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*An American Hometown*  
*Terre Haute, Indiana, 1927*

By Tom Roznowski

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. Pp. xvi, 264. Illustrations, index. Paperbound, \$24.95.)

Writer and editor David Hamilton posits that every place generates an initial, telling existential question when one moves into it. He told me that when he moved to Virginia, the question was, "Who are your people?" When he moved to Alabama, "What church will you be going to?" Michigan prompted, "What work do you do?" And Iowa, where David finally moved and still lives today, "What will you garden?"

Reading Tom Roznowski's Borgesian science fiction compendium, er, excuse me, history, *An American Hometown*, I was reminded of David's wry rubric. The interrogative crowbar that the book inserts to pry open each of its many characters is primarily the Michigan wedge of occupation. Roznowski fruitfully employs the varieties of employment found in the 1927 Polk City Directory of Terre Haute, Indiana, to leverage the nature of this place and this time. The book is an abecedarian of citizens' names, each followed by an italicized appositive of his or her job.

And, yes, the annotated encyclopedia that results does read a lot like

detailed notes for an epic science fiction in a galaxy far far away. Terra Haute might as well be the planet Mingo for all its remote strangeness, for all these remote people occupied in these bizarre and unusual tasks.

As a history, there is little story. The book is all, or almost all, exposition, as Roznowski expands names and occupations into a series of energetic speculative essays on timely common cultural technologies, social practices, and the coincidences of daily life. The effect is that of a vast museum, a cabinet of wonder, its bare bones framed by intriguingly complex enabling apparati. Every inch of this museum's walls is papered with ever-expanding interpretive labels.

Imagine a map more detailed than the thing it represents. In such a setting, juxtaposition is all. The arbitrary ordering spontaneously creates valences, insightfully opening up spaces for emotional response and intellectual connection.

This isn't "story" as much as anecdote on steroids. The white space between each entry is a graphic invitation for the reader to participate in

making the meaning of the text. Here, the entry on Birch E. Bayh, a supervisor of physical education (annotated to reflect his paternity of a future United States senator and grand-paternity of another senator who also will serve as governor) sits right next to that of Orval W. Baker, a manager of the Klan Home (bulkied-up by its hefty essay about the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana).

What to make of that? Indeed, what to make of this or that at all? Such foiling often foils our chance to make any lasting sense. Roznowski instead suggests, almost atmospherically, that Terre Haute in 1927 represented, literally and figuratively, the crossroads of America and its history. The device of the city directory as exploding cloud chamber allows us to map the many and varied trajectories at a unique collision of time and space. His introduction argues that our immediate, real-time sensation of exhaustion, our post-postmodernness, can, in fact, be traced back to this moment's Big Bang, its outward vectors incubating in this list of names

and catalog of jobs. The picture it presents of the past may therefore also be the author's portrait of our future sans cheap transportation, sans massive communication, sans entertainment conglomeration, sans concentration of wealth. To his credit, Roznowski constructs this simulation of a city and a time with little nostalgia and with much lively imaginative vision.

As I read *An American Hometown*, I was reminded not only of a more elaborate Sim City but also of a schematic for a steam-punked analog version of Facebook, a garden-like social network spun from one simple question: What do you do?

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## *The Bill Cook Story*

*Ready, Fire, Aim*

By Bob Hammel

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv, 411. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95)

Why would a sports writer author a book about an industrialist? Can you imagine Grantland Rice writing a biography of John D. Rockefeller, or Red Smith penning a tome on the life of Henry Kaiser?

*The Bill Cook Story* is as exciting as any championship series. Told by a master storyteller, the narrative sweeps the reader through the personal and private lives of Bill and Gayle Cook. Unknown even in their