

POPULARISING THE WORKING CLASS PAST¹

Kate Pfordresher

In the United States today, there are several potential avenues open to popularisers of working class history. From documentary film to museum exhibits to community oral history projects, each presents a different set of audience, funding and distribution questions. But all face a common barrier — America is a society which suffers from historical amnesia. This is particularly true of American working people who generally know very little about the past. Most assume that, though technology has changed over time, the social relations of the contemporary world are immutable. As an oil refinery worker remarked when learning about textile factory work in the early 1800s, "Well, a boss is always a boss." Working people may feel optimistic or pessimistic about their individual chances of success within this system, but their perception that power relations are fixed is never challenged. Finding ways to popularise history, to assist contemporary workers to think about history as a process, can return to them a sense of political possibility and change.

To that end the American Social History Project has been working to create a multi-media American social history curriculum for working adults in community college² and labour education centres. The Project began in 1981 under the direction of the late Herbert Gutman, Distinguished Professor of History at the City University of New York, and Stephen Brier, a labour historian and filmmaker. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation, we have finished six slide/audio-tape productions and a 30-minute documentary film, and now are completing a two-volume illustrated text and study guide series. The Project draws on the talents of a diverse group of historians, labour educators, artists, filmmakers and researchers.³ The Project is based at the City University of New York, Graduate Centre.

Who Built America?, as the curriculum is tentatively titled, is designed to fit a standard two-semester survey course, beginning with colonial settlement in the 16th century and extending to the present. In addition, the audio-visual productions, with accompanying study guides, may be used independently of the curriculum and have successfully distributed the seven programmes to a broad range of community groups, trade unions and libraries.⁴ We hope the text, to be published in 1988, will also find a general readership beyond the classroom.

Although there has been an international revolution in the study of social and working class history in the last twenty years, the teaching of American history continues to be dominated by the consensus scholarship of the 1950s and 60s. Students are still taught that the United States developed without fundamental conflict and that divisive issues were resolved through the compromises of national political leaders and ratified through the electoral process. The American Civil War — which would appear to be an embarrassing exception to the consensus rule — is portrayed as a tragic mistake, one which could have been avoided had only cool heads and diplomacy prevailed. Working people, in this school of thought, didn't determine or debate the direction of America. Their thoughts and actions merely ratified the trajectory of American development set out by others. Trade unions are usually dealt with institutionally as a 'special interest' group; their history is chronicled in obligatory chapters on industrialization and economic development.

This conventional historical synthesis, organised around the presidency, national politics and economic growth still prevails in almost all available texts. In response to the social upheavals of the 1960s, text book publishers began adding the history of blacks, women and ethnic groups — the 'little people' of American history — in side-bars, inserts, boxes and illustrations alongside the texts. But the social and political history of the working class has never been fully integrated into the analysis of major historic events.

In *Who Built America?*, we are attempting to address the old questions of American history — why did colonial Americans rebel, why were African peoples enslaved, why was the Civil War fought, what caused the Great Depression of the 1930s — in the context of the changing nature of US capitalism. With an emphasis on social history, we introduce our audience to issues they do not even know had a past such as the history of gender, race, and ethnic relations, popular culture, family and community life.

With these goals in mind, the introductory segment of the text book begins with contemporary problems such as unemployment, poverty, technological change and immigration to open discussion of historical process. It is followed by twelve

chapters spanning the period from the English, African and Native-American origins of colonial settlement to the aftermath of the Civil War and the nation-wide railroad strikes of 1877. Volume two, also twelve chapters, covers the emergency of monopoly capitalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the age of Ronald Reagan. Each chapter is supplemented with selections of primary documents from working class diaries, newspaper accounts, speeches, letters, and poetry, to give voice to the experiences of working people in the past.

In developing the curriculum, we have placed special emphasis on the creation of audio-visual materials. Visual imagery and visual thinking, particularly on television and in films, are central aspects of mass culture and growing numbers of Americans gain significant information from non-print sources. There is, however, a tendency for the visual form to take over and submerge the content. Thus, American viewers tend to rate the truthfulness or significance of information by the 'slickness' or 'Hollywood' production values of the medium. As social historians, we need to address this mass audience in ways which will catch their attention. But we also need to create new ways to use visual media to encourage critical historical interpretation and analysis. We want to restore meaning and a point of view to historical graphics to help viewers understand the multi-faceted nature of working people's experience in the past.

In the *Who Built America?* audio-visual series, we have grappled with pictorial presentation in different ways. The book, though well illustrated with pictorial and documentary evidence, remains contextual. The audio-visual productions, on the other hand, are designed to complement the text; each one tells the story of a single event or experience from the perspective of a working class participant to illuminate the social relations within a given period.

