
Book Reviews

Edited by Christopher J. Huggard

Thomas E. Wagner and Phillip J. Obermiller. *African American Miners and Migrants: The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004; 158 pp., 39 b&w photos, notes, bib., ind., paper, \$20.

In the 1930s, a female visitor to a small Central Pennsylvania hamlet remarked to her companion, "My, I didn't know you had so many blacks here!" In actuality, what she saw as she drove down the narrow road into the coal camp was a line of miners walking home after their shift was over. In the dusky hours of twilight the Eastern European miners, with black coal dust permeating every pore and crevice except the whites of their eyes, indeed appeared to be black. She was surprised to learn that not one African-American miner worked in the local mines. However, thousands of African-American coal miners and their families earned their livings from mining coal in the United States.

To the growing body of scholarship on the Appalachian mines and miners, the authors contribute an insightful and unique study of the experiences of twentieth-century African-American miners and their families in the two "model" company towns of Benham and Lynch in eastern Kentucky. Although the authors' primary focus is on the African-American miners in these two camps, there are equally important themes of welfare capitalism and the building of planned communities in the era of segregation.

The authors provide an informative overview of African-American history in Appalachia, an examination of black experiences in Appalachian coal camps and towns, and an explanation of

black migration out of the region with the demise of the coal mines. In the next two chapters, Wagner and Obermiller introduce their perspective on the activities in the Benham and Lynch communities as they relate to "the larger story of the Progressive Era practices of town planning and welfare capitalism" (4). In the final three chapters of the book Wagner and Obermiller explore the experiences of the Benham and Lynch miners and their families in the coal towns, their eventual out-migration to the Midwest after the closing of the mines, and their struggle to retain their identity as Appalachian mountain people in the American urban centers they now inhabit.

This thoroughly-researched and well-written book should inspire future scholars to pursue new lines of inquiry left unresolved in this text. Although the authors interviewed nearly a hundred individuals in the course of their research, this reviewer wishes that they had included more in-depth accounts of the miners' and their families' experiences in the coal towns. Although the subtitle is *The Eastern Kentucky Social Club*, fewer than thirty pages discuss the social club that arose as a result of the solidarity and ethnic soul-searching that came out of the communities of Benham and Lynch. A narrative full of detail and anecdotes to go along with numerous black and white photographs would have enlivened the story and engaged readers. Nevertheless, readers who want details on African-American miners or early planned communities and company towns will find this book extremely useful.

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