

‘THE GRITTY BERKSHIRES’: Former MCLA professor’s new book offers ‘A People’s History’ of region

BY JOHN TOWNES

We often hear about the Cultural Berkshires and the Scenic Berkshires, and its upscale attractions and lifestyles.

In that context, the region’s history is often associated with the wealthy Berkshire Cottagers, and its cultural icons such as Herman Melville and Edith Wharton.

The area’s industrial heritage, meanwhile, is often given the gloss of nostalgia and chic “milltown” trendiness.

In his new book, *The Gritty Berkshires*, author Maynard Seider focuses on the less glamorous side of life and the history of the region, with an emphasis on the northern Berkshires. It encompasses the region’s industrialization in the 19th and early 20th centuries to its de-industrialization and current efforts at revitalization.

The book’s full title is *The Gritty Berkshires: A People’s History from the Hoosac Tunnel to MASS MoCA*. It is published by White River Press of Amherst. (A list of sales outlets is at www.thegrittyberkshires.com.)

Seider is a sociologist who was a professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) from 1978 to 2010.

He believes that many important aspects of the history of the Berkshires have been overlooked and forgotten.

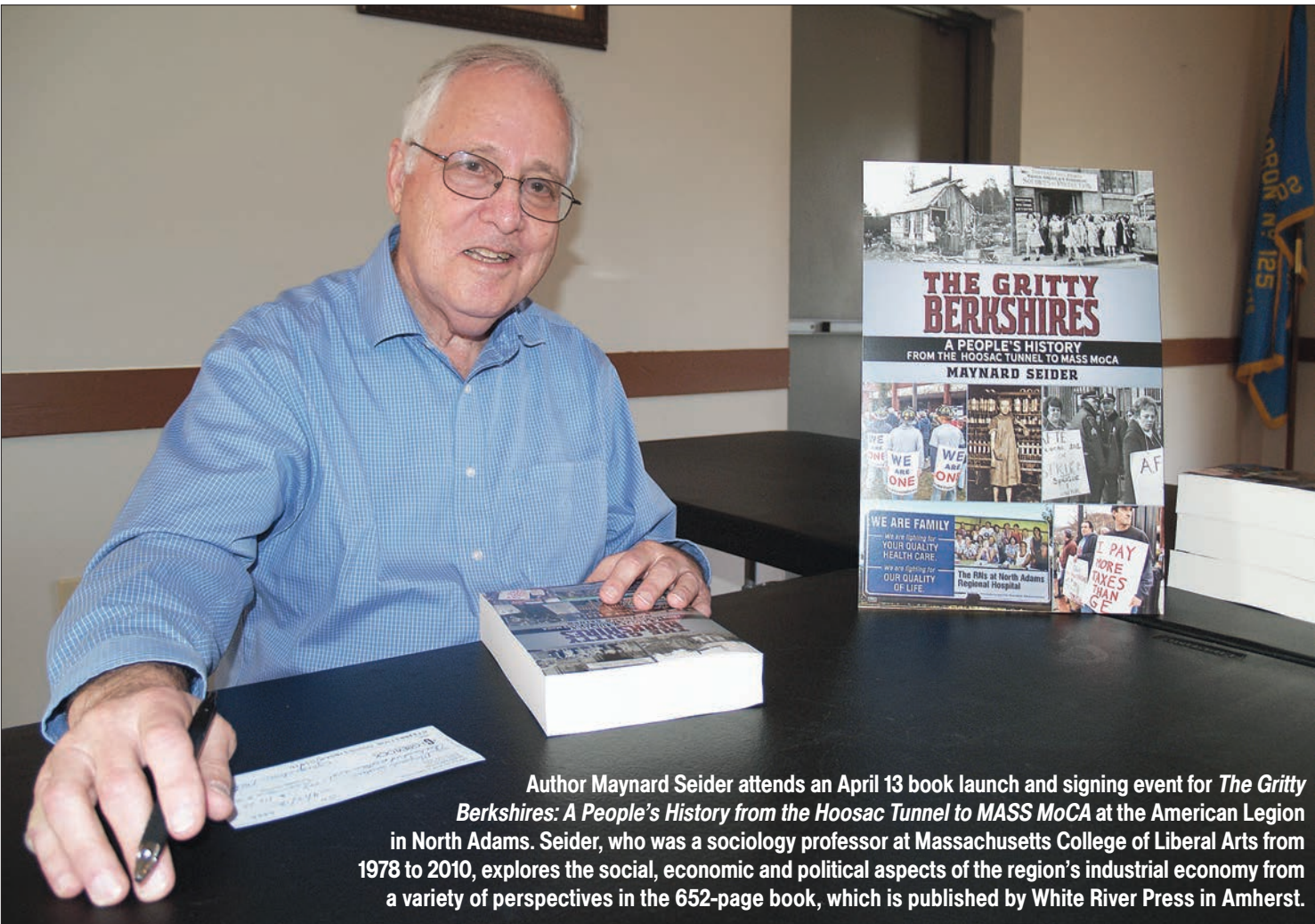
“I wrote this partially as a reaction to other local histories that have been written about the Berkshires that did not cover the lives and struggles of everyday people,” he said. “Instead they wrote primarily about the politicians, business leaders and other elites. But Berkshire County was also created by the hard work and achievements of countless laborers in the mills and other industries.”

