

# Steeltown usa: work and memory in youngstown



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the American small town tradition, the places where people work not only provide them with the means to live their life, but in many ways define their lives as well. What one does for a significant portion of their waking hours helps to form their identity, their sense of self worth, and their dignity. In 1978, the famous Jeanette Blast Furnace, located in Youngstown, Ohio, was shut down as a result of the continuing shift of the American economy away from industrialization. With the closing of this historic symbol of American ingenuity and hard work, a town lost its identity and sense of community.

These, and other aspects of the closing of “ The Jenny” were the subject of *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown*, written by Linkon and Russo. This research will focus on key aspects of that book in an effort to not only discuss the book, but the people about whom the book was written.

**Class Conflict in the Mills and Community** In the introduction to this research, the point was made that in Youngstown, the building of the Jeanette Blast Furnace not only represented the creation of a place where people could earn a wage, but also a place where the identities of people were forged along with red hot iron.

With those identities came a certain level of class conflict, which began in the mills and eventually spilled over into the community. In the mills, there was an established pecking order; the wealthy mill owners and executives of course held the power of kings over the humble people who performed the menial, back breaking work that kept the furnaces burning and product flowing from them.

Between this highest and lowest level of the company hierarchy lay an endless amount of different goals, and standards of living, not to mention race and culture, for a great deal of the manual mill labor was performed by minorities and immigrants who were routinely reviled by the mostly white mill owners and managers, who saw the living conditions and lifestyle of the lower classes as not only inappropriate, but immoral also (Linkon & Russo, 2002) . The outspoken nature of these upper classes against the lower classes generated a resentment which would always be simmering below the surface of life and work in Youngstown.

Representations of Labor, Landscape and Community Life For Youngstown, like many other industrialized American towns that came before it, the labor and industry of the town became permanently linked with the community that surrounded it. As Linkon and Russo wrote: “ Steel is clearly presented as what made Youngstown a thriving community” (p. 70). The authors continue by making the point that the focus was more on the end product of steel than on the people who labored long, hard hours to make the steel itself.

As such, community leaders apparently did not have much of a thought to the individual lives behind the industrial complex that gave Youngstown its identity, but as will soon be seen, with the fading of Youngstown’s industrial identity would come a chronic need to reconfigure Youngstown in several important ways. The Role of Memory in the Effort to Re-Imagine and Rebuild Youngstown In Steeltown USA, the authors bring up an interesting point through a consideration of what it means to be a steelworker when the job of steelworker no longer exists.

This is exactly what happened to the people of Youngstown when their blast furnace was extinguished for the last time in 1978. This dramatic change in the economy and community forced a reexamination of what Youngstown was and what it would now become. The change would take place by forcing the citizens of Youngstown to stop fighting with their past and embrace it. By confronting the tragedy that had befallen them and coming to grips with it, the people were able to view the future not as something to be feared, but to be anticipated with excitement.

In doing this, much of the lowered self esteem and depression encountered by the former steelworkers was able to be converted into a solid resolve to learn and grow from what happened with the furnace closure. Conclusion In this research, we have seen how the business and industry of a town can not only form the identity and sense of community that exists, but can also swiftly strip away that identity and sense of community when the industry that defines a town is untimely taken away.

From such examples can be drawn some important lessons that perhaps the communities of the future can heed. First, it would seem that the emphasis should be on people and equality, not on products and profits as the measure of the worth of individuals and/or communities. Perhaps if people focused more on interpersonal aspects of a community and not just using a financial bottom line as the indication of self worth, the rich and poor alike would be all the better for it.