

# The Past is at Our Feet: The Workers' City Project in Hamilton, Ontario

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# RESEARCH REPORTS / NOTES DE RECHERCHE

## The Past is at Our Feet: The Workers' City Project in Hamilton, Ontario

Robert B. Kristofferson

THE WORKERS' CITY PROJECT is the first major programming initiative undertaken by the recently established Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC) located in Hamilton, Ontario. The project was co-sponsored by the Hamilton and District Labour Council and funded by the recently cancelled Ontario Workplace Heritage Program of the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

OWAHC is dedicated to the promotion and preservation of workers' history and culture across the province of Ontario. The Centre is centrally located in the province in Hamilton's historic Custom House building. While the building itself is to be used as an interpretive centre, the Centre's mandate calls for programming that reaches out into the streets of its host city as an "eco-museum" and into towns and cities across the province with travelling exhibitions, speakers, performances, educational material, and much more.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the *Workers' City Project* was to locate and document the spaces in Hamilton where workers lived their daily lives, congregated to pursue common interests, and took their stand in major struggles. It was based on the concern that

<sup>1</sup>Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre, *The Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre Feasibility and Master Plan Study: Final Report* (Hamilton 1994). For more information on OWAHC see their semi-yearly newsletter *WorkLines*.

Robert B. Kristofferson, "The Past is at Our Feet: The Workers' City Project in Hamilton, Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 181-97.

the rapid erosion of the city's industrial base and surrounding residential districts is endangering the heritage of its working people.

In keeping with the Centre's mandate, a voluntary committee of labour educators, unionists and members of the community decided that the best way to make the past relevant to modern working people is to involve them in exploring their own heritage, not simply in an enclosed museum, but also out on the streets where the history was made. We decided that an excellent way of bringing their story into the light of day would be to organize walking tours of the city to allow local residents to discover the workers' past in their own streets, buildings, and parks. We also believed that such a project could take a broad view of Hamilton's working past, encompassing all working people, whether unionized or not, and covering the full experience of workers in their homes, neighbourhoods, and paid workplaces. This would also allow the project to address the different experiences of men and women and of different racial and ethnic groups. I was hired to undertake the project with the assistance of Sheldon Keith.

The final product of this project is the *Workers' City Kit* containing three separate walking tours of Hamilton. All these tours include a well-illustrated booklet. Two of the tours also include an audio tape, comprised of over 40 interviews conducted by the project's research team.<sup>2</sup> These tapes contain the voices of older Hamilton workers describing their experience of life and events on

<sup>2</sup>Workers' tours are becoming popular across Canada. In Vancouver the Pacific Northwest Labour History Association in conjunction with the Vancouver and District Labour Council offers the *Centennial Labour History Walking Tour*. In Winnipeg the Manitoba Labour Education Centre offers a bus tour based on the events of the 1919 general strike. In Sudbury labour educators have assembled the *Mine Mill Heritage Tour of the Sudbury Region*. The Metro Toronto Labour Education Centre offers a historical walking tour to commemorate their 125th anniversary. Several workers' walking/driving tours have also been organized in Cape Breton, especially in Sydney and New Waterford. For more information on these tours see Peter Steven, "Time Tripping: Cross Country Check-Up on Labour History Tours," *Our Times* (September/October 1996), 24-8. For information on other working community projects see James B. Lane, "Oral History and Industrial Heritage Museums," *Journal of American History*, 80 (September 1993), 607-18; Jeremy Brecher, "A Report on Doing History From Below: The Brass Workers' History Project," in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosensweig, eds. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia 1986), 249-63; John Kuo Wei Tchen, "New York Chinatown History Project," *History Workshop Journal*, 24 (Autumn 1987), 158-61; James A. Cavanaugh, "From the Bottom Up: Oral History and the United Packinghouse Workers of America," *International Journal of Oral History*, 9, 1 (February 1988), 27-33; James Green, "Engaging in People's History: The Massachusetts History Workshop," in Benson, *Presenting the Past*, 339-59; Susan Porter Benson, "Social History in the Museum," *Radical History Review*, 48 (1990), 118-33; Linda Shopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project," in Benson, *Presenting the Past*, 249-63, and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public Memory* (Cambridge, MA 1995).

the city streets, in its homes, inside its community institutions, and in its workplaces.

