Crossroads: Descriptions of Western Pennsylvania, 1720-1829. Edited by John W. Harpster.


In 1938 John W. Harpster, the curator of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, edited a monograph entitled Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania, an anthology of early travelers' and settlers' personal narratives. Collectively, their tales conveyed authentic descriptions of the lands beyond the Allegheny Mountains from 1720 until 1829. This book remained a valuable part of the literature dealing with Western Pennsylvania history for over four decades, but many observers believed an updated version was desirable. That hope has been satisfied by this recent edition, under the new title, Crossroads.

The thirty-seven essays are grouped under various chapter headings arranged chronologically. The narratives range from the personal journal of the early eighteenth-century fur trader, Conrad Weiser, to the reminiscences (made in 1887) of Russell Erret, a prominent politician, who recalls the Pittsburgh of his youth.

Among the writers are such notable figures as George Washington, Arthur Lee, and Samuel Maclay; however, most authors were ordinary sojourners who were either passing through or preparing to settle in the region. An especially interesting piece was written by a young soldier (known only as J.C.B.) garrisoned at Fort Duquesne. His recollections provide a unique look at this territory during the era of French rule. Many of the chronicles present interesting glimpses of early life in Pittsburgh in the century before the city became a major industrial center. But Crossroads is not limited to the forks of the Ohio River, because it also includes the country in northwestern Pennsylvania south of Lake Erie.

For readers not familiar with this region's general history, the editor includes useful commentaries prior to each chapter. Also, the decision was made to edit the original wording and spellings to make the texts comprehensible to modern readers. Most welcome, moreover, are the notations, in italics, that identify the current designations of many of the place names to be found in the primary manuscripts. This reviewer believes maps could have been utilized as well to enhance perceptions of exactly where the different wayfarers journeyed.

Crossroads is recommended reading for anyone interested in early Western Pennsylvania history. This monograph has been prepared in
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a method that the general reading public will appreciate; furthermore, they need not be scholars to enjoy its content. The book is a valuable addition to any comprehensive collection of works on Pennsylvania.

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Aerial Pioneers: The U.S. Air Mail Service, 1918-1927.  
By William M. Leary.  

A comprehensive and scholarly treatment of the United States government airmail service has been long overdue. With William M. Leary's Aerial Pioneers, we at last have such a study. Leary, a professor of history at the University of Georgia, traces the development of the government airmail from its shaky beginnings at the dawn of aviation to its last transcontinental flight in September 1927. Included are the political and administrative problems faced by those who got the experimental New York-to-Washington route off the ground in 1918, as well as the operational difficulties encountered when the service expanded westward across the Alleghenies in 1919 and finally inaugurated twenty-four-hour coast-to-coast airmail in 1924. Recognition of this achievement came when the airmail service received the prestigious Collier Trophy for the most significant contribution to aviation in 1923 and 1924.

Leary skillfully fleshes out his narrative with details on the key figures involved with the government airmail. Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger committed himself and the post office to the service despite political opposition and doubts that aviation technology had advanced to the point of making such an undertaking practicable. The pilots who flew the line risked their lives on an almost daily basis. Their planes, often surplus military models, were not well-suited for the demands placed upon them by regularly scheduled flights. But the fliers pushed the mail through regardless of the bad weather, crude instruments, and modest navigation facilities. One of the best was Wesley L. Smith, who joined the service in 1919 and