

Museum Review

Migration, Milling, Mining: The Johnstown Heritage Discovery Center and the Windber Coal Heritage Center

Several transformative developments highlighted the last several decades of the twentieth century. The end of the Cold War changed global political power relations from a bipolarized framework to the international hegemony of the United States. The rise of a new international economy, although less publicized, produced fundamental changes in the economic relationships between and within nations.

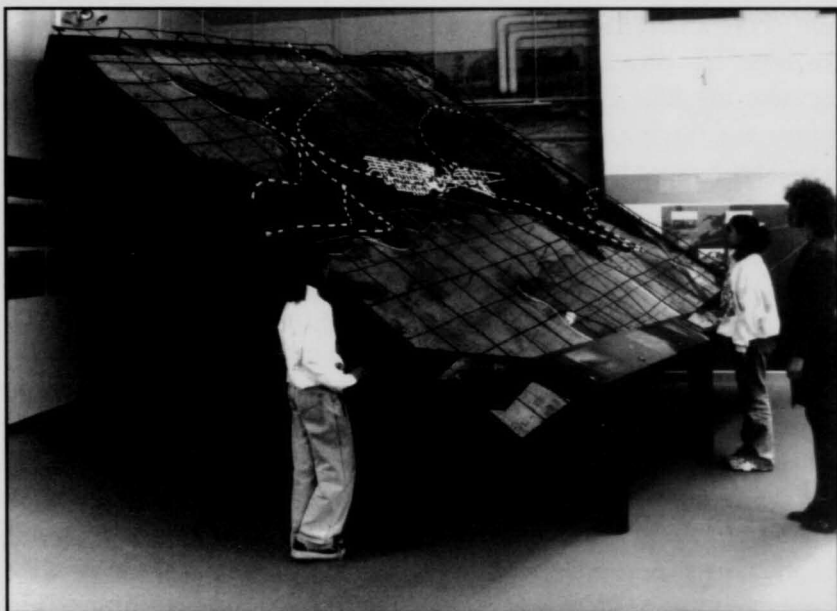
Although international economic systems date from the Medieval Era, the post-World War II global economy embodied quantitative and qualitative changes which differentiated it from its predecessors. Transnational companies, aided by major technological advances in communications and transportation, pursued maximum profits worldwide as they decentralized the consumption and production facets while concentrating decision making power in corporate headquarters. In this new system, the "Third World" added industrial and service sectors to its long term roles as suppliers of natural resources, markets, and investment opportunities for big business in the "First World." The combination of transnational companies, international financial organizations, and the governmental policies of "First World" nations infringed on the economic and political autonomy of developing nations, undermined agricultural self sufficiency in the "Third World," and accelerated the rate of internal and external population migration in economically developing areas. These changes reverberated in the core economic powers, including the United States, which became hosts to many new immigrants, witnessed a growing gap between the rich and the poor, and experienced the disorienting effects of deindustrialization.

Although few new immigrants settled in the Johnstown-Windber area, the changing economy did widen the gap between the poor and the rich. In addition, the effects of international economic competition

and deindustrialization catapulted many former coal miners and steel workers from wage earners, with middle class incomes and fringe benefits, into the ranks of the unemployed or the "working poor" of the service sector. Regions affected by deindustrialization sought other paths to economic viability including focusing on high technology, defense production, and the service sector growth as their primary candidate to stimulate economic revitalization. Johnstown embraced health care, education, and tourism as its triad of economic recovery. Windber, with its smaller population and wealth base, pursued a more limited agenda focused on downtown commercial establishments, churches, and the Windber Hospital. An intangible asset common to both communities—a rich ethnic and labor heritage—also had the potential to promote economic growth.

The need for a new economic base, the presence of an important slice of ethnic and labor heritage, and the new direction in historical scholarship and practice provided the framework for pursuing ethnic and labor heritage initiatives. In the 1960's and 1970's the focus of the historical profession changed from "the great white men" historiographical tradition to "the new social history" with its "bottom up" emphasis. Many "revisionist historians" were influenced by the protest movements of the 1960's as citizens and scholars. Often they sought to link issues of their time to a national protest tradition and to facilitate the empowerment of "ordinary people." Both historians and segment of the general public sought innovative ways of highlighting the challenges faced by underdog groups and the ways they entered the mainstream of American society. The convergence of these factors opened the possibility of new initiatives in ethnic, industrial, and labor heritage. Nevertheless, their realization depended on acquiring the missing ingredient—money. In the Johnstown area, Congressman John Murtha played the key role in bringing these concepts in reality as he convinced Congress to appropriate millions of dollars to underwrite the costs of America's Industrial Heritage Project. Under its auspices existing programs received federal dollars and new projects were undertaken to preserve the region's ethnic, industrial, and labor heritage.