The first of these tours is *Downtown Hamilton*, which examines the origins of a working class in Hamilton by retracing part of the 1872 parade route of the Nine-Hour Pioneers. It takes participants past some of the first industrial sites that made Hamilton a major manufacturing centre by the late 19th century, the railway, the metal shops, and the textile mills. The tour also seeks out spots where the city's first wage earners lived, worked, went on strike, and organized their unions and labour councils.

The second tour, entitled *Hamilton's East End*, traces the development of Hamilton's working class during the city's second round of industrialization in the 20th century. It takes participants past some of the city's major industries — Stelco, International Harvester, and Westinghouse, before winding its way through Hamilton's so-called "foreign district" to discuss the immigration of various groups to the city, where they settled and worked, and the institutions they built. Building on the first booklet, this tour details the development of unionism in the city that culminated in the pivotal general strike of 1946.

The third tour, *Hamilton's North End*, examines the development of a working-class community in the city's north end. It leads participants through some of this area's historic residential streets to document the many ways in which families fought for survival in an uncertain economic environment. It includes extended discussions of how families worked together and with others in their community to make ends meet.

The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the unique problems an undertaking of this sort offers the historian and to discuss some of the ways these challenges can be met. In part, then, this is meant as a methodological guide to attempting this type of workers' public history. This paper will also discuss the lasting rewards a workers' walking tour project offers as an educational device and has already offered as a tool for community activism. These tours might sound straight-forward enough, but achieving them was no easy task. The project itself offered constant obstacles that had to be overcome.

One of the first tasks was to assess what historical information — both secondary and primary — existed on the city. On the positive side, there was a multiplicity of sources. Like the Power of Place Walking Tour Project in Los Angeles, I found that much of the information necessary to frame the tours was available in the secondary literature.<sup>3</sup> The Workers' City Project itself builds on a strong tradition of workers' public history already established in Hamilton, much of it produced through McMaster University's Labour Studies programme in the

<sup>3</sup>Dolores Hayden, "The Power of Place: Claiming Urban Landscapes as People's History," *Journal of Urban History*, 20, 4 (August 1994), 469.

early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Also, a recent spate of scholarly historical writing has made Hamilton perhaps the most intensively studied city in Canada, especially among social historians. Works by Michael Katz and his associates in the Canadian Social History Project and by Bryan Palmer, among others, have outlined the city's early industrial development along with its resultant class formation in the 19th century. Theses by Craig Heron and Robert Storey provide copious evidence detailing the development of the city's industrial base and working class in the first half of the 20th century. In addition, the development of the city's various ethnic communities in the early years of the 20th century has become a productive field of scholarly output, as has the experience of Hamilton's working-class women.<sup>5</sup> A fair amount

<sup>4</sup>The McMaster material includes Wayne Roberts, *Baptism of a Union: Stelco Strike of 1946* (Hamilton 1981); Wayne Roberts, *Organizing Westinghouse: Alf Ready's Story* (Hamilton 1979) and Craig Heron, Shea Hoffnitz, Wayne Roberts and Robert Storey, *All That Our Hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of Hamilton Workers* (Hamilton 1981). Other works include Anon, *A Brief History of Local 113, United Rubber Workers of America* (Hamilton 1962); Thomas Melville Bailey, *They Knew What They Wanted: A History of Local 18, The United Brotherhood and Carpenters and Joiners of America* (Hamilton 1982); Ed Thomas, *The Crest of the Mountain: The Rise of CUPE Local Five in Hamilton* (Hamilton 1996); Margaret J. Smith, *50 Years of Accomplishment: The Story of the Hamilton Can Workers Union Local 354, CLC* (Hamilton 1995), and Robert Kristofferson, *Do Something About It: The Bob Jaggard Story* (Hamilton 1997).

