

BOOK REVIEWS

"raised" the child were often settled in favor of the former master who then bound the child into service until age twenty-one.

Mitchell does an excellent job of explaining the profound ambivalence with which whites approached the reality of freed black children. There was a sense that black children needed to adapt to a life after slavery, but what did their future mean for a society in which slavery no longer exists? What place did these children have in a civilization that even the most sympathetic northerners saw as Anglo-Saxon? The organization of the book, which begins and ends in New Orleans, allows her reader to see both the promise and the ultimate failure of Reconstruction through the eyes of children. It is in the experiences of the Afro-Creoles of New Orleans that the ultimate failure of the dream of racial equality is most poignant. Dreams die very hard.

Mitchell has written an important book about a group of people that it is easy to overlook. It is meticulously researched and beautifully written, and her use of visual evidence will provide encouragement to other scholars to look at new caches of evidence in new ways. With luck, the publisher will reissue the book in paperback, making it suitable for undergraduate courses. Until then, however, scholars should and will mine Mitchell's evidence and her insights.

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Jason Togyer. *For the Love of Murphy's: The Behind-the-Counter Story of a Great American Retailer*. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. Pp. 292, illustrations, index. Cloth, \$34.95.)

As with many McKeesport natives, the G. C. Murphy Company profoundly shaped the life of Dolores "Dot" Schmidt. Raised in the small city near Pittsburgh, Dot worked in the corporation's main office until after she married J. Lowry Witherow, a buyer in the company's warehouse, in 1948. Over the next thirty years, Dot and their children moved frequently as her husband rose first to assistant manager and then manager of Murphy's stores in small cities and towns scattered throughout northern Appalachia. When he retired in 1980, Mr. Witherow was manager of one of the chain's larger locations in downtown Wheeling, West Virginia. "Lowry really enjoyed his job because

he was a people person," Mrs. Witherow recalled in a recent interview. "He was a company man."

The story of Dot and Lowry Witherow, my grandparents, is the type of narrative at the heart of Jason Togyer's new book *For the Love of Murphy's: The Behind-the-Counter Story of a Great American Retailer*. As the most recent addition to Penn State Press's *Keystone Book* series, *For the Love of Murphy's* is designed to bridge the gap between the typical scholarly monograph and the interests of the general public. To this end, Togyer expertly combines frequent quotes from oral histories, extensive material from a variety of archival sources, a conversational tone, and dozens of photographs with an overarching analytical framework that emphasizes Murphy's importance to the broader history of American retailing. While it has some weaknesses in linking the particular story of the G. C. Murphy Company to the scholarly literature on postwar American history, this book should appeal widely to academics and local residents alike.

Togyer's narrative is arranged along roughly chronological lines interspersed with topical chapters covering issues of special interest, such as Murphy's cafeterias, the important role of female clerks known as "Murphy Girls," and the rush of the holiday season. The story of the G. C. Murphy Company begins in the 1880s when an Indiana County native named George C. Murphy went to work for his cousin John G. McCrory, a pioneer in the "five and 10" variety store business. In 1899, Murphy struck out on his own with the opening of a store in downtown McKeesport. By 1909, when the forty-one-year-old entrepreneur died suddenly from a burst appendix, Murphy's name appeared on a chain of twelve variety stores, by now selling items priced at five, ten *and* twenty-five cents. Following the founder's death, his company passed into the hands of two other former McCrory employees, John Sephus Mack and Walter C. Shaw, Sr.

Mack and Shaw formed an ideal partnership, according to Togyer, with the former maintaining tight control of the company's finances while the latter built a sales juggernaut based around highly trained male managers coupled with a large and effective cadre of female sales clerks. Beginning with the (temporary) closure and relocation of its downtown Pittsburgh store to Gallipolis, Ohio, Shaw established a pattern of locating in small farming and industrial communities that earned the company the nickname "Macy's of Appalachia." While other chains rapidly added locations during the 1920s, Murphy's strategy of enlarging existing locations and expanding inventories allowed it to weather the Depression handsomely. By 1940, the company's

per-store sales ranked among the highest in the industry, humbling even rivals Woolworth's, S. S. Kresge, and W. T. Grant.

