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By The Sweat Of Their Brow: Forging The Steel Valley. Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor.

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The Twentieth Century is rapidly drawing to a close, yet few museums exist that emphasize this period of time. Those that do tend to highlight popular culture (such as the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame), or items that relate to popular culture, such as automobiles. Yet few museums exist about a crucial aspect of this century: industry. This is easily explained in that industry, especially in the first half of this century, was a dirty and decidedly non-flashy part of American history. It is also a heritage that tends to embarrass modern Americans. To them, the sight of a giant steel mill belching smoke is a blight upon the landscape. That may be true, but it is also a blight that built this country, and built many of the great cities of America. <p> The Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor is one the first major museums in the country that deals with one aspect of industrial America, the steel industry. It should be recognized as a pathfinding museum, regardless of any flaws in the artifacts or interpretation at the site, and in fact should be used as a "template" for future museums of its kind that hopefully will dot the American landscape some time in the near future. Youngstown is a large step forward, and a step in the right direction. <p> The first aspect of the museum that catches the visitor's eye is the unique architecture. Designed by noted neoclassicist Michael Graves, the museum building is intended to be evocative of steel mill architecture, and it fulfills that goal admirably. Inside, the exhibit space is small but divided over two floors, the first floor being the main exhibit and the lower floor providing additional information and interpretation. The museum makes impressive use of a full array of artifacts, photos, videos, audio recordings, and life-size reproductions. The artifacts are first-rate, and explained fairly well; they also provide further interpretation of the type of work done at the mills, as, for example, the wooden shoes used by workers relining blast furnaces. In this case, the shoes demonstrate that the heat of the furnaces was such that leather shoes would have burned up instantly, and this translates to the visitor the incredible working conditions at the mills. <p> However, the organization of the artifacts and assorted interpretive devices is the first criticism of the exhibit. Upon arriving at the museum, a curator showed the general direction the visitor was to take. No real map of the exhibit or numbered stations are used, which can often prove confusing, especially in an exhibit where chronology is crucial. Providing a map, or numbering the stations, or even arrows on the floor would be one way of improving this. Perhaps even having retired steelworkers escort visitors or groups explaining the various stations and providing interpretation (illustrated with their own personal anecdotes) would be a great value, as well as a way of passing on their experiences to a new generation. <p> One very interesting aspect to the museum is that it utilizes life-size re-creations of certain aspects of the steelworker's life. One area is a reproduction of two rooms of a company house. This area is fairly well-done, in that it illustrates the modest accommodations of the workers and their families. However, a major flaw in the company house display is that it is far too clean and neat. Real company houses tended to reflect the polluted atmosphere of the steel towns. Their owners did try to keep them clean, but the smoke and noxious fumes from the mill made that extremely difficult. <p> Another reproduction is the company locker room, taken from a real mill (however, without showers and toilets). It is done quite well, and includes mementos from workers inside the lockers, which are quite interesting. While both the house and locker room are important aspects of workers' lives, the museum would probably be better off replacing them with a more appropriate display, such as a tavern or ethnic fraternal hall such as a Czech sokol, or a Ukrainian National Home. This would allow the museum to be flexible in display: they could utilize the "walls" of the recreation to display union posters, or perhaps put up cartoons and songs from the IWW, or display aspects of the ethnic culture of the millworkers. Add benches, and the space could be a performance space for ethnic music or plays, or lectures at the museum. A recreation of an ethnic hall could be one of the richest areas of the whole exhibit, and far more evocative of the workers' lives than the locker room. <p> The centerpiece of the reproductions are a real control

