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"History's Appeal: The
Michigan Historical Museum and the Presentation of
the Past"

presented by

John R. Thiel

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in History

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HISTORY'S APPEAL:
THE MICHIGAN HISTORICAL MUSEUM AND THE PRESENTATION OF THE PAST

By

John R. Thiel

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

2000

ABSTRACT

History's Appeal: The Michigan Historical Museum and the Presentation of the Past

By

John R. Thiel

For years, the audience for academic history has dwindled to the point that it now consists almost exclusively of other historians. Ironically, this dissipation has occurred despite the remarkable popularity of history in more public forums, such as museum exhibits. Due to their increased appeal, however, public history presentations must be sure to present the past responsibly while retaining their appeal, as they both attract and instruct the audiences who no longer turn to scholarly renditions of history.

In 1995, the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing opened its newest permanent exhibit, titled "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." This exhibit, with its attention to the daily lives of Michigan's citizens over the space of a century, powerfully reflects the issues surrounding the struggles over the past waged among academic historians, museum professionals, and public audiences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several people helped to push this project through to its completion, and without their assistance I might *never* have finished this thesis. I owe the greatest debt to Professor Susan Sleeper-Smith, who served as my major adviser for the project. She has guided me through most of the development of my skills as an historian over the past several years, and her patience has been invaluable as I meandered through my time at Michigan State as both an undergraduate and a graduate student. Professor Maureen Flanagan read the seminar paper that became this thesis once I pursued the topic further. She offered several worthwhile comments about the nature of museum history. Professors David Bailey and Thomas Summerhill willingly answered the late-inning call to come in out of the bullpen and serve on my defense committee, and I owe them a great deal of thanks for their assistance and thought-provoking comments. Keith Widder, a longtime veteran of public history, also took the time to read this thesis. His fresh perspective on the subject was greatly appreciated.

My experiences as an intern for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History during the summer of 2000 opened my eyes in many ways to the public's perception of history. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Timothy Grove, and the rest of the staff of the Department of Education and Visitor Services for making my experiences at the museum educational and enjoyable. Sarah Zaffina also deserves a nod for putting up with me during my stint in Washington.

This thesis would not exist without the contributions of the staff members of the Michigan Historical Museum (MHM) who patiently sat through my questions and shared

their experiences with the formation of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." I want to thank Susan Cooper-Finney, Larry Griffin, Laurie Dickens, Mark Bennetts, and especially David Bridgens, whose boundless good will and corny jokes kept me laughing throughout my time as an MHM employee.

Certainly, no endeavor of this sort could be completed without the support and love of family and friends. My parents bent over backwards to help me in whatever ways they could, and I cannot express how much I owe them. They have dutifully read everything I've written since my first tentative paper as a freshman, and their occasional critiques helped me to realize when my writing veered towards the incomprehensible. Finally, Amanda Essenmacher, my fiancée, read nearly every word of every draft of this paper. Her comments often pointed me in directions that had not occurred to me. Every time that it seemed as if I'd fall short of completing this project, her tireless support helped me to reach the finish line.

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Introduction

It is no secret among academic historians that the general public, as Allan Nevins phrased it years ago, "will open a book of history only with reluctant dread."[1] The perception of academic historians as dull, dry intellectuals is hardly a new phenomenon, but it is somewhat ironic that, as professional historians lament a situation that finds their work less and less appreciated by the general public, American history itself is enjoying unprecedented popularity.[2] Attendance at historic sites managed by the National Park Service is on the rise, preservation societies stridently defend historic buildings, and viewers flock to historical documentaries and period motion pictures, as Ken Burns' *The Civil War*, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, and the films of Oliver Stone attest. Some of the major beneficiaries of the recent "history boom" have been America's historical museums, ranging from the smallest local history site to mammoth museums such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH).

The ways in which academic and public historians, as well as members of the general public, define the practice of history can be very much at odds with one another. Each of these three groups has its own claims on the past, and its own expectations of the best ways to present history to a popular audience.

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This paper explores the contention over America's past by history museums, academic historians, and the general public, focusing upon history as it is presented in

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[1] Quoted in James McPherson, "History: It's Still About Stories," *New York Times Book Review* September 19, 1999, p. 35.

