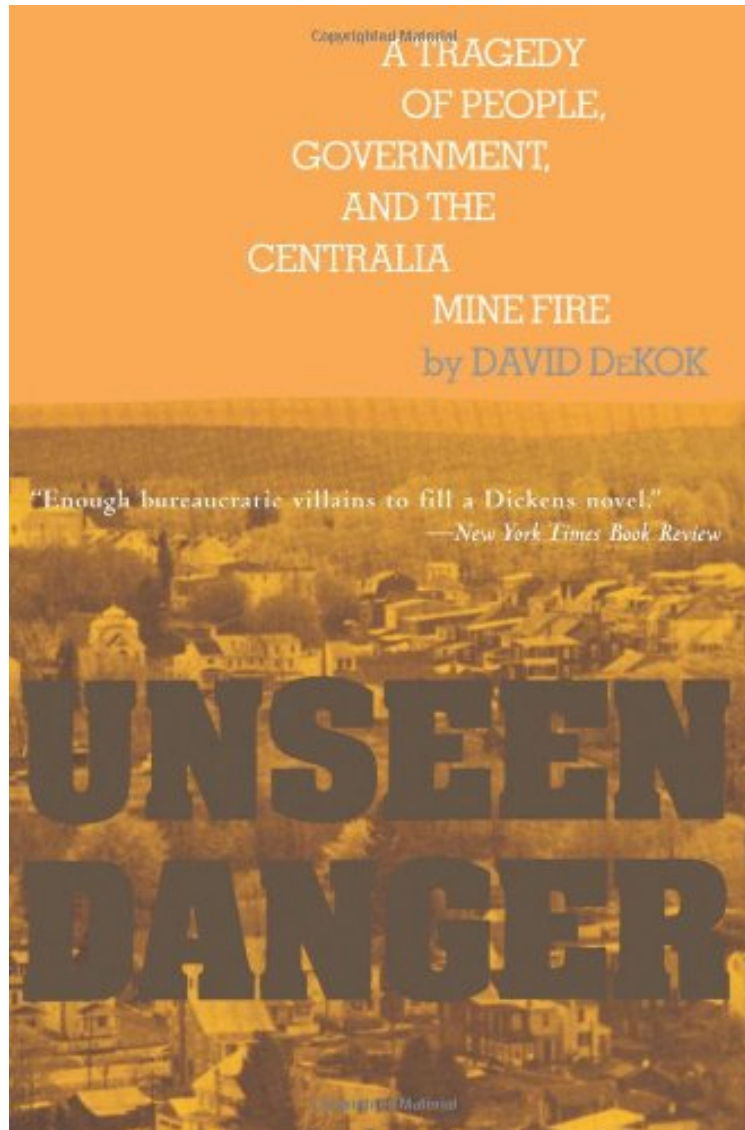


[Online library] Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire

Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire

David DeKok

audiobook / *ebooks / Download PDF / ePub / DOC



DOWNLOAD



READ ONLINE

#1569253 in BooksColor: Other iUniverse 2000-04-27Ingredients: Example IngredientsOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.00 x .79 x 6.00l, 1.05 #File Name: 0595092705316 pages | File size: 15.Mb

David DeKok : Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The best resource on CentraliaBy The ManExcellent job by DeKok! I have long known about, traveled to, and read about centralia, but, despite having heard of this book, never got around

to it. A recent trip through the anthracite region rekindled my interest so I bought a copy. DeKok gives the most fair treatment of all actors than any other source I've come across. He treats the story with true journalistic integrity. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I don't read a large quantity of books but, ...By N. Fort Myers Buyer I don't read a large quantity of books but, this one caught my attention quickly as I spent many years living in Pennsylvania. I haven't completed the book but am finding it very interesting. 21 of 23 people found the following review helpful. One Mine Fire, Two Books By Jeff Beauchamp I first found out about the underground coal mine fire at Centralia PA and the devastation of the town above it while surfing the Web, looking for information about urban ruins. The photos I saw on various websites were eerie: where a small town once stood there was now only streets and sidewalks. A sliver of a dwelling that had once been part of a string of row houses stood alone, propped up on either side by brick chimney-like buttresses that provided the support that other dwellings, now torn down, once gave. Steam rose from cracks in a twisted and abandoned highway or from patches of scorched earth surrounded by dead vegetation. While these photos were very creepy and intriguing, I didn't stop to read much about the story of Centralia; I was on a quest to find out more about abandoned sites closer to my home in New York State's Hudson Valley region that I have seen for myself and visited: the Lente house, Bannerman's Island Arsenal, and the Cornish Estate. Years later but a few weeks ago I happened across the last five minutes of a segment on C-SPAN's Book TV that caught my attention. Joan Quigley, author of "The Day the Earth Caved In" was talking about the Centralia mine fire. From the little bit I saw of the show it was clear that there was much more to the Centralia story than what I gathered from the photos on the Web. I eagerly wrote down the name of the book and its author so that the next time I visited I could order it. After adding the book to my shopping cart, suggested that I also might want to check out David DeKok's "Unseen Danger", an earlier volume on the same subject. I ordered both. As chance would have it, "Unseen Danger" arrived about a week before "The Day the Earth Caved In" and now, having read both books, I'm glad it did. I have a busy life and don't have a lot of time to read but I found Mr. DeKok's telling of the story so compelling that I neglected a lot of my duties around the house to make time for it. I took it to work and read it on my lunch and dinner breaks. I stayed up into the early morning hours, far longer than I should have, to finish it in a couple of days instead of the weeks it usually takes me to read a book. As the blurb quoted on the cover from the New York Times Book Review states, there are "enough bureaucratic villains [in this story] to fill a Dickens novel." I would add that there were some Centralian citizens (especially one infuriatingly obnoxious homeowner in particular who I kept hoping would disappear into a subsidence) and the local Catholic church (who should have also suffered the same fate) who deserved to be included in that category as well. This is a story of missed opportunities, inter-governmental squabbles, denial of the present realities and local feuds all working together to turn the lives of the residents of this beleaguered town into a living hell. Mr. DeKok does a fine job of telling the story and it is obvious that he put a tremendous amount of effort into researching it and a lot of detective work into trying to separate fact from fiction, especially when it comes to the matter of how the mine fire got started in the first place. He paints a clear and terrifying picture of what the residents who were most effected by the danger had to go through before they got some relief, and the unconscionable indifference that government officials showed to the plight of their constituents in order to protect their own political behinds. The cast of characters in "Unseen Danger" is large and varied and includes the above mentioned villains and a few heroes too. The attention to detail is astounding and makes for extremely compelling reading. However, in my opinion, the book is not without its flaws. While the above mentioned attention to detail is most welcome, at times it can be confusing, especially when trying to picture the relative locations of the events. Three small maps are included in the paperback edition that I read; one showing where Centralia is located in relation to large East Coast cities, a local map indicating local landmarks and some street names along with the locations of the fire's origin and the site of one especially scary event, and a third map that indicates where the fire hot spots were located in 1983. These graphics are only helpful in a minimal way and don't go far enough toward clarification. Photographs appear at the start of each chapter and there are a few in the bodies of the chapters. In terms of graphic clarity (not subject matter) all leave much to be desired and in many cases they are of such poor quality as to be useless. They have the appearance of being photocopies of photocopies and are of such high contrast that the very features that they were intended to illustrate have become invisible. I do not blame Mr. DeKok for this - his publisher should have done a better job. As for the type of photos included, there are many of Centralians effected by the fire, some of the government workers who had to deal with the situation on almost a daily basis, one of the fire itself, and many of the government figures involved. However there is one glaring omission: aside from the cover photo which is obscured by the bold lettering of the book's title there are no pictures of the town, either as it was at the beginning of the story, during, or after. For those, one must go to the various websites dedicated to the subject. Ms. Quigley's book generally does not suffer from these kind of setbacks. Even before her Prologue we are provided with a nearly full page map which clearly indicates street names, locations of local landmarks, locations of the principal character's homes, indications of the sites and scope of efforts to stop the fires, and a distance scale to help us better grasp the relative proximities of the places and events described. I wish I had this map while I was reading "Unseen Danger", it would have increased my appreciation of that book all the more. "The Day the Earth Caved In" contains eight pages of black and white photographs, all well reproduced, including one of the authors' grandparents row home from 1984, and one taken in 2000 of a tourist

