Homestead Books Provide All But the Feeling of Mon Valley Life

Book Review Essay by David Walton

Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town
by William Serrin
Illustrations. Pp. 452. $25.
The River Ran Red:
Homestead 1892
edited by David P. Demarest, Jr.
$39.95, $19.95 paper.

In the year since I first read William Serrin’s Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town, several lines have stuck in my mind, most of them quotes from residents of that city. In one, Mr. Serrin, a former New York Times labor reporter who lived for several years in Homestead, is describing the reactions of a group of Homestead residents to the 1988 “Remaking Cities Conference” in Pittsburgh, which featured Britain’s Prince Charles as its principal speaker. After listening to ideas for converting mill sheds into flower shows and a steel-making museum, and the Monongahela riverbank into a landing for pleasure craft, one woman stood up and said: “We want to make the valley come back.”

The valley — it hardly needs a capital letter, like saying, “The world” — for those who live there, is a world set apart, separate from Pittsburgh, separate from many of the things that those of us who’ve grown up there later find are everyday patterns in much of the rest of the world. It is a place ruled, shaped, characterized by the making of steel. Steelmaking in the Monongahela River Valley isn’t just a triumph over metallurgy, it’s a triumph over nature itself. The mills determine the color of the river and their work shifts set the divisions of the day. They manufacture the atmosphere. Or that’s the way it used to be, while steel was running, before steel moved out and left the valley towns depopulated, their only chance for survival now the complete erasure of everything that’s been there for the past 125 years.

Last year marked the centennial of the great 1892 lockout and also the likely occasion for whatever books, popular or scholarly, to be published about Homestead, and its place in American history. Mr. Serrin’s book, published by a division of Random House and scheduled to appear as a Vintage paperback in September, probably fills the slot for a commercial press. Homestead, which fits squarely in the category of popular writing, isn’t a bad or really even a pedestrian book. He has a good ear for the indigenous quote, and he’s clearly worked hard on this book; and though his writing style can be pretty workaday, he often draws themes and issues together with eloquence and precision.

“Much of what makes up America can be examined in Homestead,” he writes. “The rise of industrialization and the breaking apart of industrialization, the role that immigrants have played in American life, the migration of black people to the North, authoritarianism and the acceptance of it, contention between workers and employers, the role of unions in American life, the heroism of ordinary people in the face of the strongest adversaries, how America uses things — people, resources, cities — then discards them.”

These are vital themes, provocative themes, and no one can say that Mr. Serrin has dodged the issues or missed any of the ramifications of his subject. Yet, his book so disappoints in the number of opportunities he misses. Like a piano piece played too accurately in every note, his composition lacks spirit and interpretation. As much as half of the book is given over to a history of the United States Steel Corp., a topic that’s germane but not always integral, resulting in long stretches of pages taking place outside of Homestead. It’s as if the author worried there wasn’t enough book here in just Homestead alone. His descriptions of the rise of steelmaking in the nineteenth century parallel Joseph Frazier Wall’s in Andrew Carnegie, and he echoes Wall’s handling of the July 6, 1892, “Battle for Homestead” as tragedy and farce. Mr. Serrin treats Wall and other historians as sources, the way a reporter would, condensing and streamlining their accounts, rather than weighing perspectives and seeking to enlarge our understanding of what happened, the way a historian must. (The reader might compare the opening chapter of Paul Krause’s The Battle for Homestead, 1889-92, reviewed in this issue by Wilson J. Warren, in which Krause uses his disagreement with Wall’s interpretation to lead into a re-examination of what happened that day, and of the issues that led up to it.) However, Mr. Serrin is a reporter, and probably it’s his reportage, not his scholarship, that ought to be judged.

Homestead is strongest in its de-
scriptions of town life under “the company” during the peak years of steel, the 1920s through 1960s, the years of living memory. Mr. Serrin very effectively shows how company policy and company interests directed, controlled, corrupted everyday life, how refined it was, and how pervasive. He shows how politicians and priests were bought off, how the city justice system was tamed and used as an instrument of company policy, and how just the presence of an industry so huge dominated every aspect of community thinking. For instance: today, the Homestead water authority is one of the institutions hardest hit by industrial decline. During the boom years, the company paid such a proportion of the city water bill that it didn’t matter if individuals lapsed on theirs, and the habit has lingered.

Mr. Serrin handles this kind of local color detail very tellingly. He knows how to highlight it and draw out its germ of significance. He does a fine job of portraying the everyday patterns of life in a steel town in the glory years. The book’s shortcomings are the more contemporary sections, the period and events he would have covered in his years as a reporter and witnessed firsthand living in the community — the assumed foreground of his book. His reporting of the Denominational Ministry Strategy, especially, and the various attempts to protest and impede the phasing out of steelmaking in the 1980s — what you might call the political dimension of his book — seemed to me thin, pointedly but not enlighteningly disapproving, and distanced. It isn’t that Mr. Serrin lacks access to the individuals involved or lacks a historical perspective, but his powers of description — which is really what this book has to be evaluated on — aren’t always up to the job; put it a little differently, his book stays locked in the vernacular of the popular feature style. Of Ron Weisen, president of the Homestead United Steel Workers local in the mid-80s, Mr. Serrin writes: “Weisen could be hard to get along with, and there was, at times, an edge to him, as though he might coldcock you if he didn’t like what you were saying.” This style of characterization, so effective in drawing a reader into a feature article, feels too thin when applied to a book.

