

REVIEW ESSAY
"BLACK HISTORY AND YORK,
PENNSYLVANIA"

*B*y James McClure. *Almost Forgotten: A glimpse at black history in York County, Pa.* (York: York Daily Record and York County Heritage Trust, 2002. Pp. 101.)

By William Keisling. *The Wrong Car: The Death of Lillie Belle Allen.* (Harrisburg: Yardbird Books, 2002, Pp. 279.)

Almost Forgotten is what it says it is—a "glimpse." "It's like looking through the small end of a funnel. The light is brightest at the other end of the spectrum—what you can't see, unless you come and look close and look with your heart." (4) The notion of public memory as perception is also what the book *The Wrong Car* is about. Both books urge a reexamination of not only York County black history but also how we examine that history. In *Almost Forgotten*, McClure offers "a photo album, showing snapshots from York County's past." (5) *Almost Forgotten* was written to commemorate the twenty-fifth Annual Conference on Black History in Pennsylvania in York, May 2002. Based

upon research done at the library of the York County Heritage Trust and the files of the *York Daily Record*, it surveys more than 250 years of black history in York. James McClure is managing editor of the *York Daily Record* and the author of two other books on York history: *Never To Be Forgotten* and *Nine Months in York Town*. Clearly *Almost Forgotten* is a companion volume to *Never To Be Forgotten*. McClure's book arrives during a "renaissance" of York County history writing. For example, Jim Kalish's *The Story of Civil Rights in York, Pennsylvania: A 250-Year Interpretive History* and John Vincent Jezierski's *Enterprising Images: The Goodridge Brothers, African American Photographers, 1847-1922* were both published in 2000. McClure's book "looks" at black history through newspaper stories but rewritten in the present tense. The text reads not so much as historical narrative but like an almanac. For example when discussing the 1969 riot, McClure writes, "Lillie Belle Allen. . . is shot to death while on her way to a Manchester Township supermarket." (54) We don't learn that Allen was in "the wrong car" but only "the riots culminate years of what appeared to be racially motivated incidents, practices, and attitudes in the county." If so, why did things explode in 1969? As a snapshot album of "newsmakers" of black York history, this book is delightful. Yet historians will discover that *Almost Forgotten* falls short of a scholarly treatment of race relations in York. Much of the book is an "appendix" with sections on "12 questions and answers about York County's black heritage" and "10 ways to learn more about black history," suggesting that this is probably targeted at teachers and students in York County schools. The strengths of the book are the bibliography, index and many images of past and present black York County citizens.

The Wrong Car is aimed at a different audience of readers, namely adults familiar with the media coverage of the trial of the accused killers of Lillie Belle Allen. In *The Wrong Car* readers learn how the automobile that Lillie Belle Allen—a young black woman visiting York with her family from Aiken, South Carolina—was riding in one summer day in 1969 was thought by white rioters to be the vehicle of James and Sherman Spells, local black citizens. Allen was killed by gunfire and only recently were the alleged killers brought to justice. Keisling is a novelist and journalist specializing in writing about Pennsylvania government and public policy. He researched the Allen case using local newspaper archives, gaining access to police records and interviewing local citizens. Keisling uncovers astounding information about the Allen case apparently overlooked by the mass media. For instance,

the theory of the "wrong car" suggests that although Allen's murder was not a random shooting—because the gunmen were looking for someone else—it was strangely "accidental." Like McClure, Keisling "looks" the past in a reflective, if not almost fictional way. The beginning of Chapter Two, for example, reads: "All eyes fix on the Cadillac as it glides down Philadelphia Street. Neighbors sitting on their porches and stoops along Philadelphia Street watch expectantly. They know what's about to happen." (5) The "glimpse" here is that of an eyewitness. Keisling was not there when Allen was shot but he has done his best to evoke the sound, sight, and feeling of what Philadelphia and Newberry Streets in York city were like in July 1969. It is great reading as a detective novel with the characters boldly sketched, the author as sleuth and the drama moving rapidly toward the predictable climax.

The Wrong Car is a great read for historical fiction buffs, but this is not fiction: The people are real and in many cases still living. The events are real and historically true. In fact, the trial of Allen's alleged killers was still in progress when *The Wrong Car* came off the press, leading one to question the timing of Keisling's book. It would have been a better "true crime" book if he had waited for the jury's verdict. It would have been a better history book, had Keisling wrote from an objective rather than subjective point of view. He could have supplied the readers with a list of written and oral history sources. *The Wrong Car* like *Almost Forgotten* utilizes the perspective of the "Fifth Estate" to present black Pennsylvania history to the public. But history is not just chronology. We need to know not just "what" happened but "why." Journalism can help us identify people and events in African American history. But those facts still require historical explanation and methodology and not just presentation in a popular manner.

These latest books on York history open a window upon York County black history and therefore in Pennsylvania as well. The "glimpse" they provide into that experience is not so much a "funnel" but a mirror in which we discover that in looking at York County, Pennsylvania sees itself.

ERIC LEDELL SMITH

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission