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# After The Smoke Clears: Struggling To Get By In Rustbelt America



## Synopsis

Takes readers into Homestead and Braddock, Pennsylvania; Lewiston, Maine; Matewan, West Virginia; and Flint, Michigan to focus on the strife caused by the departure of industry. Through words and photographs, this book explores the relationship between work, loss, and identity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Other photographers have captured the desolation of abandoned factories and boarded-up main streets. Economists and historians have chronicled what Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone called 'The Great U-Turn.' But no one has brought home that story with quite the same passion and pathos as Mellon. These are not down-and-out steelworkers, miners, or auto assemblers, but witnesses to the betrayal of the American dream, as eloquent as anything Bruce Springsteen has penned." - Stuart W. Leslie, *Technology and Culture*

"Mellon's book finds history's visual record... in the faces of the people those now-gone industries left behind. In his photographs, they appear often as impassive, and impressive, as the sprawling industrial complexes that once sustained them." - Chris Potter, *Pittsburgh City Paper*

America was once full of small, lively places where people produced things. These were factory towns, mill towns, mining towns; places with corner groceries and five-and-dime stores, community churches and neighborhood bars, parades down Main Street, softball games at the town park. Workers could depend on their jobs to support their families for life. Then America changed. Factories closed, mills shut down, mines stopped hiring. Steelworkers, textile workers, automakers,

and coal miners were laid off, phased out, downsized, outsourced, given the axe, or otherwise told to get lost. Once-proud towns became crowded with vacant storefronts, haunted by empty streets, and populated by a group of wounded people fighting through an odd mixture of anger and resignation, determination and hope. Through touching words and poignant pictures, Steve Mellon takes readers on an unforgettable trip through five communities in rustbelt America. In Homestead, Pennsylvania, a former steelworker painfully remembers those driven to the grave by the collapse of the town's legendary works. A steel mill continues to bellow hotly in nearby Braddock, Pennsylvania, as an aging town crumbles around families struggling to stay together. In Lewiston, Maine, a middle-aged man spirals into depression and drink after losing his textile business yet somehow finds enough inner strength to build his life anew. Mellon also unearths tales of sorrow and success in Matewan, West Virginia; the tiny Appalachian coal town infamous for the blood spilled on its streets in the name of work; and in Flint, Michigan, the city that gave birth to a gigantic corporation and an equally titanic union. Each of these company towns had staked its fortune and trust to a single industry. Each at one time prospered. And each, in turn, has suffered mightily. Mellon focuses on the human face of that suffering. Again and again, men and women fighting to make ends meet freely admit that the blows to their sense of self and sense of community were more hurtful than the economic damage caused by the departure of the mill or mine or plant. The voices in *After the Smoke Clears* clearly speak of hardship, kinship, grit, and humor, and the photographs starkly reveal the architecture, landscapes, and personalities of these towns. As he explores the complex relationship between work, loss, and identity, Mellon offers a cautionary tale on the hidden costs of economic policies and business decisions made by multinational corporations to abandon the small towns that made them strong. "A very personal journey through a land that many people have forgotten; the land of closed mills, broken promises, and shattered dreams. I have been there, too, and in his encounters and his photographs, Mellon reminds us all of the price the new economy exacted before it, in turn, went bust."—William Serrin, author of *Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* "The stories of everyday working people rarely get told, especially after their industries, their towns, and their lives are consigned to the economic trash heap. . . . As a touching, partly autobiographical journey, *After the Smoke Clears* also links the industrial past with the 'post-industrial' present, raising the specter that the heartbreak in what are often dismissed as rustbelt communities may visit as well workers in the boom businesses of today."—David Moberg, Senior Editor, *In These Times* "If there has ever been an adequate visualization of the phrase 'the salt of the earth,' it can be found in *After the Smoke Clears*. . . . Anger, sadness, and dignity speak from every page. . .

. Bitter labor strife, the aching loneliness of unemployment, and the disorientation when a way of life collapses. . . . This rich and vital book captures one of the greatest disappearing acts of all time: the eradication of our industrial way of life."#x97;Charles McColleston, Director, Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Labor Relations "Mellon's portraits of real people, their words, their looks, their surroundings, are a marvel, combining the eye of the photographer and the ear of a fine reporter."#x97; David Demarest, editor of *The River Ran Red: Homestead 1892* --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

*After The Smoke Clears: Struggling To Get By in Rustbelt America* by Steve Mellon (a journalist and staff photographer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette) is an informed and moving chronicle of the rise and fall of the steel and mining industry in America. A tale of the communities surrounding the employment bounty of the steel mills, and the struggle to survive when the closure of this employment bounty left a void in people's ability to support themselves, *After The Smoke Clears* is a compelling and highly recommended saga of twentieth-century American history enhanced with black-and-white photography.

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