

Idaho's Bunker Hill: The Rise and Fall of a Great Mining Company, 1885–1981. By Katherine G. Aiken. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2005. xix + 284. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photos. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-806-13682-0.

Reviewed by Vagel C. Keller Jr.

This book proves the axiom that “you can’t judge a book by its cover,” for Katherine G. Aiken has produced a work of much more substance than the corporate biography suggested by her title. Rather, hers is a story of the consequences of the “rise and fall” of the Bunker Hill Company for Kellogg, Idaho, an industrial community whose citizens depended—directly or indirectly—on a single business organization for their livelihoods. Through a century of coexistence, the company, its workers, and their fellow townspeople carried on an ambivalent relationship, in which they struggled with seemingly irreconcilable ethnic, labor, health, and environmental issues while at the same time recognizing the interdependency of these factors. This process yielded an insular community with a paradoxical sense of nostalgia for a company whose legacy is an economically distressed town surrounded by a blighted, contaminated landscape and a population with potentially serious long-term health problems. To Aiken, the complex patterns of conflict and resolution surrounding Bunker Hill’s business practices are the key to understanding why the people of Kellogg continue to resist the federal government’s efforts to clean up their degraded environment today, twenty-five years after the mines played out and the smelters shut down.

Business historians should find *Idaho’s Bunker Hill* interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that this is the first comprehensive study of a major player in an industry of paramount importance to the history of the western United States: nonferrous metal mining and smelting. Drawing on numerous and diverse primary sources, including contemporary newspapers and trade journals, corporate records, case law, and government documents, Aiken places Bunker Hill’s rise and fall in the context of technological, political, social, and business developments at the state and national level during its lifetime. From murky beginnings in the rough-and-tumble silver-mining camps of the Coeur d’Alene Valley in the 1880s (a tale involving a down-on-his-luck

prospector and his stray donkey, nefarious gamblers and claim jumpers, and a landmark court case), the Bunker Hill Company grew into a corporation “preeminent in the annals of American mining” (p. xv). At the time of its hostile takeover in 1968 by the conglomerate Gulf Resources and Chemical Corporation, Bunker Hill was a fully integrated enterprise that mined, processed, and smelted lead and zinc ores and concentrates, manufactured lead and zinc products, and marketed them through its own outlets.

Aiken observes that the Bunker Hill Company thus conformed to Alfred D. Chandler’s model for the development of large industrial enterprises (*The Visible Hand* [1977]), albeit with a touch of western-style folklore. But merger into a vertically integrated international conglomerate also spelled doom for Bunker Hill, a distinctly non-Chandlerian outcome that she doesn’t seem to notice. Almost overnight, Gulf Resources began to pillage Bunker Hill’s profits to compensate for losses elsewhere. More ominous to Bunker Hill’s employees and their fellow citizens of Kellogg, Gulf placed the authority for business decisions affecting the local community in the hands of unfamiliar executives in far-away Texas, usurping the traditional, localized management–labor relationships that had evolved over generations. The final phase in the Bunker Hill story, then, is a case study to “suggest,” in Chandler’s words, “how narrowly trained managers, who must administer the complex processes of production and distribution in complex modern economies, can be made responsible for their actions—actions that have far-reaching consequences” (*Visible Hand*, p. 500). Interestingly, the rape of Bunker Hill documented by Aiken in chapter six largely postdated the research by Chandler that she cites in her introduction (p. xv).

Of greater significance, however, are two important and potentially rewarding new directions of inquiry for historical studies dealing with the relations between business and the environment taken by Aiken in *Idaho’s Bunker Hill*. First, Aiken’s study features a much-needed expansion of the scope of research on the environmental effects of American industrialization to include rural manufacturing districts removed from major urban industrial centers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is high time that historians realized that the hinterlands of America’s major industrial cities were much more than sources of raw materials. Second, and probably more important, Aiken

follows an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of business and environmental history called for in Christine Meisner Rosen's recent essay, "The Business–Environment Connection" (*Environmental History* [January 2005]). Rosen wrote: "We must investigate . . . the business institutions, organizational structures, market forces, public policies, personality factors, cultural forces, and all other internal and external dynamics and constraints that shaped the flow of capital, the management decision making, and the activities of the workers . . . that have determined how the business system has interacted with the natural world over time. It is imperative that we investigate all aspects of this interaction, rather than limit ourselves to the study of the environmental depredations of industry." This is essentially what Katherine G. Aiken accomplishes in *Idaho's Bunker Hill*, and for that reason, if for no other, her book is an important contribution to the scholarship of both business and environmental history.

*Vagel C. Keller Jr. is visiting assistant professor of history at Carnegie Mellon University. He is the author of "Analyzing Change and Continuity in Women's Experience as Wage Earners, 1840–1940," which was published in the Magazine of History (Fall, 2000). At present he is working on a history of the interaction of technology, business practices, and public policy in shaping the environmental effects of rural manufacturing industries in Pennsylvania during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*