[2] Edward T. Linenthal, "Committing History in Public," *Journal of American History* 81:3 (December 1994), p. 986.

museums. As a graduate student in an academic setting, I have been frustrated by the lack of public appreciation for the work of professional historians. At the same time, I have worked in various forums of public history and have seen that history has the power to enthrall museum visitors.[3] In an attempt to trace the origins of this discrepancy, Chapter 1 examines the roots of this divide between academic and public historians, exploring the early purposes of historical museums and professional historians in this country as differing interpretations of practices such as social history caused them to drift apart. In light of the current popularity of historical museums, Chapter 2 investigates the pressures museums must deal with in order to present history to many different groups, each with their own expectations and demands. One of the strongest pressures exerted upon history museums is that the institutions acknowledge the diversity of the society they commemorate. Therefore, Chapter 3 examines the ways in which museums address such issues as race, class, gender and ethnicity in order to afford their visitors the most meaningful museum experience. Lastly, Chapter 4 explores another heated debate about museum history: the dilemma faced by museum personnel as they strive to hold the public's interest through exhibits that entertain but also seek to educate their visitors. If the combination of style and substance is balanced, museums can cultivate a strong and devoted audience for the future, especially among their youngest visitors.

As a case study, these issues will be framed primarily around the example of the Michigan Historical Museum (MHM) in Lansing, Michigan. The MHM opened at its current location in 1989, as part of a massive building which also houses the State

[3] I spent the summer of 2000 as an intern in the Department of Education and Visitor Services at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Previously, I have worked as an historical interpreter at both the Walker Tavern Historic Complex in Cambridge Junction, Michigan, and at the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing.

Archives and the Library of the State of Michigan. The museum welcomes roughly 160,000 visitors each year; approximately seventy percent of those people are children who come either with their families or in the many school groups that arrive daily for guided tours.[4] The museum's exhibits fill three floors of space. The ground floor serves as a welcome area for the museum's visitors and also contains a "Special Exhibits Gallery" for annual exhibits with themes that range from Michigan's Civil War battle flags to the history of radio and television broadcasting in the state. The second floor of the MHM is home to the oldest collection of permanent galleries, which opened with the museum in 1989. These exhibits explore the state's past from "pre-history" to approximately the end of the nineteenth century, tracing Michigan's evolution from a Native American landscape to the industrial climate at the end of the nineteenth century that paved the way for the explosion of the automobile industry. The second floor's galleries represent a variety of time periods. A visitor will pass through a mock-up of an Upper Peninsula copper mine, a recreation of the first territorial capitol building in Detroit, a late nineteenth-century schoolhouse, and miscellaneous other environments. When the museum opened, these two floors comprised the entire scope of the institution's exhibits.

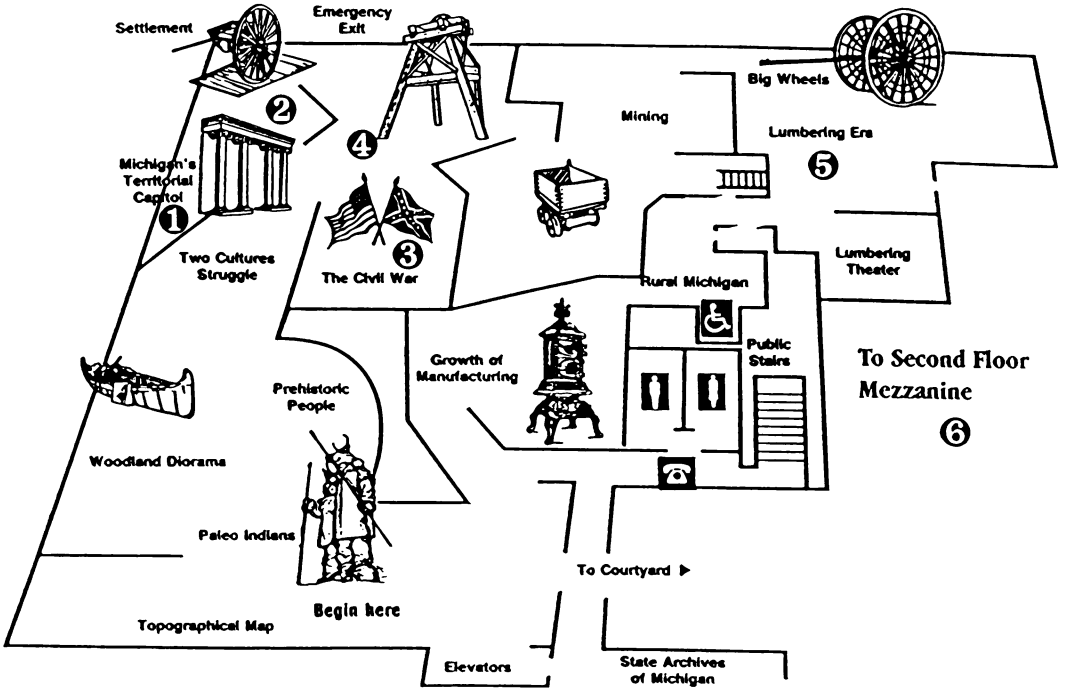
Although these exhibits will receive some attention in this thesis, the third floor exhibits, completed and opened to the public on May 6, 1995, constitute the primary focus of this study. "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" examines the state's history from the emergence of the automobile industry to approximately the middle of the 1970s; the progression of galleries on the floor roughly follows a decade-by-decade pattern (see

[4] Visitor statistics for the Michigan Historical Museum are courtesy of Mark Bennetts, MHM Communications Assistant.

