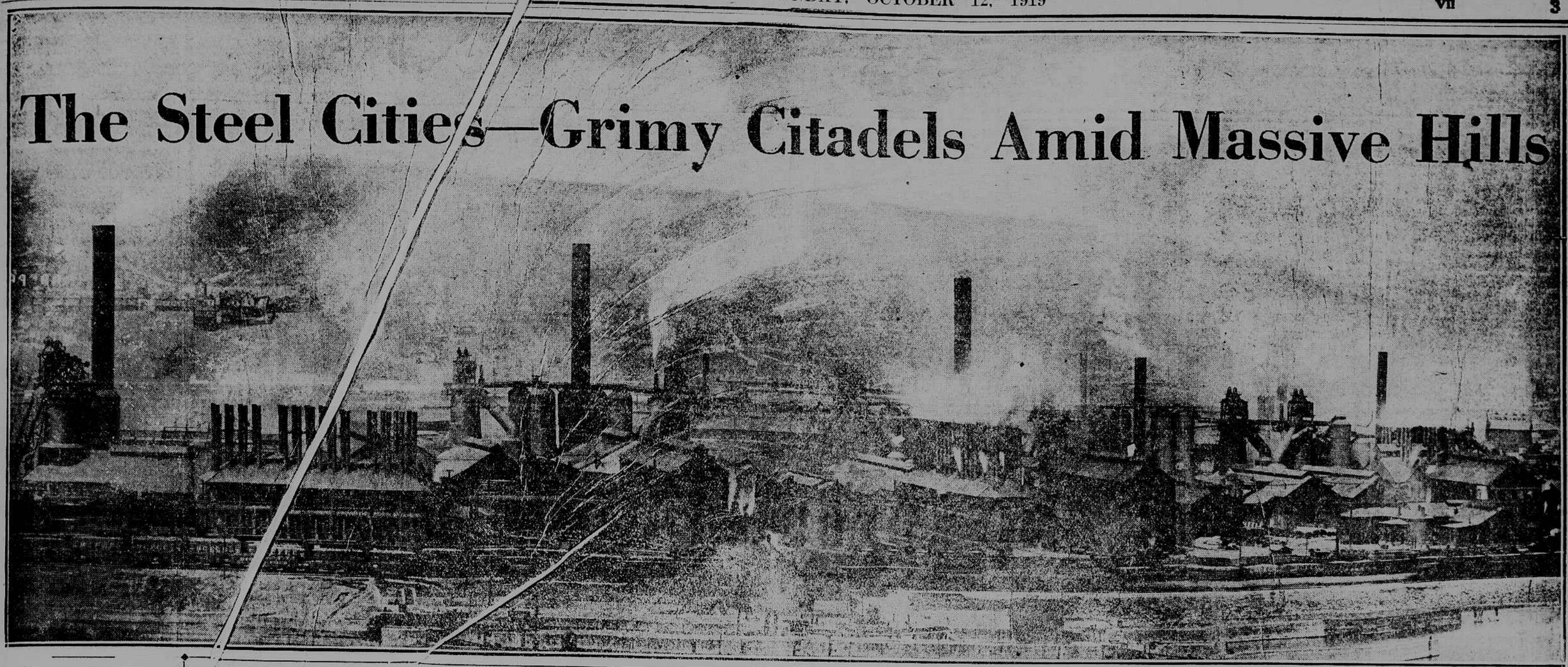
The Steel Cities—Grimy Citadels Amid Massive Hills



By Theodore M. Knappen

PITTSBURG'S industrial region, the Verdun of the war for the control of steel, is naturally one of the most picturesque sections of America, and viewed in the mass the works of man have but added to Nature's work. Into a setting of massive hills and deep and narrow valleys roughing three great rivers and many tributaries, where Nature builded solidly and hugely, came rough, sturdy and indomitable men to rear in time the hard, toilsome industries of iron and steel that produce the foundations and the fabric of the physique of modern civilization. Most unlovely in themselves, the interminable smoking mills, furnaces, coal tipples, oil well derricks, railroads that slash the hills, and the myriad towers and stacks that pierce the sky, slag dumps that resemble and rival glacial moraines, all contribute to a scene of impressive grandeur, shrouded by smoke by day and glowing with the fires of creation by night.

