

## The Contested Terrain of Workers Heritage: Recent North American Experience

Picture a meeting of fifteen men and women gathered around a large committee table for the monthly meeting of the board of directors. Three carry credentials from a provincial federation of labour, another is a local union activist and self-taught labour historian, and another a union educator. One is an artist, another a curator and art historian, and another a video producer. Three are academic historians, and two more teach in a labour studies program at a nearby university. One is an activist from local community organizations. The two staff members who join the meeting have backgrounds in adult literacy, community development, and arts programming work. This particular group runs a relatively new institution known as the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC), located in Hamilton, Ontario, a steelmaking centre at the head of Lake Ontario in the middle of Canada's manufacturing heartland. Since November 1996, OWAHC has presented a series of temporary exhibitions on union struggles, labour parades, working time, Latin American labour, working-class leisure, including a major exhibition on "booze", Italian working-class experience, child labour, and other themes, as well as hosting numerous art exhibitions, plays, concerts, film showings, May Day celebrations, and other events. The coalition of interests represented in this Centre is typical of many projects in "workers' heritage" across North America. The following discussion attempts to untangle some of the complicated dynamics and creative tensions that run through these projects. It draws on some academic discussions about this new field of cultural practice, but even more on the practical experience of working in workers' heritage projects over the past fifteen years.<sup>1</sup>

The term "workers' heritage" or "labour's heritage" has recently come into more widespread use to designate public programs to preserve and promote the history and culture of working people. Many Canadian and American communities now have fascinating versions of these programs. A variety of museums presenting the history of workers and the labour movements have proliferated over the past quarter century. Some are directly sponsored by the labour movement, such as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers' Archives Exhibit and the Laborers' Archives Museum, both in Washington D.C., and the George Meany Memorial Archives in nearby Silver Springs, Maryland. Many more are community projects more akin to the Ontario project, including the Ecomusée du Fier Monde in Montreal, the Miners' Museum in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, the American Labor Museum in Haledon, New Jersey, and the

1 The evolution of the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre since 1994 and the range of its activities can be traced through the pages of its newsletter "Worklines", which is published twice a year, and the annual reports issued each November since 1997. See also Christopher Moore, "Working with History," *The Beaver*, (October/November 1999), 54-5.

World Museum of Mining in Butte Montana. There are still more institutions where the direct influence of unions is much less evident, but where the history of waged labour and the domestic life of working people is presented in rich detail. Examples are the Lowell National Historic Park in Lowell, Massachusetts, the Sloss Furnaces National Historical Landmark in Birmingham, Alabama, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.<sup>2</sup> However, excluded from the category of workers' heritage museums are the so-called "industrial" museums that have grown up as well. They typically focus more on technology and labour processes than on workers themselves, may profit from corporate sponsorship, and rarely deal with conflict in the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

There are also flourishing programs that reach beyond the walls of heritage buildings. For twenty years, Montreal's Ecomusee du Fier Monde has developed its programming through the direct involvement of working people and their community organizations.<sup>4</sup> In many other cities, unions and labour historians have co-operated in organizing walking tours that allow participants to discover the labour history hidden on the main streets and back alleys of their cities.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in all these forms of public history has converged from several different points and reflects a variety of concerns. Academics with history or labour studies backgrounds have emerged out of the vast new fields of study within the university that have brought the experience of workers into the mainstream of the social sciences and humanities over the past quarter century.<sup>6</sup> They have written books and articles on working-class history and contemporary life that have been accepted by their colleagues as serious, respectable scholarship, but

- 2 The range of these institutions across North America can be seen in the Spring/Summer 1999 issue of the quarterly magazine published by the George Meany Memorial Archives, *Labor's Heritage*, see also John A. Herbst, *A Slice of the Earth: The Story of the American Labor Museum, Botto House Historic Site, Haledon, New Jersey* (Haledon, 1982).
- 3 For critical discussions of industrial museums in Britain and North America, see Bob West, "The Making of the English Working Past: A Critical View of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum," in Robert Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display* (London and New York, 1988), 36-62; Tony Bennet, "Museums and 'The People,'" in *ibid.*, 63-85; Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (eds.), *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia, 1986), 137-61.
- 4 "L'Ecomusee de la maison du fier monde," *Muse*, Winter 1991, 8-9; "Innovation Marks Montreal Museum," *Worklines*, (Spring 1994), 9.
- 5 Peter Steven, "Time Tripping: Cross Country Check-Up on Labour History Tours," *Our Times*, (September-October 1996), 24-8; "Mapping Labor Cities," *Labor's Heritage*, (Spring/Summer 1999), 71; Robert Kristofferson, "The Past Is At Our Feet: The Workers' City Project in Hamilton, Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 181-97. OWAHC published three self-guided walking tours under the title "The Workers' City", two of which also include audio-tapes with excerpts from elderly workers interviewed for the project.
- 6 The Canadian Committee on Labour History, the recently organized Labour and Working Class History Association, and several regional labour history societies continue to nourish these developments. Canadian scholarly output is listed in annual bibliographies in the journal *Labour/Le Travail*, while American publications can be found in *Labor History*. For overviews, see John Schacht, "Labor History in the Academy: A Layman's Guide to a Century of Scholarship," *Labor's Heritage*, (Winter 1994), 4-21; and Gregory S. Kealey, "Writing About Labour," in John Schultz (ed.), *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough, 1990), 145-74.