<sup>5</sup>The literature on Hamilton is vast. What follows is a partial list. John Weaver's *Hamilton: An Illustrated History* (Toronto 1981) is the best general history of the city. On the city's industrial development and resultant class formation see Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal 1979), Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Cambridge, MA 1975); Michael B. Katz, Michael Doucet and Mark Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA 1982); Craig Heron, "Working Class Hamilton, 1895-1930," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1981; Robert Storey, "Workers, Unions and Steel: The Shaping of the Hamilton Working Class, 1935-1948," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1981. For the history of the city's ethnic communities see Boris Cetinic, "A Brief History of Croats in Hamilton," *Polyphony*, 14 (1994), 35-41; Susan Papp, "Hungarians in Ontario," and "Hungarian Immigration After 1945," in *Polyphony*, 2, 2/3 (1979/80), 3-16 and 45-50; Isabel Kaprielian, "Armenians in Ontario," *Polyphony*, 4 (1982), 5-25 and 53-66; Zofia Shahrod, "The Early Polish Settlement in Hamilton," *Polyphony*, 6 (1984), 33-6, and Enrico Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton, 1900-40," *Polyphony*, 7, 2 (Fall/Winter 1985), 28-36. The best overview of the development of Hamilton's various ethnic communities in the first half of the 20th century can be found in Craig Heron's "Working Class Hamilton." Work on the experience of women includes: Karen Dubinsky, "'The Modern Chivalry': Women and the Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1891," MA thesis, Carleton University, 1985; Patricia Bird, "Hamilton Working Women in the Period of the Great Depression," *Atlantis*, 8, 2 (Spring 1983), 126-36; Jane Synge, "Immigrant Communities — British and Continental European — In Early Twentieth Century Hamilton," *Oral History*, 4, 2 (Autumn 1976), 38-51; and Craig Heron, "Working Class Hamilton." The spatial development of the city is

of primary research was necessary to fill out this formidable stock of secondary writing. Most of this was conveniently centralized in the Special Collections department of the Hamilton Public Library and the Ready Archives at nearby McMaster University.

So, I was not at a loss for a story to tell. But, as David Harvey has pointed out, the trick was going to be to "somehow relate the social processes of the city to the spatial form which the city assumes."<sup>6</sup> While the historian's ability to perform this task has had its detractors<sup>7</sup>, it fast became evident that class development in the city *had* taken place in a recognizably spatial way. The difficulties lay in attempting to wed the geography of the streets to walkable coherent narratives and chronologies.

In one sense the city's geography worked to our advantage. Early on we realized that three separate tours could cover a lot of ground, both chronologically and thematically. Hamilton's historic downtown was the site of many of the city's first industries and working-class organizing. After the turn of the 20th century a new workers' "walking city" sprung up in Hamilton's east end. This enclave was populated by a number of new immigrant groups who provided semi-skilled and unskilled labour for the large-scale more highly mechanized factories nearby. The city's historic north end has remained a compact community of working people from the 1840s to the present day.

The real problem arose when we began to consider the three specific routes that had to be mapped for each tour. Dolores Hayden has argued that while a "single historic place may trigger potent memories, networks of such places begin to reconnect social memory on an urban scale."<sup>8</sup> All too many walking tours suffer from a lack of flow and offer little in the way of a step-by-step story. This lack of narrative severely undermines the educational potential of the experience, leaving the participant with a fragmented understanding of the tour's subject matter. To avoid this trap, and to put together a walking tour with a coherent narrative, involved hours of work mapping the spaces that mattered to workers — the factories, residential districts, parks, cultural institutions, and so on. Secondary material coupled with old fire insurance atlases and pictorial maps were helpful for this. A sense of coherence was best gained, though, by walking the streets themselves.

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dealt with in Michael Doucet and John Weaver, *Housing the North American City* (Montréal 1991) and Richard Harris and Matt Sendbueler, "The Making of a Working Class Suburb in Hamilton's East End, 1900-45," *Journal of Urban History*, 20, 4 (August 1994), 486-511.

<sup>6</sup>David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London 1973), 23.

<sup>7</sup>See David Cannadine, "Residential Differentiation in Nineteenth Century Towns: From Shapes on the Ground to Shapes in Society," in James H. Johnson and Colin Pooley, eds., *The Structure of Nineteenth Century American Cities* (London 1982).

<sup>8</sup>Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 78.

The route of the *Downtown Hamilton* walk was by far the most challenging of the three to map. Various structural constraints shaped the route, including the city street pattern and the choice of starting the tour at the Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre on the edge of downtown. It also had to incorporate early railway and metal industry development on one side of downtown and the development of the city's textile industry on the other while at the same time discussing the development of working class organization in the city. In addition, participants had to be able to walk the whole route in about an hour and a half.

