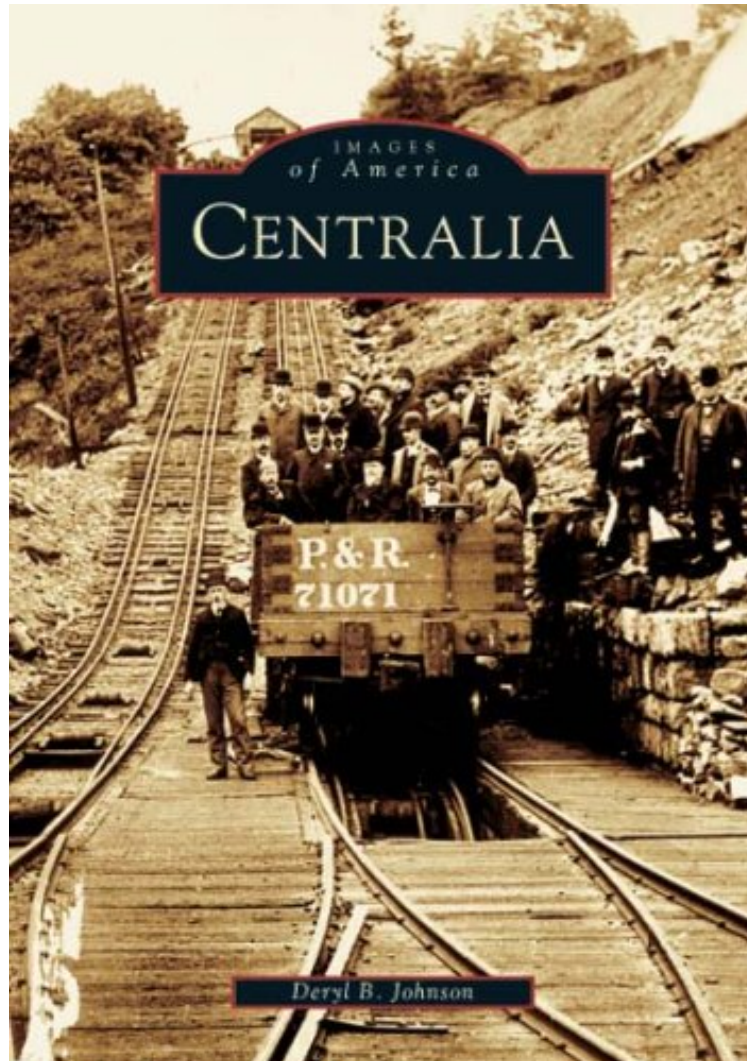


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## Centralia (PA) (Images of America)

*Deryl B. Johnson*

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**Deryl B. Johnson : Centralia (PA) (Images of America)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Centralia (PA) (Images of America):

5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Echoes from a somber empire.By Angry Mofocentralia continues to disappear -- there are even fewer houses left standing now than in the pictures at the end of this book. The other properties are almost completely overgrown. You can guess where the houses used to stand by looking at the patches of tall grass and weeds in between the bigger trees. Sometimes you can see the remains of steps that once led up to someone's front porch.What a strange and sad story -- a routine bonfire accidentally ignited a huge underground deposit of anthracite coal, creating an unseen fire that is expected to burn for hundreds of years. The small town on the

surface was completely obliterated, with fewer than ten people still holding out in their family homes. Rumors allege that coal interests are pushing for their eviction, in order to get at the coal. Disquieting, if true; at this point, rather than tearing up the hill, disturbing the old cemeteries and former church grounds, I think it may be better to just let the town sink peacefully into oblivion. Once an active community, Centralia has turned into a sobering vision of human impermanence. So anyway, my interest in this story led me to this book. Unfortunately, this isn't really the best place to go to for one's education. Now, granted, the "photo essay" format does have its strengths. A big part of the impact is purely visual -- you have to see the difference between the way the town was and the way it is now. But you can get that by searching on the Internet, or by going there yourself if you happen to be visiting the area. One would like to have a little more background information. Unfortunately, this book offers little exposition. When it tries to describe something, it uses tortured, awkward prose: "The tension between ethnic class, religious and social class created great tensions." (11) A full dissertation on the Molly Maguires (who even sort of inspired a classic Sherlock Holmes novel) might be a bit much to ask for, but at least one might want a bit more information on Alexander Rea, the man who founded the town and was subsequently murdered in it. It would have been nice to have more description of the different ethnic groups that came to the town, and how they came to settle down in this particular place. The town had a very prominent Orthodox Christian community, and one of the main cemeteries in town was set aside for this particular religion. I was surprised to see it when I visited Centralia -- it seems like the Orthodox faith was going strong for many years in this region, though it's not something that most people would tend to associate with American history. The book gives some sense of the townspeople's sentimental fondness for their town, with a few anecdotes about how people enjoyed singing festive songs and so forth. But it's not a very historical perspective. Perhaps the book's author wished to focus on the personal aspect, trying to convey the feelings of individual townspeople rather than the broad historical narrative. However, while the book does offer a few quotes from current and former residents, it has no interviews. I would have thought there'd be at least a list of names and portraits celebrating the last remaining townspeople, but there isn't. If you view it purely as a photo essay, there are still gaps. Possibly the most haunting image in Centralia is the ruined highway. Part of Route 61 collapsed due to the fire. The road was abandoned and an alternate route was constructed. There used to be a warning sign marking the place where the detour began, but it's gone now -- if you drive on 61 today, all you will see is a very innocuous bend in the road, with an unobtrusive dirt mound on the corner. But past that mound is an overgrown road with warped, twisted asphalt and smoke wafting out of cracks in the pavement. You'd figure that this desolate landscape would deserve its own chapter in the book (David DeKok devotes a lot of space to it in his Centralia photo archive), but no. Parts of the book are informative and effective. There is an entire chapter showing the demolition of the town's most important Catholic church, an integral part of the town ever since the latter was founded. The last photograph in this section shows the empty space where the church once stood (now, that place isn't even marked anymore), a sad epitaph considering the importance of religious life in the town. Overall, though, this book doesn't quite serve its purpose. If you've already visited Centralia, it can provide a little more context. DeKok's book covers the mine fire and its aftermath in much more detail, but is written in a much more sensational tone, and also lacks a complete historical picture. The definitive Centralia book has yet to be written... 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Tim Kichline Good read. Good pictures and history of centralia. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer Great little book. Everything I expected.

Centralia is the saga of a Pennsylvania community consumed by an underground mine fire. The town, founded in 1866, has often been embroiled in tragedy and controversy. Beginning with the infamous Molly Maguires, Centralia was confronted with the murder of its founder and an assault upon its Catholic priest, who cursed the town, saying, One day this town will be erased from the face of the earth. Almost one hundred years later, a vein of coal that ran underneath the town caught fire and has burned since 1962. In the 1990s, the state of Pennsylvania declared eminent domain and forced most of the towns sixteen hundred residents to leave. Ten people remain in Centralia today. This book chronicles many of the images and stories from this fascinating and colorful Pennsylvania community.

About the Author Deryl B. Johnson is a playwright, performer, and professor in the Department of Speech Communication Theatre at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. He has been researching and documenting the history of Centralia for years.