they also are generally engaged intellectuals who are looking for wider audiences and new modes of communicating their insights.<sup>7</sup> They find support from some archivists and librarians who share the urge to bring working-class life onto research agendas.<sup>8</sup> They also receive help from many teachers in other branches of the school system who struggle to find curriculum materials to be used in Social-Studies and History classes in particular.<sup>9</sup>

The second source of commitment to the project of "workers' heritage" comes from the specialists in public history who work in museums, historic sites, historical societies, and government agencies responsible for heritage programming, and who share an interest in workers' heritage. Here is a constituency that has been heavily influenced by the burgeoning social history of the past three decades and has been struggling to incorporate at least some of this research into their programming. The 1970s and 1980s saw some soul-searching in heritage institutions and some effort to overcome old elitist biases that led to the neglect of workers' history and to a lack of recognition of diversity. The strongest pressures came, in the United States, from the African-American communities and, in Canada and the United States, from the blossoming "multiculturalism" of ethnic and racial groups not drawn from the British Isles.<sup>10</sup> To a somewhat lesser extent, changes were also prompted by the diffusion of feminist critiques throughout society.<sup>11</sup> The emergence of new state funding to support the history of women and ethnic and racial groups helped to make them a higher priority in heritage planning. As the staff in some of these institutions became more professionalized and more sensitive to the new developments in social history, more workers' history ultimately found its way into museums. A few large institutions and a growing number of local museums have made serious efforts to address working-class experience as part of a more inclusive approach to museum programming. The most notable breakthrough was the 1981 exhibition of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., entitled "Images of Labor," which toured

7 For reflections by one such labour historian, see Michael Piva, "Labour Historians and Unions: Assessing the Interaction," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 209-11.

8 See *Archivaria's* "Special Issue on Documenting Labour," 27 (Winter 1988-89); and the Association of Canadian Archivists, *Labour Archives Bulletin*.

9 See Myer Siemiatycki and Gail Benick, *Labour Studies in the Classroom: An Introduction* (Toronto, 1984); Peter Seixas, "Teaching Working Class History in B.C.," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 195-99; Myra Novogrodsky, "Putting Workers' History into the Schools," *Worklines*, (Spring 1994), 8.

10 See, for example, "The Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village," *Muse*, (Summer 1987), 8; Laurence Grant (with Mary Smith and Pat Zimmer), "Cultural Pluralism in Three Ontario Community Museums," *ibid.*, (Winter 1992), 54-6; Sandra Morton Weizman, "Multiculturalism in Museums: A Coat of Many Colours, A Case Study," *ibid.*, (Spring 1992), 60-2.

11 For critiques of the treatment of women in public history, see Sharon Reilly, "Setting an Agenda for Women in Museums: The Presentation of Women in Museum Exhibits and Collections," *Muse*, (Spring 1989), 47-51; Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A.Zenetou, eds., *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington, 1994); and Thomas Dublin, Nancy Grey Osterud, and Joy Parr (eds.), "Special Issue on Public History," *Gender and History*, 6 (November 1994), including Laurence Grant's discussion of developing an exhibition on the history of women at the Windsor Community Museum. See also Tina Bates and Helen Knibb, "The Museum as a Teaching Resource for Women's History," in Bettina Bradbury et al. (eds.), *Teaching Women's History: Challenges and Solutions* (Athabaska, 1995), 245-54.

for four years and was viewed by half a million people.<sup>12</sup>

A third, quite different current has flowed out of the arts. Visual artists, curators, film-makers, playwrights, musicians, and producers have increasingly drawn inspiration from workers' lives. Documentary films dealing with workers continue to proliferate,<sup>13</sup> and photographers often turn their lenses on workers.<sup>14</sup> Many have also reached out to work with labour organizations to develop their own art and to encourage the development of projects to promote workers' own artistic expression. In many cases, the art has been incorporated into the politics of the streets and woven into the huge demonstrations of the 1990s as richly decorated banners, towering puppets, or agit-prop theatre. As in Scotland and Australia, festivals of what is increasingly called "labour arts" have appeared in several North American cities, including the annual multi-media event in Toronto known as "Mayworks" and the many programs of New York's Bread and Roses Cultural Project. In the United States, the Labor Heritage Foundation in Washington D.C. supports many labour arts projects and has organized an annual Great Labor Arts Exchange. These projects may have echoes of the socialist realism of the 1930s, but in fact they are more diverse, less formulaic, and generally less didactic.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, unions are contributing their own current of active interest in workers' heritage. This development might seem natural, but in fact it marks a historic shift within North American labour movements that deserves a closer look. In the postwar era, most unions turned away from associating with the likes of intellectuals and artists, largely as part of their Cold-War suspicions of communist taint among such people. Artists like Pete Seeger or Paul Robeson were left to perform only for left-wing organizations.<sup>16</sup> In Canada the major international unions pulled back from the once thriving Workers' Educational Association and