observing a cloud of vapor emanating from a non-descript area in the woods, as well as photos of mine workings from the 1880's and pictures of some of the people central to her telling of the story. As with "Unseen Danger" wide angle photos of the town before and after are absent and their inclusion would have helped drive home the immense scope of this catastrophe. Again, one has to search the Internet to find those kind of pictures. While David DeKok relates the Centralia story by presenting an almost day by day account of the events that occurred he does not get inside the heads of the principals too deeply. He doesn't have to - anyone who has an atom of imagination can empathize or sympathize with the horrors that these people must have been through. But what left me scratching my head in bewilderment after I finished his book was why the Centralians were so reluctant to leave their homes and flee the danger. I suppose this is because I was born and raised in New York City and have moved to new homes five times since I left my parents house - once because the dangers of living in a loft on NY's Lower East Side became too much to bear. It wasn't until a few days ago while discussing the matter with a co-worker who grew up in a small town in upstate New York (population about 2000) that I really began to understand what made Centralians want to cling to their homesteads so tenaciously. Joan Quigley, by telling her version of the story through the eyes, histories and emotions of a few of the key players attempts to explain that sense of attachment, but is only partially successful. Ironically enough, it is DeKok's sparse explanation that comes closest to what my co-worker told me and what I've observed since moving from NYC to a small town: that many people living in small towns are fearful of the outside world and are much more likely to cling to surroundings that are much more familiar and therefore comforting. Quigley's device of presenting the story by delving into the personal histories and feelings of her selected subjects is a welcome supplement to the mine fire disaster story as told by DeKok but ultimately it falls short in conveying just how desperately dangerous their situation was. At times I got the impression that she feels that the personal relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children or neighbors and neighbors is the interesting part of the story and the mine fire and its dangers were just a backdrop to that soap opera. Major events, like one man's close encounter with death by carbon monoxide poisoning while asleep in his bedroom and the circumstances leading up to it are described in great detail in "Unseen Danger" while Ms. Quigley mentions it almost in passing, preferring to more often dwell on what clothes a person was wearing. (What bearing does who wore what color pants suit on a particular day have on the story at hand? Inexplicably, these kind of observations appear far too frequently.) This is generally indicative of both authors approach to their subjects. Similarly, Mr. DeKok tends to speak with authority and presumably understanding on technical matters while Ms. Quigley shows some lack of comprehension. For example, at one point she states that oxygen was the fuel that kept the mine fires burning. Just for the record: coal is the fuel that is consumed by the fire while oxygen needs to be present for oxidation - burning - to occur; oxygen in and of itself does not burn. This is elementary Junior High school science. While I realize that the point Ms. Quigley was trying to make was that some scientists proposed that if the mine fire were to be deprived of oxygen then it might go out, it is this misunderstanding of basic physics that influences me to trust Mr. DeKok's opinions over hers. One rare instance where Ms. Quigley's narrative excels over Mr. DeKok's is in her scathing indictment of the Reagan administration and of the local Catholic church, an institution highly revered and trusted in Centralia, who let their parishioners down as shamefully and grievously as the government had. Mr. DeKok also criticizes these institutions, but instead mostly relies on the method he employs when dealing with other facets of the story, that of letting the facts speak for themselves. Ms. Quigley does this as well, however, she goes one step further on this one point by including examples of government official's blunders not cited in "Unseen Danger", in particular those of the lunatic James Watt (who was Secretary of the Interior near the end of the story) whose public statements were so insane that President Reagan gladly accepted his resignation, and none too soon: after Watt left office he was indicted on charges of influence peddling. None of this information about Watt was in "Unseen Danger" and I strongly feel it should have been. Both books tell pretty much the same story (though from different perspectives and not equally as well), but one disagreement between the two is about how the fire started in the first place. In my opinion Mr. DeKok presents a far more plausible explanation, citing specific evidence in chapter 3 of his book while Ms. Quigley covers the subject in an author's note at the end of hers. While she states that her research provides strong evidence for her version of the events, she reveals very few specifics of it and appears to rely heavily on the testimony of residents living near the ignition site, claiming that they had no reason to lie. I view this claim with a lot of skepticism. Her own depiction of the character of the Centralia residents (especially some who lived near the dump) leads me to conclude otherwise. Also, Ms. Quigley seems to overlook one gigantic 500 pound gorilla in the room: Why would the town dump be set on fire if it was already burning? It seems painfully obvious to me that they wouldn't. In any case, the cause of the fire is only one part of the story and either scenario would have led to the same result. If one is interested in reading about this subject my advice is to get both of these books. Read "Unseen Fire" first (it is by far the better of the two because in part it tells the horrific story in much more frightening detail) but keep "The Day The Earth Caved In" handy so you can refer to its superior map. Then read Ms. Quigley's book as a supplement, to flesh out some of the characters involved and to learn a handful of interesting but not necessarily essential facts that were left out of Mr. DeKok's. Some may find her more personally intimate and emotional method of storytelling preferable to DeKok's somewhat dry, fact based delivery but I for one did not. For as much as I enjoyed "The Day The Earth Caved In" on a certain level I think I did so because I already knew the facts