The steel giant, as symbolized by Pittsburgh, is a colossal octopus whose tentacles reach out through all the valleys roundabout from the city itself and grip the rustic hills in coils of relentless industry working mightily in iron and coal and gas. The capital of steel is thus not a compact city that excludes the country but rather one that penetrates and encoils it for a hundred miles. The farmer from his cornfields and pastures looks down upon cities and towns that have length rather than width, and the stripped worker at the blistering furnaces and forges has but to look upward to behold a fair and quiet countryside. From the great spaces of the generous hills and plateaus it is but a step to the constriction and congestion of the huddled workshops and habitations that intrude upon the rivers on one side and gouge and hang onto the hills on the other.

The Hills and Valleys

On the hills is sparsity of population, in the valleys such crowding as is not surpassed elsewhere in America. Above is the cleanness and wholesomeness of the primitive world; below the dirt and squalor of the human warren. From valley floor to hilltop one passes from the complexity of the industrial age to the simplicity of the rustic era. Above, the world seems good and lucid; below, it appears dubious and turbid. In the hills reside the homogeneous old American stock, taking life in leisurely fashion; in the valleys swarm and jabber all the races and tongues of the alien world in a bedlam of social and economic distraction. On the heights there are no "modern problems"; in the depths there is nothing else.

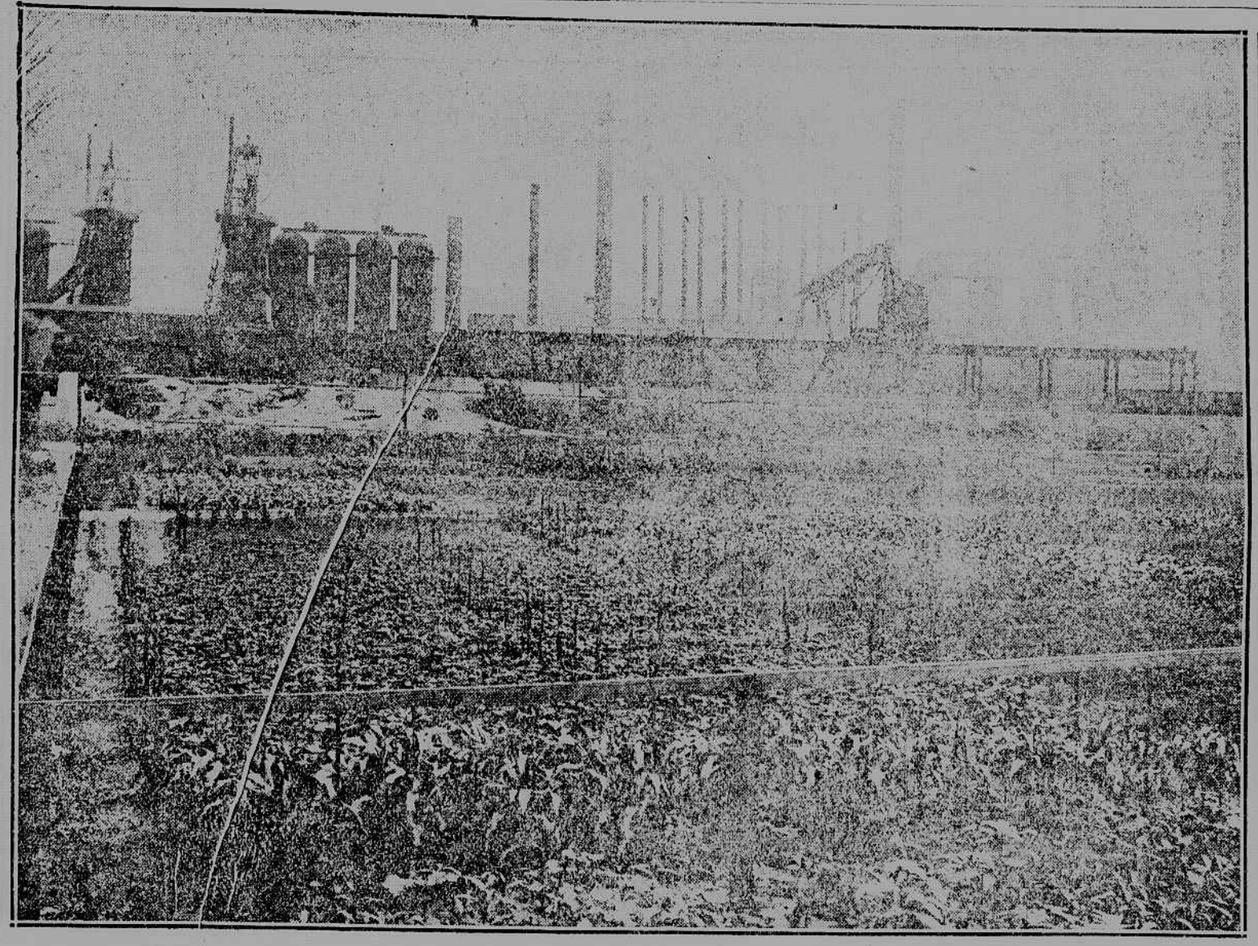
Where the blue Monongahela from the south unites with the brown Allegheny from the north to form the Ohio is Pittsburgh city, straddling all the rivers—the brain and head of the octopus. It has grown out of the valleys for its better residences, but the business district is piled into them and is close against the innumerable mills, around which are built the endless rows of houses in which the workers live. These are usually two-story structures, abutting directly on the streets, contrasting strangely in their more or less unkempt—though by no means wretched—appearance with the trim office buildings and great stores that rival the hills in height.

