
Book Reviews

George D. Torok. *A Guide to Historic Coal Towns of the Big Sandy River Valley*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004; 400 pp., paper, \$24.95.

The Big Sandy River Valley is classic Appalachian "Coal Country." Located where the borders of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Virginia converge, the Big Sandy River flows through rugged land that is underlain by rich seams of bituminous coal. Beginning about 1880, the Big Sandy River Valley helped fuel America's industrial revolution, as railroads were built into the valley and coal mines were developed.

That boom transformed the landscape, as this formerly isolated area of small marginal farms now echoed to the whistles of locomotives and the rumbling of mine tipples. Although the mining boom lasted about forty years (1880-1920), some coal continued to be mined into the 1950s. Even today, many features from this area's mining heyday remain, although many more have disappeared.

This fascinating book documents those features that can still be seen today—or were at least visible in the late 1990s when the author conducted his research. It is organized as an informative, illustrated travel guide keyed to locations along roads and highways. An effective map in the introduction helps orient the traveler to the region, but it probably should be supplemented by more detailed maps for a better comprehension of how the Big Sandy River Valley's convoluted maze of twisting roads, creeks, and railroad lines is configured.

The Big Sandy River Valley is home to many places that are legendary in the annals of mining and labor history, including

a portion of the Hanging Rock Iron Mining District, the coal mines and towns of Pocahontas, Virginia, Welch and Matewan West Virginia, and Harlan County, Kentucky. The book contains an especially effective introduction to the local geography, labor history, mining techniques, and company towns. The section on sites and structures associated with coal mining towns—features like housing, schools, mines, tipples, and coke ovens—is excellent. As an added bonus, this book covers some of the region's noteworthy writers—including Harry Caudill and Jesse Stuart—who helped immortalize the life and plight of miners here.

This book effectively places individuals and corporations in context as the author recounts stories associated with the varied locales along the guide's itinerary. It covers a wide range of communities, from the largest towns (for example, Ashland, Kentucky, and Huntington, West Virginia) to the smallest hamlets, and even some sites that are now effectively "ghost towns." I especially liked the way the author brought individuals—from miners to railroad barons—into the stories of hundreds of communities.

This is a valuable guide that serves several audiences. First, it is a must for the serious tourist who wants to truly learn about these places. Second, it is also a valuable tool for historians interested in learning more about the sites associated with the Appalachian region. Lastly, with its numerous references to, and illustrations of, mining features, it is a wonderful companion for mining historians who would like to experience first hand artifacts of various sizes: grave markers, sheds, company stores, railroad depots, even entire landscapes. Well documented, approachable, and clearly written, this guide

is a most welcome addition to the literature. We need more books like it for other mining areas.

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Robert E. Ficken. *Unsettled Boundaries: Fraser Gold and the British-American Northwest*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2003; 208 pp., 18 ill., 3 maps, notes, bib., ind., paper, \$19.95.

The story of the 1858 rush to the Fraser River has often been told: the discovery of gold, the spread of rumors down the coast, and the subsequent movement of thousands of Californians north to New Caledonia. The hardships and realities of mining in that cold country caused most stampeder to become discouraged and return home to blessed California, all the while cursing the new gold diggings. In *Unsettled Boundaries*, Robert Ficken puts the rush into its international context. He also reviews the old tale of failure reported by Californians and turns that assumption on its head.

Ficken, an independent scholar of Northwest history, begins with the Hudson Bay Company and the role of trading posts in managing this rapid increase in population, a population that threatened the existence of British authority. The efforts to establish a government that maintained rather than blurred the boundary at the forty-ninth parallel is a major theme. That a large number of Californians failed to return to the Fraser River in 1859 gave local authorities—especially Governor James Douglas, also chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company—needed time to respond to the influx of miners. Douglas' central governmental control is unique among the gold rushes, and, fortunately, he maintained, for the most part, an even handedness. Ficken also discusses the evolving society of British Columbia and the impact of the rush on Native Americans.

One cannot review *Unsettled Boundaries* without comparison to Netta Sterne's *Fraser*

Gold 1858!: The Founding of British Columbia, also published by Washington State University Press, in 1998. Sterne provides a good chronicle of the rush, with extensive quotes from period documents which bring the reader into the scenes of 1858. Ficken, similarly chronicles the rush, but provides the broader context and carries the story beyond 1858 into the period of the opening of the Caribou Country and the rapid rise of gold production. He also more thoroughly documents events, especially through the use of regional and Hudson Bay Company archives.

Both books are worthy additions to one's library about gold rushes, the evolution of British Columbia, and the international landscape. However, Ficken provides a well-written and researched history of the rush that improves upon and replaces all previous works.

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Carol Arlen. *Colorado Mining Stories: Hazards, Heroics, & Humor*. Montrose, Colorado: Western Reflections Publishing Company, 2002; 176 pp., photos, glossary, paper, \$12.95.

Eric Twitty. *Riches to Rust: A Guide to Mining in the Old West*. Montrose, Colorado: Western Reflections Publishing Company, 2002; 383 pp., photos, drawings, maps, appendix, notes, bib., ind., paper, \$24.95.

Both of these books offer the reader fascinating insights into mining, and, as a definite plus, each discusses twentieth-century mining. Writer Caroline Arlen spent two years traveling around Colorado interviewing men and women whose lives were touched by or involved with mining; Eric Twitty spent even more time examining sites.

Arlen's interest started in 1997 at Silverton's Hardrockers Holidays. "I knew one of the miners. I sat with him and his friends and listened to them tell stories. I did a lot of listening that day [5]." Out of that experience