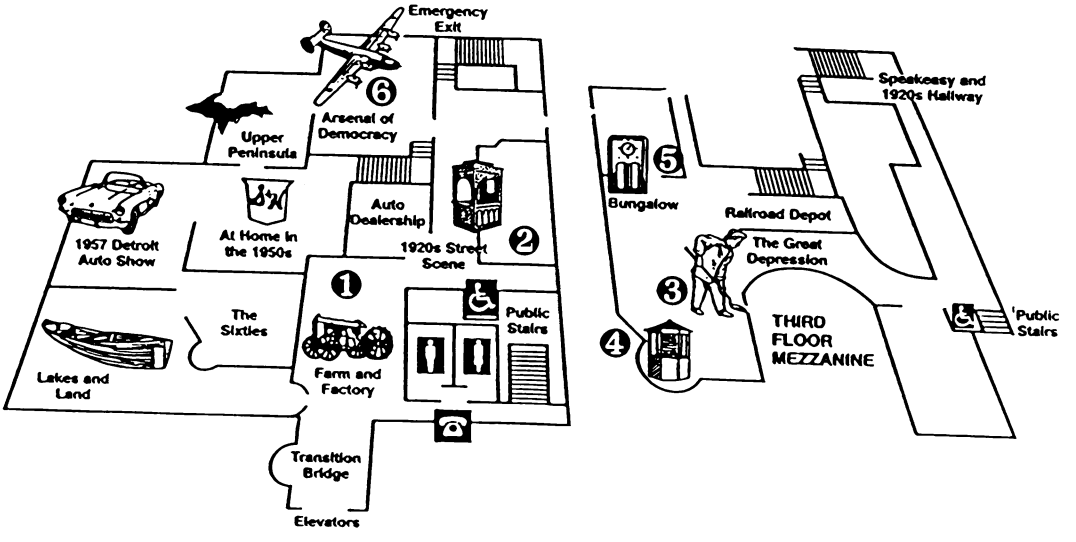
Figure 1). These exhibits provide an especially appropriate forum to examine both the presentation of history to the public and the contests over the ownership of the past. First, Michigan's industrial legacy, in the form of copper and iron mining, manufacturing, and automobile production has created a racially and ethnically diverse population. Therefore, an exhibit addressing the state's recent past should be an interesting case study for this exploration of social history in museums, as well as the feelings of personal ownership museum history inspires in its audience. Second, because "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" was created and largely designed by members of the MHM staff, rather than by an external exhibit designer, the exhibit invites a discussion of the ways museum professionals have defined the study and presentation of history. Third, the staff's ideas about the expectations of the public guided many of their choices for topics and design approaches throughout the third floor. One of the staff's most pressing concerns was to keep the exhibits educational, while maintaining the air of entertainment they felt was necessary in ensuring the popularity of the floor, especially among the children who visit in school groups.

Figure 1: Permanent Exhibits at the Michigan Historical Museum
(Third Floor Houses "Michigan in the Twentieth Century")

Second Floor



Third Floor



Chapter One
The Paths of the Past: Social History, Museums, and the Academy

"...vivid experience gleaned through audiovisual displays, museum visits, heritage sightseeing, and reenactments has for many enhanced, if not replaced, bookish historical knowledge."
- David Lowenthal, 1989[5]

While academic historians have watched their audience shrink to what essentially consists only of other historians, another gulf has arisen between historians in the academy and those working in history museums. Each side in this long-standing debate disagrees with the ways the other practices history, and the divide seems likely to expand further. Although the split has distant roots, the emergence of social history unintentionally deepened the schism still further, and is perhaps the most basic reason for the public's disdain for written history while they eagerly embrace visual depictions.

Both historians and museum professionals who are social historians use the same label for rather different practices. Academic historians who turned to social history in the 1960s and 1970s focused on previously marginalized populations and created women's history, African American history, and other branches of the profession that emerged as a result.[6] Social history in museums, as in academic history, also presents a more well rounded picture of the past, but museum social history can best be approximated as visual portraits of the daily lives of "everyday people" on a local scale.[7] Social history in a museum setting has given the public a deeply personal attachment to the history on display in exhibits. Academic social history, meanwhile, has often isolated itself from the public by focusing on theoretical constructs informed by studies of smaller

[5] David Lowenthal, "The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions," *Journal of American History* 75:4 (March 1989), p. 1277.