The book explores the social, economic and political aspects of the industrial economy from a variety of perspectives, including the political machinations, the lives of workers, and how industries shaped the communities and patterns of immigration. It includes anecdotal stories, historical overviews and analysis. It also contains numerous photographs and illustrations.

Seider said he used the term “gritty” as a positive attribute.

“If you look it up in the dictionary, the definitions include terms like courageous, persistent, plucky and resourceful,” he said.

Reflective of a viewpoint that could be described as progressive and oriented to



Author Maynard Seider attends an April 13 book launch and signing event for *The Gritty Berkshires: A People’s History from the Hoosac Tunnel to MASS MoCA* at the American Legion in North Adams. Seider, who was a sociology professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts from 1978 to 2010, explores the social, economic and political aspects of the region’s industrial economy from a variety of perspectives in the 652-page book, which is published by White River Press in Amherst.

labor and social justice, the book recounts the development of labor movements, strikes and other forms of activism.

The Gritty Berkshires also includes the harsher aspects of industrialization, including the mistreatment of workers, and the connections between the owners of 19th century textile mills in the Berkshires and southern slavery.

While his book focuses primarily on northern Berkshire County, Seider said the subjects and issues it covers reflect the entire county.

“I would love to write about the Berkshires as a whole, because all of the county

has a gritty history,” he said. “However, the northern Berkshires is the area where I lived and worked for many years and I am most familiar with.”

He added that, while its history is unique, northern Berkshire County is also a microcosm of how history and economic trends have affected many other industrial areas in the nation.

One of Seider’s influences is Howard Zinn, the noted historian who wrote *The People’s History of the United States* (1980), which covered U.S. history from a critical perspective regarding its economic and political systems.

“Howard Zinn was amazing,” said Seider. “But I certainly can’t compare myself to him. Also he was a great historian, while I’m a sociologist who wrote a local history.”

Seider drew on a variety of sources for the book, including his own research, and

additional historical records and archives, newspaper files, and oral histories of workers. He said he also gained insights and information from his students, many of whom lived in the area.

Textile times

Beginning in the 19th century, North Adams and Adams were the primary industrial centers of the northern Berkshires. The Hoosic River stimulated the development of mills near its banks.

Textile industries had a major role, including cotton and woolen mills. Another prominent early industry was shoes.

By the early 20th century, Arnold Print Works, located at the present site of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, was the largest textile printing operation in the world.

Gradually the textile industry moved from the north to the south and abroad. In the 1940s Sprague Electric acquired the former Arnold Print Works complex to manufacture electric capacitors and became the largest employer in the city.

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In addition to an early railroad line to Pittsfield, the construction of the Hoosac Tunnel in North Adams brought a major east/west railroad line through the city. The construction, which lasted from 1854 to 1875, also brought an influx of new workers to build it.

“While it is recognized as an engineering achievement that benefitted the economy, it is not as well known that building the tunnel was very difficult and dangerous for the workers,” said Seider.

The book points out that approximately 200 men were killed during construction. One chapter of *The Gritty Berkshires* covers the efforts of Chuck Cahoon, president of the North Adams Historical Society, who has spent years researching and collecting the names of workers who died building the Hoosac Tunnel.

“Most of the names of those workers were not publicly acknowledged publicly before that,” said Seider. “That was one of the things that gave me a focus for the book.”

