Can Workers Have a Voice? The Politics of Deindustrialization in Pittsburgh

Dale A. Hathaway
State College: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993. Preface, acknowledgements, tables, bibliography, index. $29.95

by James B. Lieber

D ale A. Hathaway, a political science professor at Butler University, has made an interesting and worthwhile study of what occurred in the region during the late 1970s and 1980s. Hathaway aptly refers to the recent history of Pittsburgh as a tale of two cities. In 1985, Rand McNally named Pittsburgh America’s most livable city. But during the same period, the bottom fell out of the region’s manufacturing base. It is this transformation and its consequences with which Hathaway is chiefly concerned.

To some extent, this story has been told before, most notably by John Hoerr a few years ago in And the Wolf Finally Came. But where Hoerr focuses on labor-management relations in the steel industry, Hathaway surveys other actors in the drama which have cost the region about 30,000 steel jobs since 1979 and much attendant social dislocation. As Hathaway reports, only about 40 percent of ex-steelworkers had found full-time jobs by the end of the ‘80s, and on average they earned less than three-quarters of their former incomes. Moreover, once-thriving towns such as Clairton went bankrupt and others could not fund essential services. Crime, divorce, alcoholism, and even suicide rates climbed in this industrial core, the Monongahela River Valley.

Hathaway traces the responses to the human disaster. He spends little time on the United Steel Workers Union, save to note that it was remarkably quiescent, acted to stifle dissent, and eventually erupted into a belated and somewhat quixotic rebelliousness during the 1986 strike. Instead, he focuses on the Denominational Ministry Strategy (DMS), the oddly named assemblage of Protestant ministers and militant workers which made headlines in the ‘80s by dumping twisted scrap on the altars of local churches, spilling skunk oil in Mellon Bank branch offices, and engaging in the armed occupation of a Lutheran church.

Hathaway ably profiles the chief of the group, including the oft-jailed Rev. D. Douglas Roth, now defrocked, living in Kansas and working as a vocational rehabilitation counselor helping disabled clients find jobs, and such labor leaders as Mike Bonn, a huge, colorful figure who tweaked consciences by lecturing about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian whose religious ideals drove him to try to kill Hitler, and Ron Weisen, the sharp-witted radical who left the DMS when he foresaw that its destiny was to force an intramural church dispute rather than a debate on the economic future of the region.

Hathaway sees the DMS as a failure. Its religious message that the actions of the banks and steel companies were somehow anti-Christian never took hold in Pittsburgh. Hathaway also points out the DMS lacked Catholic or Orthodox components, which distanced it from a blue collar population that largely follows those faiths. The section of the book on the DMS is engrossing, but it slips a bit when the author tries to deal with ideas of the group’s controversial trainer, Charles Honeywell, a follower of the late Saul Alinsky, the leading theoretician of community organizing in post-war America. Hathaway correctly points out that the Alinsky method includes making the middle-class feel uncomfortable. But unlike Honeywell and the DMS, Alinsky followers work just as hard on forging bonds to the middle class. For instance, Cesar Chavez, the late president of the United Farm Workers Union and perhaps the most successful Alinsky disciple in recent years, built wide support for migrant laborers by taking them and their movement into tens of thousands of California homes for meetings over coffee, where their message could be delivered in a cogent, non-threatening way. Also, Chavez knew how to manipulate the media into a sympathetic position. Honeywell’s public persona invariably was off-putting.

Hathaway does a credible job of covering the two other key movements of the time, the Tri-State Conference on Steel and the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee. A coalition of labor, church and community activists, Tri-State became an educational resource, think tank, and organizing tool for those who wished to preserve basic industries. It evolved rather utopian plans to save USX’s “Dorothy Six” blast furnace in Duquesne and to convert the old LTV plant on the South Side to employee ownership, both of which failed. However, its activism contributed to saving the Nabisco cookie factory in East Liberty and to the formation of the employee-owned City Pride Bakery, which got off the ground but quickly went out of business. In addition, Tri-State played a central role in the creation of the Steel Valley Authority, a visionary vehicle for publicly seizing idled mills and operating them on the model of the Tennessee Valley Authority. To date, however, no municipality has taken over a mill, probably due to the age of the equipment, the uncertainties of the world market, and the sheer magnitude of such a project.

Of the three groups, the most effective was the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee based in McKeesport. Through lobbying, fund-raising, and rallies, the committee opened food banks, won extended unemployment benefits, and persuaded local officials to forego home mortgage foreclosures. The author attributes much of this success to the fact that the committee’s efforts were relief-oriented rather than geared to causing structural changes in the economy, and therefore did not trouble business leaders.

Hathaway also assays the Pittsburgh power structure. Some of this information is truly disturbing; for example, the alacrity with which US Steel invested $6.4 million in Marathon Oil, and local banks capitalized Korean Steel factories instead of regional manufacturing facilities. But Hathaway has a rather tired Marxist view of the local elite, seeing it as a monochrome puppet-master always pulling strings to weaken workers, underpay them, and undermine community consciousness. In an era when big business has been dominated by bean-counters, cutting costs — including labor costs — has been a chief goal. But the moral case against the elite which Hathaway makes is simplistic and overstated.
argument for an interlocked, synergistic ruling class also seems passé after a shake-out period in which major corporations such as Gulf, Koppers, Mesta, and National Steel have failed, reorganized, or left town. The example of a local lion-king that Hathaway cites is Robert Buckley, head of defunct Allegheny International who is hounded now by a bankruptcy court.

