

Culture, as well as Technology, in Mining History

Book Review by Jim Dougherty

Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts

by Richard V. Francaviglia

University of Iowa Press, 1991. Pp. xx, 237. Photographs, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$35

MINING has been one of the industries which has helped shape U.S. political, economic, and social affairs. Among studies on the impact of mining, many have documented the role of race, class, gender, and technology.

Richard Francaviglia departs from these efforts by providing an interdisciplinary investigation of one of the most under-appreciated aspects of mining, the "cultural landscape" the image of a place based upon its visual characteristics. Francaviglia assumes that much of the U.S. mining landscape which extends from the anthracite and bituminous coal fields of the East to the iron ore, copper, and uranium fields of the West has been created by the technology used during the extraction process. Although this might smack of technological determinism to some, the author is quick to argue that *Hard Places* goes beyond technology to include some of the "deepest cultural values" which explain our society's motivation to dig into the earth. The abandoned towns and mining facilities that dot the countryside should not be characterized as "a ruined hellish wasteland," according to Francaviglia, but perceived, interpreted, and remembered within the same framework held by the operators who reshaped

the land around the turn of the century. To Americans in the late nineteenth century, the author argues, "mining activities symbolized progress and domination over nature." (pg. 9) *Hard Places* is not an intense case study of any particular mining area but an overview of mining landscapes and a guide for developing a better understanding of them.

Francaviglia provides the reader with three chapters to initiate this process. In the first, "Reading the Landscape," one learns how the natural and "person-made" configuration of the site, its physical layout, and the design of buildings help shape mining regions. Surveying photographs, maps of infrastructure development, U.S. Geological Survey maps, and other state and local historical and archaeological collections can augment what a student or visitor might see and find when investigating a mining area.

Interpreting the landscape, the focus of the second chapter, is a process Francaviglia describes as "akin to art history and art criticism," where an analysis of mining landscapes should include aesthetic factors as well as the social forces which, combined, shape a region's heritage.

When scanning surface maps of mining regions one might develop a sense that mining communities are scattered about with no logical pattern to their location. But Francaviglia argues that "mining towns are not randomly built but are located at places where deposits are close to the surface." (81) The distribution of copper towns on Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, for instance,

provides an example of how such communities develop near mineral deposits. This process of clustering and concentration, known as "nucleation," is partially responsible for producing the unsuitable living environments many miners and their families faced well into the post-World War II period.

The story of mining communities is also a story of conflicting characteristics. Socially they were stratified by race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Yet houses, commercial buildings and other functional buildings were physically homogeneous. Francaviglia attributes this lack of physical diversity to the domination of large corporations, which expected their mining engineers to also serve as architects. The lay-out of towns and company housing done by these engineers tended to be as standardized as the production processes they designed. For readers in Western Pennsylvania, the example of Lucius W. Robinson, president of the Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal Company in the early 20th century, is especially interesting. A graduate of Yale's School of Mining and Engineering, Robinson over-saw the purchase of land from small farmers and the construction of R&P mines and company towns throughout Indiana County, Pennsylvania.

Contemporary perceptions of the history of mine town remains are as diverse as the many forms and conditions in which they exist. Popular films and novels have portrayed these places as wild, gun-fighting boom towns infested with gambling and prostitution and/or as ghost towns that are tattered reminders of a distant past. Francaviglia sees the grow-

ing interest in historic preservation as one of the most powerful economic and social forces affecting modern perceptions of the landscape. Spurred by the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, preservationists aim to identify and evaluate all historical resources and to preserve historically significant ones. With a \$17 million annual budget, America's Industrial Heritage Project, for instance, seeks to turn a nine county region of south-central Pennsylvania into a national park based upon industrial heritage. It has become a major U.S. National Park Service preservation project. Francaviglia, suspicious of such efforts, argues that in most cases

preservation has been a selective (and subjective) process that favors properties that are attractive, desirable, or marketable — those historical properties that the culture feels are worthy of preservation. This selective preservation has resulted in the saving of certain residential and commercial properties, while many industrial features owned by the mining interests have vanished. Included in the latter are buildings, headframes, flumes, and other structures. Therefore, preserved mining landscapes are usually lopsided assemblages of genteel buildings — not the gritty landscape of everyday industrial life that characterized the mining district during its active period(s). (180)

Whether the industrial heritage project in central Pennsylvania follows the narrow selection processes that Francaviglia criticizes or develops broader interpretations remains to be seen. Developing a holistic perspective of today's mining landscape depends on how well one utilizes all available clues, including topography, the nature of the extraction process, weather conditions, and re-vegetation, among numerous other considerations.

Hard Places is a good place to start for those interested in an intro-

duction to America's mining landscapes or in finding out how to begin to make sense of the country's mining heritage (including Western Pennsylvania). Professionals and academics — archaeologists, architects, mining engineers, geographers, historians, and others — will find Francaviglia's effort useful to their work and a source for linking with other disciplines.

Hard Places is not without its shortcomings. The author does address the role of the operator and mine worker, but the discussion is often overwhelmed and lost in the description of the physical structures. It is equally important to remember that although these communities and areas were hard places to live, they were decided upon, invested in, planned, and maintained by human beings, a point Francaviglia does not seem especially interested in. The stories of mine workers and their families, which unfolded throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, still affect us today. Understanding how resources were developed in our country may help us gain more insight into what it takes to develop resources on a much larger scale in the modern global economy. ■

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News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home

Edited by Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer

Part of the Documents in American Social History, series editors Nick Salvatore and Kerby Miller.

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. ix, 645. Preface, introduction, appendix, sources cited, index. \$35

THIS volume, which presents a selection of immigrant writings to friends and fam-

ily in Germany, is part of Cornell Press' series originally published in German. It draws on the Bochum Immigrant Letter Collection, which is housed at Ruhr University-Bochum. The editors undertook the daunting task of selecting, introducing, and abridging entries from the nearly 5,000 letters in the Bochum collection to "present a work that would meet the highest scholarly standards of documentation and authenticity, that would make a solid contribution to research in social history, but that at the same time would provide to general readers with historical, political, or social interests an informative and even exciting piece of literature." (pg. viii) With such an ambitious goal, it is remarkable how well they have succeeded.

The book's extensive introduction places the letters in the context of German immigration, and offers a trenchant discussion of demographic, migratory, and settlement patterns. The introductory section also touches on other issues necessary for an understanding of the letters' content and meaning: nativism, politics, ethnicity, German language instruction in schools, the German language press, and the impact of World War I on German-American life. In addition, the editors evaluate the general status and usefulness of letters as historical documents, and describe their criteria and methods for selecting and abridging the letter series included in the volume.

Kamphoefner, Helbich, and Sommer divided the letters into three broad categories which reflect the occupation of the writer: farmer, worker, or domestic servant. Introductory essays on the experiences and circumstances of each occupational group open the three sections, and relevant information also prefaces each of the 20 series of letters contained in the volume. The editors deserve praise for this thorough introductory work, for without it, fully appreciating the letters would be difficult indeed. Equally commendable is the meticulous and extensive documentation which