12 These developments are addressed in Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig (eds.), *Presenting the Past*; and in the fall 1989 issue of *Public Historian*. In 1998, the Smithsonian also mounted a major exhibition on sweatshops; see Peter Liebhold and Harry R. Rubenstein, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The National Museum of American History's Exhibition on Sweatshops, 1820-Present," *Labor's Heritage*, (Spring 1998), 4-25.

13 For a guide to American (and a few Canadian) films about workers, see Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labor* (Ithaca, 1996).

14 See, for example, Milton Rogovin and Michael Frisch, *Portraits in Steel* (Ithaca and London, 1993); Vincenzo Pietropaulo, *Celebration of Resistance: Ontario's Days of Action* (Toronto, 1999).

15 See Philip S. Foner and Reinhard Shultz (eds.), *The Other America: Art and the Labour Movement in the United States* (London, 1985); Archie Green, "Working with Laborlore," *Labor's Heritage*, (July 1989), 66-75; Moe Foner, "Images of Labor at Gallery 1199," *ibid.*, (April 1990), 28-53; "Great Labor Arts Exchange," *ibid.*, 78; Catherine McLeod, *Mayworks: Ten Good Years* (Toronto, 1996); Karl Beveridge, "Working Partners: The Arts and the Labour Movement," in Mercedes Steedman et al. (eds.), *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto, 1995), 251-68; and "Programme Links Unions and Artists," *Worklines*, (Spring 1994), 10-11; Karl Beveridge and Jude Johnston, *Making Our Mark: Labour Arts and Heritage in Ontario* (Toronto, 1999); Rosemary Donegan, *Spadina Avenue* (Vancouver and Toronto, 1985); and *Industrial Images/Images industrielles* (Hamilton, 1989); *Working Art: A Survey of Art in the Australian Labour Movement in the 1980s* (Sydney n.d.); Gregory Burke and Ann Calhoun (eds.), *Art and Organised Labour: Images of Working and Trade Union Life in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1990).

16 Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 1989).

looked inside their own organizations for any educational programming. Rarely did this extend beyond so-called "tools" courses to train collective-bargaining skills. Even in the various labour colleges that operated in the United States and the one run in Canada by the Canadian Labour Congress, history and culture were only limited parts of the curriculum.<sup>17</sup> In fact, most unions embraced the hegemonic modernism of the post-war years, showed little interest in labour "traditions," and, all too often, sent their own union records and memorabilia to the dump as they moved out to their new suburban offices. Occasionally they turned to academics to write a short history of a union local or perhaps a longer history of the whole union when they wanted to mark some milestone in the life of their organizations. But these projects were seldom seen as significant parts of union educational programming and were often forgotten soon after being produced.

North American unions began to show more signs of interest in "workers' heritage" in the 1970s and 1980s. That shift co-incided with a massive growth of interest in public history, heritage, and personal "roots" in the general culture. Many individual workers delved into the history of their own union locals. Many were also swept up by the enthusiasm for African-American culture and multiculturalism. But the explanation for labour's turn to history was more specific. First, the pioneers of the modern labour movement were retiring and reflecting more carefully on the course of the labour history through which they had lived. In a new flood of labour biographies and autobiographies, old-timers passed on their memories of the pioneering years of the modern labour movement.<sup>18</sup> Second, and ultimately more important, the labour movement was being hammered by plant shutdowns, hostile government policy, and belligerent employers bent on destroying workers' collective power in the United States, or weakening it which was the case in Canada.<sup>19</sup> Unionists began to look to the past

17 Ian Radforth and Joan Sangster, "A Link Between Labour and Learning: The Workers Educational Association in Ontario, 1917-1951," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982), 41-78; Max Swerdlow, *Brother Max: Labour Organizer and Educator* (St. John's 1990); Piva, "Labour Historians and Unions"; John Bullen, "Rewarding Your Enemies, Punishing Your Friends: The Labour College Strike of 1983," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 163-74; Bruce Spencer, "Industrial Studies for Trade Unionists," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 261-75; Elaine Bernard, "Labour Programmes: A Challenging Partnership," *ibid.*, 27 (Spring 1991), 199-209; Joel Denker, *Unions and Universities: The Rise of the New Labour Leader* (Montclair, N.J. 1981); Jeffrey Taylor, *Union Learning: Canadian Labour Education in the Twentieth Century* (forthcoming).

