

Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West. *By Michael A. Amundson.* Boulder: University Press of Colorado. xvix + 204 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN 0-870-81662-4.

Reviewed by Michael A. Church

Michael Amundson's *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* traces the origins, development, and decline of the domestic U.S. uranium industry from the perspective of four western communities. Though different from each other in many respects, the towns of Moab, Utah, Grants, New Mexico, Uravan, Colorado, and Jeffery City, Wyoming, were, at one time, all connected by a common attribute: an absolute economic dependence on the mining and milling of "yellowcake," or processed uranium ore. This book compares the variable impacts that federal government policies, unregulated market forces, and local entrepreneurs had on these four communities within the dynamic commercial and geopolitical frameworks of World War II and the cold war. Drawing heavily on local newspaper articles, trade journals, government reports, and personal interviews, Amundson skillfully integrates political, economic, social, and cultural history into an uncommon analysis of the "supply side" of America's atomic weapons and energy programs that is both satisfying and convincing.

As a regional study, Amundson's analysis plays heavily on traditional "western" themes. To explain the relation between twentieth-century uranium mining and community development in the western United States, Amundson borrows the trope "continuity through change" from Patricia Nelson Limerick's book, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987). He argues that the origin and development of these towns was at once typical and atypical of economic and social development in the West generally; suggesting both continuity and discontinuity with a conventional "western" past. While the federal and corporate paternalism at the center of these towns' existence easily concurs with the conventional western theme of "economic colonialism," the author discovers a local pro-government, pro-industry enthusiasm for the emerging "atomic culture" that clearly disturbs traditional notions of western "isolationism." This local boosterism, Amundson claims, shows that, "[u]nlike

westerners' traditional cry against eastern capital, the study of twentieth-century colonialism is a study of the integration of the western economy into the global economy" (p. xvii).

Concisely written and well organized, Amundson's analysis alternates between succinct explanations of the political and commercial dynamics effecting changes in the industry and detailed studies of each town's struggle to cope with those changes. The U.S. government's initial regulation of uranium mining through the Manhattan Project during World War II led to considerable expansion of federal control after the war. Increasing postwar concerns over national security prompted Congress to pass the Atomic Energy Act in 1946, in part to decrease America's overwhelming dependence on foreign uranium supplies by expanding production at home. Using price controls and a government buying program to encourage private production, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) subsidized the first uranium boom, which occurred between 1946 and 1966. By 1962, with uranium production outgrowing government demands, the AEC began to shift the industry's dependence to private markets and encourage development of "peaceful" uses of the metal. Without adequate government protection, companies like Western Nuclear, which prospered under the government procurement program, could not compete in a free international market. Despite a brief commercial boom in the mid-1970s, layoffs and consolidation haunted the industry until its collapse in the 1980s. Explaining the rise and fall of this sector at every step, Amundson's analysis is both comprehensive and intelligent and could stand by itself as a concise introduction to American cold war politics and culture, an especially poignant conclusion for survey classes in the history of the American West. Ultimately, it provides the framework for understanding the dynamics at work in the four uranium communities.

The core of the book's analysis is the relation of dependence established between local communities, foreign corporations, and the federal government and the struggle by each town to accommodate dramatic demographic changes. While such problems were common to all four communities, Amundson finds significant differences. The company towns of Uravan and Jefferson City experienced tightly managed growth. While carefully controlling the size and constitution of the local population to meet their production demands, the founding companies also provided basic public services. Housing, schools,

transportation and communication systems, and recreation were always in adequate supply. Living under this autocratic corporate system, however, meant residents lost considerable control over their everyday lives. By contrast, the independent boomtowns of Moab and Grants suffered through substantial growing pains as city officials strove to keep pace with quick, unregulated growth. With local resources taxed to their limit, city governments failed to supply adequate public services and, ironically, came to depend more and more on federal and corporate subsidies to meet the demands of the growing community. The only escape from this cycle was through a diversification of the local economy, which, Amundson shows, only Moab was able to achieve to any real degree. The book's heavy dependence on local newspaper articles underscores the important role of a pro-industry local culture so central to its argument, as do photos of atomic beauty pageants, uranium cafes, and pro-industry billboards. Confronted with a lack of adequate census data, the author uses school enrollment records to measure demographic changes in the local population. Accounts of individual entrepreneurs, such as Moab's Charlie Steen, add drama and entertainment to the story.

Yellowcake Towns will appeal to the business historian and to historians of the cold war and the American West. Its complex analysis is subtle enough to interest the graduate student, and the writing is, generally, clear and engaging enough to appeal to undergraduates. Occasionally, the firm line drawn between "outside" and "inside" economic forces appears to break down in the face of complicated economic relations, prompting questions about the usefulness of such neat oppositions. Similarly, the author frequently relies on the concepts of "colonialism," "paternalism," and "isolationism" to situate his study in the larger context of the history of the American West, yet he does not explain the historiographic significance of the terms. Had he done so, I believe, he would not only have uncovered some of his underlying assumptions, but he also would have made the book accessible to a much broader audience and heightened the nonspecialist's appreciation of its argument. But these are minor criticisms when weighed against the book's unique and perceptive analysis.

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Farming: Nonferrous Mineral Smelting and Agricultural Reform in Northcentral Utah, 1900–1945.” He has also made extensive contributions to museum exhibits on the history of the smelting industry in Utah and its role in the development of several local communities.