

Company Towns of the Pacific Northwest. By *Linda Carlson*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. viii + 286 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, photographs. Paper, \$22.50. ISBN 0-295-98332-9.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf

Company towns have often been associated with negative images, including paternalism, exploitation, isolation, antiunionism, substandard housing, and cowed workers who are chronically indebted to a monopolistic company store. According to Keith C. Petersen, scholars have made too much of this negative stereotype. In *Company Town: Potlatch, Idaho, and the Potlatch-Lumber Company* (1987), he wrote that there was much to admire about conditions for workers in the town of Potlatch. While Linda Carlson concedes that the negative images attached to company towns contain a grain of truth, her anecdotal history of twentieth-century company towns in the Pacific Northwest echoes Petersen's view, and indeed often draws upon his work. She too paints a relatively benign portrait of these controlled communities.

Carlson draws from newspapers, local histories, memoirs, and correspondence with former residents to explore the "flavor of everyday life" in the company towns of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Most of these communities were associated with extractive industries, such as mining or lumbering, although several were built to support the operation of dams and power plants. With the exception of Vanport, Oregon, which Henry Kaiser established just outside Portland to house workers during World War II, the towns were generally located at remote sites. Transportation, especially in the winter, was difficult and even dangerous, contributing to the residents' sense of isolation and intensifying their dependence on the company. Chapters include generous details about daily life, some fascinating and the rest merely compilations of minutiae, ranging from descriptions of housing to characterizations of the residents, the food, schooling, religion, recreation, shopping, and communication. Other chapters briefly survey safety and accidents, the impact of the world wars, and the influence of the company boss over town life. Since women and minorities were excluded from the mining and timbering industries of the Northwest, residents were generally male and white. Women and

children, however, could be found in towns where the company provided family housing, primarily as a means of recruiting and stabilizing the workforce. Conditions varied dramatically from town to town. In some communities, housing was rudimentary, if not dilapidated, while in others, like Potlatch, employers provided clean, comfortable, well-designed homes. Good or bad, one advantage of company housing was its affordability. Companies also subsidized schools, especially at the primary level. These small schools were often of surprisingly high quality. According to Carlson, firms paid teachers well in order to attract good faculty, and students in these close-knit communities benefited from heavy parental involvement. Like welfare capitalists throughout the nation, employers offered a wide variety of recreational activities to divert workers from the perilous thrills of cheap amusements, especially drinking, gambling, and carousing, which could potentially undercut industrial efficiency. Companies provided social and cultural amenities that were not available in similar remote communities. They built recreation halls (some quite elaborate, with bowling alleys and even swimming pools), brought in dance bands, entertainers, and speakers, sponsored traveling sports teams and social clubs, and hosted endless parties, parades, and special events.

Carlson gives a nod to the negative aspects of living in remote northwestern company towns. Accidents and deaths in the mining and logging industries were common, and paternalism had its drawbacks. Behavior was closely regulated in many communities. Some regulations were simply petty and bothersome. In Cedar Falls, Washington, for instance, residents were prevented from owning dogs because their barking might keep night-shift workers awake. Moreover, absolute control made it difficult, if not impossible, for workers to protest unsafe conditions or low wages. Companies successfully kept unions at bay by firing and immediately evicting strikers or anyone, even schoolteachers, believed to be sympathetic to unions.

Overall, however, as portrayed by Carlson, life was pretty good in these company towns. She argues that the exploitation associated with the company stores of the East was uncommon. The risk of accidents and disability might be high, but, unlike other isolated communities, residents “had the advantage of a local doctor and hospital” (p. 158). While some company towns closed down during the thirties, paternalistic employers insulated families from the worst ravages of the depression by reducing rents

and relaxing the credit policies of the company stores. The remote location of most company towns often made life difficult, but Carlson emphasizes that residents appreciated the benefits of living in peaceful, beautiful, rural settings. Indeed remoteness was an advantage, because it helped create a sense of community. Schools, company stores, recreational activities, and even moments of travail associated with death, disease, and illness helped create uniquely close-knit communities. She concludes that “those who lived in company towns, even for only a few years, [were] likely to remember them with joy and delight” (p. 207).

This amply illustrated local history is entertaining and readable and should appeal to a general audience. It will, however, be of limited use for historians. The author makes little effort to analyze or contextualize her material. Mixing examples from various periods makes it difficult to understand how communities changed over time. Moreover, the lack of a comparative framework and the author’s failure to use archival sources, such as corporate or union records that might have amplified her depiction of the relationships between workers and town managers, keeps this account firmly fixed in the genre of corporate history.

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