18 See, for example, Joe Davidson and John Deverell, *Joe Davidson* (Toronto, 1978); Kent Rowley, *The Organizer: A Canadian Union Life* (Toronto, 1980); Howard White, *A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Raconteur* (Vancouver, 1983); Gerard Fortin and Boyce Richardson, *Life of the Party* (Montreal, 1984); George MacEachern, *George MacEachern: An Autobiography*, ed. by David Frank and Don MacGillivray (Sydney, 1987); Jack Munro and Jane O'Hara, *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro* (Vancouver, 1988); Jack Scott, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers' Movement, 1927-1985*, ed. by Bryan D. Palmer (St John's, 1988); Milan (Mike) Bosnich, *One Man's War: Reflections of a Rough Diamond* (Toronto, 1989); Swerdlow, *Brother Max*; Nicholas Fillmore, *Maritime Radical: The Life and Times of Roscoe Fillmore* (Toronto, 1992); Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A Woman For Her Time* (Vancouver, 1995); Doug Smith, *Cold Warrior: C.S. Jackson and the United Electrical Workers* (St John's, 1997); Frank Colantonio, *From the Ground Up: An Italian Immigrant's Story* (Toronto, 1997).

19 Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of the American Labour Movement* (London and New York, 1988); Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (2nd ed., Toronto, 1996).

for validation of their contemporary concerns and for the threads of a tradition of resistance and struggle. It was no coincidence that in 1988 the Canadian Labour Congress passed a resolution deploring a rumour (later proven false) that their records would no longer be accepted at the National Archives of Canada, or that a year later the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) launched its quarterly magazine of popular labour history, *Labor's Heritage*, at the end of an extremely difficult decade for organized labour in the United States.

The convergence of these four currents – the scholars and educators, the public historians, the artists, and the unionists – created a powerful alliance of mutual support. The academics had the deep knowledge of workers' past and, usually, some serviceable writing skills. The people who ran heritage institutions had the experience of assembling and presenting heritage material for diverse audiences. The artists had the creativity to breathe new energy into labour traditions and to spark new concepts of communicating. And the unions typically had the money to support workers' arts and heritage projects, the halls for events, the rituals such as Labour Day to be built on, the communications links to reach large numbers of working people, and the reservoir of aging men and women who were determined not to let their stories die. Each of these constituencies took initiative on their own and reached out for support from the others: academic researchers worked with unions on their oral-history projects; union commemorative events drew on historians and musicians; museums interested in mounting labour-oriented exhibitions turned to historians for expertise and local unions for resources; labour arts festivals tapped into union coffers for funding and union memberships for participants. Yet the process of collaboration was not always easy, largely because each group brought to these projects its own style of work, priorities, and distinct sense of what "workers' heritage" should involve.

First, there was the question of the goals of this broad movement. Behind a shared desire to "preserve" and "promote" workers' history and culture lie some fundamental divergences. One involves the concept of commemoration, which, for academics, can highlight the critical difference between "history" and "heritage." Far more often than in academic history, public history involves cultivating the public memory of a geographically or socially defined community and more particularly celebrating and commemorating the high points of its experience. For generations, such projects were highly selective in their form and content, and conveyed implicit or overt elitist lessons about hierarchy, social and civic harmony, ideological consensus, and cultural cohesion. The emphasis was on military campaigns, aristocratic or bourgeois splendour, or humbler myths about the rugged virtues of pioneering in the backwoods of North America. As some critics have argued, much of the heritage community tends to have a nostalgic, relatively uncritical view of the past – one that emphasizes harmony and such solid virtues as hard work and determination and one that assumes the past is closed and shut off from the present. For them, touching the past through public history should be a feel-good experience, a retreat from the disruptions of modernism into a simpler, less troubling world.<sup>20</sup> Many people working in heritage institutions have been challenging that elit-

20 Mary Tivy, "Museums, Visitors, and the Reconstruction of the Past in Ontario," *Material History Re-*

ism and selectivity, opening up the diversity of the past and widening the range of experience to be remembered. Now exhibitions may deal with the poverty of immigrants, the daily lives of working women, or the drama of a tumultuous strike. But the goal remains to be commemoration. And often the boards of heritage institutions and their many volunteers cling to a more nostalgic perspective on heritage projects.

Unions are usually quite interested in commemorating the high points in workers' past. Significantly, a recent heritage project sponsored by Canada's national labour central, the Canadian Labour Congress, was organized almost entirely around major strikes, that is, the glorious moments of confrontation and struggle. Yet, consolidating the public memory of a working-class experience runs the risk of emphasising only the positive features, such as the determination to survive, pride in skills, solidarity in the face of oppression, and so on. There is a certain reluctance to recall the pain of suffering, the indignities of bad jobs, or the less noble behaviour of sexists and racists, even within the "House of Labour." Unions may be reticent to admit publicly that their organizations have sometimes made mistakes or engaged in behaviour, now regarded as totally unacceptable, as barring people of colour and women from their ranks. For quite different reasons, they may also be less interested in the grim social history that labour historians are prone to write. Presentations of demeaning jobs, inadequate living standards, and limited opportunities in the past may remind working people too much of their present-day experience. They can usually find less depressing ways to spend their Sunday afternoons. Celebrating nobility of work, resourcefulness in survival, and heroism in struggle is probably a more satisfying form of heritage programming for most working people. It might be called the working-class version of commemoration.

