The Tribe of Ishmael is a biblically derived moniker for hundreds of impoverished late nineteenth-century migrants and immigrants in Indianapolis whose requests for public welfare caught the attention of Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch of the Plymouth Congregational Church. McCulloch, who named the tribe and made its members the focus of his campaign to reform charity and eradicate pauperism, asked untrained observers to conduct “family studies.” Their notes (available in the Indiana State Archives) pin crime, feeblemindedness, and intentional poverty on a loosely connected, racially mixed group of people whose behavior and relationships flouted conventional mores.

In the 1970s, Hugo P. Leaming, a Unitarian minister and historian in Illinois, read McCulloch’s work. Inspired by the notes’ numerous mentions of intermarriage and procreation among blacks, whites, and American Indians, Leaming traced the Ishmaels’ origins as well as their purported “gypsying” paths between Indiana and Illinois towns with names like Mecca, Mahomet, and Morocco. Because he self-identified as tri-racial and was interested in black nationalism, Leaming searched for connections between the Ishmaels and African Islam. In “The Ben Ishmael Tribe: A Fugitive ‘Nation’ of the Old Northwest,” a chapter in The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest (1977), he declared the Ishmaels to be Muslims of African descent and founders of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam.
Leaming's history-changing assertions are still in circulation, especially online. However, according to Nathaniel Deutsch, they simply aren't true. Deutsch, a professor of literature and history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is the author of books on Judaism, Gnosticism, and early Christianity. His research on marginalized communities and African American religions led him to Leaming's essay; this book deftly dismisses Leaming's conclusions as wishful thinking consistent with other American Orientalist ideals. “He literalized elements of [the Ishmaels'] identity that had previously functioned on a symbolic level,” Deutsch says. “Leaming flipped the actual ethnic and racial proportions of the tribe’s members so that . . . he had transformed a collection of poor, overwhelmingly white, Upland Southerner migrants into an African American Islamic community” (p. 14). Although the McCulloch notes document mixed-race members as well as some who ignored Indiana’s Sunday laws, Deutsch asserts that the Ishmaels were actually “white Christians.” Whether that is a leap of faith as long as Leaming's may someday be known, but Deutsch acknowledges that McCulloch's study of the Ishmaels helped to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment in the 1880s and beyond.

Deutsch also discusses Arthur H. Estabrook, a caseworker for the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), from 1910 to 1929, and a biologist with particular interest in mixed-race genetics, who edited McCulloch’s Tribe of Ishmael materials after World War I. Although the resulting manuscript was never published, Estabrook and others used it in support of antimiscegenation and compulsory sterilization laws intended to prevent mixed-race marriage and reproduction by individuals deemed degenerate or mentally unfit. Estabrook's manuscript was archived in the ERO with other studies of mixed-race groups.

Deutsch critiques “Estabrook’s retrospective diagnosis of the Ishmaelites as feebleminded” (p. 115) because it was based not on firsthand observation but on McCulloch’s unscientific study. The author points out many problems in Estabrook's work, including: weak or undisclosed sources; genealogical and statistical missing links; evidence that “gypsying” was not always an indicator of pauperism and that many Ishmaels traveled in search of work, despite accusations of laziness; and no proof that the tendency to travel is genetically determined. In fact, he notes, “Estabrook was unable to provide any evidence that the Tribe of Ishmael still constituted a distinct community—if it ever had” (p. 126).

And yet Indianapolis did include those citizens called the Tribe of Ishmael, whose descendants continue to search for new clues to their real identity. One unusual example is the pseudonymous “Ishi Ishmael,” a Massachusetts performance artist and musician who began researching the
tribe when his family mentioned “Indiana gypsy” ancestry. (They are appalled, he says, that he would want to identify with “the worst family in America”; thus the pseudonym.) His album, *Comin’ Home to Indiana*, is the creative result of many years of reading and connecting the dots among chapters of Hoosier history that reflect disenfranchisement of the “Other.” Billed as roots rock, the CD’s twenty-two tracks move through many folk and world music forms, including American Indian rhythms and Celtic ballads; Caribbean ska, reggae, mento, and calypso; and American jazz, blues, traditional rock 'n' roll, and contemporary country. The stream-of-consciousness lyrics, spoken and sung by Ishi and a band of unidentified friends, weave the Tribe of Ishmael and racism, poverty, and industrialization in early Indianapolis together with Tecumseh, Abe Lincoln, Little Orphant Annie, Eugene Debs, Booth Tarkington, and a lot more.

Ishi views the Tribe of Ishmael through a wide artistic lens; Deutsch narrows the focus through scholarly vision. Both perspectives inspire continued research.

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**Steel Giants**

*Historic Images from the Calumet Regional Archives*

By Stephen G. McShane and Gary S. Wilk. Forward by Mark Reutter


The story of Northwest Indiana’s transformation is fascinating. From the end of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century, the region that Powell Moore had described as Indiana’s last frontier became one of the great centers of industrial production. This quick transformation has long given the Calumet region great symbolic value. In his 1979 book, *The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines*, historian Perry Miller framed the paradoxes of modern development. He argued that when previous generations realized that they were incapable of dealing with their world they could blame the gods; but, Miller continued, “whom dare we blame for Gary, Indiana” (p. 202). At the turn of the twentieth century, however, the steel cities of Northwest Indiana symbolized the nation’s great potential for industrial growth. Not only did Inland Steel and U.S. Steel build massive industrial complexes to produce steel, they also documented every step of this process with vivid photography. Here was the tabula rasa upon which was to be