



Red Lodge and the Mythic West: Coal Miners to Cowboys

Bonnie Christensen

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Midway between Billings, Montana, and Yellowstone National Park, tourists encounter the quaint little town of Red Lodge. Here one may see cowboys, Indians, and mountain men roaming a downtown that's on the National Register of Historic Places, attend a rodeo on the 4th of July, or join in a celebration of immigrants during the annual "Festival of Nations." One would hardly guess that until recently Red Lodge was really a down-and-out coal-mining town or that it was populated mainly by white Americans.

In many ways, Red Lodge is typical of western towns that have created new interpretations of their pasts in order to attract tourists through a mix of public pageants and old-timey facades. In *The Evolving West*, Montana-born Bonnie Christensen tells how Red Lodge reinvented itself and shows that the "history" a community chooses to celebrate may be only loosely based on what actually happened in the town's past.

Tracing the story of Red Lodge from the 1880s to the present, Christensen tells how a mining town managed to endure the vagaries of the West's unpredictable extractive-industries economy. She connects Red Lodge to a myriad of larger events and historical forces to show how national and regional influences have contributed to the development of local identities, exploring how and why westerners first rejected and then embraced "western" images, and how ethnicity, wilderness, and historic preservation became part of the identity that defined one town.

Christensen takes us behind the main street facades of Red Lodge to tell a story of salesmanship, adaptation, and survival. Combining oral histories, newspapers, government records, and even minutes of organization meetings, she shows not only how people have used different interpretations of the past to create a sense of themselves in the present, but also how public memory is created and re-created.

Christensen's shrewd analysis transcends one place to illuminate broader trends in the region and offer a clearer understanding of the motivations behind the creation of "theme towns" throughout America. By explaining how and why we choose various versions of the past to fit who we want to be—and who we want others to think we are—she helps us learn more about the role of myths and myth-making in American communities, and in the process learn a little more about ourselves.

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