Two elements of the workers' heritage coalition, however, may find this approach an awkward fit. Both artists and academic historians are quick to recognize the major contributions to the larger culture that workers have made through their remarkable skills, their cultural creativity, and their organizing for social justice. But they are rarely willing to overlook the less glorious parts of workers' past. Artists may be quite unwilling to engage in what they may think of as whitewashing and are often much more interested in exposing flaws in the heritage. A striking example is the film *Canada's Sweetheart*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, which dramatizes the life and times of one of the country's most corrupt labour leaders of the 1950s, Hal Banks.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in their own scholarship, academic histori-

*view*, 37 (Spring 1993), 35-51; Chris Miller-Marti, "Local Museums and the Creation of 'The Past,'" *Muse*, (Summer 1987), 36-9; Wallace, "Visiting the Past"; Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright, "'Charms of Residence': The Public and the Past," in Richard Johnson et al. (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London, 1982), 252-302; Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country* (London, 1985); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985). For alternative perspectives, see Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*; John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society* (London, 1990).

21 On Banks, see William Kaplan, *Everything That Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Seamen's Unions of Canada* (Toronto, 1987); and Peter Edwards, *Waterfront Warlord: The Life and Violent Times of Hal C. Banks* (Toronto, 1988).

ans generally engage more critically with the past and may want to bring that spirit to heritage work – to encourage workers to strip the nostalgia from their history and use more critical understandings of where they have been to help give direction to their current situations and their futures. Rather than simply make workers feel good, this more intellectual perspective suggests they should be shaken up and challenged to think about the treatment of women, racial and ethnic minorities, or gays and lesbians, as well as the political paths towards more radical transformations of society that were suppressed. This sharper political edge may sit uneasily with the drift toward nostalgia in so much commemorative work.

Second, whatever their perspective, all parts of the workers' heritage coalition recognise that their main goal is to educate – to make workers and the rest of society better aware of working-class history and culture. Education can have different meanings, however. Academics and most museum staff have a didactic approach – they want their relatively ignorant audiences to understand the analysis that they have already made of a particular historical experience. The message has been pre-determined and is reflected in straightforward presentation of the past as historians have discovered it. In this sense, their heritage work is an extension of the formal school system, and museums by and large put great emphasis on programming for school visits.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, artists understand their heritage work as making art, which does not depend merely upon fact-grubbing and academic analysis but flows from the artist's imagination and creativity. Historical accuracy or subtle interpretation may be less important than impressions conveyed through narrative or character development or visual impact. In order to make a better story, for example, a recent feature film about nineteenth-century cotton-mill workers in Cornwall, Ontario merged several events that occurred more than a decade apart. Intellectual critics sometimes denounce this approach as the desire to "entertain" rather than "educate."

Labour activists may be suspicious of both the didactic and artistic approaches to workers' heritage. They may resent the preachiness of middle-class educators, who may remind them too much of the school teachers who once made them feel inadequate.<sup>23</sup> They may also feel exploited by the historians or film-makers who descend upon them to extract what they need for their books, exhibitions, or videos and then move on to other projects. They may quickly recognize that, in heritage programming, their own knowledge of workers' experience is ignored or disparaged, or perhaps simply showcased as raw material to be interpreted by the "experts" in universities or museums or captured by the camera lens of the photographer or film-maker. They will probably insist that education is not such a one-way process and that learning about workers' past should be a more interactive dialogue between their own current experience and knowledge and the insights of outsiders to their communities.<sup>24</sup>

22 See, for example, the many interesting articles in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), *The Educational Role of the Museum* (London and New York, 1994).

23 See, for example, Bruce Curtis, S.W. Livingstone, and Harry Smaller, *Stacking the Deck: The Streaming of Working-Class Kids in Ontario Schools* (Toronto, 1992); Julie Davis et al., *It's Our Knowledge: Labour, Public Education, and Skill Training* (Toronto, 1989).

24 The "community-arts" perspective offers an alternative to the more distant stance of the artist; see, for



Workers involved in these projects, as organizers or audience, might also measure the message of workers' heritage against other, more immediate ways of knowing the past, such as flipping through family photograph albums, driving through familiar old neighbourhoods, rummaging through flea-market collectables, or, most important, listening to stories at family gatherings, at work, in the pub, or over the back fence.<sup>25</sup> Storytelling, which is the age-old method of oral communication, is still the most common and most important way that workers learn about the past, as the memory of local events, colourful people, or daily routines is passed on. This is particularly true of the experience of working-class women, whose lives left less impact on the public sphere, but also of major public confrontations.<sup>26</sup> In researching an exhibition on a major steel strike in Hamilton in 1946, for example, researchers for the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre discovered how many stories were still repeated about painting "scab" on the side of strikebreakers' houses or making merry on the picket lines. As Larry Peterson has argued, these collective memories can be compressed and reintegrated into a more expansive, though factually less certain, tale with the status of "legend."<sup>27</sup>

