TRAIL OF HISTORY GUIDES

Erie Maritime Museum and U.S. Brig Niagara
By Chris J. Magoc (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2001). Illustrations, maps. 48 pp., $10 paper

Ephrata Cloister
By John Bradley (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2000). Illustrations, maps. 48 pp., $10 paper

Daniel Boone Homestead
By Sharon Hernes Silverman (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2000). Illustrations, maps. 48 pp., $10 paper

Three books in the Pennsylvania Trail of History Guides series deal with the historic sites and museums administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Richly illustrated with photographs, maps, and charts, each book provides a general overview of a particular historic site and thorough information on things to see when visiting.

Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Spiritual Biography
By Marcus C. Bruce (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002.) Illustrations, index. 208 pp., $19.95 hardcover

Detailed biographical account of the Pittsburgh native who went on to become the first renowned African American painter. Explores the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of the author that governed his life and work during his progression from a struggling young artist to an international success.

The Bridges of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County
By Robert J. Gangewere (Pittsburgh: Science and Technology Department, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, 2001). Illustrations. 36 pp., $5 paper

Richly illustrated overview of the bridges of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County that includes information on bridge construction technology, categories of bridges, the artistic elements of bridges, and some of the most unusual bridges in the city.

By Tom Dwyer (Syracuse, N.Y.: Trailside Publishing, 1999). Illustrations, numerous maps.148 pp., $12.95 paper

Comprehensive guidebook highlighting popular hiking, camping, fishing, and other outdoor activity areas in northern Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest.

FEATURES

Listen to Our Words: Oral Histories of the Jewish Community of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania

Recording an oral history is much like taping a folk song that is on the verge of vanishing. Both seek to grasp a bit of the past and preserve it for the future. But while each record is unique, it is best understood in combination with other pieces to form a larger picture. So it is with the 35 oral histories in this collection.

Who were these people and what larger history do their recordings illuminate? They were Jewish immigrants, their children, and grandchildren who settled in Westmoreland County roughly between 1875 and 1955. Through their stories, one feels the sweep of American history over the past 125 years: the rapid change from an agricultural to an industrial and urban society, and two world wars that bracketed the painful Depression. They also reflect modern Jewish history—the immigration and adjustment of two million people from Eastern Europe to the United States; the rise of Zionism and the establishment of Israel; and the development of an Americanized Judaism. The immigrants' lives were substantially shaped and colored by these historical forces.

A few of the immigrants were survivors of the Nazi period, but most were Eastern European Jews fleeing oppression and poverty at the turn of the 19th century. A high proportion of the men first earned their living as peddlers (then called hucksters), trudging the country roads with packs filled with fabrics, umbrellas, cooking utensils, and shirts for farmers, coal miners, and factory workers. Later they had horse-drawn wagons and trucks. Quite a number settled in towns along their routes and opened retail stores selling food, furniture, and other consumer goods to the growing number of factory workers and miners. Wives and children were much involved in these businesses. Extended families provided social contacts, often on the occasion of a Bar Mitzvah, a wedding, or a holiday.

The immigrants quickly organized synagogues and religious schools for their children, at the same time that they made full use of the public schools. They were adamant that their children would have the best education available and worked hard to send them on to universities. The newcomers learned English and took an active part in the life of the communities where they lived. Relations with their non-Jewish neighbors varied from cordial to friendly, but the immigrants were always keenly
aware that they were Jews. More than a few
encountered anti-Semitism. One hears many
references to living in poverty (this comes
through in the children's games), though some
families moved into the middle class and a few
became wealthy.

These oral histories, spanning three-quarters
of a century, make it possible to spot changes
and trends. This is particularly so with regard
to religious observances. Virtually all the immi-
grants brought with them a strict Orthodoxy, but
they soon found their religious traditions hard
pressed by the demands of work and school.
Close contact with Gentiles presented them with
obstacles and temptations unknown in the small
Jewish communities in Europe. Perhaps the
greatest source of stress was the pressure to
work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. As owners
of retail stores, they could ill afford to remain
closed on the busiest shopping days.

The immigrants and their American-born
children were drawn to Conservative and
Reform forms of Judaism that made use of
English, music, and less restrictive dietary
rules. On the other hand, the immigrants
quickly reconstituted a set of Jewish communal
services (to help the poor and the sick, to
provide for the ritual slaughter of meat, etc.)
that they had known in Europe. These were
efforts to balance the continuity of Jewish
culture at the same time as they were adapting
to their new land. According to one interviewee,
"I want to be remembered by my Jewish identity
and as a decent American."

These histories are salted and peppered with
intriguing incidents. One man who was making
illegal whiskey during Prohibition was arrested
by the federal "Revenuers" and hauled into
court, where the mayor and town officials testi-
fied for him, declaring "he was a good citizen
and it was damn good whiskey!" Much later, in
1948, a man who had fled the pogroms in Russia
bought up spare parts of trucks for the Haganah,
the underground defense force that was fighting
to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

In short, there is much valuable and inter-
esting material in this book. However, the format
chosen by the editors — presenting the inter-
views in full and without comment — raises
several questions. Does this format result in too
much repetition? Would it have been helpful to
the reader to begin with a broad context for
better understanding the experiences of each
immigrant? For example, the editors might have
presented a description of life in Westmoreland
County, as well as a list of the questions that
the interviewers posed. By the same token,
some interpretation at the end would have been
useful. But these are minor concerns that do
not outweigh the value of this book in con-
tributing a wealth of raw material on the social
history of Western Pennsylvania.

Robert Perlman, Professor Emeritus, Brandeis
University. Perlman is the author of From Shtetl
to Milltown: Litzaks, Hungarians, and Galizianers
in Western Pennsylvania, 1875—1925, and Bridging
Three Worlds: Hungarian-Jewish Americans,
1848—1914, published by HSWP.

Waiting for Jacob: A Civil War Story
By Edwin P. Hogan (Latrobe, Pa.: Saint Vincent
College Center for Northern Appalachian Studies,
2000). Illustrations, maps, appendices, and
index. xxiii + 227 pp. $25 hardcover.

History is defined by those fragile tattered
papers preserved through the generations.
It is only by collecting these documents
and revealing their lost messages that we may
continue to illuminate the events that have
shaped our past. In Edwin P. Hogan's Waiting
for Jacob: A Civil War Story, we are introduced
to a small collection of letters that help us
understand one of the most important events in
our country's history. Through the experiences
and thoughts of Jacob Greenawalt, we discover
the hopes and fears of an officer from Western
Pennsylvania during the Civil War.

Hogan prefaced his book by recounting how
Jacob's letters survived and how he came to
discover them. He tells of Clara Nichollis, the
niece of Jacob and Rebecca Greenawalt, who
related her remembrances of Jacob's widow
Rebecca. Nichollis recalls how Rebecca kept a
black velvet purse tied around her arm her
whole life, and after suffering a stroke, would
simply stare out the window of her house in
West Newton. After Rebecca's death in 1925,
the mysterious black purse came into the pos-
session of Nichollis' uncle who helped care for
Rebecca, and eventually into the hands of
Clara. Knowing Hogan's interest in the Civil
War, she contacted him about the contents of
the purse, which included the letters written by
Jacob to Rebecca while he fought for the
Union's cause during the Civil War.

Jacob Greenawalt was born October 27,
1837, in Sewickley Township. Rebecca was
born the following year on the neighboring farm.
Their friendship began at an early age; when
Jacob left home in 1857 to pursue a law
degree, he began writing to Rebecca. The