The end result, while somewhat serpentine, does tell a number of stories in a coherent order, from site to site. The city's industrial development is revealed as tour participants move from the railway shops on one edge of the city (1850s) past the original sites of the city's metal industry in the core of the old town (1860s and 1870s) to the other side of the old downtown where part of the early textile industry flourished (1880s and 1890s). Stretches of the tour through residential neighbourhoods and past textile factories allow for discussions of women's paid and unpaid labour. Woven together with this is a roughly chronological discussion of the development of unionism in the city in the 19th century. The tour ends at the site of the 1906 street railway riot — the last real instance in which the community of working people who constituted the 19th century walking city took a collective stand to preserve the key social values they saw being eroded under industrial capitalism. The whole tour follows a partial route of the 1872 parade of the Nine-Hour Pioneers. A running commentary through a number of sites explains this event's importance as for the first time Ontario and Québec workers allowed craft identities to melt into class solidarity to create a regional labour movement in Canada. Fortunately, OWAHC is housed in the city's old Custom House which is situated on this parade route.

Once the routes and the narratives were in place it was the physical structure of the finished product itself that became the object of concern. The question of how much would people be willing to read on a walking tour became problematic. On the one hand, too much information would bog down the tour and might make people lose interest, but on the other hand enough information to develop the many themes was required. After much discussion with the project committee, we decided that content should win out over brevity. Two lines of thinking informed this decision. First, we believed that since the experience of the city is ongoing in people's social memory, the walk did not end out on the streets. There was a good chance that tour participants could read at home what they did not have the time nor inclination to read on the street, all the while invoking the spatial memories gained at the various sites along the way.

We also understand that given that "best-seller" status has alluded most works of Canadian labour and social history, these tours could well be the only, or among the few, texts on this topic lining the bookshelves of its consumers. Given this, we decided that it was imperative that something in the way of a modestly compre-



"The Jolly Good Fellow's Club. Comprised mainly of members of the glassblowers' fraternity, this well-paid group used their long summer breaks to pursue a few months of sports and leisure around the shores of the Bay every year." Photo courtesy of *Special Collections, Hamilton Public Library*.



hensive account of the historical experience of Hamilton's working class should be included. This made the coherence of the general narrative from site to site more important than ever. Recognizing this, we decided to augment each tour booklet with a short introduction aimed at reinforcing the main themes and providing more context for each tour.

While we did opt for the content option, we still believed some counterbalance was necessary. We decided that each site should not exceed five hundred words and the booklets' introductions should be kept to less than four pages. More importantly, in order to be accessible to everybody (including school children and adults who do not read well), it was important that the writing be kept clear and direct. While this was a hotly debated issue, in the end we all agreed that complex ideas do not have to be wrapped in convoluted prose. In writing the booklets I found that, instead of compromising the ideas I wanted to get across, clarity of prose forced clarity of thought.<sup>9</sup>

Once the rough form of the tour booklets was decided upon, we turned our attentions towards the audio portion of the tours. At selected sites along the walks we wanted tour participants to be able to listen to an audio tape which would provide them with further information on that site. These tapes were compiled directly from oral histories collected by the project team, and were filled with the voices of older workers telling their own stories about what it was like to work in a given factory, organize in a particular park, or live in a certain neighbourhood.

The audio segment of the tours was key to the programming rationale behind the whole project. This medium, more than the tour booklets, would allow workers to actively compile and explore their own heritage. As Staughton Lynd has written, we needed to get beyond a situation "in which one group of people (workers) experiences history, and another group of people (professional historians) interprets the experience for them." I was excited about engaging in an oral history project that would not end up as some generally inaccessible academic publication and whose collection of vibrant experiences would not be committed to some university archive where it would languish and deteriorate in the coming years. The audio dimension of the tour seemed to be exactly the type of project Michael Frisch was alluding to when he urged that we need to make workers' memories more "active and alive, as opposed to mere objects of collection."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Literacy worker Ruth Baldwin argues that if written materials are "clear and easy to read, they will have the greatest benefit for people who don't read well. But people who do read well can find out what they want to know more quickly from material that is clear, focused on the main ideas, and well designed." Ruth Baldwin, *Clear Writing and Literacy* (Toronto 1990), 4. I would also like to thank clear language editor Mary Breen for her generous help in this project.

<sup>10</sup>See: Staughton Lynd, "Oral History From Below," *Oral History Review*, 21, 1 (Spring 1993), 8 and Michael Frisch, "The Memory of History," in Benson, *Presenting the Past*, 17. James Lane has also recognized the value of oral history in museums seeking to present



"Harvesting ice near the foot of Bay St., c. 1890s." Photo courtesy of *Betty Cummer Aikman*.

