

Book Review

The Arthurdale Community School: Education and Reform in Depression-Era Appalachia by Sam F. Stack, Jr.

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Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, commentators began to refer to the political importance of the “silent majority.” This group is now said to consist primarily of white individuals in rural communities who have suffered economic hardship and feel neglected, if not abandoned, by the political establishment. A fair amount of attention has been directed not only toward understanding this group, but also finding solutions to alleviate their concerns. Of the many symbols that have come to represent this group, perhaps none is more compelling than that of unemployed Appalachian coal miners.

The Arthurdale Community School: Education and Reform in Depression-Era Appalachia, a new book by Sam F. Stack, Jr., can provide insight into the crucial role that schooling and community should play in these conversations. This work examines the Arthurdale Project, a New Deal program that sought to create a community in West Virginia where displaced coal mining families could flourish. More specifically, the book focuses on the Arthurdale Community School. This institution was at the heart of the larger community project and served a diverse group ranging from primary school up to the twelfth grade. Ultimately, the story of the Community School is used as a lens to explore political and intellectual anxieties about the decline of the “concept of community,” possible paths to its “restoration” during the Great Depression, and ways to reconcile the primary tension of a democratic society: balancing the benefits of collective action with respect for individual autonomy (Stack, 2016, p. 1).

Chapter One seeks to situate the Arthurdale Community School within

the larger context of the progressive education movement. Much of this chapter covers terrain that would be familiar to historians of education, particularly the view that progressive education was about bringing schooling, individuals, and communities into greater harmony. The author does an excellent job, however, of illuminating the significance of his study by demonstrating that the progressive education movement was seen by both contemporary members and later historians as one that was implemented only in experimental and well-funded laboratory schools and private institutions. Arthurdale, on the other hand, was rural and impoverished.

Chapter Two goes to some length to make this point very clear. Stack describes the devastating toll taken on Appalachia by the Great Depression. It then explores the ideology of the “back-to-the-land” movement. At its heart, this movement was a reaction to the rapid urbanization and industrialization that seemed to lie at the heart of both the causes of the Depression and its effects on morals and morale. The back-to-the-land movement held that impoverished Americans must cultivate a sense of self-reliance to “nurture and build” communities that were not only economically sustainable but emotionally sustaining (Stack, 2016, p. 29). The author shows that this movement had adherents within the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt—most notably the First Lady. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt was intimately involved with Arthurdale and saw it not only as an experiment in social engineering, but as a model that might be followed by communities across the nation. The Arthurdale Community School was created specifically to be the “center of community life” and would provide “students and adults the requisite skills to participate in the local community and democratic society [by nurturing] the habits of cooperation, interdependence, and responsibility” (Stack, 2016, p. 42).

John Dewey was an adviser to the Arthurdale Project, and one of his students, Elsie Ripley Clapp, was chosen as Director of Community Affairs and Principal of the Community School. The author spends much of Chapter Three tracing Clapp’s relationship with Dewey, her broader training at Columbia, her work as a teacher and administrator in Kentucky, and her activities within the larger progressive education movement. Clapp’s credentials were impeccable, and the author does an outstanding job of building on his earlier scholarship to demonstrate that she was a progressive educator who believed schooling should serve as a process of communal socialization and reform.

The next two chapters describe the Arthurdale Community School during Clapp’s two-year tenure as principal. Like many progressive educators, Clapp based her administrative decisions on meeting the needs of the community that she was simultaneously creating and serving, in the most “efficient” manner possible. She encouraged the autonomy of

her teaching staff, with the caveat that the curriculum must be justified as relevant to the community.

Stack carefully and brilliantly utilizes surviving documents and a beautiful photo essay to reconstruct the Arthurdale Community School under Clapp's tenure. Unlike many historians of progressive education, Stack is able to provide a sense of the curriculum as it was practiced in the classroom and the experiences of the teachers and students. The depth with which he is able to discuss specific courses, assignments, and extra-curricular activities is matched only by the breadth with which he is able to show the outreach work of the school—including nutritional training for parents, and theater performances for the entire community.

Although the progressive elements put in place were deemed successful by contemporary educational researchers, a litany of “usual culprits” ultimately ended Arthurdale's reign as a progressive school. The federal government found the school to be unusually costly, and parents were worried that their children were not receiving adequate preparation for college. The institution was dealt a blow when Clapp left after two years to pursue other opportunities. Chapter Six explores the aftermath of Clapp's departure and suggests that, slowly but surely, the progressive elements faded, and shifting social contexts caused the federal government to pull away from Arthurdale. A final chapter provides practical lessons for teachers and larger contemplations on the role of community in a democratic society.

Sam F. Stack, Jr., has written a wonderful book. His discussion of progressive education in a rural setting is a novel contribution to a saturated literature base. More important, he has carefully reconstructed the school as it existed. By doing so, he has reminded everyone that progressive education was not—and is not—merely a set of theories represented by a passage in John Dewey's writings; it was also practices that could be represented by something as simple and powerful as a student connecting with her/his community by painting a local landmark. It is quite common for educational policymakers, administrators, teachers, and pre-service teachers to voice their belief in the restoration of community, differentiated instruction, and a whole host of vaguely defined “progressive” ideals. However, the difficulty lies in translating these ideals into practice. Grappling with this potent book can provide inspiration for all who face this important task.

Reference

- Stack, Jr., S.F. (2016). *The Arthurdale Community School: Education and reform in Depression-era Appalachia* (pp. 1-197). Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.