All the life and activity of the tenuous valleys flow into this tense and pulsing city. Just as the rivers converge here, so converge the railway lines in intricate yards and terminals—not only from the surrounding territory, but from half a continent. In these yards are collected and thence dispatched to the ends of the earth the greatest initial traffic the world has yet produced. The rivers themselves do not escape the law of toil that is upon all this region. Up and down their canalized loops move, day and night, long tows of coal barges from the countless river mines.

A Continuous City

Up the Monongahela on either side of the stream are Homestead, Duquesne, Braddock, Rankin, McKeesport, Glassport, Dravosburgh, Clairton, Monongahela City, Donora, Monessen, Charleroi and so on, in a continuous city. Up the Allegheny are such places as Sharpsburg, Etna, Tarentum, New Kensington, Aspinwall, Brackenridge and Nationa, and on the tributary streams scores of busy towns that work in iron and steel. In all of them, the majority of the lowlier workers live in mean houses, chiefly frame, and usually painted a dull gray, that front on dirty streets, leading from the mills.

In the larger places there are rarely any yards, but in the smaller towns, even in the "company houses," all but the most recent of which are extreme in their ugliness and monotony, there are patches of yards, but they are always littered and uncared for. They do not look like homes—they are only bunkhouses for families or boarders, no matter how substantial they may be.



The better class of workers get away from these dreary districts to snug cottages and pretentious houses on the hillsides and up the gulches. The mill tenements are as unhomelike within as without—nothing but the rudest furniture of living incongruously mixed up with pianos, graphophones and washtubs, with dirty babies sprawling on the floors and rolling out the doors and into the streets. Despite the environment, the human stock of these lowly districts is vigorous. The men are stocky and muscular and the women sturdily moulded for motherhood. There are no signs of malnutrition; no evidences of lack of food; and of a Sunday the men don the most up-to-date clothing and the women blossom forth in expensive raiment.

The crowding in these dingy

At the top of the page, some of the great steel shops in the Pittsburg strike district.

The picture above shows flourishing truck gardens under the shadow of the great mills themselves.

At the left——No strike in this alley.

places is often awful, but there seems to be little relation between that fact and the earnings of the workers. Thrift concentrated solely on the amassment of cash is not altogether a virtue. The foreign workers are willing, with the exception of a few extravagances, to sacrifice all present good and well-being to the accumulation of money. With such a goal, high standards of living are incompatible and apparently excluded. Crowded together like animals in a stockyard of their own volition, decency and cleanliness are impossible and sanitation forgotten. Most attempts to improve living conditions among the foreign masses have failed. Often when houses have been provided with bathtubs they are used for coalbins and other storage purposes. Then the plumbing gets out of order, the householder has a big plumbing bill to pay—and after that he wants no more modern houses. All he wants is a place to sleep, a place to eat and a place to work. His thoughts are always on the old home in Europe and the "pile" that will take him back one day, there to live in ease and comfort. Of course, marriage, children and their responsibilities often come to dissipate the initial purpose, and then begins the phase of mergence into American life, higher standards, a little home up in the hills and living for living's sake. To the men of the squalid tenements the strike really appeals as a chance for more money—not more money for better living, but more money for the stocking, the money belt and the bank—more money for the life in the old homeland.