The Heritage Discovery Center, located in a "recycled" brick building in Johnstown's Cambria City Historic District, has become an anchor of Johnstown's heritage project along with the Johnstown Flood Museum. The Center focuses on ethnic heritage and provides visitors with an understanding of the immigrant through the eyes of the newcomers and their families. The goal is for the visitors to understand the

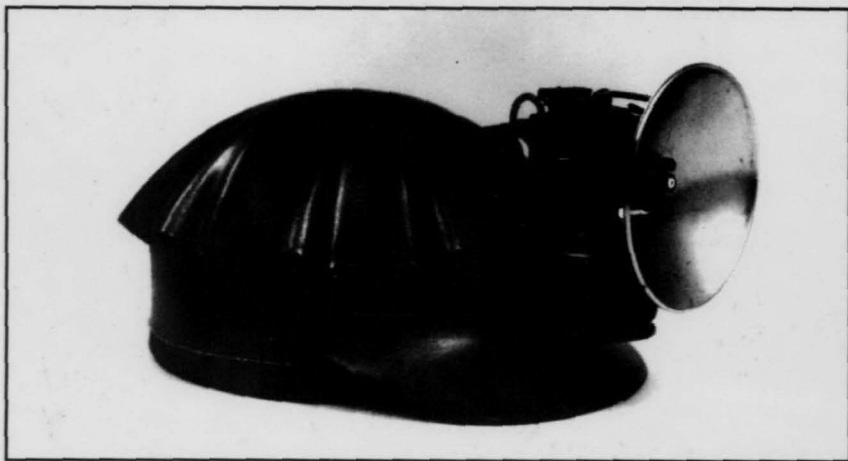


The
Windber
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role of the immigrants as builders of America as well as builders of better lives for themselves and their families. The immigrant's story includes the Ellis Island experience, working in the mills and in the mines, and forging communities with close knit families and a rich cultural life. As they became Americans by imbibing the American way of life and the American dream, the immigrants also shaped the nature of American.

The technical facets of the History Discovery Center will impress many of its visitors. The interactive exhibits not only provide information about the immigrant experience of the eastern European newcomers, but they also offer a "feel" for their everyday lives. These lives focused on family, neighborhood, and culture as well as work, ethnic clubs, and churches. In addition, the Center presents a variety of visuals and the voices and reminiscences of the immigrants and their children. A short film and an overview of the ethnic heritage of Johnstown, using graphics, provide some sense of the changes over time in the lives of the immigrants and serve to link the exhibits and other features of the Center into a more cohesive pattern.

The chronological emphasis of the exhibits is on the 1890-1945 era, with special attention devoted to the "Golden Age of Johnstown, 1900-1914." Change is as much a major theme of the story as economic growth. The expansion of the steel industry produced a need for labor which stimulated a massive influx of eastern European immigrants and resulted in a rising city population. The exhibits depict the immigrants' way of life, their relationship to the city's elite and its management stra-



Miner's hat which provided the only light source for miners underground.

tum, and the identity issues they faced in preserving their ethnic heritage and becoming Americans.

The saga begins in Europe with a brief description of the conditions which influenced the decision to leave and to make the long, arduous journey to Johnstown via Ellis Island. The visitor is introduced to Johnstown through the newcomers' eyes and sees a growing industrial city which needs their labor, but often discriminates against the immigrants and forces them to cope with a different and often hostile setting. An elite held power and created an anti-union environment which compelled immigrants, prior to the 1940's, to find other means to redress their grievances, find a new identity, and become Americans. Johnstown's eastern European immigrants built their lives around family, work, and neighborhood and formed churches, synagogues, and ethnic associations to preserve their ethnic heritages and to become Americans. In addition to daunting tangible problems, such as low wages, long hours, unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, inadequate housing and public services, and the lack of political clout, they also faced troubling identity issues. Clothes were a badge of identity, which could be altered with limited difficulty, but the issues of language and loyalty presented more complex and severe challenges for some immigrants. The exhibits and other features of the Heritage Discovery Center offer the visitor both information and a "feel" for the hard life experienced by immigrants and their ability to endure prolonged hardships because of personal resilience and the collective efforts of families, religious institutions and ethnic groups. The dialectical relationship between urban institutions and the new residents and part of the process used in negotiating a new identity receive effective treatment.

