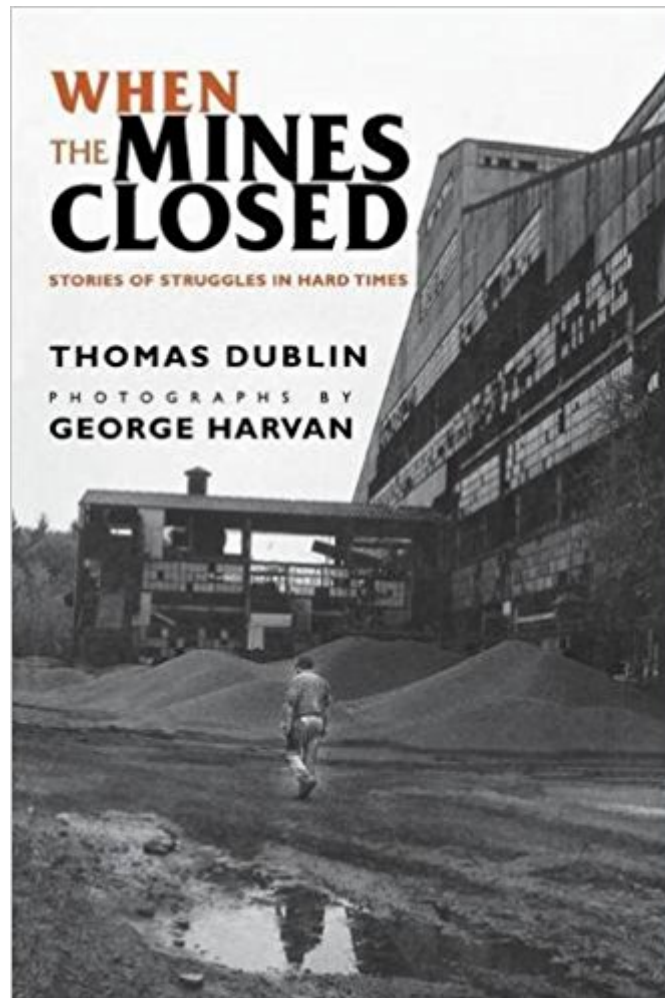




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When The Mines Closed: Stories Of Struggles In Hard Times



Synopsis

The anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania, five hundred square miles of rugged hills stretching between Tower City and Carbondale, harbored coal deposits that once heated virtually all the homes and businesses in Eastern cities. At its peak during World War I, the coal industry here employed 170,000 miners, and supported almost 1,000,000 people. Today, with coal workers numbering 1,500, only 5,000 people depend on the industry for their livelihood. Between these two points in time lies a story of industrial decline, of working people facing incremental and cataclysmic changes in their world. When the Mines Closed tells this story in the words of men and women who experienced these dramatic changes and in more than eighty photographs of these individuals, their families, and the larger community. Award-winning historian Thomas Dublin interviewed a cross-section of residents and migrants from the region, who gave their own accounts of their work and family lives before and after the mines closed. Most of the narrators, six men and seven women, came of age during the Great Depression and entered area mines or, in the case of the women, garment factories, in their teens. They describe the difficult choices they faced, and the long-standing ethnic, working-class values and traditions they drew upon, when after World War II the mines began to shut down. Some left the region, others commuted to work at a distance, still others struggled to find employment locally. The photographs taken by George Harvan, a lifelong resident of the area and the son of a Slovak-born coal miner, document residents' lives over the course of fifty years. Dublin's introductory essay offers a brief history of anthracite mining and the region and establishes a broader interpretive framework for the narratives and photographs.

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Customer Reviews

History professor Dublin's look at the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania addresses important questions, not just for the beleaguered mining industry, but for American labor in general. By focusing on a largely unschooled, working-class population of former coal miners and their wives, he chronicles how people adapt to economic upheaval. While the book is framed by Dublin's excellent introduction, the bulk of the text is made up of oral histories. Twelve women and men—all of whom are now in their 70s and 80s—address the centrality of work, and analyze how ethnic, religious and gender-based associations mediated work conflicts and financial want. Their recollections span the 20th century, and move from mining's peak during WWI—when 175,000 men were employed and one million were supported by the industry—to 1992, when the mines employed 1400 and supported approximately 5000. As oil, natural gas and electricity replaced coal heat, most of the workers had to find alternate employment. Many of the men went to plants like Bethlehem Steel; women for the most part headed for textile factories. Their testimony about this translation is often extremely moving; on the other hand, more probing about alluded-to ethnic and racial conflicts, attitudes toward unions and worker associations, and changes in family structure would have made the book more resonant. Eighty photos. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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Dublin (history, SUNY at Binghamton) is the author of a number of labor history titles, including *Women at Work* (1979). He focuses here on the coal mine closings in northeastern Pennsylvania, using oral history to "reconstruct how relatively ordinary residents in the region experienced economic decline." From 90 interviews, he selected 12 for this book. Dublin provides background on mining in the region, and he has done an excellent job of editing the interviews to bring these voices alive. While the miners and their wives have led hard lives, one is left with an impression of their great pride in work done well. The photographs by Harvan, a lifelong resident of the area, nicely complement the narratives. Highly recommended for labor history collections. —Linda L. McEwan, Elgin Community Coll., IL Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Excellent history of the anthracite coal industry and the European immigrants who made it all possible.

Most of us don't have books written about the neighborhoods and local institutions that we grew up with. This is particularly so for places off the beaten path like the Pennsylvania coal regions. I grew up in the 50's and early 60's just a few miles from the coal towns that form the geography of Mr. Dublin's book and went to some of the same schools as his narrator's children. My family worked for the coal companies and the garment factories at various times. These stories ring true from my experience - the reliance on family, the acceptance of 50 mile commutes to work rather than leave the area, the accurate concern that everyone for miles around knows your family business. The real value of this book for me is that these narratives show the commonality of experiences that I thought were unique. And, it also fills in many gaps about the social forces at work that I didn't realize existed in the lives of that generation. They shielded us from the dangerous aspects of some jobs, the lack of job security, labor-management tensions, and the potential need to migrate to make a living. For those readers without the personal ties to the coal regions this book provides a view of how tough the "golden years" of the 50's were for some Americans.

The beauty of this book lies in the fact that it does not attempt to analyze or comment upon. It simply presents the stories of ordinary men and women of this century in more or less their own words. All their lives in some way revolved around the dark world of Pennsylvania coal mining in the anthracite area of the Panther Valley. They are all refreshingly human, wonderfully straightforward, and tell deeply moving stories. Each in his or her own way reflects the rich cultural and ethical traditions brought here from European shores. The beauty of the book is its utter simplicity in approaching the mystery of the human personality against the backdrop of the drudgery of labor. It's a wonderful slice of life.

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