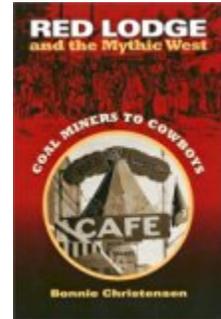


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie Christensen. *Red Lodge and the Mythic West: Coal Miners to Cowboys*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xxiii + 312 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1198-0.

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## “In Search of” a Public Identity: The Case of Red Lodge, Montana

“In Search of” a Public Identity: The Case of Red Lodge, Montana

The West, like America in general, has been shrouded in mythology for centuries as newcomers (as well as newcomer hopefuls and those who sought to attract them) imposed their own notions and sense of identity upon the land for a wide variety of reasons. From New York to Anaheim, Americans have constructed a plethora of identities for particular locales. In this study, Bonnie Christensen takes a close look at the changing persona of Red Lodge, Montana, from its founding in the late-nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth century. There, local opinion makers first denied, then embraced notions of the Old West. Not surprisingly, they did not base their quest on empirical research. Rather, they followed a process similar to their counterparts in other small towns.

This small mountain town had its beginnings as part of the industrial West, built on coal mining for the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1889. That activity, replete with newly arrived European immigrants, absentee corporate ownership, and labor-management conflict, defined the reality of the town until the late 1920s. The first generation of boosters, however, invoked images of a growing, progressive town and agricultural center—cowboys and their employers as well as Native Americans were decidedly unwelcome in Red Lodge’s first public persona. Although they embraced the aging mountain man John “Liver-Eating” Johnson, who served as constable at the time, opinion makers eschewed the popular Wild West

imagery, preferring to attract settlers by touting a peaceful, progressive Main Street that offered opportunity to all.

When the Northern Pacific finally closed its mines, however, survival required new attractions and new industry. Tourism, and with it a new public identity, quickly surfaced. To meet those demands, Red Lodge entrepreneurs quickly embraced the once despised Wild West. Merchants erected false storefronts, former miners donned Western garb (or at least what popular opinion decreed was “true” Western clothing), and the town established its widely publicized rodeo. Even images of Native Americans appeared in signage, such as that of the Red Lodge Cafe, publications, and souvenirs, as the town struggled to attract visitors.

Following the Second World War, Red Lodge fashioned yet a new identity. Grafting the once-denied ethnic diversity onto its Western image, boosters created a public Festival of Nations. Capitalizing on its spectacular scenery and the opening of the Bear Tooth Highway to Yellowstone National Park, opinion makers added a new, scenic appeal for tourists and themselves. Again, at the close of the twentieth century, they joined other locales in the historic preservation movement to resurrect the town’s coal mining past. Down came the false storefronts as citizens rehabilitated the structures of the previous century. “By the 1990s,” Christensen concludes, “Red Lodge was not only a Wild West rodeo site, an ethnic Festival of Nations community, and nature’s town, but it was also a ‘historic’ mining district” (p. 217), and

a viable model for the values and life style commonly associated with small town America.

This latest public identity, of course, was sanitized like its predecessors. The ugly slack piles from the mines were removed, class and ethnic tensions blurred, and other gritty realities ignored. "Like the cowboys who no longer lived in town, the immigrants who now seemed so American, and the natural world that had been conquered with a highway, industrial mining could finally be idealized and celebrated and incorporated back into the town's public persona" (pp. 236-237). In the end, generations of residents have chosen and fabricated a whole series of identities for their town. In part they did so to

appeal to potential settlers and tourists. In part, too, they simply took what they needed or wanted from their past for themselves and for their collective survival as they adapted to the changing realities of the present.

This is a fine case study of a small town's search for a public identity. Christensen has researched her book thoroughly and writes engagingly. She is sensitive to the residents' differing perceptions of themselves and their town, and how those notions meshed with the existential realities of life in the Rocky Mountain West. She carefully blends her story with the larger, national culture and shifting popular views of the West in this thoughtful, well-written story.

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