1877: The Grand Army of Starvation, a half-hour film documentary, tells the story of the nation-wide railroad strikes and urban riots of that year in the context of America's post-Civil War economic, political and social transformation. As the Civil War ended slavery once and for all, Americans looked forward to a future of unbroken prosperity and economic development. The rapid growth and consolidation of industry, particularly the railroads, seemed to fulfil this vision, but it also created vast new inequalities of wealth and power. For the first time, a few businessmen made decisions which could change the fortunes of people across the country. Their increasing ability to influence national politics scandalised the country. As the catastrophic economic depression of 1873 and the vicious repression of employers crushed the fledgling labour movement, working people increasingly felt helpless to confront this growing power. The strikes and riots of 1877 were a national outcry against these conditions, inaugurating a new struggle over the country's future.



Though the strikes marked a major watershed in America's industrial development — a point well recognised by the workers, the emerging middle class and corporate capitalists of *that* day — it has dropped from sight in most traditional histories of the period. The story of the strike and its aftermath is an excellent vehicle to demonstrate the important role working people played in shaping national historical development. The irony that so central an event is now lost to memory provides a forum to introduce the politics of historical interpretation.

1877 employs both standard documentary techniques such as voice-over narration and period graphic illustrations, and innovative visual forms such as tinting, limited animation and the use of on-camera actors to portray strike participants. We have dramatised eye-witness testimony of working class participants to humanise their often anonymous presence in the historic record. For example in one scene, the camera settles on the face of a 'tramp' in a period graphic. He sits wide awake among a group of homeless men sleeping on a city park bench. As we hear the tramp describe his fruitless search for work, the camera closes in on the man's face and the graphic dissolves to an actor dressed as the character who finishes his personal account on camera. The technique leads viewers to understand that people much like themselves played a part in historic events. At the same time, it underscores the veracity of the information in the same way interviews are used in contemporary documentaries.

We also have used drama to create the slide and audio-tape productions, where the story in each show is narrated by a working class character. In all but one of the shows (which is based on a documented biography), the character is a composite whose dialogue follows letters, diaries, newspaper accounts and other historical material as closely as possible. In *Tea Party Etiquette*, George Robert Twelves Hewes, a poor Boston shoemaker, relates his experiences in the popular crowd protest leading to the American Revolution. In *Doing As They Can*, a fugitive slave woman explains plantation life, focusing on the ways black men and women defended themselves against the worst oppression of the slave system. Clio Malarkey, a cartoon detective in *The Big H*, tries to solve a "history mystery" and Lucy Hall, a 15 year old millworker in *Daughters of Free Men*, writes home to her sister on the eve of an early industrial strike. The itinerant black minister and namesake of *Dr Toer's Amazing Magic Lantern Show* shows us a nineteenth-century slide show about the progress of freed slaves in the years following the Civil War.

In each production, the 'character-narrator' addresses an audience of his or her own contemporaries. This not only makes the character more credible but also conveys information about the social assumptions and context of the period. In



April 6, 1867

Figure 1. 1867 cartoon by prominent Harper's Weekly illustrator, Thomas Nast, portraying a racially stereotyped view of Irish immigrants fighting the New York police.

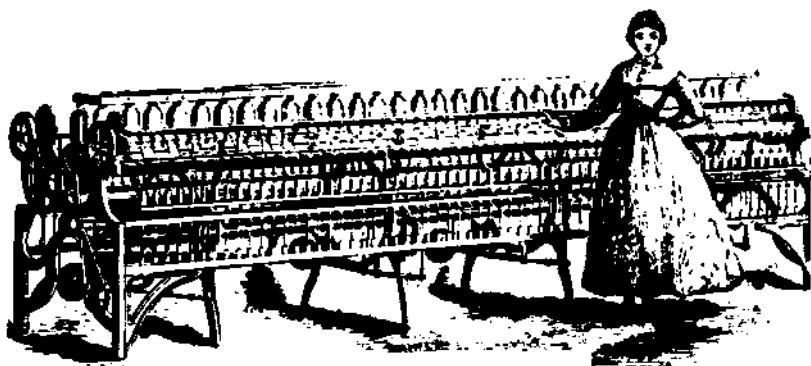


Figure 2. A "mill girl" posed beside a Fales and Jenks spinning machine; ca. 1845.

Doing As They Can, the fugitive contradicts the pro-Southern propaganda for an ante-bellum Northern audience. "Don't be taken in by those accounts and pictures of the smiling, childlike slaves," she says (as we see just those pictures), they hide the violence and family disruption of slavery. Slaves must live two lives: one they show the master, the other they show only among themselves. In this way, the pre-Civil War political debate over whether slavery had a civilizing or destructive impact on black slaves is suggested without resorting to a more didactic presentation.