The book also covers contemporary issues and events, up to the current plan to bring an Extreme Model Railroad and Contemporary Architecture (EMRCA) Museum to North Adams.

Intersecting Interests

The Gritty Berkshires reflects Seider’s longtime interests in sociology, labor, social justice and activism, as well as the history of the northern Berkshires.

“I’d say the book was developed organically, ever since I came to the Berkshires to work at MCLA,” he said. “It reflects the work I did during my career at MCLA. When I retired, I finally had the time to pull it all together into a book.”

Seider, who grew up in New Haven and Hamden, Conn., said living and working in the northern Berkshires was a perfect fit for his professional and personal interests.

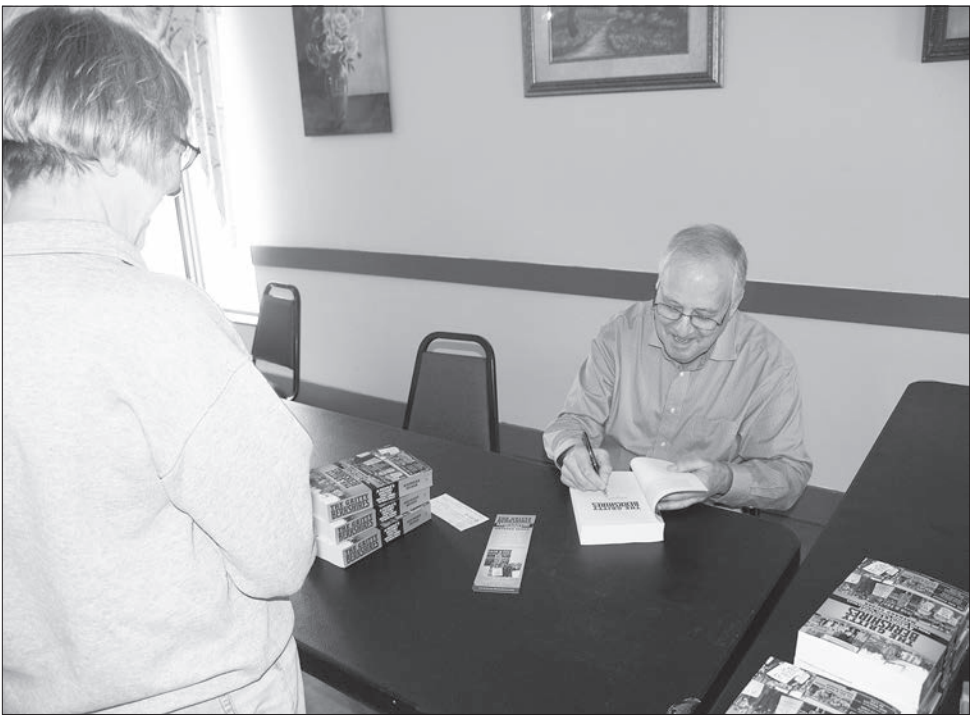
“I’d never been to Berkshire County before I came for my job interview at MCLA,” he said. “Like most outsiders, I only had the image of the Berkshires as a popular resort area. I quickly found I had a

lot to learn about the area’s history and the role of industry and labor here.”

Seider’s tenure at the college also coincided with the final years of the Sprague era, and the region’s struggle to recover and transition from the loss of its industrial base. This included the long development of MASS MoCA in the former Sprague complex.

Seider’s interest in the labor movement and activism actually began much earlier. His father was a union member, which was a strong influence in his early years.

Seider received a bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of Connecticut in 1967, and a master’s degree



Maynard Seider signs one of four copies of *The Gritty Berkshires* that were being purchased by a northern Berkshire resident (who wished not to be identified) at his April 13 book launch in North Adams. Seider will do a reading from his book at Boswell’s Books, 10 Bridge St., Shelburne Falls, on June 26 at 6:30 p.m. Other upcoming events and information related to the book are at www.thegrittyberkshires.com.

and PhD in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin.

In 1978 he joined the faculty of MCLA (then North Adams State College) as an assistant professor of sociology. He progressed to a full professorship and remained at the college until his retirement in 2010.

He received the college’s Distinguished Service Award in 1980. He was named “Sociologist of the Year” by the New England Sociological Association in 2003, and received The Apple Award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching

Sociology from the Massachusetts Sociological Association.

