

H-Net Reviews

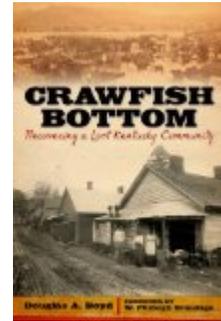
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Douglas A. Boyd. *Crawfish Bottom: Recovering a Lost Kentucky Community*. Kentucky Remembered: An Oral History Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 236 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3408-6.

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer



Douglas A. Boyd's *Crawfish Bottom: Recovering a Lost Kentucky Community* is about peripheries. His book portrays a community on the periphery of history. One of many like it throughout the United States, Crawfish Bottom thrived on the other side of the tracks—a slum, a red light district, an embarrassment to middle-class America. Like similar communities across the country, it grew in the period of social flux in the years following the Civil War and the era of industrial urbanization, and because of the social flux, it took on a wild character that skirted the law or even ignored it.

In portraying Crawfish Bottom, Boyd relies on a methodology that too often has been relegated to the periphery of historical work—oral history. Despite increased acceptance as a tool in scholarly research, oral history often is viewed as a method of last resort by academic historians. In spite of its primary nature, many academicians still view oral history as inferior to secondary sources. As Boyd demonstrates, however, peripheral communities can often lose much of their history without the use of peripheral methodologies.

Crawfish Bottom risked losing more of its history than some communities because of its physical disruption in the 1960s. Lying along the rough and tumble riverfront in Frankfort, Kentucky, the community fell victim to urban renewal. Boyd introduces the reader to the story of Crawfish Bottom with a discussion of community and the role of perceptions in forming its identity. This is especially true when little remains of a community but memory, whether the community has been displaced by urban renewal, declined because of economic distress, been carved up by interstate highways, destroyed by dis-

aster, or surpassed by suburbia. In introducing the reader to Crawfish Bottom, Boyd outlines the 1991 oral history project by James E. Wallace which serves as the core of the memory that he uses in the book. A strong collection of books, journal articles, newspaper accounts, census data, police reports, and maps supplement Boyd's use of Wallace's oral history interviews.

In discussing community, Boyd points to the importance of perception in defining the boundaries of a town or neighborhood. Frequently, governments assign arbitrary or uninformed borders to a community. Such borders become important in the center of politics and society, but on the periphery, political boundaries have less meaning than the cultural and economic lines that depend on perception. Such was the case for Crawfish Bottom.

Names for communities share a similar state. The postal system and railroad companies often stamped names on communities based on the perceptions of those in government or in company headquarters. These names many times ignored the history and culture of the place, particularly if much of the history and culture was on the periphery of society. Peripheral communities often carried several names, depending on the perceptions of the people who lived there or the residents of the surrounding communities. This reflected the fluid nature of the periphery. People referred to Crawfish Bottom as "the lower part of the city" until newspapers provided some uniformity to naming the area (p. 24). Afterwards, variations of Crawfish Bottom surfaced: "Craw," "land of the Craw-Fish," "Crawdad Bottom," or "Bottom" (pp. 25, 55-57).

Crawfish Bottom grew as a community, with its informal borders and names, after the Civil War as African American refugees from the South and German and Irish immigrants came to Frankfort. These peripheral peoples found a geographically peripheral place to live in the low area next to the Kentucky River, an area that repelled mainstream society because of its tendency to flood and its proximity to lumber mills that received rafts of logs floating down from the mountains. The geographic and cultural segregation of Crawfish Bottom made it ripe for vice and violence as millhands and migrant loggers fueled a trade in alcohol and prostitution. The outcast nature of Crawfish Bottom brought concern from mainstream Frankfort as the progressive age dawned. It was the legacy of this progressivism, manifested in the era of the Great Society, that brought the demise of Crawfish Bottom in the guise of urban reform.

Much of Boyd's book examines the work of Wallace's interviews in defining Crawfish Bottom and in building a popular memory of the neighborhood. Wallace built a sentimental body of work that seemingly fell into the trap of absence making the heart grow fonder. In other words, it appears that the narrators in Wallace's interviews shared a nostalgia that might not have been felt had the community still existed with its crime, economic strife, and social inequality. In chapter 4, Boyd makes an effort to balance Wallace's subjectivity with other sources, but the chapter fails to make its point, and the overall tone of the book treats Crawfish Bottom with nostalgia and remorse for the urban renewal that displaced it. This poses a problem because, while it may be well known on the regional and local level that the dominant view of Crawfish Bottom has been that of mainstream Frankfort, the only account readily available to the reader outside of Kentucky is Boyd's book. Thus, in its debut on the national scene, the history of Crawfish Bottom suf-

fers without broader perspectives.

Still, much of the strength of *Crawfish Bottom* lies in its effectiveness in capturing the underside of history and the remnants of a physically defunct community, particularly through its use of oral history as the key source. Taken as such, Boyd's work has much broader implications than the history of a specific place, as each of us can call to mind a community, perhaps in our own heritage, that has become lost or unrecognizable. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of a historical account of a community, oral history should be included.

Overall, *Crawfish Bottom* serves as an informative source about the region and an enjoyable commentary on community history in general. It suffers at times from an awkward organization of chapters and paragraphs, and that awkwardness may be connected to the sometimes difficult integration of oral history into historical narrative. The last chapter, "The King of Craw," highlights the political and criminal boss, John Fallis, but, while interesting and important to the history of Crawfish Bottom, the devotion of an entire chapter to Fallis feels abrupt and out of place. His story could easily have been integrated into another chapter. Instead, the final chapter might have been more fittingly devoted to a full discussion of the urban renewal effort and the steps that led to it. Little is mentioned about the discussions in or out of the community concerning the project or the reactions to it or what happened to the residents of Crawfish Bottom after the renewal.

The strengths of *Crawfish Bottom* far surpass the weaknesses, however, as it provides valuable insight into Kentucky history, African American history, and urban history. It will serve as a resource for scholars in community studies, oral historians, and public historians in general, no matter what the locality.

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