As with the hard-driving steel and coal towns at the heart of its business, Togyer notes that the postwar years were both a golden age for G. C. Murphy's as well as a time of increasing economic stagnation. Flush with profits, the company went on a buying spree as it expanded to over five hundred stores in states as far flung as Connecticut, Florida and Texas. During the 1960s, however, declining revenues at its mostly urban locations and outdated business practices caused an economic crisis culminating in the ouster of company president William T. Withers in 1978. Despite some promising attempts to expand into the suburbs with larger discount "Murphy's Marts," in 1985 Murphy's became the target of a takeover bid by rival Ames Department Stores. This loss of independence began a steady decline in fortunes as first Ames and then a subsequent owner stripped the company of its assets and allowed the remaining stores to fall into decay. The last few Murphy's locations, including its flagship store in downtown Pittsburgh, were finally shuttered in 2001.

Throughout *For the Love of Murphy's*, Togyer skillfully balances issues of scholarly interest with a more nostalgic representation of a company much beloved by thousands of former employees and local residents alike. His extensive utilization of dozens of oral histories extending from childhood memories of the Murphy's snack bar to the behind-the-counter maneuvering of home office executives, for example, allows insight into the importance of the company to local communities as well as decision-making in the corporate boardroom. Togyer also makes excellent use of a wide range of archival sources dating from the late nineteenth century to the present, and extending from newspaper and magazine articles to company documents and the private papers of several key Murphy's executives.

Togyer refuses to gloss over less pleasant episodes in the Murphy Company's history, such as gender, racial and religious discrimination as well as sometimes acrimonious labor relations, but this book is clearly not intended as an exposé. For example, the author does note that racial discrimination in employment (Murphy's had no black executives until the early 1970s) and service (African Americans were not welcome in the dining room of the flagship Pittsburgh store through the early 1950s) did occur in Murphy's northern locations. However, this discussion largely takes place within a chapter on "McKeesport Yankees in Dixieland" thereby implicitly reiterating the comfortable notion that racial discrimination was primarily

a southern concern. On a similar note, the failure to include any mention of such contentious, but historically important issues in the book's unduly sparse index may suggest a desire by the publisher to downplay controversial aspects of the Murphy's story.

In making his argument about the importance of Murphy's as a window into American business history, Togyer uses a strong, though somewhat dated, secondary source base to connect the evolution of the company to broader social and cultural changes. The author's analysis may have benefitted also from the inclusion of recent urban history scholarship on the links between retailers and the evolution of the central business district. Alison Isenberg's *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), for example, argues that chain stores such as Murphy's were instrumental in refashioning the form and function of downtowns around the perceived interests of middle-class white female shoppers.

In the end, Togyer provides compelling evidence that were it not for the particular political economy of the 1980s, G. C. Murphy's brand of service-oriented salesmanship may have weathered financial difficulties and perhaps provided competition for Walmart, Target, and the like. *For the Love of Murphy's* is a timely addition to the literature of American retailing that bridges the divide between the coffee table and the college library. Its blend of excellent writing, wonderful images, and an extensive grounding in oral history will please scholars, former employees, and nostalgic customers alike.

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John A. Nagy. *Rebellion in the Ranks: Mutinies of the American Revolution*. (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2008. Pp. xix, 386, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$29.95.)

John A. Nagy does not claim that his history of mutinies during the American Revolutionary War is exhaustive, but rather representative of hundreds of mutinous incidents, both large and small. At the outset, he indicates that "Hollywood history has led us to think that mutinies are strictly a naval event." However, states Nagy, "[g]roups of men, usually armed, acting