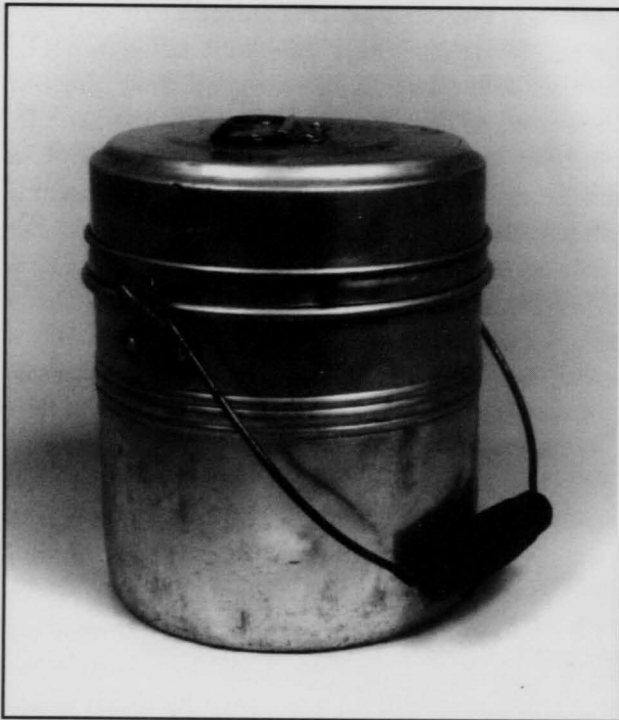
However, the strengths of the museum's presentations are also a source of its weaknesses. The brief chronological period and the narrow approach to ethnic heritage provide coherence, focus, and depth, but these assets come at a cost. It leads to neglecting the unfolding and partial resolution of issues raised in the prewar era and downplaying the roles of gender, race, and especially class, and ignoring linkages between these factors and ethnicity. For example, the self determination and industrial democracy rhetoric of the World War I era, the steel strike of 1919 with its clash between worker's Americanism and businessman's Americanism, and the rhetoric and activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's affected the search of immigrants for a new identity which would mesh their ethnic heritage and becoming an American. The welfare capitalism, mass media, and chain stores and brand names of the 1920's, the

New Deal and the CIO organizing drives of the 1930's and 1940's and World War II also influenced the approach of immigrants and their children to identity issues.

The exhibits downplay the roles of women in the service and industrial labor forces and overlook their participation in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and other labor unions. Although almost all Johnstown residents were white, African Americans served as strike breakers, workers, and strikers. They were subject to discrimination, including a mayoral proclamation, issued in 1923, which ordered recent arrivals to leave the city immediately or suffer punishment. As several scholars have noted, whiteness is a racial designation and status, which influenced the societal position of native-born whites and immigrants. The overwhelming majority of eastern European immigrants who came to Johnstown were members of the working class. They usually faced oppressive working and living conditions and suffered from discrimination. Although the local elite opposed strikes and unionization, these workers were the backbone of the Johnstown Steel Strike of 1919 and they and their relatives were often involved in the 1937 Steel

Strike and the steel organizing drive of the early 1940's. These initiatives merit more attention for the intrinsic importance and their location at the nexus of class and ethnicity.

Obviously, pursuing this entire agenda exceeds the resources of a single facility. Nevertheless, their enumeration highlights the potential of a more expansive



Miner's dinner bucket had two compartments, one for food and the other for potable water.

chronological and ethnic heritage perspective and offers a supplement to the current focus.

The Windber Coal Heritage Center, took shape in the 1990's as a result of the combined efforts of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission, the Eureka Coal Heritage Foundation, and Congressman John Murtha. The center is located in a building which once served as both a post office for the Berwind-White Coal Company and as the headquarters of its subsidiary, the Wilmore Coal Company. The museum seeks to preserve and present the heritage of a coal mining community through the use of videos, artifacts, and interviews. In addition, a large interactive map lights up to reveal important sites from the town's heyday and to expose the extensive network of mines below the surface of the town and its thirteen dependent mining communities. The bottom level of the museum contains a depiction of a mine, which acquaints visitors with the work setting of the miners, coal mining technology, and the production process. Graphics and captions provide information about the Berwind family, the way of life of the eastern European labor force, and the institutions located in this large company town. The role of Graham Avenue, the main thoroughfare, and the stores, schools and hospitals, and the churches are depicted in graphics and described in captions. Much attention is devoted to the ethnic cultures and role of religion in the lives of the residents.

The museum concentrates on the business and technological aspects of coal and on ethnic culture and makes its major contribution in these areas. However, several limitations, especially the handling of gender and class issues, mar its presentation of the town's history. The crucial role of women as centers of family and church life and as producers of wealth and well being deserve more emphasis. Worker grievances and labor activism, while not ignored, receive limited coverage in three brief videos. The strikes of 1906 and 1922-23, the appeal of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal to coal miners, and the unionization drive of the 1930's played major roles in shaping the character of the town. These occasions reflected the courage and initiative of coal miners and their families who took big risks in pursuit of a better way of life. By these actions they became agents of historical change in an environment dominated by adherents to the status quo. Additional emphasis on labor activism would also focus on historical development instead of a timeless and historical depiction of town life.

The issues raised by the character of the Johnstown and Windber museums link them to a long term, ongoing debate among public historians and museum professionals about the forms and functions of

industrial and ethnic heritage museums. A special issue of *The Public Historian* (Summer 2000) contained a series of articles which addressed some questions about the operations of heritage museums. The article by Thomas W. Leary and Elizabeth C. Scholes emphasized authenticity as a crucial goal for industrial museums. Their definition involved an accurate depiction of the industry's physical environment and congruity between heritage presentations and the current state of knowledge about the past. Most industrial museums, including the Windber Coal Heritage Center, perform the first function more successfully than the second one especially in cases of controversial issues such as the class conflicts which periodically convulsed the town of Windber. More extensive use of *The Miners of Windber* by Mildred A. Beik would assist the museum in achieving the second facet of authenticity. An article by Don Mitchell with a response by Curtis Miner and Richard Burkert (*Pennsylvania History*, July 1992), although it focused on the Johnstown heritage projects of the early 1990's, has relevance to the Heritage Discovery Center. Mitchell's article raised questions about the "hidden agenda" of industrial heritage and its distortion of history to serve elite interests desiring to transform Johnstown into a service economy city. This policy priority, according to Mitchell, led heritage sites to create myths about Johnstown as a city which displayed heroism in the face of adversity and reflected the presence of a community of interests among Johnstown residents. This approach neglected confrontational aspects such as the steel strike of 1937 and steel worker opposition to company demands for givebacks in the 1980's. Miner and Burkert responded to this critique by denying the existence of a "hidden agenda" and asserting their desire to offer a perspective which takes account of contradictions and complexities. However, they noted the constraints imposed on heritage facilities. They need to attract masses of visitors, they must balance educational and entertainment features, and they must operate in an environment in which interactive media conveying a clear message has much more appeal than reading materials that present conflicting perspectives about complex issues. The Windber Coal Heritage Center and the Heritage Discovery Center are more "in tune" with the Miner-Burkert perspective than with the second element of "authenticity" and the viewpoint of Don Mitchell.

Despite some important limitations, both sites merit visits from local residents and tourists seeking to be more informed about the ethnic and industrial heritages of central Pennsylvania. Visitors will take with them an appreciation of the richness, diversity, and denseness of the religious

and ethnic features of the working class life of eastern European immigrants in early twentieth century. This experience will allow them to capture some of the sights and sounds of the everyday life of workers and their families. They will be exposed to work environments, below and above ground, and encounter lives revolving around churches and synagogues, ethnic clubs, and homes and neighborhoods.

Irwin M. Marcus, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