New Cottages

The steel companies feel the reproach of these squalid dwellings and the gray lives of the dwellers, but they hardly know how to go about improving conditions. Nevertheless, they are building more and more cottages, varied in design, thoroughly modern and low in rent. Almost every mill has its athletic field and recreation grounds for the children, and spacious washrooms, ample lockers, shower baths, lunchrooms and cafeterias for the men are coming in. A little more time and they will be introduced into all the mills. Hospital facilities, emergency and permanent, are generally well supplied. Community gardens have been established to give the people a chance to get away from their confined districts, and attempts are even made to beautify the open spaces in the mill yards. But so long as the poorer houses remain they will be occupied. The long hours of the steelworkers doubtless have something to do with their indifference to their home surroundings.

There is danger that an account of the worst conditions will give an erroneous impression. It needs to be remembered that probably not more than a third of the mill men live in the poorer class of houses. The other two-thirds—mostly Americans—live in better houses, provide better and enjoy more of the good things of life than most of the wage workers in such cities as New York and Chicago. They earn largely and spend freely.

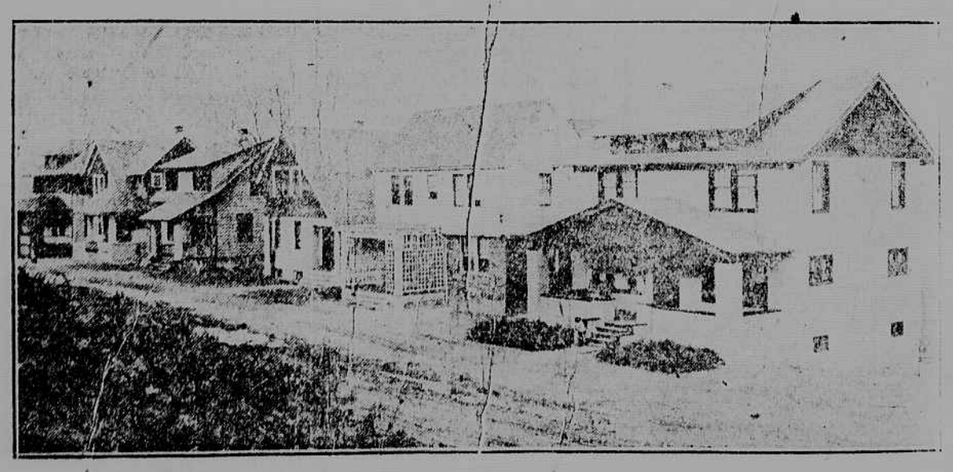
A Traffic Problem

The mills are generally on the water fronts of the rivers and creeks. Close to them and paralleling the watercourse is the main street of the town, with the dwellings of the unanchored workers crowded closely above or below. In getting from one valley to another by anything like a direct road tremendous hills have to be crossed, and the municipal engineers have hard problems to solve in getting passable grades for them as well as the city streets. In Pittsburgh itself inclined railways are resorted to in places, the traffic being lowered and lifted by what are in effect huge elevators. Trestles and bridges are everywhere. Population, factories, railroads, business houses and residences all tend toward the valley floors, so that great congestion exists in proximity to the open country. The result is that many of the working people are grouped more closely together than in most factory towns and live where pleasant surroundings are almost impossible. In these long and narrow towns it is impossible to traverse them without seeing the worst sections more easily than the best. The nearness of the workmen's quarters to the mills, which the topography encourages if it does not necessitate, to a large extent contributes to the slatternly appearance of their habitations, with smoke and soot everywhere.

Great Blacksmith Shop

The mills and plants are rude places and the making of steel is at best hard and dirty work, and often dangerous. A steel mill is, after all, nothing but a great blacksmith shop—a place of smoke, fire, heat, steam, noise, cinders and soot, where mammoth machines annihilate time and multiply power in dim and murky bays under grimy vaults. Fascinating to a spectator as is the colossal process of smelting iron from ore and steel from iron and the concentration of prodigious mechanical force that beats it into shape, it is only a dirty job to the common worker. From the dirt and grime of the mill the unskilled worker goes unmoved to an ugly home in a dreary street. In a lovely world in the hills all roundabout he lives and has his being in the dank valleys.

To him a strike vaguely points the way to the hills. It varies the monotony of serving with the stimulation of protesting. For a time he gropes into a world of thought and views life outside the shop and the human den. A strike is an epoch in his life. It is a grand variant from the dull round of humble work, even if it leaves him poorer. It demonstrates the importance of his labor and dignifies for him his part in the human drama.



These two pictures afford an excellent idea of the contrast in livinig quarters