

A Vibrant, Vertical Town

LOU ANN STOKER DICKSON

Upstairs to a Mine by Violet Boyce and Mabel Harmer. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1976, 189 pp. \$6.95.

For several decades Bingham, Utah was a turbulent mining town. Built on the edge of the "greatest hole on earth," its inhabitants slaved for gold and then for copper. One day Bingham disappeared, consumed by the mine for which the people had toiled so long.

Upstairs to a Mine is the loving narrative about that vibrant, vertical town where everyone lived upstairs to someone or something. Not the kind of book that demands intricate cerebral gymnastics, it lopes along like a visit with Grandma or a favorite aunt. It is the kind of book that Mom picks up between loads of laundry or that history buffs browse on a pleasant evening. A potpourri of nationalities, generations and activities, this is not a Mormon book in the truest sense, but the Mormon soul will instantly recognize the terrain.

These reminiscences of Violet Boyce and Mabel Harmer are retold with keen insight and kindly humor. The memories are vivid and descriptive, but they leapfrog, leaving large gaps that sometimes puzzle the reader. In spite of this, the book is fairly concise and does not ramble as many such narratives are prone to do.

Set in Bingham and the surrounding Salt Lake valley in the opening quarter of the century, the book begins chronologically, but soon dissolves into a collection of humorous tales and interesting anecdotes. Everyone in Bingham is related to everyone else either by blood or by longevity of approximation, and the interactions of this ragged clan in daily survival display a wealth of imagination and some remarkable personalities.

In the forefront of these is "Aunt Becky." She plays a prominent part in

many of the incidents and seems to have been particularly admired by the author. Aunt Becky is a closet feminist who "... had a home in Midvale and owned the Miner's Hotel in Bingham. She ran both with great efficiency and even had enough energy left over to run the town ... " leaving little doubt in anyone's mind that "... (neither) the mayor nor the sheriff had any great illusions as to who was the real boss."

Notable for his ingenuity was Mr. Wallin, a grandfatherly Welshman, full of good humor, songs, tricks and stories. A favorite of the children of Bingham, he had a watch-cat named Midnight whose reputation could chill the heart of any child. Mr. Wallin's imaginative use of Midnight regulated the enthusiastic visits of neighborhood children to tolerable doses.

Of particular interest to today's homogenous society might be the diverse nationalities which inhabited Bingham. The Swedes are extolled as the "... greatest celebrants of any people ... when it came to Christmas. They made it last almost a month." Scattered throughout the narrative are such disparate characters as an Assyrian with a double hernia, a patriotic Armenian, Chinese who bathe every night in tin tubs, Greek bakers and Finns who enjoyed saunas before they became a status symbol.

Reproduced in the book are several old photos which, while interesting, would be more valuable if dated. Readers unfamiliar with the locale might also wish for a map of Bingham and the surrounding valley.

Overall the book suffers from sloppy editing. It is filled with cliches and town jokes that, although part of the vernacular, need not be given such prominent display. Better organization would make the book less confusing.

Incidents tend to be repeated, some events prematurely introduced. Lopez, for example, is presented to the puzzled reader several times before we finally realize his importance. There is also a disconcerting tendency to materialize and then to vaporize characters without introduction or explanation. Quotes are not attributed; assertions are not documented and there is neither index, introduction nor footnotes.

For all its faults, the book is a valuable record of the working class in a mining town during the early part of the century. While activities of the upper classes are generally well documented, little is written about the lower classes. Survival leaves them neither time nor

energy to record their stories. Many of them are illiterate. *Upstairs to a Mine* relates the daily activities of these people beyond lifeless statistics. The colors and flavors of their daily lives are vivid, and there are some startling insights into the quality of life in this small mining town.

The authors have taken the thread of family life in Bingham and have strung it on their loom. Using the gaily colored threads of daily interaction, they have woven the bright, intricate tapestry that was Bingham before the "giants moved it away." The finished cloth may be roughly woven and flawed in places, but it has an unmistakable reality, an exciting pattern.

We Are What We Remember

STEPHEN L. TANNER

Frost in the Orchard by Donald Marshall. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1977. 173 pp. \$4.95

Wright Morris once said, "The 'subject' of Wolfe, Hemingway, and Faulkner, however various the backgrounds, however contrasting the styles, pushed to its extremity, is nostalgia." He should have included Fitzgerald, and even then the list would have been incomplete. Nostalgia permeates American fiction in our century. Donald Marshall may not equal the names above in literary skill, but he shares their subject and has explored it in a penetrating and often profound way.

Having a "subject"—in other words focusing on a significant aspect of human experience—is what distinguishes *Frost in the Orchard* from most Mormon fiction. Too many writers in the Church overrate the uniqueness of the Mormon experience as a source for literary art. More precisely, they overrate the external and superficial characteristics of that experience while at the same time ignor-

ing the deeper core of the uniqueness. Writing about wards, home teaching, polygamy, testimony meetings or folkways of the Wasatch Front is no guarantee, in itself, for creating special or significant literature.

Marshall does not make this mistake. His stories are distinctively Mormon without being self-consciously so. The regional and cultural flavor is there to be enjoyed (the book is a showcase of names delightfully typical of rural Mormonism), but the essential concerns in the stories transcend Utah and Mormon life and treat the universals in human experience, particularly the complex and fascinating experience of nostalgia.

Perhaps nostalgia is not an accurate word. I am referring to more than mere homesickness. Remembrance of things past constitutes a large part of one's character and personality in the present. To a large extent we are what we remember. Consciousness, after all, is mostly memory. Because memory is subjective and suffused with subtle and evanescent