This kind of experiential, internal approach to narration encourages viewers to take an active role in interpreting historical material. But there *are* drawbacks. No matter how strategically you have placed a character in a historical moment, there are limits to what he or she could have experienced. Aspects of the overall context and long-term implications cannot always be forced into the character's own recollections and still retain the character's credibility as a historic actor. A non-didactic approach also leaves open the possibility that some viewers may miss significant information or misunderstand certain points. For these reasons, we are developing brief, 16-page study guides for each show which provide both an overview and discussion questions to assist the viewer. We have also assumed that most people will see the shows in a group setting where the themes and implications can be drawn out by a teacher or discussion leader. Though the difficulties inherent in this kind of dramatic presentation should not be passed over lightly, the chance to directly engage viewers with historical process, which this approach offers, has been well worth the risk.

The story in each show is illustrated with graphics from the historical period portrayed. The pictures usually closely follow the subject and point of view of the narration. But at times, they counter-point or even contradict what is being heard. For example in *Doing As They Can*, the fugitive simply describes a religious meeting among plantation slaves. As we hear her relate how slaves sing about the Exodus and the story of Daniel, we see typical Bible illustrations. But as she continues, these standard pictures are replaced by pictures of plantation life. As we hear her appeal "to triumph over Satan," we see a picture of the white plantation owner. The heartfelt petition to have Moses lead them to the Promised Land is illustrated with a graphic of escaping slaves. In this way, the narration and picture sequences together convey how slaves understood their oppression and found ways to acknowledge it without incurring their owner's wrath.

Viewers seem more willing to accept this looser correlation between sound and picture in a slide show than they do in a film — perhaps because in a slide show there can be no pretence that what is being seen is a succession of still pictures.

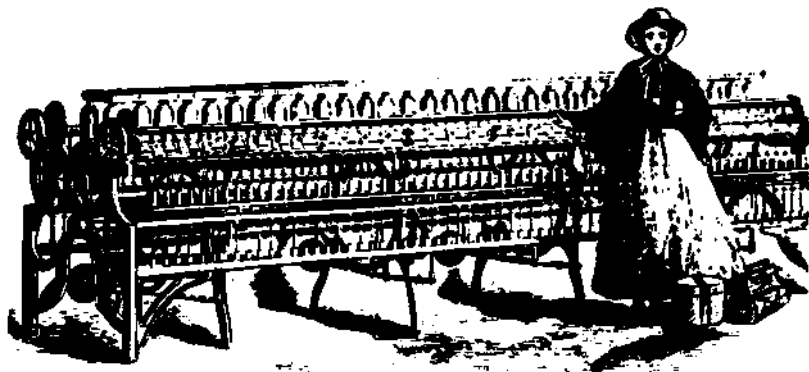


Figure 3. Original graphic retouched to suggest the monetary rewards offered by mill work.



Figure 4. Original graphic retouched to illustrate the mill women's growing militance.

One tends to 'read' the picture sequence of slide shows in the same way one follows a comic book where wildly different visual view-points can still be related to a single narrative.

Besides adding nuance to the presentation of working peoples' lives, the ability to understand a slide show sequence on more than one level also allows us to comment on the pictures' historical bias. The visual history of America's working class is hidden under a mountain of dominant, generally hostile imagery. The technology available for mass production of graphic imagery — wood cuts, wood engravings and lithographs — were expensive to print and required large staffs of engravers. Only well-capitalized publications, primarily serving the growing upper and middle class markets such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, could afford such outlays on a regular schedule. Though union and community newspapers flourished in the nineteenth century, frequent graphic illustrations have remained beyond their reach. It was not until less expensive technical processes including the reproduction of photographs were developed around the turn of the century that graphics began to appear regularly in working class and radical journals.

The process of creating images also limited the style of graphic presentation as well. With sometimes no more to go on than a journalist's written account, the sketch artist drew the scene and handed it over to engravers whose reinterpretation was often further mediated by instructions from the editors. Often subtle, artistic conventions were thus introduced. For example, the ways in which working people were pictured often highlighted ethnic and racial stereotypes, even in straight-forward objective news accounts.

The interests and concerns of the illustrated magazines' upper and middle class readership also dictated the kinds of scenes published. Working people are most often depicted in public life engaged in disturbances: carousing in the street, striking, parading and brawling. Morality infused the way they were pictured at home or at leisure leaving us with either sentimentalized views of the up-right workman or the critical ones of the lazy drunkard. This is not to say that the vision presented is solely negative. Periodicals like *Frank Leslie's* did frequently express sympathy for workers displaced and victimized by growing monopolies, but this sympathy did not extend to trade unions which were portrayed as provocative and as violating individual freedoms.