ahead of time. Much to her credit, Ms. Quigley invoked in me even more sympathy for the people she chose to focus on than I had before, (at least those who were deserving of it,) especially one young couple's story of being pulled apart because of wanting different things out of life, which paralleled my own personal experience. However, I feel that this concentration on the private lives of a select few takes too much attention away from exploring and understanding the broader picture of governmental incompetence that any one of us could fall victim to under similar unfortunate circumstances. Hope that nothing like this ever happens in your town.

Award-winning journalist David DeKok tells, for the first time, how the Centralia mine fire really started in 1962. He shows how local, state and federal government officials failed to take effective action, allowing the fire to move underneath the small town of Centralia, Pennsylvania. By early 1981, the fire was sending deadly gases into homes, forcing the federal government to install gas alarms. A 12-year-old boy dropped into a steaming hole in the ground wrenched open by the fire's heat on Valentine's Day as the region's congressman toured nearby. DeKok tells how the people of Centralia banded together to demand help from the government, finally winning money to relocate much of the town.

From Library Journalphotog/environment Coal mine fires are not unusual in Pennsylvania, but the one that is the subject of these books certainly is. It has been burning uncontrollably underground for 24 years, generally unseen, but releasing smoke and gases into the atmosphere and homes of Centralians. It is an environmental disaster of the magnitude of Love Canal, with similar citizen versus governmental agency wrangling, and a combination of inaction and ineptitude that has destroyed the town. In these first books published on the topic, the authors both try to present all sides of the issue. DeKok is a journalist from a neighboring town who followed the story for his newspaper and has gone to great lengths to document the facts. His *Unseen Danger* is an excellent, unbiased chronicle devoid of the emotionalism which set resident upon resident. Photojournalist Jacobs, on the other hand, focuses on the personal side. She interviewed residents, who describe their feelings regarding daily life in a stricken area and offer opinions as to how the health and safety problems should have been resolved. Their words appear as captions to the 93 striking black-and-white photos. The two books complement one another nicely, and will enlighten concerned citizens, environmentalists, sociologists, and public policy makers. Sondra Brunhumer, Western Michigan Univ. Libs., KalamazooCopyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.About the AuthorDavid DeKok covered the Centralia mine fire for more than eight years as a reporter for The News-Item, Shamokin, Pa. A graduate of Hope College, he is a recipient of the National Press Club's Freedom of the Press Award. He lives in Harrisburg, Pa., with his wife and two daughters, and is a business reporter for The Patriot-News.