The River Ran Red: Homestead 1892, a book narrower in focus, turns out to be more expansive, binding together a wider range of issues and themes. Edited by David Demarest and a roster of co-editors and sidebar contributors too numerous to cite, ‘The River Ran Red’ is an illustrated compilation of period prints and newspaper headings, contemplative news accounts, memoirs, ballads, and testimony before congressional committees. Published to coincide with the centennial of the July 6, 1892, battle, this is one of the rare instances I’ve seen where a book in this format and put together by this kind of committee apparatus works to deepen as well as enliven one’s comprehension of events. Probably the contributing factor here is the event itself, so powerful in dramatic contrast, so diametric in its dramatis personae.

The purpose is to let readers “be there,” Demarest writes in his introduction: “to hear the voices of the principals, to encounter the events and the actors with the immediacy of a newspaper reader — surprised, shocked, enlightened by the drama. Nineteenth-century journalists wrote with a detailed narrative vigor that is seldom matched in today’s daily press. Moreover, the central characters at Homestead, on both the union and company sides, revealed themselves as articulate, charismatic personalities, not only in newspaper accounts, but in letters, business communications, public testimony, and memoirs.”

That “detailed narrative vigor” in the press reports of 1892 is what most startles a contemporary reader, used to today’s standards of journalistic objectivity. The style is colorful, and quaint, but it becomes clear, too, how much the reporting of what was happening in Homestead that year was a significant factor in the outcome. The language, the imagery — just the freedom to use phrases like “murderous slugs” and “volley of bullets” — do a lot to evoke the melodramatic spirit of the time, and help to explain the readiness of so many of the participants to take and then hold to some extravagant position — Frick, Berkman, and the women who lined the gauntlet that beat the Pinkertons. Individual voices, isolated episodes, sometimes a single word or turn of phrase illuminate a whole landscape of events. In this way, one comes to the fullest understanding of the futility of Berkman’s attempt on Frick’s life by reading his own account of it, written years later in prison; comprehends the full measure of Frick’s unperviousness and power to infuriate from his own temporizing and ungiving testimony before Congress; and gauges most clearly the mood of the public toward what was happening in Homestead from the peripheral episode of a young national guardsman punished for cheering the news that Frick had been shot, an episode that might have earned a footnote in another book.

In fact, there’s really not much “book” here, in the usual sense of a narrative thread or an organizing perspective that binds the material together, though that’s of course this book’s merit. By staying strictly by chronology, and allowing all voices to be heard, ‘The River Ran Red’ avoids editorial bias, polemics, and the narrowing perspectives of academic fashion. Read again after a year, and separate from the commemorations of the 1992 centenni-
al, it is a book whose strengths of editing and layout are even more apparent. Along with being a clear and absorbing narrative of the events of 1892, it is an excellent casebook on the historical process: on how events occur in the context of the values and attitudes of a time, and how the recording of those events shapes how they are understood, then and in the future. This, I think, is this book’s chief interest for the general reader and for the student: it displays how the historical record is assembled, and how a historical perspective is arrived at. What happened in Homestead in 1892 was a turning point in American history, an episode of high drama and consequence. But it is also an illustration of how chance and reputation, accident and misstep, as much as individual will or group demographics, are decisive in the outcome of events. All of that comes across very well in this book.

So what’s missing? What more can a reviewer legitimately ask from a book on this subject?

This past year has seen one book in each of the likely categories for a publication about Homestead and its famous strike: a successful illustrated compilation, an outstanding scholarly analysis of the origins and issues in the 1892 lockout (Krause’s, mentioned previously), and a good popular history of the town and its industry. Homestead and 1892 have now been covered from every angle: events, issues, town. So what’s left?

None of these books, I’d say, even though it’s a bit of a caval, manages in any memorable way to communicate a sense of atmosphere and place, the “mentality” and aesthetic of steelmaking, and the particular combination — and more often, confounding — of those elements in everyday life: the patois of valley life. This is something more than valley pronunciation or any “local color” features, and is more than ethnic tradition or even the pervasive presence of heavy industry — although that has very much to do with it. What shift you’re on this week and what year you were hired when the mill’s laying back; whether you live downtown or on the hill, in town or in one of the hollows; what “nationality” your family is, and how many generations you’re in this country. It’s something more than ethnocentrism, though, or that old derogatory charge of a “hunkie mentality,” and more like the whole toll of mill life, the dulling and finally the defiance of the aesthetic sense, summed up in the generic valley word “ignorant” — ignorant, minus vowels.

What I miss in these books is the unusual blend of squalor and grandeur, the combined feeling of deontology and exaltation, that I remember feeling myself growing up in a valley town — the experience of thinking that here was the most spectacular, most consequential place on the earth to be, and at the same time knowing you were going to have to do something on earth you could escape it. Steel town life has been written about many times, of course, most memorably in Thomas Bell’s novel Out of This Furnace, and more recently in John Hoerr’s And the Wolf Finally Came, and most interestingly I think in a children’s book called No Star Nights, by Anna Egan Smucker, which is set in Wheeling, W. Va. But this particular gaudy feeling is something I’ve seen described only one time in a book, in passing, in Egan Smucker’s book

Harrisburg Industrializes: The Coming of Factories to An American Community
by Gerry Eggert
Illustrations, charts, table, bibliography, notes, index. $35.

FIVE years ago, when I first came to the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Gerry Eggert had already been hard at work for some time in our archives and library. At that time, I was rather skeptical of this Penn State professor writing a history of my town. Harrisburg has been blessed and cursed with a wide range of works on various themes in local history. My thoughts were that Professor Eggert would write just one more name-calling work against the rich but seemingly foolish industrial giants who ruled the city in the nineteenth century. Even worse, he might spend countless hours studying various sub-communities without ever understanding the bigger patterns which have governed the history of Pennsylvania’s capital city. Was I ever wrong.

Harrisburg Industrializes is a monumental achievement for not only American industrial and business scholars, but also for Harrisburg. Like countless others, I have pondered the historical reasons for