A third area of friction can be the methods used in creating workers' heritage. The teamwork required within this coalition can be awkward. Academic labour historians and labour-studies specialists are trained to value individual scholarship and to present personally crafted works of research and writing. They have little or no experience with teamwork and a tendency to expect reverence for their expertise. Artists like film-makers or exhibition designers may be more accustomed to collective work, but still expect to have the final word in producing heritage programming. For quite different reasons, union sponsors of workers' heritage projects may expect to have some final say in the message presented or the overall tone of the project, particularly if they are the main funding source. Inevitably, then, workers' heritage programming requires complex negotiating and some difficult compromises.<sup>28</sup>

example, Su Braden, *Committing Photography* (London, 1983); Deborah Barndt et al., *Getting There: Producing Photostories with Immigrant Women* (Toronto, 1982).

- 25 The Center on History-Making in America found through surveys that respondents to the question "Where do you turn for information about the past?" listed, in order of frequency, "books; family members or relatives; primary sources, such as letters or archival material; professionals including scholars and teachers; and television." In subsequent interviews, "grandparents were seen as the most trustworthy sources for information about family and human experiences, while teachers as well as TV were perceived as biased." Barbara Franco, "The Communication Conundrum: What is the Message? Who is Listening?" *Journal of American History*, 81 (June 1994), 157. Raphael Samuel also presents a powerful reminder of the many different, widely diffused locations for the generation of historical knowledge in *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994).
- 26 See Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York, 1998), especially the essay by Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History."
- 27 Larry Peterson, "Workers' Memory as Legend and Myth: Reconstructing Labor Conflicts at Pullman" (paper presented to the North American Labor History Conference, Detroit 1996).
- 28 The most ink has been spilled on the collaboration of historians and filmmakers; see, for example, Natalie Zeman Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, 1983); and "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Yale Review*, 76 (1989), 457-82; Daniel Walkowitz, "Visual History: The Craft of the Historian Filmmaker," *Public Historian*, 7 (Winter

There can also be tension over how to communicate workers' heritage to broad audiences. Academics are primarily concerned with the content of the message rather than the form. The written word is their main tool of communication, and they are used to working with primary documents on paper and have little or no experience with interpreting artifacts. To set off in search of objects to be used in an exhibition and to interpret history through them is therefore a new research challenge. Furthermore, historians may find that their written analysis on a text panel or an exhibition catalogue may have much less immediate impact than the artifacts themselves.

In contrast, the staff of museums or historical societies put the artifact at the centre. Generally, they are accustomed to building exhibitions out of their collections of artifacts. But the bits and pieces of working-class life have not been well preserved and are seldom found in any quality in the storage vaults of either small or large museums. Until quite recently, the simple, cheap furnishings of workers' households, the tools of domestic labour, the clothing of blue-collar workers, the tabloid papers or magazines they read, the leaflets or banners of workers' movements, and so much more were rarely seen as suitable material to be preserved. What little survives may be poorly or inaccurately identified.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the workplaces where workers found jobs often contained gargantuan machinery that could never be easily dragged inside museum buildings, even if it had been preserved and not been sold off or destroyed when factories or mines shut down.<sup>30</sup> Much of what remains is material generated by outsiders to working-class communities, such as government reports, social-work investigations, advertising beamed at working-class families, and, above all, photographs, which are the single most powerful and most commonly used window on workers' past. Needless to say, all of these materials require a great deal of care in interpretation and presentation.<sup>31</sup> The

1985); Ken Burns, "The Movie-Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *Journal of American History*, 81 (December 1994), 1031-50.

- 29 Mary Tivy, "The Quality of Research is Definitely Strained: Collections Research in Ontario Community Museums," *Material History Review*, 27 (Spring 1988), 61-8; Scott Molloy, "Collecting Labor," *Labor's Heritage*, (April 1990), 56-69. For one stimulating study, see Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915," in Dirk Hoerder (ed.), *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes During the Period of Industrialization* (Westport, Conn. 1985), 321-52.
- 30 For a survey of industrial history in Canada, see Louise Trotter, "Preserving Canada's Industrial Heritage: Studies and Achievements, 1987-1992," *Machines*, (Summer 1993), 9-15; on the challenges in preserving industrial heritage, see John Weiler, *Our Working Past: Conserving Industrial Relics for Recreation and Tourism* (n.p. 1982); Thomas E. Leary, "Shadows in the Cave: Industrial Ecology and Museum Practice," *Public Historian*, 11 (Fall 1989), 39-60; and Laurence F. Gross, "Problems in Exhibiting Labor in Museums and a Technological Fix," *Technology and Culture*, (1993), 392-400. One of the more successful industrial-history projects in the United States is at the Youngstown Historical Centre of Industry and Labor in Ohio; see Curtis Miner, "Review of 'By the Sweat of their Brows: Forging the Steel Valley,'" *Journal of American History*, 80 (December 1993), 1019-24.
- 31 For stimulating discussions on the biases of photographs of workers, see Allan Sekula, "Photography Between Capital and Labour," in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968: Photographs by Leslie Shedden, A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax and Sydney, 1983), 193-268; Eric Margolis, "Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of Historical Photos," *Radical History Review*, 40

source of working-class history that museum staff may be least accustomed to handling is by far less tangible. It is the oral record, the stories and oral traditions of particular workplaces, cultural groups, neighbourhoods, or wider urban communities.<sup>32</sup>

