that “race, not class, has fixed the status of contemporary Black workers and has created the poverty and unemployment
which perennially afflicts them" (1). Dickerson makes the case that the experience of black workers differed sharply from that of European immigrants. Although blacks' entry into the steel industry predated that of Eastern Europeans, industrialists turned to Europe rather than to the American South as their labor needs expanded. Consequently, from the 1880s to 1919, when steel production was at its height, Europeans entered the industry as a matter of course, while blacks entered mills as strike breakers. During the Great Migration, industrialists hired blacks partly on the strength of their reputation for anti-unionism. This was especially true at Jones and Laughlin Steel and the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation (a subsidiary of U.S. Steel). Yet despite their value to open-shop industrialists in the 1919 steel strike, black workers frequently lost their jobs to white workers during the 1930s. This convinced many formerly anti-union black workers to support the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), although others proved reluctant unionists. Blacks struggled to overcome discrimination in the mills under SWOC's successor, the USA. They wanted a continuation of World War II's Fair Employment Practices Commission in steel but garnered little support among whites. The USA's civil rights agenda after 1945 was dominated by white unionists who preferred to deflect attention away from the mills and refocus it on legislative and educational struggles. Dickerson argues that the USA did little to advance black workers, who had to rely on federal civil rights legislation in the 1960s and their own litigation of the 1970s, which led to the 1974 Consent Decree that removed the institutional barriers faced by black, women, and Hispanic workers. When black workers did finally achieve some parity with white workers in the 1970s, deindustrialization rendered many of these gains moot.

The son of a steelworker, Dickerson bases much of his analysis on interviews with more than forty black steelworkers. Although Dickerson quotes these workers infrequently, he relies on their testimony to establish the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in the mills as well as black workers' resistance to racism, particularly their long struggle to force the USA to live up to its egalitarian rhetoric. Black workers' voices revealed that white steelworkers only infrequently bucked a system that benefited their race. Out of the Crucible is thus an important work that points out the continuing importance of race in working-class life.

In Making Their Own Way, Peter Gottlieb focuses on rural southern black migrants' transformation into a urban, northern, industrial proletariat between 1916 and 1930, a transition, he argues, that was only partial. By 1930, black workers were still partly rooted in the rhythms of southern agricultural and migratory labor
as they still returned home for harvests, vacations, and family events.

To understand these migrants, Gottlieb conducted over seventy-five interviews and wove their stories together with a variety of company records, biographies, newspaper accounts, and letters to the National Urban League. His analysis of blacks' oral histories provides a model for unraveling the complexity of experience, analyzing how it is remembered, and using constructed memories as a means to understand identity. Gottlieb used interviews and primary documents to show that black workers, unlike their more settled white counterparts, initially viewed their time in the mill as temporary and did not fully settle into the rhythms of industrial life. Hired as laborers in the furnaces, open hearths, and railroad track gangs, blacks frequently sought to build up a cash stake that would allow them to move on to another job. An important tactic was to quit a job, sometimes to get a better one, sometimes to take a break from the heat and danger of the mill, sometimes to return to the South to harvest crops or visit family. Despite the best attempts of steel firms to secure blacks as a steady labor force, many took full advantage of the common practice of allowing employees to draw money against their next paycheck. Blacks referred to this as "drag day," and many took what they could and left before the next pay day. One worker, who returned to the South every year throughout the 1920s, annually argued with his foreman who tried to get him to "leave one pay in the mill" to ensure his seniority. But he said he "couldn't see it" (126). He always took all his pay when he returned to the South.

Nonetheless, throughout the 1920s some black migrants settled down to an industrial, urban life. One indication of blacks' determination to become urban residents was the way they sought to move up the occupational ladder within the steel mills. These workers confronted enormous barriers to upward mobility, placed there by white supervisors and sometimes white workers. When one black worker was passed over for a promotion, he complained to his foreman's supervisor and got the job. He recalled that "they would have twisted it around somehow if I hadn't acted up" (135). However, this kind of protest frequently failed and indeed, half of all blacks fired at one steel mill were accused of "insubordination," shown in "friction with foreman" or even "wanting to be foreman" (135).

Taken together, these five books point to the centrality of racial and class identities to any understanding of steelworkers. Racism was a central experience for black workers, who readily recall it as an integral part of their experiences as steelworkers. White workers also experienced racism, although they did not directly suffer from its petty humiliations and profound injustices; not surprisingly,
their racial identities were more assumed than articulated in their oral histories. In speaking to historians, white workers were far more likely to emphasize class and ethnic experiences. The different ways that white and black men remembered their experiences suggest that selective memory helps to shape contemporary identities among working-class people. The striking absence of racism from the memory of white men does not imply that they have no experiences with racism or that they have no contemporary racial identity, but that it is of a completely different nature than that of black men. This insight could be applied with great effect to gendered experiences and identities as well. Sometimes what is left unsaid is more important than what is spoken.

Notes


2. Interview with Albert Reid, June 16, 1976, in the “Homestead Album,” Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.