Audio tapes also allowed us to get beyond the written word — the traditional province of historians — and into an alternate media that could help expand the educational potential of the tours. Dan Sipe has stated that mediums such as audio tape and video can record more completely the expression and processes of memory collection since the spoken word is “embedded in a setting, a situation, a context” and people “speak with body language, expression and tone [and] learn to communicate not with the precision or brilliance of their words but with energy and affect.” Inclusion of an audio component will hopefully add depth to the spatial experience tour participants would already be having by walking the streets of the workers’ city.<sup>11</sup>

Actually recording the oral history, of course, came with its own package of problems. First of all we had to gain the trust not just of one particular union or ethnic association but of all and any workers in Hamilton. This problem was compounded by the fact that the institution we worked for was new and had yet to “prove itself” to the city’s working population. This meant that in our search for prospective interviewees we had to explain not only our own somewhat unwieldy project but also the whole philosophy behind OWAHC. We soon found that repeated sets of eyes glazed over as we explained what we were doing and why we needed their help. After about a week we decided something must be done. Our solution was to produce a short pamphlet that offered a very basic outline of the project itself and a paragraph outlining the functions of the Centre. This made meeting with people a lot easier, since now all we had to do was provide simple answers to specific questions if there were any. As Jeremy Brecher found, introducing a workers’ history project as briefly as possible leaves more time for “negotiating a basis for a mutually rewarding experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Now that we were able to explain ourselves, we had to work on being accepted. Older workers who had to fight tooth and nail for every ounce of progress they had won in their lives were understandably wary about a project involving “outsiders.” This problem was made deeper by existing divisions in the city’s working class. We soon became aware that gaining the trust of one union or community organization could mean losing the trust of another. In the end, I think it was our commitment to remaining open, patient, and constantly willing to explain ourselves to whoever would listen that won our modest amount of acceptance in the

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“history from below.” See Lane, “Oral History and Industrial Heritage Museums,” 607-18. Discussions of the necessity of gathering workers’ oral histories along with some of its potential pitfalls can be found in Edward D. Beechert, “The History of Work and the Words of the Worker,” *International Journal of Oral History*, 8, 2 (June 1987), 112-21 and William L. Lang and Laurie K. Mercier, “Getting It Down Right: Oral History’s Reliability in Local History Research,” *Oral History Review*, 12 (1984), 81-99.

<sup>11</sup>Dan Sipe, “Media and Public History: The Future of Oral History and Moving Images,” *Oral History Review*, 19, 1/2 (Spring/Fall 1991), 79-81.

<sup>12</sup>Brecher, “A Report On Doing History From Below,” 270.



"Preparing tomato paste on a warm summer's day in Hamilton's north end." Photo courtesy of *Labour Studies, McMaster University*.

community. Like the members of the Brass Workers' History Project in Connecticut we developed the relationship of "pet outsiders" to Hamilton's working community.<sup>13</sup> This allowed us to gather oral testimony from a vast array of workers with a divergence of experiences.

The interview process itself offered some unique problems. First of all we had to produce recordings of reasonable enough audio quality to be taken into a studio for editing and reproduction. Unfortunately, the budget for this part of the project

<sup>13</sup>Brecher, "A Report on Doing History From Below," 269.

was quite limited. In the end we had to settle for two reasonably good quality walkman-style tape recorders outfitted with directional video microphones. These did provide sufficient sound quality for our purposes but did limit the project in important ways. For instance, at the outset we had hoped to hold a series of community meetings at which we could capture the reminiscences of oldtimers on tape. We believed this would be central to our mandate of getting the people themselves interested in collecting their own history and be an excellent way of connecting with the collective memory of certain neighbourhoods. It would also help establish the Centre's presence in the city's various working communities. We soon realized that obtaining a quality recording of the voices of a sizable group of people talking in a large room would be beyond the capabilities of our equipment. Despite this, we decided that the event itself was more important than the oral evidence we might gain from it. At the one community meeting we were able to organize within the temporal and financial constraints of the project, I believe important progress was made both in facilitating a sense of a collective connection with the past among those who attended and in building bridges between us and the community. We were also, in the end, able to use some — albeit a quite limited amount — useful oral evidence from the event to compile what eventually became our North End audio tape. On the positive side, we found that for one-on-one interviewing the small, unassuming and easy-to-use nature of the recording equipment helped keep the intimidation factor for the interviewee to a minimum.