Labour activists bring a more complex approach to the modes of communicating workers' heritage. On one hand, they tend to expect that the museums they support should be soberly formal places modelled on the old-time museums they knew in their youth. The Laborers' International Union of North America Museum in Washington, for example, has a grand display area with numerous heavy wood-and-glass showcases, large formal portraits, and ball-room-style lighting.<sup>33</sup> Labour leaders are also delighted with the elegant architecture of the old Custom House that the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre inhabits, notwithstanding all the museological debates about avoiding the museum as "temple."<sup>34</sup> It is not hard to see that these assumptions among working people are based not only on their limited contact with museums, but also have to do with concerns about respectability. Just as it is frequently believed that union photographs should be carefully posed portraits, and public occasions should maintain a basic decorum, so too museums or heritage centres devoted to workers' history should be proper, respectable places – even if that means being formal and stuffy.

Ironically, workers rarely visit stuffy museums, which must seem cold and unfriendly. For example, the Laborers' International Union of North America exhibition in Washington draws only about 2,000 visitors a year. Most workers prefer leisure-time activities that are less earnest and formally educational.<sup>35</sup> This does not mean that they are uninterested in the past but mostly they find heritage institutions, especially museums, too much like "being in a

(Spring 1988), 33-48; Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989); Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (eds.), *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley, 1988), 15-42; and Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," *ibid.*, 43-73; Ken Cruikshank and Nancy B. Bouchier, "The Pictures Are Great But the Text is a Bit of a Downer: Ways of Seeing and the Challenge of Exhibiting Critical History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 80 (March 1999), 96-113.

32 For descriptions of two successful exhibitions based on oral history, see Judith Coake and Susan Pointe, "Voices from Memory: A Community-Made Exhibition," *Muse*, (August 1997), 45-7; Roberta Kremer, "Spoken Memories: The Use of Oral History in Exhibitions," *ibid.*, December 1998, 36-9. For discussions of some of the challenges in programming community history, see Linda Stopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project," in Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig (eds.), *Presenting the Past*, 249-63; Jeremy Brecher, "A Report on Doing History from Below: The Brass Workers' History Project," in *ibid.*, 267-77; James Green, "Engaging in People's History: The Massachusetts History Workshop," in *ibid.*, 339-59.

33 *Labor's Heritage*, (Spring/Summer 1999), 8.

34 Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, Temple or Forum," *Curator*, 14 (1971), 11-24.

35 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Counting Visitors or Visitors Who Count?" in Robert Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display* (London and New York, 1988), 213-32; and "Who Goes to Museums?" in Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), *The Educational Role of the Museum* (London and New York, 1994), 47-60; N. Merriman, "The Social Base of Museum and Heritage Visiting," in S. Pearce (ed.), *Museum Studies in Material Culture* (Leicester, 1989); J.H. Falk and L.D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, 1992).

church or library.<sup>36</sup> Besides discovering history through different channels, they know, implicitly, from their daily experience in the home and the work world that learning by doing is at least as effective as didactic instruction. Many heritage institutions have belatedly recognized this pedagogy and have tried to introduce more hands-on exhibitions. In their struggle for survival in the face of falling incomes and emerging competition from Disneyesque theme parks, some have gestured toward the amusement park with more glamorous exhibits and expensive interactive technology in the hopes of attracting more visitors.<sup>37</sup> These heritage toys can be well beyond the budgets of most workers' heritage projects, however. There are cheaper, simpler solutions that allow visitors to use the tools of various workers, industrial and domestic. In a different take on interactivity, I myself designed a highly successful, unmechanized board game for one exhibition to simulate the work of a housewife during the depression of the 1930s.

Public historians interested in workers' heritage have also responded to the challenge of infusing more life to working-class history by reaching out to working-class neighbourhoods, treating them as living artifacts and active resources for portraying workers' heritage. Walking tours, community-sponsored exhibitions, installations, workshops, commemorative events, and so on have made it possible to draw on the architectural heritage of these older neighbourhoods and the oral traditions still alive and well within them. It is necessary to also look for ways to carry workers' heritage programming into shopping malls, unemployment offices, community centres, union halls, churches, and a variety of locations where working people regularly gather.<sup>38</sup>

Workers are also more responsive to programming structured around stories, especially personal reminiscences. Academic historians are often too insensitive to notice and appreciate the particular cultural form of the working-class story, that is, its narrative structure, its cadences, its ethical power. Successful workers' heritage programming recognizes that the mode of story-telling rather than the didactic text panel is central to the way in which most workers understand the past.<sup>39</sup> The use of interviews on audio- or video-tapes within

36 Tanya Du Bery, "Why Don't People Go to Museums?" in Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), *Educational Role of the Museum*, 61.

