

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! ■

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Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government and the Centralia Mine Fire. By David DeKok. and *Slow Burn: A Photodocument of Centralia, Pennsylvania.* Photographs and text by Renee Jacobs.

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. Pp. 299.

Index, maps, photographs. \$17.95.) and

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. Pp. 152.

Introduction, maps. \$24.95.)

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

more than 20 years, DeKok says, Centralia residents suffered from government ineptitude, callousness and outright deception.

At first, government unresponsiveness reflected the size and nature of Centralia, a mining community in an area that has traditionally been agricultural. For the legislators who were supposed to represent Centralia's citizens, the town "was as different from the rest of their districts as the Bronx would be to Oklahoma." (page 47) Even when residents could get help from local lawmakers, Centralia had to contend with bureaucratic in-fighting between the federal Bureau of Mines and the Office of Surface Mining, a problem further compounded by the political tug-of-war between Harrisburg and Washington over who would pay to extinguish or contain the fire. At least one government official justified his inaction by invoking the need to look at the big picture. Writes DeKok, with appropriate skepticism: "Whenever an agency of government talks about the need to look at the big picture, one can be certain that little people somewhere have been left to suffer. Centralia was no exception." (140)

As DeKok's title denotes, the threat to Centralia was largely invisible, and thus more insidious. Some residents denied the existence of the fire, ascribing reports about it to a plot to steal the remaining coal under the town. Even the more realistic residents grew accustomed to the steaming pipes that vented heat and gas from the mine fire and to the ticking carbon monoxide monitors in their homes. Any complacency ended in February 1981, when a 12-year-old boy nearly died after falling into a gaping gas-filled hole apparently created by the mine fire. That incident generated national press coverage, which helped to create public pressure for a \$42 million program to relocate Centralia residents who wanted to move.

In concluding his tightly structured chronological account, DeKok writes that the main lesson to be learned from Centralia is that "citizens have the power to force government to heed their will, if — and this is important — they have the courage and determination to use that power.... It was was a lesson the citizens of Centralia learned too late to save their community."

The image captured in the cover photograph comes straight from small-town America: young members of the Centralia Brownie troop, attired in rain gear and carrying small U.S. flags, gamely march along

an empty street on an overcast Memorial Day. What separates the scene from thousands of similar celebrations is the ominous presence of a steaming vent pipe, a constant reminder of the invisible mine fire that still burns under the town. The picture conveys a message of youthful innocence and of adult courage to carry on in the face of an implacable environmental disaster.

Jacobs' book provides an invaluable addition to David DeKok's *Unseen Danger*. Where DeKok focused on the political battle in Centralia, Jacobs turns her attention to the human side of the mine fire, portraying in words and pictures the personal loss, confusion and anger that Centralians experienced. Many pictures are startling, sometimes not so much for what they show as for what the reader knows is happening beneath the facade of ordinariness. How can life appear so normal when a mine fire is eating away at the foundation of the town?

Jacobs moved to Centralia in mid-1983 for the express purpose, she says, of recording "the struggles of people who possessed more courage than I could fathom. I believed then, and even more so now, that the residents of Centralia represent us all. History has shown that it is not whether a disaster will strike a town, but when." (151) For the most part, Jacobs lets the people tell their own stories, quoting them at length in the text accompanying many photographs.

Among the more memorable figures is Joan Girolami, a Centralia homemaker who served as one of the first officers of a Centralia citizens' group organized to seek government help. Girolami's health and personal life suffered as she battled Borough Council, and state and federal authorities. Equally dedicated, but at the extreme opposite pole from Girolami was Helen Womer, who led a strident fight to keep the town in one piece despite the fire. Friction between the two factions prompted Girolami to observe: "You know, they say small towns are so nice. Put a tragedy in a small town, you'll find out how nice it is. Put a disaster there, and it's not so nice anymore." (133)

Most poignant is Jacobs' account of the turmoil experienced by Clara Gallagher, an elderly resident who died shortly after leaving her home in Centralia under a 1984 relocation program. As Jacobs' camera recorded the sadness of the woman's last day in Centralia, Clara told her, "I wanted to stay here until I died. But it won't happen that way." (137)

Because the book chronicles recent events, it straddles the boundary between photojournalism and contemporary history. As journalism, it is a moving portrait of a town's effort to confront calamity. As history, it is a valuable record preserving the human dimension of the Cen-

tralia story — a dimension that otherwise might have been buried in 25 years of documents, reports and recommendations generated by an often unsympathetic government. ■

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