{essays in history}

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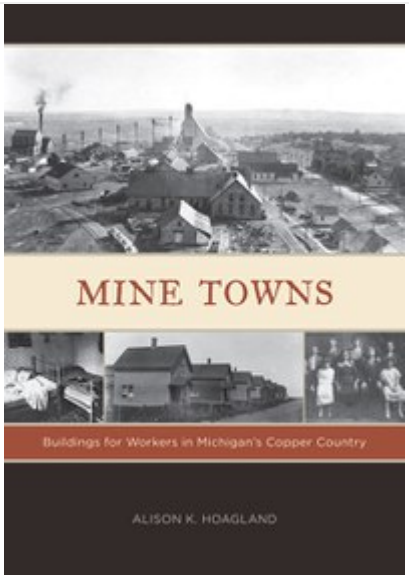
Mine Towns: Buildings for Workers in Michigan's Copper Country



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Reviewed Work(s)

Mine Towns: Buildings for Workers in Michigan's Copper Country. By Alison K. Hoagland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Pp. 328. Paper, $25.00.

Michigan's northwestern Upper Peninsula has often been a source of interest for historians. From the ancient archaeological record of the Lake Superior basin up until the modern era, the Copper Country or the Keweenaw Peninsula, as the region is known, has a rich past that many have tried to explore, cultivate, and preserve. The literature of the region has been growing in recent decades, with homage paid to the ancient copper working of native peoples, the economic history of the mining industry, the technology of the mines, and the lives of miners. Up to now, a majority of scholars have focused on the era of industrial copper mining, the nature of mine work and copper extraction, and the history of mine development. *Mine Towns* makes a significant addition to the literature by not only expanding on the mining history but also by taking a clear look into the meaning of the company town and the role that the company-provided buildings played in the lives of mining families and the communities that they called home.

Examining the industrial copper boom era from 1890 to 1918 in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, *Mine Towns* considers the relationship that developed between company managers and miners during the state's largest mineral land rush, especially in terms of land, housing, and community spaces. The business model for the major mining operations of the Quincy Mining Company and the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company essentially consisted of east coast investment dollars, with American managers and superintendents overseeing a force of English, German, Irish, Finnish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrant workers. Adding more complexity to this equation was the geographic remoteness of the Keweenaw, the grueling seasonal cycle of short summers and long harsh winters (oftentimes more than 200 inches of snow can fall in any given winter season), as well as the unforgiving, physically taxing, and potentially tragic realities of commercial mining. The elements of the business model, the environmental realities, and the day-to-day operations of the mines shaped the emergence of these communities.

In order to promote the region to potential workers, as well as to keep laborers and their families satisfied with the mines and the surrounding communities, companies needed to take creative measures. By instituting what they deemed a working wage, providing access to company housing, and developing resources such as schools, hospitals,

libraries, and bathhouses, the companies laid the groundwork for a paternalistic company town. In a world where mining company management oversaw not only job-related functions but also had a stake in most aspects of community life from the homes to the community buildings, tension was certain to develop. It was inevitable that debates over the boundaries between private life and company life, struggles for control between management and the labor force, and the possible inequality of access to services, among other uncomfortable situations, would arise. The companies viewed the housing and services they provided as tools to promote stability and to control the workforce. However, workers residing in company homes did not fully subscribe to elements of control. Many tenants took in boarders and used the homes as temporary residences to save money for their own land. Company land, boardinghouses, and the community also played complex roles in the shaping of the strike of 1913. While privately owned homes and public spaces gave a forum for striking workers to organize, the companies built boardinghouses for strikebreakers and used company-run tenant homes to "favor certain workers, to engender loyalty, to keep wages down, and as a propaganda tool in the battle for public opinion" (89). Hoagland effectively chronicles these developments within the paternal company system.

To illustrate the meaning of paternalism in the copper mine towns during the era of the land rush and to examine the role that companies played in domestic life, Hoagland utilizes an array of source material. She interviewed surviving workers and their family members, scrutinized archival documents, newspapers, photographs, mining company papers, articles and books by other Copper Country scholars, and she also conducted an investigation of the mine company homes and buildings themselves, many of which still permeate the region. The variety of her source material allowed her to take a robust approach to the topic. She intertwined the existing architectural and material history, technological history, and industrial landscape of the region and seamlessly complemented it with a family history of Joseph and Antonia Putrich, a couple of Croatian descent who married in Michigan in 1907. This holistic approach allowed Hoagland to piece together a thoughtful and complete analysis. The results of her research efforts detailed in *Mine Towns* share a history that defines the authenticity of the remaining industrial landscape, the meaning of domestic space, the role

of mining management, and most importantly, it provides a thorough account into how miners and their families worked and survived in a company town arrangement, one that was as much the choice of laborers as it was that of the mining management, albeit for different motives.

Previous historians that have focused on the past of this region have tended to explore the area through a lens that is archaeological, industrial, economic, or social. *Mine Towns* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Copper Country and the copper mining boom times, specifically because it expands on existing themes while also introducing new topics for consideration. This work is part working-class history, part family micro history, and part architectural history. The author takes these elements and composes a memory study that examines a company landscape and a family story from the ground up that would appeal not only to scholars and students interested in the history of the region but also to those interested in mining history, labor history, and industrial America.

Lindsay Hiltunen

George Mason University

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