From 2001 to 2008 he was president of the MCLA chapter of Massachusetts State College Association (MSCA,) a union for faculty and librarians. He was also among a group of academics and industrial and health-care workers who formed the Northern Berkshire Labor Coalition.

As a professor, Seider developed a course at MCLA called The Social History of North Adams, which involved students gathering oral histories from workers and other residents.

He also conducted and published research papers and delivered presentations on subjects such as the relationship of class identity and college education, the Great Depression in the northern Berkshires, and “Contested Beliefs and Rebellion in a New England Mill Town.”

In 1984, he published a book, *A Year in the Life of a Factory*, based on a year he spent in 1973-74 as a worker in a transformer factory

in California after receiving his PhD but being unable to find a teaching job.

In 1995, he produced and co-wrote “The Sprague Years,” a play which depicted the relationships between workers and Sprague

Electric. The play was co-created and performed by local residents.

He also co-produced a documentary film, “Farewell to Factory Towns?” – released in 2012 – which took a skeptical look at the development of the MASS MoCA as a revitalization strategy.

Following his retirement, he was also co-editor of *Class Lives: Stories From Across Our Economic Divide*, published by Cornell University Press.

Seider currently lives in the Philadelphia area. “I love the Berkshires, but we have family in Philadelphia,” he said. “We had to struggle with the decision to leave, but ultimately the grandchildren won out. However, I still come back regularly and spend as much time in the Berkshires as I can.”

Seider said he has numerous concerns about the benefits of focusing so heavily on tourism as an economic solution for northern Berkshire workers. He would also like to see new forms of industries encouraged that would benefit workers in tangible ways, such as the development of worker-owned businesses.

Overall, he said, the region’s greatest strength is the spirit of its population.

“I hope that one of the things the book will make clear is the resilience of the people of the northern Berkshires,” he said. “Working people in the Berkshires have often had tough lives, but they did the best they could do. And they fought back and stood up for themselves when necessary. They won’t stay down.”◆

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BerkShares Business of the Month

On a weekend trip to the Berkshires in 2012, Jeffrey Blaugrund entered a tried-and-true recipe from his New Mexico roots into a chili cook off at the then Meat Market in Great Barrington. To his surprise, and perhaps the dismay of some local contestants, his Carne Adovada dish won! At the suggestion that he begin selling the red chile pork stew, Jeff became consumed by the idea of starting a business.

Moonlighting as a Crossfit coach, Jeff loved the routine and convenience of prepared meals that allowed him to maintain his fitness goals and made for quick desk lunches during his busy day. In thinking through his business idea, he realized that it’s not one great product that makes a

business, but rather “the value proposition of quality sourcing, thoughtful cooking and a convenient, delicious result.” Enter Braise Worthy: a line of frozen meals that Jeff and co-founder Austin Banach say are “exactly what you want to eat when you don’t have time.”



Braise Worthy
Great Barrington, MA | www.braiseworthy.com

Georgia, Mississippi Pot Roast with pepperoncinis and homemade ranch dressing, to the vegan Menudo that calls upon mushrooms to replicate the texture of tripe in the classic Mexican soup, Braise Worthy’s products respectfully honor the tradition of each dish while bringing it new life.

Braise Worthy has a unique business model, too. Through a direct-to-consumer subscription service, meals are delivered weekly to three pick up locations throughout the southern Berkshires. Jeff and Austin say this format gives them flexibility when it comes to research and development while sustainably scaling their business operations. In addition to feeding the masses at community events, their baby blue taco truck can be seen traveling around the county acting as a testing ground for new recipes. Braise Worthy will soon be releasing 7 more dishes, offering a total of 16 omnivorous and vegan menu items.

Fundamental to Braise Worthy’s commitment to quality and consistency, is transparency. That’s why each batch of their slow cooked meals includes an ingredient tracker that allows customers to see exactly where their food is coming from. Jeff and Austin source their proteins and vegetables from local farms as much as possible, including fellow BerkShares businesses North Plain Farm and Mayflower Farm. The same commitment to transparency is why they decided to take BerkShares. BerkShares distinguish local businesses from global counterparts and makes visible how money circulates in the region. As they continue to iterate and grow, Jeff and Austin look forward to deepening their connection to the local economy and community.

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