
Book Reviews

Mary Jane Gentry. *The Birth of a Texas Ghost Town: Thurber, 1886-1933*. (Edited with an introduction by T. Lindsay Baker.) College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008; 256 pp., 16 b&w photos, 2 tabs., illus., append., notes, bib., ind., cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 1585446297

Most people conjure up two images when they think of the historical industries of Texas: cattle and oil. Yet Texas was once a significant producer of bituminous coal and, from the 1880s until the 1930s, the state's leading producer was Thurber, a wholly-owned company town located about halfway between Fort Worth and Abilene. Once the largest, most cosmopolitan city between Fort Worth and El Paso, home to about ten thousand people from more than a dozen nations at its height, Thurber is now one of the best-known ghost towns in the state.

Mary Jane Gentry (1912-1996) wrote the first complete history of the town's rise and fall in her 1946 master's thesis, supervised by the famed historian Walter Prescott Webb of the University of Texas. Entitled "Thurber: The Life and Death of a Texas Town," her thesis has been available to most researchers only as a multi-generation photocopy, but has remained essential reading for those studying coal mining, labor history, and company towns in Texas.

Now published for the first time, introduced and edited by industrial historian and authority on Texas ghost towns T. Lindsay Baker, *Birth of a Texas Ghost Town* offers a unique and interesting glimpse into a now-vanished coal town. Gentry, whose family moved to Thurber in 1919, had access to various primary sources, including her memory, contemporary newspaper articles, and

interviews with living ex-residents and coal company officials. She tells her story in a straightforward narrative fashion, beginning with a history of the site and its major industries.

In 1886 brothers William and Harvey Johnson founded the coal camp that became Thurber in northern Erath County, hoping to profit by providing coal to the Texas and Pacific Railway which ran through the area. Two years later, due to labor unrest and insufficient capital, the brothers sold their operation to a new, well-funded corporation called the Texas & Pacific Coal Company, headed by cattle rancher Robert Dickie Hunter and his son-in-law Edgar L. Marston, a New York banker. Hunter and Marston, with the help of William Knox Gordon, who served as general manager of the town, supervised the operation of fifteen mines over Thurber's history.

Based primarily on first-hand accounts, Gentry describes the daily life and work of the miners, weighmen, checkers, cagers, and other laborers at the pits. Coal in the Thurber mines resided in a thin vein, and diggers had to lie on their sides in order to remove it, often after the coal was first loosened with charges of dynamite. Miners from coal fields in the eastern United States found the work difficult, and daily tonnage per worker was lower than in other places, although workers removed three thousand tons a day in the busiest high-demand period around the First World War.

Gentry also details the operation of the brick plant, which manufactured millions of vitrified paving bricks, many of which survive in streets throughout Texas and the southern half of the United States. In subsequent chapters, she describes labor difficulties in Thurber: the Knights

of Labor action of the 1880s; the disturbances of the turbulent 1890s; the 1903 strike, led by the United Mine Workers of America, that totally unionized Thurber; and, finally, the 1921 disruption that ended union mining at the town.

Gentry studied public records and interviewed both company management and union stalwarts to tell her story. Her revealing correspondence with UMWA official and Thurber miner Gomer Gower is printed in the appendix. Gentry recounts the history of the company store, a subsidiary which operated the various mercantile and service establishments in Thurber, and how the town's workers reacted to its influence on their lives.

In chapters entitled "Living Conditions," "Recreation," and "Foreign Population," Gentry describes the lives of the workers and their families, from baseball and Italian breads, to fistfights and company housing. The final chapter narrates the abandonment of Thurber, as the coal company discovered West Texas oil, became the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company, and finally dismantled the town as a money-saving measure during the Great Depression.

Gentry's text shines with a love of her subject, the people and history of the town of her youth. Coupled with her lucid writing style, this makes her narrative a quick, entertaining read. The editor's introduction and preface gives a detailed history of Gentry's life, thesis, and work as a Texas high school teacher, and places her work in its historical context.

The editor chose not to make any substantive changes or annotations to the text. Although coal company records unavailable to Gentry have superseded some of her information, out-of-date facts are allowed to stand without annotation or comment. Readers may also find some 1940s idioms quaint, or stumble over words like "negro" and "colored" in the text. But these are minor quibbles. *Birth of a Texas Ghost Town* is an essential introduction to the history of bituminous coal mining in Texas, and wonderfully details the

birth and death of a vibrant and important company town.

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F. Darrell Munsell. *From Redstone to Ludlow: John Cleveland Osgood's Struggle against the United Mine Workers of America*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009; 392 pp., b&w photos, drawings, maps, notes, bib., ind., cloth, \$37.50. ISBN: 0870819346.

John Cleveland Osgood was a central figure in the organization and operation of the Colorado Fuel Company, formed in 1883 and merged and reorganized in 1892 as the coal and steel conglomerate, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. The relatively cash-poor Osgood and his associates ultimately could not resist the Rockefellers' financial juggernaut.

After Rockefeller assumed control, Osgood resigned from CF&I in June 1903, took his gains, and shifted his colors to the Victor and American coal companies, two firms which he had organized separately in 1900. These entities merged into the Victor-American Fuel Company in 1909, with Osgood, who controlled 90 percent of the stock, presiding as one of Colorado's coal barons. As such he played one of the leading roles in southern Colorado's Coalfield War that culminated in the violence associated with Ludlow.

Munsell seeks to shift blame for that disastrous conflict away from the Rockefellers, father and son, and onto Osgood. He believes that, while the Rockefellers bore the brunt of the criticism, Osgood's intransigence was most responsible for the strike and for the bitterness that erupted into bloodshed. He writes in the preface that his purpose is "to mark John C. Osgood's place in U.S. labor history, first as a fierce opponent of organized labor and second as one of the men most responsible for the tragic events that occurred in the southern Colorado coal fields in 1913-1914."