home grown medical practitioner, sending their sons away to Ivy League schools and traveling east themselves for medical treatment.” (90) Only with Mellon money in the late 1940s did the school begin to flourish, and only within the past two decades have affluent Pittsburghers stayed home when they became ill.

Finally, since this is an honest history, no reader can make a case for a true “100 Years of Excellence.” The deans of the school all wanted that to be so, but despite their efforts (and usually because of fiscal shortfall or faculty squabbles) accomplishment fell far short of desire. Not until the past 30 years has Pitt really achieved excellence. From an inbred, academically incestuous faculty of Pitt graduates teaching Pitts students until the late 1940s, it has finally become an institution of national and international fame. The sporty debonair traveler, Dean Arbuthnot, would be pleased.

No reviewer can conclude without mentioning a flaw or two. The index to this history is mediocre; many photographs are of people not mentioned in the text and others seem inserted to satisfy someone’s nostalgia; the Foreword’s inclusion of all of Dr. Duff’s speech welcoming the first class in 1886, while setting the tone of the period, adds a bit too much Presbyterian oratory to an otherwise clean text; the concluding two sections drift off instead of providing a final fanfare.

Despite this, the book contributes an important piece to the total puzzle of the history of Pittsburgh in a century of cultural and medical upheaval. It also is very timely, as the city’s economy today relies more and more on medical employment. The book can, and should be enjoyed by anyone concerned with the area, physician or non-physician.

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Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class and Community Conflict, 1780-1890. By Ronald L. Lewis


The publication of Ronald L. Lewis’ Black Coal Miners in America significantly advances the study of black workers during the industrialization period. Lewis’ book, which complements recent studies on black
autoworkers, and black steelworkers, and monographs on black workers in Richmond, Milwaukee and Pittsburgh turns this burgeoning field away from the traditional focus on blacks, their role in organized labor, and national legal issues to an emphasis on black laborers in their historical and geographical settings. Also like the authors of other recent studies, Lewis stresses the importance of examining industries with particularly large numbers of black workers.

Lewis shows that the entry of blacks into the nation’s coal industry commenced under coercive circumstances. Black slaves, principally in Virginia and Alabama, mined coal in the ante-bellum period, while the notorious convict lease system drew hundreds of hapless blacks into southern collieries in the decades after the Civil War. Both groups became miners involuntarily, but those who survived either slavery or imprisonment brought their industrial experiences into a freer labor market, where many pursued occupations in the coal fields.

While Lewis’ narrative account of black coal miners, their occupational development and geographical mobility are important features of this book, it is his thesis that is most arresting and provocative. Although race, according to Lewis, has been a central theme in the experiences of black coal miners wherever they have worked, its role has been either tempered or exacerbated by the degree of class solidarity with white laborers. The importance of race as a factor determining the economic status and opportunities of black coal minders actually depended upon the section of the country in which they labored. Lewis identified three major areas where blacks became crucially involved in the coal industry, either as established miners or laborers seeking entry to the workplace. The factor of race in each region differed significantly. Moreover, the relationship between black and white miners and the extent of solidarity between them was largely determined by the length of time blacks had worked in the coal fields.

In Alabama, particularly in coal-rich Jefferson County, blacks and whites simultaneously entered mining during the post-bellum period. Because black laborers outnumbered whites in the industry at times and in some places, regional patterns of racial exclusion could not prevail permanently among unionists serious about improving workers’ lives. Hence, when strikes occurred, remarkable unity existed between black and white miners who clearly understood that despite color differences, they had more in common with each other than with white employers bent on exploiting their labor and paying them the cheapest wages possible. Such fervent unionism caused black miners to react as angrily against strikebreakers of whatever color as their white
counterparts. At times, efforts by white outsiders to wreck bi-racial solidarity among workers with racist appeals were successful, but the long history of black participation in southern mining sometimes checked that influence.

Conversely, in the Central Competitive Field, an area embracing Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and western Pennsylvania, whites established themselves in the mines. Located in towns with no indigenous black population, white miners believed that they had an inherent right to job control over positions in the coal fields. Hence, when employers brought in strikebreakers, who were often black, worker-owner disputes often deteriorated into racial confrontations between miners. Even when black strikebreakers were imported to unlikely places in Washington, Iowa and Kansas, white miners opposed their presence and would not countenance them as fellow workmen exploited by the same coal operators. Sometimes blacks who remained in the coal fields when industrial peace prevailed found that race made it difficult to make common cause with white miners.

In Alabama, blacks and whites laid claim to mining jobs at the industry’s inception, and in the Central Competitive Field, the first generation of whites believed that their rights to job control in those regional mines entitled them to exclude blacks. But a third pattern of “judicious mixture” emerged in West Virginia and Appalachia. Coal operators, wishing to prevent worker solidarity, deliberately employed specific proportions of blacks, native whites and foreign-born whites. The effort backfired, however, because the ruthless exploitation of workers forced them to forget their differences and view employers as the common foe. While in Appalachia, like Alabama, white miners had greater social amenities than blacks, these dubious advantages were not sufficient to undermine class solidarity.

Mechanization in the coal fields, however, precipitated the demise of the black miner. Abetted by the United Mine Workers, the coal industry secured union acquiescence to introduce labor-cutting innovations into the pits. During the period from the 1930s to the present, blacks miners, like counterparts in other heavy industries, had too few opportunities in operating new machinery. Consequently, their numbers dropped steeply and steadily. In coal mining, as in steel and auto manufacturing, technology reinforced by racism sounded the death knell on black employment.

Lewis has written an important and seminal book. He discusses the complex interplay between class and race in understanding the variable status of black coal miners in different parts of the country. He
explains how in one coal mining region blacks were synonymous with strikebreakers, while in other sections blacks enjoyed the very best reputation for staunch unionism. While one wishes that Lewis had focused some attention on the impact of the wartime F.E.P.C. and civil rights legislation on black miners, especially Title VII of the 1964 act, these omissions do not undermine the basic strength of the book. This is a crucial study!

Dennis Dickerson   Williams College


Although Centralia, Pennsylvania, officials deny the story, journalist David DeKok asserts that Borough Council in 1962 inadvertently started the mine fire that nearly 25 years later forced the evacuation of most of the small Columbia County community. DeKok, a reporter for a Shamokin newspaper, began covering Centralia and the mine fire in 1976; he reached his conclusion on the fire's origin after learning that the borough routinely cleaned up its garbage dumps by having firemen set them ablaze each spring, an illegal act which nonetheless took care of rats, odors and excess papers. DeKok maintains that a May 1962 fire, set in an abandoned strip mine being used as a landfill, ignited an outcropping of anthracite coal, part of a seam that ran beneath the town. From there, the stubborn fire spread through a honeycomb of old mine tunnels, creating subsidence and filling many homes with poisonous gases, including carbon monoxide. The fire still burns today.

Whatever blame council might bear, DeKok argues, Centralia's main sin was simply being too small, too ethnic and too Democratic to pressure Republican administrations in Harrisburg and Washington to spend the necessary millions of dollars to save a town of only 1,000 people and a total assessed property valuation of just $500,000. For