

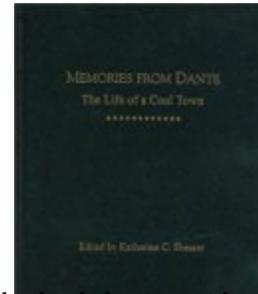
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Katherine C Shearer. *Memories From Dante: The Life of a Coal Town*. S.I.: People Incorporated, 2002. pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9725154-0-5.

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Memories from Dante is a large and hefty book. Between its covers an interested reader will find a wealth of information on the Russell County, Virginia coal town of the title. Interspersed with a well-researched and thorough written history of Dante are 800 photographs, excerpts from interviews, maps, genealogies, poems, song lyrics, recipes, and more. There does not appear to be anything crucial left out and all the various segments of the town's population, its key institutions, and numerous traditions seem to have gotten their due.

Although impressive in its own right, *Memories from Dante* is actually one part of a larger Dante History Project (www.peopleincorp.org/dante.htm) and is very much the product of a collective endeavor. Editor Kathy Shearer interviewed forty-three residents of the town, labored in the archives, collected photographs and other items, wrote much of the accompanying text, and did the bulk of the production work. Retired Dante postmaster Glenn Litton assisted Shearer as did numerous folks at the Dante Senior Center, who offered stories, photos, advice, and support. Jean Haskell, director of Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University, wrote the book's introduction that originally accompanied a traveling display. And Nancy Garretson and Charlene Chambliss Spencer provided some wonderful pen and ink drawings.

Arranged chronologically, the book begins with a brief section on Native American and early European and African American settlement in southwest Virginia. The rest of the chapters provide a unique, detailed social history of Dante in the twentieth century, covering a whole host of topics, including family structure, gender relations, homemaking practices, farming techniques, leisure activities, religion, schooling, and medical care. Of course, the book also covers coal mining, from the creation of the Clinchfield Coal Corporation to its absorption by Pittston, addressing business organization, mining methods and technology, safety and accidents, as well as labor organizing. It ends with chapter on the hard times that have periodically visited Dante, in the forms of economic downturns, floods, wars, and the closing of the mines in 1959.

The only real criticism to make of *Memories of Dante* has to do with its length and cost. At 525 good-sized pages and \$48.00, the book is an unlikely choice for use in either undergraduate or graduate courses. Considering that its primary audience is the people of Dante, this is probably not that big of a problem. But the book is so well-researched and informative it deserves a wider audience. Perhaps, after revisions, an academic press could publish a more user-friendly version.

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