BOOKREVIEWS

Those interested in reviewing books should contact Nicholas Ciotola at npciotola@hswp.org. Publishers and authors can send review copies to the Editor, Western Pennsylvania History, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1212 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15222.

Foreigners in Their Own Land: Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic
By Steven M. Nolt. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index, 238 pp., $29.95 hardcover
History of the largest non-English speaking, white ethnic group in the early United States. Tells the story of the struggle of Pennsylvania Germans to combine Old World traditions with a new national identity.

Pennsylvania Apples: History & Culture
By Kyle Nagurny. (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002). Photos, recipes, guide to apple festivals and farm markets, xi + 116 pp., $16.95 paper
Must-read guide for lovers of apples, farm markets, and festivals. The author provides photos, recipes, and information on apple growing that will enhance anyone’s enjoyment of one of Pennsylvania’s premier fruits.

Pittsburgh Legends and Visions: An Illustrated History
By Eliza Smith Brown. (Carlsbad, Calif.: Heritage Media, 2002). Photos, bibliography, indexes, 360 pp., $54.95 hardcover
A large, photo-rich review of the region’s history, part of the publisher’s Great American Cities series. The second half contains 98 biographies of local companies. Published in cooperation with Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation.

Sensacional! Mexican Street Graphics
By Juan Carlos Mena and Óscar Reyes. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002). Illustrations, 347 pp., $25 hardcover
Colorful, unique collection of images from Mexican street signs and printed materials showing the creativity of folk and trained artists working in the vernacular tradition.

The Storm Gathering: The Penn Family and the American Revolution
By Lorette Tessee. (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002). Notes, bibliography, index, 245 pp., $16.95 paper
Exploration of the story of William Penn’s heirs and their struggles with ownership of Pennsylvania in the 18th century. Examines how mounting pressures and the American Revolution resulted in the decline of Penn family power.

This Fantastic Struggle: The Life and Art of Esther Phillips
By Lisa A. Miles (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 2002). Pp. 460. Introduction, appendix, bibliography, index. $18 paper

The story of the artist in American society toiling, with little success, to gain recognition and respect — not to mention a means for monetary sustenance — is not a new one. Indeed, the “starving artist” has become a platitude often appropriated, in quaint fashion, to peddle “sofa size” paintings which bear little resemblance to art. But it’s a condition of renewed poignancy when revealed in the biographical details of a specific individual, as in Lisa Miles’ account of the life of Esther Phillips, whose art, the author contends, has been undeservedly neglected.

Phillips was born in “an eastern village of the former Soviet Union,” and immigrated to Pittsburgh with her parents and siblings in 1905. Her early years were centered around the activities of the Irene Kaufmann Settlement, particularly its Neighborhood Art School. Her preoccupation with drawing and painting led her, through frequent visits to the Carnegie Library and the Museum of Art, to gain a relatively broad education in painting techniques as well as a knowledge of contemporary painters and movements. In this way she acquainted herself with the work of the Ash Can artists, the post-Impressionists, and with the “scandalous” new work exhibited at the Armory Show of 1913 in New York.

Despite her continuing interest in art, Esther Phillips graduated “with a concentration in business” (so as to assure her parents who intended that she find suitable employment and get married) from Ralphston Preparatory High School on Penn Avenue in 1919. While the family provided for educating her brothers at the University of Pittsburgh, Esther enrolled herself as a part-time student at Carnegie Tech where in the evenings she studied illustration and design while working during the day to pay her tuition. That her parents made no allowance for her goals, that they were — to her — emblematic of the culture generally in that they perceived artists to be impractical, self-absorbed dreamers was a source of life-long resentment. She later described herself at this time as having “health that was not very good,” and as being “always a little nervous.”
Ms. Miles has accompanied her narrative with a liberal selection of photographs of Phillips and her circle of friends, with newspaper articles and reviews of exhibitions in which Phillips' work was displayed, and with numerous color plates of the artist's paintings. But what most establishes the "flavor" of the era, and a steadily developing insight into the manner in which Phillips and her friends viewed the circumstances of their lives, is the extensive correspondence between them which Miles has painstakingly located and included throughout the book.

Among Esther's friends by the early 1930s were Gladys Schmitt, who would achieve a national reputation for her novels, and Merle Hoyleman, whose poetry and prose had begun to appear in literary journals and would continue to do so over the next four decades. "Ellie," the primary character in Schmitt's first novel, The Gates of Aulis, was loosely modeled on Esther Phillips. But her friendship with Hoyleman and, later, with artist Eugenia "Jerry" Hughes in New York City, would be those which aided her through the most difficult times: Hoyleman, by acting as agent in selling Phillips' paintings in Pittsburgh, and Hughes by providing at various intervals companionship, food, and shelter in New York.

Miles writes with particular dexterity of Phillips' disillusionment with her life in Pittsburgh, of her wanting to go "where the real art was"; of her arrival in New York at age 34; of the years of low-paying jobs and unsuitable living conditions; of her acquaintances in the Village art scene; and of her nearly seven-year sojourn in mental institutions where she abandoned and then returned to her painting. The vignettes of Phillips as a street vendor selling her ceramics, or in Automats purchasing cheese sandwiches and pot pies from machines, "eating ketchup on crackers" and "using teabags over and over again" are powerfully rendered.

The final chapter of This Fantastic Struggle constitutes a kind of plea for greater understanding of the creative personality. Without knowing the author's own biography, one surmises nonetheless that from this point, Phillips' life serves to represent not only the plight of many unrecognized female artists, but that of the author herself. Yet Phillips ultimately accepted the consequences of her choices. While artists may seek the limelight, they survive and endure because of a passion for what they do; they paint because they are able to; because of the gratification it brings them; because they discover in the making of art the most valuable way of spending their time. Miles quotes Phillips saying, near the end of her life, to her sister Dorothy:

*I consider myself very lucky. I did exactly what I wanted to do in my life and I was happy doing it.... I lived the best life. When I got up in the morning I looked forward to the day. I was happy I could paint.*

It is the story of Esther Phillips — and not its corollary — that will cause readers to value this book and to seek out her paintings.

Gerald Costanzo, Professor of English and Director of Carnegie Mellon University Press. His most recent collection of poems is *Great Disguise.*

Author Lisa Miles will speak about Esther Phillips at the History Center on Saturday, December 7. Visit www.pghhistory.org for more information.

**Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh**


Index. xvii + 348pp., $25.95 paper

This book combines John Hinshaw's dual roles as an activist and an academic. In both capacities, he has a deep interest in the issue of labor solidarity and fragmentation. As an activist, he views labor solidarity as a crucial precondition for a successful struggle to achieve a good society. As a historian, he realizes that the solidarity and fragmentation issue is a key element in understanding the histories of the working class and the labor movement. To illuminate this topic, he used the Pittsburgh steel industry in the 20th century as his case study. Although Hinshaw realized that ethnicity and gender factors produced schisms, he focused on race as the fundamental dividing line. While not ignoring the common interests of Pittsburgh steelworkers in higher wages, fringe benefits, and job security, he also highlighted their divergent interests. His major example was the seniority system which benefited white workers...