The nature of the project itself also forced us to reconsider and modify some of the traditional methodologies of oral history.<sup>14</sup> One of the major challenges of this project was to strategically extract a response from the interviewee that would "make sense" to the consumer of the final product while at the same time maintaining the historicity of the interview. Since we wanted the workers themselves to tell their stories to whoever participated in one of our walking tours, their oral testimony had to come across as self-explanatory. For example, in a traditional interview situation the question "Where did you work?" might be met with the response: "at Westinghouse." This type of soundbite was not useful for our purposes. Instead, we needed a response along the lines of "I worked at Westinghouse." This type of soundbite could then be connected with other similarly-framed pieces of oral testimony to construct a narrative that would be understandable to a third party detached from the information gathering process.

My attempt to deal with this quandary came in two stages. In the early stages of the project we decided to take a few minutes with the subject before commencing the interview to coach them on how to frame their answers in this peculiar situation. We asked them to speak as though they were leading the tour from the tapes themselves. We also urged them to answer in a way that would suppose no

<sup>14</sup>See Charles T. Morrissey, "Team Interviewing and the Merger of the A.F.L. and C.I.O. in 1955," *Labor History*, 25 (Summer 1984), 448-55 for a discussion of another workers' history project that demanded modification of traditional oral history methodologies.

foreknowledge on the subject by the listener. However, I would not recommend this strategy in collecting oral evidence. First of all, in the already tense situation that exists between interviewer and interviewee it is almost impossible to explain exactly what it is you want without leaving at least some confusion in the mind of the subject. Second, leaving the interviewee constantly preoccupied with the structure of their answer can take away from the spontaneity of the interview as well as the relaxed recollection of historical memories. I found that not only were many reminiscences unsuitable for presentation in the final product, but that the process itself was having a negative impact on the quality of the actual historical information I was gathering.

Unsatisfied with my initial results, I was forced to find an alternative. At the core of this methodological search was a seeming paradox. On the one hand I needed information that was as historically accurate and "objective" — and therefore, unforced — as possible. On the other hand, I had to make sure this information was posed in a fairly rigid way. In other words, how could I get interviewees to say exactly what I wanted them to without violating the prime directive of oral history by guiding them in any way. I found my answer in a variant of the preinterviewing technique.

Most oral historians use at least some degree of preinterviewing to frame their final interview. This technique is often a screening process. For example, it can be as simple as contacting a prospective interviewee on the telephone to confirm that they were indeed a member of this or that union and had been involved in such and such a strike. For my project, I decided to place a much heavier emphasis on the preinterview. In fact, in the end, it was the preinterview that consumed most of my time with each subject.

The methodology I settled on assigned distinct functions to both the preinterview and the interview itself. The preinterview took the form of a traditional oral history interview with all its attendant methodological considerations.<sup>15</sup> In this phase of the interview I would sit down with the subject and ask the complete series of questions pertaining to their experiences on a given topic. This process often took two or three hours. In this time I would collect, in proper historical fashion, all the information I would need to conduct the final interview. During the interview stage I would use this information to ask the interviewee to tell me exactly what they had told me during the preinterview, only this time in a way that would provide appropriate sound bites for the final edit of the audio tour. This way I could coach their response without compromising the historical integrity of the interview. I was

<sup>15</sup>For important methodological, theoretical and conceptual discussions of oral history see Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany 1990); Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York 1991); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford 1988) and Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review*, 3, 1 (1994), 5-28.

careful to record both the preinterview and the interview itself for later cross-reference and clarification.

Going to the extent we did to identify and overcome many of these methodological and technical obstacles has been greeted by some external observers of the project as a waste of time and taxpayers money. I firmly believe, though, that the social utility of this project goes far beyond providing the general public with a moderately interesting way to get some exercise and pass the time on a Sunday afternoon. At the outset our goal was to get working people themselves actively involved in exploring their own heritage. This was justification enough for the project. However, once I became immersed in the research, mapping and interviewing for the project, I began to realize how singularly important a walking tour project could be both as a pedagogical device and as a tool for social activism.

