

Stolen Fields: A Story of Eminent Domain and the Death of the American Dream

Jean Boggio

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Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (4/08)

“Stolen Fields” is a story of the American Dream gone wrong. It is a story of hatred, bitterness, ambition, and greed. It is also a story of “What If” and “If only.” What if eminent domain had not taken the Cole property? If only Grandfather Cole had been able to build his prosperous ventures?

Jean tells of growing up as a descendant of the strong-willed and vibrant Cole family. In the first few chapters she gives the reader a glimpse into the historic heritage and of the hard working Coles and the economic success of the fertile farm on Neville Island near Pittsburg. The Cole farm on Neville Island was known as “The Market Basket of Pittsburgh.”

Jean Boggio consistently and fairly shared two sides of a story. I felt bonded to the family as I listened as Jean shared lighthearted gossip through the stories handed down from one generation to the next, fairly reporting on two completely different perspectives of the perceived facts.

During the years of 1918 and 1919 toward the end of WWI, the United States government came up with a plan to rival the German Krupps Works that provided munitions for the German juggernaut. Neville Island was selected to be the site for the project. The government officials invoked the process of eminent domain to seize the property for public use. The project had only begun when the Armistice was signed. The government no longer needed the land. It was put it up for public auction.

The Cole family, distraught by loss of the home that had been in the family for over a hundred years, held out in an attempt to negotiate a fair market price. After a great deal of harassment and the fear of arson they were forced to accept the government-determined price.

Family accounts, newspaper research, and historical sources, as well as her own memories provided Jean Boggio with the material for this remarkable account of the Cole’s of Neville Island and the impact of eminent domain on the dreams of her parents, their children, and ultimately on the generations that follow. Although there were feelings of hatred, and bitterness by members of the Cole family, theirs is a journey that resonates with a sense of accomplishment, pride, and promise.

This is more than a leisurely nostalgic stroll down memory lane. Jean's vivid descriptions draw the reader into the experience of being a part of her childhood at the Sandy Lake farm. She has the amazing ability to turn everyday circumstances and events into entertaining, often humorous, stories that resound with simplicity, warmth, and reality. Jean uses flashbacks depicting scenes from her childhood. She reveals details of her relationships with her sister, her parents, her grandparents, Aunt Gladys, Uncle Robert, Uncle Ned, and her cousins. These colorful characters provide dramatic word pictures bringing an excitement to the otherwise routine life for the Cole's from Neville Island. Family photos are included throughout the book to illustrate the events. These pictures add another dimension and a sense of relationship to the Cole family.

I especially enjoyed Jean's openness in relating college relationships and her early experiences in New York City. As an aspiring actress she was sympathetic to the beatnik culture. I appreciated her positive writing even in light of romances gone awry, family relationships gone amok and personal goals unattained. Jean gained a broad range of work experiences in corporate offices, in the field of education, and ultimately in the medical field as a nurse.

Strong writing, thorough research, and an objective look into the avarice that often accompanies the process of eminent domain make "Stolen Fields" a significant contribution to the history and future restructuring of a process often misunderstood and abused.

As a memoir writer Jean Boggio is a gifted storyteller. Her vivid descriptions and characterizations insure that the enjoyment of her writing will linger long after reading the final chapter. "Stolen Fields" is a rich and entertaining reading experience.