room, a "pulpit" from a blooming mill. Two views are allowed of the pulpit, from the main floor, with the visitor looking down into the room, or from the basement room, which looks up at the battered and rusted exterior of the pulpit. From the bottom angle, the aged condition of the pulpit is an excellent reminder of the state of the steel industry in the 1970s, when little was spent on maintenance or modernization. Accompanying the pulpit is a video showing the function of a blooming mill, which is an excellent video, and does a fine job of portraying how noisy the mill can be. <p> Other videos are also well done, though one problem is that they run continuously. It would be far better for the visitor if each video station could be started by a pushbutton, so that the visitor could start the video and watch it through to completion, rather than starting at the middle or end and waiting for the video to cycle through to get back to the beginning. Also the videos need to be louder; many of them are far too soft, especially the ones with monitors suspended from the ceiling. <p> Another problem with the videos is evident in the basement exhibit room, where one section features interviews with various employees. The interviews represent a wide diversity in employee and management, including minority workers. Yet there is one monitor for all the interviews, so if a visitor wishes to see a particular interview, they have to wait for all the others to cycle. It would be far better if all the interviews had their own monitors, or one monitor with a control to allow the visitor to choose which interview they would like to see. The museum does provide some seats for some video areas, but not enough. More are necessary, especially since all the videos are fairly long. <p> The main exhibit space ends its chronology with the closing of the Youngstown mills, including a dramatic wall-sized photo of a blast furnace being demolished. In the reasons for steel's decline, the exhibit takes a not-so-subtle jab at foreign imports, but does not do enough to fully explore all the reasons for the troubles of the industry. Undoubtedly this is a controversial area, one that is still recent enough to cause pain, but all sides of the argument of steel's decline need to be shown. <p> The basement exhibit is a kind of catch-all, including aspects of the steel mills and steel towns that were too important to be ignored but perhaps not important enough for inclusion in the main exhibit. However, the basement exhibit also features information about immigrant workers and ethnic groups, which is quite important and belongs upstairs in the main exhibit. Instead, the information is shunted aside in a nook downstairs. Steel was an industry dominated by immigrant labor, and their importance to the industry should be recognized better than the museum does. <p> The African-American workforce is almost completely ignored. One chart showing the ethnic breakdown of Youngstown notes that by 1960, African-Americans accounted for almost 20 percent of the population. Yet nearby is a map showing the ethnic neighborhoods of Youngstown, with no mentions of any black neighborhoods. Also going unmentioned is any racial tension in the mills or the company towns, or even mention of tension between various white ethnic groups. If there was none, THAT should be mentioned. Also needed is more emphasis on women. Some women worked in the mills, as secretaries, nurses, or cafeteria workers. Other women ran businesses in town, or had to deal with raising a family in a company town. Their stories go untold, yet are still a part of the story of steel. <p> Another area missing at the museum is a gift shop. Most modern museums have gift shops, and some museum shops do quite a booming business. Apparently this was the decision of the architect, but now that his work as been done the museum should reevaluate the need for a gift shop. A gift shop could be stocked with numerous items including books on immigrant history, the history of the steel industry, community studies on various steel towns (including Youngstown), and books on all aspect of labor. A gift shop at this museum could stock all these types of books (which most bookstores do not), becoming in essence, a resource for research on the steel industry. Copies of videotapes used in the museum could be sold, as well as old industrial films, WPA films, WWII films on the defense industry, and even popular movies that used steel mills and steel towns as settings. A gift shop selling items like these could greatly profit the museum, and aid in luring visitors back. <p> This brings to light a basic problem: how will it lure visitors back? Perhaps devoting more space to changing exhibits would help. Holding lectures by historians would be another way. Northeastern Ohio is fortunate in that it is home to many historians who specialize in labor, ethnic, and industrial history, giving the museum a huge untapped resource. This could be another use for a re-creation of an ethnic hall, because if the space is sizable enough it could be used for lectures, right in the exhibit itself, as well as being a space where films of steel mills, or old industry films could be shown as education and entertainment. <p> None of these criticisms are intended to suggest that the museum is incorrectly done, or that it does not adequately present the history of steel. Rather, they are to provide suggestions for improvement to the museum. Admittedly, some of these suggestions, such as including an ethnic hall re-creation or adding a gift shop, would cost money and require an addition of space, but they are entirely feasible ideas that

should be considered. What Youngstown did was break new ground. They should not let the ground harden under their feet, but instead continue to break new ground, and improve the museum constantly. It should not be considered as completed, but rather a work in progress. <p>

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