Hathaway also attributes the relative passivity of workers to his view that they feel powerless in the face of control by the local economic elite. To some extent, this may be true. We live in a trickle-down time. But average people repeatedly have shown that when they want something, they often can mobilize to get it, whether it’s more prison cells, less toxic waste next door, or an employee buy-out such as the one at Weirton Steel, in Weirton, W. Va.

Corporate politics in particular has become more complex and interesting than the nineteenth century theory of class conflict would allow. The modern industrial or post-industrial company has four constituencies: employees, managers, owners (shareholders), and consumers. Each, of course, has different interests, and each can expand its influence by joining or melding with another. At Weirton Steel, for example, workers saved their jobs and the West Virginia Panhandle by becoming shareholders. At the LTV electro-galvanizing plant in Cleveland, some workers increased their stature by in effect becoming their own managers.

Dale Hathaway engages important issues in a part of modern regional history that otherwise might be lost. But his analysis of workers’ weaknesses in the labor market is clouded by an ideology that is not particularly useful in a profoundly changed world.

Just Good Politics: The Life of Raymond Chafin, Appalachian Boss
Raymond Chafin and Topper Sherwood
by John Hennen

Logan County, W. Va., Democratic political boss Raymond Chafin and Charleston journalist Topper Sherwood have joined forces to create a lively and illuminating political memoir. Chafin’s career embodies the personalist, ritualistic power brokering (vote buying, road building, school building) inherent in the bumptious waltzes of West Virginia politics, spanning a half-century from the early Depression era to the 1980s. Sherwood has intelligently edited Chafin’s observations so as to imply the erosion of traditional community practices during Chafin’s lifetime, and to bring into view the universality of Chafin’s traditional style of personal politics, as practiced by such influential West Virginia political figures as M. M. Neely, William Marland, Robert C. Byrd, and Arch Moore.

The book is actually a series of anecdotes woven together in a rough chronology, and is promoted on the book jacket as the inside story on John F. Kennedy’s celebrated victory in the 1960 West Virginia Democratic presidential primary. Historical and market imperatives demand an emphasis on Kennedy’s West Virginia struggle, and Chafin’s role as a mountain Metternich in that campaign is important to the narrative, but hopefully readers will not focus on that episode to the exclusion of others. In a sense, if the Kennedy mystique overshadows Chafin’s primarily locally grounded memoir, it would serve as a metaphor for the historical periphery that the state occupies relative to national political and economic demands, a status which has institutionalized an assumption that regions are of value only in relation to national events, needs, and “values.”

That would be unfortunate, because Chafin and Sherwood often return to the currents of West Virginia life and politics in the context of the loss of local and regional autonomy that modern market (inter)nationalism demands. Many of this memoir’s most enriching moments are interdependent with Chafin’s responses to the bureaucratic modernization of life, labor, and the mechanics of governance. Partly as a testament to judicious editing, and partly attributable to Chafin’s gift as storyteller, these moments flow effortlessly from the topic at hand into the broader picture of Chafin’s life in tradition-bound “good politics.” Chafin provides glimpses of traditional life in observations about home, diet, cooperative land use, and the prevalence of chestnut “mast” to nourish free-ranging cattle and hogs. He integrates his memories of work on county road crews — the preindustrial duty of able-bodied males — with industrial mining conditions and the reign of Logan County’s most celebrated and notorious public figure of the prohibition and “mine war” era, Sheriff Don Chafin. (A distant relative to the book’s subject. “If it’s a Curry or a Chafin,” Raymond says, “you can pretty much figure that I’m related to it somehow.” [17]) He notes the importance of moonshining to his community’s underground economy, and outlines the politics of the illicit liquor trade. He matter-of-factly recounts the structure of rewards for political loyalties, dissecting the autocratic power to control elections and patronage exercised by his political mentors, and, later, by Chafin himself. He updates some of West Virginia’s most enduring legends to salt his reminiscences, including the pervasive account of the (political or union) agitator thrown into the powerhouse furnace (67), and the Logan County jailhouse murder of the “outside” union organizer, usually reported in the context of the coal strike and mine war of 1920-1921.

False humility is not one of Chafin’s faults, and he often exaggerates the reach of his political mastery. He suggests that in 1953, Governor William Marland ordered a road built in Chafin’s home community of Cow Creek because Raymond fed him some of Aunt Mary Browning’s famous hamburgers. (Mary was the mother of Chauncey Browning, a Chafin ally who once served as West Virginia’s attorney general.) President Kennedy in 1961, appreciative of Chafin’s delivery of Logan County in the 1960 primary, adopts Chafin’s analysis of institutional hunger and, presto!, initiates the food stamp program. Governor Jay Rockefeller builds bridges at Chafin’s command. Logan County Democratic Chairman and elder statesman Raymond Chafin, powerbroker nonpareil, ignites the gubernatorial campaign of darkhorse insurance mogul Gaston Caperton, setting in motion the events.