For social history, walking tours go straight to the core of pedagogy. They convey to an audience, in the most effective way I have yet found, a deep understanding of social history. Specifically, a simple workers' walking tour can be an effective way of "making sense" out of the important place theories of urban space hold for social history.

Ira Katznelson has argued that any social theory concerned with the intricacies of structure and agency must start from the realization that "[p]eople live in spaces that are the product of specific relationships between the natural environment and human creativity." Without this, he argues, social history is full of "cardboard working classes" detached from the built environments in which their daily experiences of capitalism occur. Mapping the city — paying attention to urban space — will help reduce "chaos to pattern" by making social relations "legible" since the analysis of working class formation "is in significant measure the study of how working people constructed images and mental maps of remarkably innovative spatial terrains in which they found themselves forced to work and live." "Capitalism," he concludes, "is lived in particular locations at particular times."<sup>16</sup>

In her own work in workers' public history, Dolores Hayden has argued that social memory is firmly located in the urban landscape. As opposed to reading a dry textual account of workers' immiseration, she argues that experience of a single historical site has the potential to trigger all five senses. Networks of such historic places have the power to nurture the social memory of the city. "People invest places with social and cultural meaning," she argues, "and urban landscape history can provide framework for connecting those meanings into contemporary urban life." A device like a walking tour is a uniquely powerful way to stimulate visual memory and allow its participants to truly appreciate place as a "contested territory."<sup>17</sup>

Taken together, the insights of Katznelson and Hayden offer a powerful pedagogical package. A well constructed walking tour has the unique potential to

<sup>16</sup>Katznelson, *Marxism and the City*, (Oxford 1992), 203-7. See especially Chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup>Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 78. See especially Chapters 1-3.

convey many of the insights of modern social history to a much wider audience than before and in a more meaningful and lasting way. Walking tours offer a way of transforming some of the thick academic theoretical studies of urban space and class formation into a form that is understandable and digestible to all. In this way, ordinary people, steeped in the spatial configurations of their cities, can come to a true appreciation of Henri Lefebvre's idea that "space is permeated with social relations."<sup>18</sup>

By facilitating an understanding of the city as a continuum of contested terrain from the 19th century to the present day, a workers' walking tour can also be a politicizing experience for its participants.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the Workers' City Project's use as a tool for social activism has already become evident. The theme of how workers' history is relevant to modern struggle has shown itself in some of the organizational campaigns of the labour movement. Hamilton's Labour Day Committee adopted the theme "Remembering Our Past, Celebrating the Present, Unit-ing for the Future" for its 1996 Labour Day events. The Hamilton Days of Action Committee considered using the parade route of the 1872 Nine-Hour Pioneers for their march of over 100 000 workers through the city's streets in protest against the right wing agenda of Mike Harris' provincial government. While the route itself proved unfeasible for an event of this size, an illustration of the Nine-Hour marchers did grace both the cover of the promotional leaflet and the home page of the campaign. Similarly, the Canadian Auto Workers have adopted the cover illustration of the East End Tour for their "Line in the Sand" campaign against the provincial government.

In addition to this, the walking tours are being put to pedagogical use in an attempt to ignite the interest of some of the city's younger people. As part of the Vision 20/20 Action Plan for Hamilton Region's Future's Sustainability Days the Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre used elements of the North End Tour to help upwards of 1700 Grade 6-8 students learn about Hamilton from the bottom up. The Centre has established a relationship with student-run history clubs in a couple of area high schools, making the tours available for further research by the students themselves. In co-operation with District 8 and District 36 of the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers Federation (OSSTF) the Workers' City tours have also become part of the OWAHC EDU-KIT, now available for use in Hamilton and Wentworth County classrooms.

In line with OWAHC's programming initiative, the Workers' City tours take history out of the museum and into the streets, allowing it to become an organic part of the community that surrounds it. The Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage

<sup>18</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford 1991), 286.

<sup>19</sup> Dolores Hayden has argued that "the recognition of important cultural heritage in diverse working people's neighbourhoods can support other kinds of community organizing..." See Hayden, "Power of Place," 483.





"Celebration of the Feast of St. Anthony, 1918. These paraders are winding their way down Clinton Street in the heart of Hamilton's east end Italian community." Photo courtesy of *M.H.S.O.*

Centre hopes the Workers' City Project will give ordinary working people the opportunity to use the city as tool with which they can both frame and shape their own lives.

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