Rather than disguising or glossing over these biases in the graphic record, we have decided to confront them head on, using the racist and anti-working class images against themselves and demystifying stereotypes by contrasting historical graphics with 'corrected' pictures (drawn by the ASHP staff).⁵ For example, *Five*

Points depicts life in an Irish immigrant, New York City slum in the decade before the Civil War. The show juxtaposes the views of the Reverend Louis Pease, a Protestant minister, and those of members of an immigrant family. With rare exceptions, the available graphics from the period portray the Irish as ape-like drunkards or vicious thugs leading lives of utter degradation and immiseration (figure 1). To counteract the visual stereotypes, members of the family are introduced with a realistic engraved or photographic portraits. Identified in this way their personal stories contradict the racist bias of the graphics. At significant points in the script, key pictures are changed to contrast the Rev Peases' point of view with that of the Irish immigrants. Thus the sub-human figures fighting in a saloon become working men gathered in the "working-men's club" discussing the day's events.

In *Daughters of Free Men*, a show about the young women who left their family farms in the 1830s and 1840s for factory work in Lowell, Massachusetts, America's first industrial city, the available historic graphics present a different visual problem. Here the dominant pictorial message is not viciously anti-working class but actively pro-industrialization. The graphic record of textile work in the ante-bellum period comes primarily from trade cards and business advertising. Genteel mill women work in airy, well-lit surroundings; the noise, dust, clutter and drudgery are rarely suggested. To draw attention to this particular point of view, we exaggerated and embellished the images. As the viewer hears a labour-recruiting agent describe the pleasures and remunerations of factory work, the viewer sees an image of a well-dressed girl standing before a spinning machine, an illustration from a period advertisement (figure 2). In successive slides, the girl in the picture is given a cloak, hat, purse, and then surrounded by piles of store-bought parcels, suggesting how wages fulfilled the workers' desires to acquire personal possessions (figure 3). Later, the graphic is further adapted to illustrate the factory workers' growing union militancy: now the model 'factory girl' is replaced with angry young women dressed in less resplendent work clothes (figure 4). Repeating the image with symbolic changes, the original advertisement becomes an illustration of both the advantages and disadvantages of life in Lowell for the young mill workers.

In all the programmes, we have tinted pictures to cut down the alienation many working people today feel when viewing an archaic drawing style. We try to use the strengths of the old pictorial conventions, such as their minute detail and panoramic scope, and the way a progression of events is presented simultaneously — cause and effect — in the same picture. Where there are no pictures to depict aspects of working-class life — we have drawn our own. We have retouched pictures not to fool the viewer, but to highlight the point-of-view of each image.



The film and slideshows do not claim to tell the whole story. They are meant instead to open debate, to raise questions and issues by telling the story of working people while using the contradictory visual evidence that purported to depict their lives. In conjunction with the text, they attempt to show how working people experienced and participated in history.

The creation of a popular, accessible working-class history is no small problem in a culture which is so devoted to erasing all traces of the past. This is a time when the US administration is asking a concerted effort to seal the lessons of the Vietnam War — barely ten years distant — safely away as 'history' in order to mentally prepare the American public for future military adventures in Nicaragua, Libya and beyond. We hope that by encouraging the study of the past, working people today may begin to see that their contemporary world emerged out of a comprehensible historical past. In this way, they can begin to understand that the present is the result of actions and ideas in the past and what they assumed was given and fixed in their lives — the product of the past — was once present and contingent.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 I wish to especially thank Josh Brown for his careful reading and comments on this paper. We together developed many of the ideas expressed in discussion and while producing the audio-visual materials.
- 2 Community colleges generally offer two to four year technical degrees and continuing education programmes. These institutions see their mission as training working adults and minority students.
- 3 These include Josh Brown, Bruce Levine, Bret Eynon, Dorothy Fennell, David Brundage, Josh Freeman, Michael Musuraca, Michael Hyman, Elizabeth Sheehan, Nancy Hoch and myself. Sue Porter Benson, Edward Countryman, Bryan Palmer and Nelson Lichtenstein have also contributed to the text.
- 4 Several of the ASHP audio-visual productions are available at the History Workshop Media Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- 5 Graphics are modified by placing a clear sheet of acetate over the original and making a second drawing. The back of the acetate is painted to block out parts of the original creating the illusion of a new graphic. The acetate is then tinted so that the changes blend in. This is the same technique artists use in creating animated cartoon.



Miguel Vera

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