

prisonment, and supporting such generalities as higher wages and lower prices. A revolutionary spirit, Williams finds it, harnessed to the service of limited, local reforms.

The rising dissolved after the arrival of the soldiers called in from various barracks in the region to reestablish order in Merthyr. With control reimposed, twenty-eight “sacrificial scapegoats,” in Williams’ words, were arrested and charged with crimes associated with the rising. Trials that July produced twelve convictions, with six sentenced to prison, four to transportation, and two to death for the capital offense of stabbing a soldier, although one of the death sentences was commuted to transportation.

Williams’ book then becomes something of a detective story, attempting to establish the innocence of the condemned Richard Lewis, immortalized in Welsh folk history as Dic Penderyn after his execution in August 1831. In this pursuit, as throughout the book, Williams demonstrates a judicious use of facts and inferences, speculating freely but carefully avoiding overreaching when considering evidence.

This may be less true, however, of his conclusions. Williams sees “the Merthyr Rising” of 1831 as “a crisis of working-class identity,” that, once endured, produced a working-class consciousness, participation, and power that led to subsequent reforms. Williams believes the rising’s ramifications to be “one of those structural, almost geological shifts which accompany a profound change in opinion and attitude,” but makes almost no attempt to place the conflict in Merthyr into the context of discontent and protest widespread in Britain in that era. How, for example, does the clash in Merthyr Tydfil in 1831 compare to the riots that occurred four months later fifty miles away in Bristol, England? Williams sees the significance of the revolt almost exclusively in terms of class, but one wonders whether the power of the Merthyr rising and the execution of Dic Penderyn, then and since, is less as a marker of working-

class consciousness than of Welsh nationalism.

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Mark A. Vendl, Duane A. Smith, Karen A. Vendl. *My Home at Present: Life in the Mine Boarding Houses in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado*. Lake City, CO: Western Reflections Publishing Co., 2013; 166 pp., numerous b&w illus., map, 2 append., ref., ind., cloth, \$35. ISBN: 97819378511101

Before Mark and Karen Vendl married, Mark asked Karen to promise that she would agree to accompany him on several trips a year from Chicago to Colorado. The excuse was to learn more about Colorado’s mining history. As the story goes, the pre-nuptial agreement was not at all hard to keep. And now, with a couple of books under their belts, the retired geologists and current mining historians continue their research trips to Colorado.

The Vendl’s latest book, written with retired history professor Duane Smith, is *My Home at Present: Life in the Mine Boarding Houses in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado*. With Mark as the lead author, the book tells the stories of ordinary working people, from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, isolated in the rugged mountains of southwestern Colorado. Together, the Vendl’s and Smith have tapped a rich vein of previously unknown mining history.

My knowledge of San Juan boarding houses had been limited to Harriet Fish Backus’ book, *Tomboy Bride: A Woman’s Personal Account of Life in Mining Camps of the West*, through which I got a feel for the length of the winters and the depth of the snow. But *My Home at Present* does much more by taking the reader back in time using lively quotes and anecdotes, along with dozens of spectacular and previously unpublished photographs.

Meals were the highlight of a miner’s day.

Miner and author David Lavender, who worked at the Camp Bird mine, is quoted about the “stampede” when the dinner bell was rung. “The vast old building shook with the rush, and the bottleneck created by the door into the dining room was a dangerous thing,” he wrote, adding that all energies were then devoted to consuming the greatest amount of food in the least amount of time.

Quality, as well as quantity, of food was important, too. As noted in the book, the boarding house cook was the most important person at a mine, since hungry miners would move on to the next mine if not well fed. Mining companies often praised their cooks’ specialties—“his old English plum-pudding is worth going miles”—in the local newspapers.

Simply by giving men a place to live and eat near their places of work, boarding houses allowed mining to gain a foothold in the high country. *My Home at Present* addresses all aspects of boarding house life, and it provides a new perspective into the significance of the mining economy in the West, particularly in Colorado.

Many of the boarding houses were located in remote locations, high on the sides of steep mountains. Even so, they were not immune from federal and state census takers, who noted each lodger’s occupation, nationality, age, and marital status. Social historians will appreciate that the authors took the time to research who these people were and from where they came.

At the time, mining was exclusively a man’s job, but women worked and lived in the boarding houses as early as 1880. A few were wives (with children) of superintendents, but widows, such as forty-one-year-old Katie Conhela from Finland, often were employed as cooks. In 1880, the majority of the men were born in the U.S., while most of the non-Americans came from Europe. After 1900, a large influx of miners came from Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, and Italy.

It is easy to get caught up in the authors’ enthusiasm for their topic. In the chapter on “The Lodgers,” they comment that census data can only

provide limited information, adding, “It would have been interesting to accompany the census taker as he made his rounds, and to listen to the stories the miners, mill workers, cooks, and waiters had to tell.”

The book is just plain fun to read. A special treat is David Lavender’s reminiscences on rat hunts at the Camp Bird boarding house. And, since we know the Vendl’s will return to Colorado, it will soon be time to look for their next book—rumored to include more on mining in the San Juans. (Smith and the Vendl’s are also the authors of *Colorado Goes to the Fair: World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893* (University of New Mexico Press, 2011).)

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James Rada, Jr. *Saving Shallmar: Christmas Spirit in a Coal Town*. Gettysburg, PA: Legacy Publishing, 2012; 183 pp., 40 b&w images, notes, bib, paper, \$18. ISBN: 9780971459977.

Saving Shallmar can be recommended as a very enjoyable and informative book that tells a surprising and memorable story. James Rada, Jr., provides a case study on the rise and fall of a small mining village in the soft coal fields of western Maryland. The author is a good storyteller with an engaging style. He offers numerous details about the town’s history and culture, none of which are particularly surprising or new, but the tale turns on a significant occurrence in 1949 that forms the core of the “saving” aspect of the story—more about that later.

Located in Garrett County along the north branch of the Potomac River, Shallmar was established by the Wolf Den Coal Company after 1917. Like most company towns during the early decades of the twentieth century, Shallmar had no indoor plumbing, electricity, or running water, and its streets were unpaved and unlit. Production peaked in 1929, when about a hundred min-