Workers' World

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Workers' World: Kinship, Community, and Protest in an Industrial Society, 1900-1940.

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The interview material used here was selected from a collection of more than one thousand recorded interviews with industrial workers and their families. Conducted between 1974 and 1981, the interviews were structured and arranged by the author of this book, who conducted most of the interviews, trained additional interviewers, and conceptualized and supervised the entire effort. All tapes are now stored at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg, where they are available to researchers.

The conceptual approach to the interviews is explained in the Introduction, but the method of initiating oral-history projects and obtaining interviews bears amplification if the reader is to understand the entire research process. Generally the interviews were conducted during distinct projects that centered on a particular industrial community or industry. Thus the Braddock interviews with Louis Smolinski and Stanley Brozek emerged from a project involving steelworkers in several towns, including Braddock, McKeesport, and Alequipa. Similarly, the Stanley Salva tape is taken from a study of anthracite coal miners, and the Wayne Hendrickson interview from a program dealing with tannery workers.

In nearly every instance the interviews were secured with the help of local institutions familiar with working-class populations. For instance, the Philadelphia interviews were arranged through neighborhood settlement houses, the Steelton interview was set up by a local church, and the Pittsburgh and Nanticoke respondents were located by means of the pensioner lists at local union halls. Obviously, such an approach does not necessarily produce a statistically representative sample, and it results in interviews only with workers who said “yes” to our requests and were living in the industrial locations studied. The author does not pretend to have solved these problems. It should be stressed, however, that a great deal of comparable data was generated by the interviews and that the selections included here contributed some new perspectives to our understanding of working-class life.
Equally as crucial to a full understanding of the interviews is the fact that all of the respondents were interviewed after the conclusion of their most productive years. Although research on human memory has indicated that a slight decline in memory occurs after the age of thirty, psychologists now acknowledge that the period following retirement or some other traumatic change is a period of “life review,” a time when a sudden emergence of memories and a desire to recall the activities of one’s life are experienced with particular intensity.* Indeed, it may not be accidental that most of the respondents in this book were interviewed five to eight years following their retirement. Most were markedly willing to remember and thus responded affirmatively to the author’s request for an interview. Such a willingness to recall the past is an indispensable factor in obtaining important historical information.

Finally, the basic questionnaire used in this study has not been reproduced here because it was altered and refined so many times. The author’s emphasis was always on the familial, communal, and work arrangements of industrial workers, but the specific questions asked and the overall content of the interviews varied as individual respondents and circumstances dictated. For example, a woman who remained at home and never entered a mine or a mill was questioned more intensively on family life, while a steelworker was asked more questions about the workplace. The interested researcher should note, however, that the questionnaires used in this study are on file with the tapes of the interviews at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg.