The Spencers of Amberson Avenue: A Turn-of-the-Century Memoir.

Ethel Spencer’s family memoir — looking back at the turn of the century from the late 1950s — is a pleasure to read. Its language is clear and vivid; its tone affectionate but unsentimental. Its details bring the early years of Pittsburgh’s Shadyside into sharp focus: a child’s view (with interpretive assists from the adult writer) of being raised in a comfortable, happy, middle-class family.

Shadyside [at the end of the century] was not very far removed from the farm it had recently been . . . though the streets had been paved and flagstones had taken the place of boardwalks, the rural atmosphere lingered. A row of sweet cherry trees on either side of Grandfather’s house still bore fruit of superlative quality — big cherries, almost black when ripe and richly juicy . . . When the fruit trees blossomed in spring, Amberson Avenue looked like an orchard (p. 3).

Reflecting the child’s point of view, the book’s strength comes from focusing on a world that is small and concentrated. Not Pittsburgh, not all of Shadyside — not even all of Amberson Avenue — is its subject (Fifth Avenue, two blocks east, is barely mentioned). Ethel Spencer remembers room by room, from basement to third floor, the interior of the “Queen Anne” house built by the family in 1886 — a house “ugly but roomy,” though strained to capacity by “our constantly expanding household . . . a mother and a father, seven children, and during the early infancy of the twins a wet nurse and her baby, not to mention a cook, a chambermaid, and two regular nurses for the children.”

The Spencers of Amberson Avenue is about a household, its daily and seasonal rituals, its furnishings and housekeeping equipment, its inhabitants, their relatives, and — just occasionally — some nearby neighbors. As Stearns and Weber suggest in their interpretive introduction, the book invites comparison and contrast with Margaret Byington’s 1910 study for the Pittsburgh Survey, Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town, in that both emphasize the dominant role of women in the home. Like her milltown counterparts, Mary Spencer, the Amberson Avenue mother, is food manager, supervisor of space and schedules, chief mentor for her children (and far from Homestead, also director of a staff of servants). The father, Charles Spencer, stays shadowy in the child’s remembered view.
Weber and Stearns indicate that Ethel Spencer designed the text for private circulation to family members — "a typescript copy was presented to each of the author's brothers and sisters." The chapter headings — with their occasional textbookish sound — were evidently inserted by the editors as a reader's aid: Shadyside in the 1890s, Our House, Household Staff, Relatives, Growing Up, Education and Religion, Special Occasions, Our Mother. Unfortunately, the editorial process can only be inferred, since it is not explained in the introduction. In private conversation, Weber and Stearns suggest that the original text was about one-third longer than the published version and that their editing involved both deletion and rearrangement in order to fit a chapter scheme. Surely a reader has a right to be curious about these editorial decisions. Was the original text in chronological order — in the editors' judgment boring and unimaginative? Were deleted passages redundant? Did the editors reject materials they thought too detailed, or too moralistic, or too sentimental for modern taste? As historians (both are members of the history department at Carnegie-Mellon University), Weber and Stearns had an understandable interest in highlighting what the text shows about middle-class life in Pittsburgh at the turn of the century. But the authorial decisions made by Ethel Spencer were arguably part of their evidence, and to obscure them, without explanation, is strange.

As a frontnote to the book sums up, Ethel Spencer "graduated from Radcliffe College and taught English at Carnegie Institute of Technology from 1920 to 1955." To judge from the book that has been published, she purposefully designed a text to show how her world looked and felt when she was about ten years old. With its child's-eye magnification of mundane details — the contents of a library table drawer, the roof-slope of a tool shed, the shape of an attic alcove — The Spencers of Amberston Avenue sometimes seems Dickensian. And that is not surprising since, from outloud readings, the Spencer children "knew Dickens almost by heart and Mother herself was letter perfect." In her memoir, Ethel Spencer chose to create a literary document with a deliberately limited point of view: what a child — not what adults — thought was important in 1900.

Given that perspective, Weber and Stearns are occasionally incautious in their introduction in generalizing from what the text does not say —

Certainly the Spencer family seems oblivious to the turmoil swirling about them in this rapidly changing city. The frequent and often violent labor
strikes, job-related accidents, and deaths and crime as well as all the other urban pathologies noted by historians of the nineteenth-century city seemed to have escaped the notice of these suburban families. . . . An almost painful naivete, by today's standards, permeates the book (pp. xix-xx).

Such conclusions may not be fair about a text that concentrates wonderfully well on a child's nurture on a particular corner in Pittsburgh.

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By now John Bodnar, formerly of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and currently a member of the history department at Indiana University (Bloomington), has become one of the most prolific practitioners of oral history in the country. In the past few years, for instance, he has authored or coauthored several outstanding books using oral history to help describe the lives of Pennsylvania industrial workers during the first half of the twentieth century. Compared to these earlier volumes his present contribution is a modest effort, though a useful one.

*Anthracite People* consists of a fifteen-page introduction followed by excerpts from sixteen interviews conducted by Bodnar and others with members of mining families of the Nanticoke area and the Wyoming Valley. No basic questionnaire is provided the reader, and there is no explanation as to the inclusion of these interviews over others from the more than thirty-five cited in the backnotes to the introduction. Perhaps the author selected those that would give the greatest thrust to his thesis.

And Bodnar's central thesis here is about the same that he has developed in his other books dealing with Pennsylvania industrial workers: basically conservative, pragmatic, and nonideologically motivated, the economically distressed anthracite miners were not wild-eyed radicals out to overthrow the American system, but rather they sought social and economic betterment through the integrity of their religious, ethnic, and community kinships. In the midst of the