Browning on Morris, 'Yountsville: The Rise and Decline of an Indiana Mill Town'

Review published on Monday, December 7, 2020


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55667

In Yountsville: The Rise and Decline of an Indiana Mill Town, Ronald V. Morris and his collaborators trace the intertwined stories of industry, labor, and education in the rural Indiana town of Yountsville, located approximately forty-five miles northwest of Indianapolis. These stories revolve around the German immigrant Yount family who ran the local woolen mill industry from Indiana’s pioneer period until the factory closed in 1907, the mill’s immigrant textile workers, and state educational reform that responded to the needs of the new mid-nineteenth-century industrial economy. Morris’s framing addresses two intriguing gaps in the literature. He pays close attention to nineteenth-century immigrant industrial labor in a rural setting when the literature skews toward stories of immigrants working in urban factories. In addition, he considers the parallel between nineteenth-century economic boom and deindustrial bust with the more voluminous scholarship on patterns of economic dislocation during the twentieth century’s post-industrial era. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including census data, archaeological and architectural evidence, and material culture, Morris’s chapters shift between the mill’s industrial environment and local schoolrooms’ experimentation with educational reform measures. Interwoven throughout is Morris’s thoughtful treatment of the process of historic preservation at Yount’s mill complex and discussion of how the decisions about landscape use shaped historical interpretation. Yountsville provides a delightful account of everyday rural life in the nineteenth century—particularly how it was experienced at school and in the workplace—and is a compelling example of how an interdisciplinary methodological toolbox enriches historical inquiry.

Morris begins with Indiana’s common school movement, tracing how public education prepared community members for civic life. Caleb Mills, the president of Wabash College (located just four miles from the Yount’s mill in Crawfordsville), was the period’s leading educational reformer who became the state’s second superintendent of education in 1852 and convinced state lawmakers that common schools would effectively prepare youth for the expanding industrial and managerial workforce. Chapter 2 studies the economic life of the town as the move from hydropower to steam fueled the mills, tying the town to a network of production that included cotton production and slave labor. Chapter 3 hones in on the mill’s growth, its contribution to the region’s economic vitality in the 1850s and 1860s, and its ultimate demise despite protective tariffs on imported wool. The German immigrant Yount family is the focus of chapter 4, with an emphasis on how they navigated and...
adapted to changes in manufacturing and environmental conditions. A leader in the Methodist Episcopal Church, mill owner Daniel Yount was a generous philanthropist committed to supporting the well-being of his agricultural neighbors. Chapter 5 gives a detailed account of workers’ families, their daily routines, and their tasks within the mill as the labor force experienced a transformation from the region’s predominantly agricultural task-oriented work to the regimented factory system of the mill. Morris’s analysis of mill workers’ graffiti on the factory’s walls is an especially interesting study of how laborers understood their identities in relation to their workplace. Preservation efforts come alive in chapter 6, as Morris considers how the mill’s various landowners changed the site over the years. Plans in the 1920s to turn the abandoned factory complex into a mill-themed amusement park were scuttled during the Great Depression, and the property eventually fell into disrepair. Large-scale restoration began in 1987 when a new private owner refurbished the decrepit mill and boarding house for a bed and breakfast that continues to preserve the mill’s historic features. The relationship between industry and education is examined in chapter 7, with an emphasis on how residents relied on these institutions to envision a new way forward. What Morris especially hopes to do is convince readers to see the rural Midwest with new eyes—that the region is not simply a post-industrial economic wasteland but a productive community where people have long invested in democratic governance. Readers benefit from a series of tables and graphs quantifying the workforce and the mills’ productivity. However, more detailed maps showing Yountsville’s location within its social and economic networks would help illustrate the author’s claims about how the town figured within the Midwest’s spatial and economic contexts.

This is a rich microhistory that illuminates the interplay of social life, economics, and education in rural Indiana. Perhaps the book’s most valuable contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century Indiana and the broader Midwest is its intricate detailing of the centrality of mills to regional economies and the impact of the life of the mill on local residents’ imaginings of future progress. One area that would benefit from more careful scaffolding is the attempt to link this local history with our contemporary moment by claiming that “the extant industrial site serves as a metaphor through which to provide critical commentary for educational policy in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). For such a case to be made, the book needs a clearer explanation as to how this story of nineteenth-century educational reform is relevant for today’s educational and economic challenges. Furthermore, Yountsville sometimes appears as a stand-in for all small midwestern towns, glossing over the various regional variations that make for a more complex picture. All told, Yountsville is a fascinating study of social life and economic change in small-town Indiana during the second half of the nineteenth century and reminds readers of the importance of looking beyond text-based sources for a more comprehensive accounting of social history.


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