

Fall 2002

Book Review: The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia; A Brief History

Frank Allen

University of Central Florida, fallen@ucf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>

Recommended Citation

Allen, Frank (2002) "Book Review: The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia; A Brief History," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol50/iss3/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Book Review

Tams, Jr. W.P. *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia; A Brief History*. Morgantown, W.V.: West Virginia University Press, 2001. 106pp.

Originally published in 1963 and recently reprinted through the efforts of Ronald Eller, professor at University of Kentucky, this book provides an introduction to the early years of the coal mining industry in West Virginia. While scant on details of the hardships of the life as a coal miner, the reader is reminded that this is the work of a mining company owner sharing his side of history. Mr. Tams was one of the most successful coal operators in the Southwest region of the state in the first half of the 20th century, starting at 21 years of age and retiring in 1955 after 51 years dedicated to coal.

The book is part autobiographical and part encyclopedic. Chapter titles include "Early Development", "Finances and Organization", "Work in the Mines", "The Gulf Smokeless Coal Company" (author's company), and "Personalities in the Smokeless Coal Fields." Mr. Tams churns out plentiful facts about production tonnage, land leases and negotiations with rail companies. The term 'smokeless' refers to the type of coal produced in Southern West Virginia. Smokeless coal had relatively low gas content and produced lower amounts of smoke when burned, making it a highly desirable grade in densely populated urban areas such as New England. It also made Mr. Tams a wealthy man over his life as he was fortunate to acquire leases on rich deposits early in his career.

As one who had no previous introduction to the early coal industry I was fascinated by Tams' account of life in the mining towns. One of the chief responsibilities of an

operator was to literally build a town, since the early fields of West Virginia were located in extremely remote areas that prohibited commuting to work. It thus became the operator's responsibility to provide the basic necessities to attract workers. Amenities typically included a company provisions store, medical facilities, houses of worship and, for the more paternalistic operators, recreation such as movie theatres. These communities defined the term 'company town'. Mr. Tams portrays himself as a fair man who expected a full day's effort from his miners but paid higher than market wages and provided above-standard housing, recreation and sanitation services. He is also quick to admit that part of his motivation for providing a higher standard of living was to keep organized labor out of his camps, a strategy which proved successful until the Roosevelt administration virtually mandated unionization of all mines by the late 1930's. Despite these economic motivations the reader can discern a strong degree of humanity and empathy for his miners.

Mr. Tams held a degree from Virginia Polytechnic University, and a love of history. He was approached in the early 1960's by Dr. Robert Munn, Director of Libraries at West Virginia University Library, to write this book. He pays great thanks to Dr. Munn for his assistance in researching the personal histories of other coal operators, which make up the latter portion of the book. At 106 pages it can be read in one sitting. The author does not waste words and the reader is left with a base introduction to the West Virginia mining industry. Recommended to anyone interested in Appalachia, late 19th and early 20th century mining history of West Virginia, and biographical figures from this era and place.

- Frank Allen, *SELn* editor