37 For critiques of this trend, see Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (London, 1993); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985).

38 For discussions of some of these dilemmas in programming community history, see Linda Stopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project," in Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig (eds.), *Presenting the Past*, 249-63; Jeremy Brecher, "A Report on Doing History from Below: The Brass Workers' History Project," in *ibid.*, 267-77; James Green, "Engaging in People's History: The Massachusetts History Workshop," in *ibid.*, 339-59.

39 OWAHC used personal reminiscences as the basis for two of its published walking tours, which include oral cassettes with recorded voices to be used in a tape recorder during the tour. A 1997 display on women in northern-Ontario mining communities used transcribed interviews as text, and a 1998 exhibition on Ontario autoworkers presented the actual voices of retired Studebaker workers. But, on the whole, the Centre's exhibitions have reflected the more abstract academic conceptualization of the past and have not been structured around story-telling.

exhibitions and of elderly workers as tour guides can help. So too can theatrical presentations.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, when employing diverse perspectives and modes of representation, there is the difficulty of defining and targeting the audiences for workers' heritage. Academics have the experience in communicating with a highly specialized, well educated audience. In contrast, public history assumes from the start that the potential audience is wide, diverse, and unspecialized, ranging from the half-interested school children herded through local museums, to vacationing tourists, to seniors seeking the nostalgia of past experience, to citizens seriously interested in deepening their knowledge of history and culture. It is noteworthy that, as one researcher found, local museums in Ontario aim at the comprehension level of a thirteen-year old.<sup>41</sup> To assume a homogeneous audience is not an option for workers' heritage programming, however. Rather, the diversity of audiences confronts those programming workers' heritage with the need to find levels of interpretation and modes of communication that take into account the ignorance and misconceptions, as well as the deep reservoirs of knowledge about a subject, that visitors might bring with them.

One promising way to try bridging the gulf between a heritage centre and its working-class audiences is to involve working people themselves in the planning, development, and organization of an exhibition, so that a heritage display is not simply a professional product seeking a passive audience. The Ecomusée in Montreal has pioneered this work in Canada and has had considerable success.<sup>42</sup> The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre has had several exhibitions to which specific unions have been convinced to contribute, although involving members in the planning and production has proved difficult to organize. Two projects integrated unionists: members of two locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees in Hamilton collaborated with artist Jim Miller on a project called "Making Time," and a group of retired Studebaker workers helped create an exhibition on their working lives in the Hamilton plant. Three projects did grow out of other community links. For example, residents of Hamilton's North End contributed to the walking-tour project known as "The Workers' City," and a local centre for immigrant women worked with a number of local artists. In addition, a group of high-school history students developed a small exhibition known as "Working Family Treasures" aimed at displaying the story behind some familiar object in an elderly relative's household.<sup>43</sup> The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre's limited ex-

40 For a discussion of the many uses of museum theatre, see Sherry Anne Chapman, "Forward Through the Past: Reminiscence Theatre and Museums," *Muse*, (December 1998), 12-14; David Skeele, "Steel/City: Docudrama of an Industry and its City," *Labor's Heritage*, (Winter 1992), 48-63; Michael Gordon, "Staging the Line: The Creation of a Play About the Patrick Cudahy Meat Packing Strike of 1987-1989," *ibid.*, (Fall 1997), 58-77.

41 Tivy, "Quality of Research," 66.

42 The Power of Place group has been quite active as well; see Hayden, *Power of Place*.

43 Kristofferson, "The Past is at our Feet"; Robert Yates, "It's About Time: A Review of 'Making Time,'" *Worklines*, (Spring/Summer 1997), 3-4; Renee Johnston, "Spinning Yarns: Stories of Women's Work in North End Hamilton," *ibid.*, (Fall/Winter 1997-98), 7-8; Shawn Shoesmith, "Working Family Treasures," *ibid.*, (Spring/Summer 1998), 10.

perience with this kind of community-based exhibition suggests that there are rich rewards but also large practical problems. Working people have to be convinced that their histories have any relevance, and also have to be encouraged to shed their deference to professional direction.

It would be misleading to suggest that the divergences in goals, methods, and perspectives within the coalitions that produce workers' heritage programs are fundamentally debilitating. Quite the contrary! The careful working through of differences among scholars and educators, public historians, artists, and unionists is a creative, dynamic, and rewarding process, which has resulted in a serious challenge to dominant cultural elitism in North America. In fact, it has been driven by the shared consensus that what is at stake is building a more democratic culture.

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