[6] John Higham, "The Future of American History," *Journal of American History* 80:4 (March 1994), p. 1298.

and smaller portions of society that deter the formation of a comprehensive historical narrative.[8]

The debate over social history is further complicated by the role played by the public, a third party that is not to be taken lightly. The practice of American history has become a hotly contested arena, in which "the stakes are high," as Edward Linenthal observed.[9] The occasionally bitter divisions between academic and public historians stem from the struggle for ownership of America's past. As academic and public historians feud over their respective claims to the country's history, the interpretation of social history put forth by historical museums makes its visitors feel that they, too, own the past through the personal connections they make with the exhibits and objects on display. Therefore, museum professionals must strike a tenuous balance. They must work to present a responsible portrait of the past, while at the same time remaining aware of the expectations of visitors who also have a stake in the ownership of history.

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In a sense, academic and public historians can trace their differences back to one of the United States' first organized museums in the early nineteenth century, where Charles Wilson Peale opened the Philadelphia Museum. Prior curatorial efforts were private collections, garnered by wealthy individuals who had sufficient leisure time and capital to accumulate interesting objects from around the globe and place them on display for public edification. Peale fit the mold of the wealthy collector, but his museum attempted to place the objects he had gathered into some sort of historical context,

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[7] David Fleming, "Introduction," in *Social History in Museums: A Handbook for Professionals*, edited by David Fleming, Crispin Pain, and John G. Rhodes. (London: HMSO, 1993), p. 1.

[8] Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 304.

locating the artifacts in front of painted backgrounds that suggested their original purpose and/or role in the formation of the American nation.[10] The Philadelphia Museum's overall message, if it can be said to have possessed a theme, was that the objects on display were part of a broad continuum of progress that continued to the present. If the museum's visitors could take away a sense of their own place on that spectrum of improvement, the museum's mission was fulfilled.[11]

The story of the Philadelphia Museum took a sharp turn after Peale's death in 1827. Unable to raise public funds for its support, the museum was forced to depart from its educational orientation and to incorporate such crowd-pleasing spectacles as live animal pageants and human sideshows stocked with Siamese twins. This sort of dubious entertainment increased when the museum became the property of showman P.T. Barnum in 1850. Once Barnum entered the fray, the museum further "blurred the boundaries between museums and carnival sideshows, between the theater and the circus, between the real and the contrived," as Gary Kulik observed.[12] The Philadelphia Museum was not the only American institution in this period devoted to preserving the past; other historical societies and museums also existed by the mid-nineteenth century. However, many of these museums also gradually evolved into entertainment venues, rather than sources of education and enlightenment. For instance, massive dioramas

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[9] Linenthal, p. 990.

[10] Kevin Wash, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World.* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 106.

[11] Timothy Grove, Andrea Lowther, Martha Jo Messerole, Heather Paisley-Jones, and John Thiel, *National Museum of American History Interpreter Manual.* (Unpublished, on deposit at the Department of Education and Visitor Services, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 2000), p. 5; James William Miller, "Museums and the Academy: Toward Building an Alliance," *Journal of American Culture* 12:2 (1989), p. 2.

[12] Gary Kulik, "Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present," in *History Museums in the United States*, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 5.

overshadowed more simplistic displays of objects; the nineteenth-century public on both sides of the Atlantic clamored for this sort of "spectacular panorama."[13] The whims of popular culture had gradually turned relatively serious institutions into circuses.

Just as museums departed from their original mission and focused on entertainment, the historical profession experienced an equally dramatic transformation. Peter Novick has detailed this shift, and contends that history became a more analytical process that claimed to present the past in a more objective, less laudatory light. The profession shifted from a group consisting solely of wealthy gentlemen such as Francis Parkman and Henry Adams – each of whom possessed his own sense of American exceptionalism that spilled over into his interpretations of the nation's history – to a more cohesive band of university-trained authors largely influenced by rigorous German educational training.[14] By the time the American Historical Association was founded in 1884, historians in the United States had begun to follow the lead of German scholar Leopold von Ranke, who urged his students to show the past *"wie es eigentlich gewesen,"* as it essentially happened.[15]

The turn-of-the-century focus on objectivity among scholars of history was, in Novick's view, part of a general trend toward "the austere, rather than the ornate." Even American newspapers, previously shameless in their political partisanship, attempted to present the day's news as opinion-free information, rather than editorializing current events through one or another perspective. American historians underwent a concerted effort to become a more professional society, and objectivity was the watchword in this

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[13] Wash, p. 106.

[14] James Turner and Paul Bernard, "The Prussian Road to University? German Models and the University of Michigan, 1837-c.1895," *Rackham Reports, 1988-1989* (Ann Arbor: Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, The University of Michigan, 1989); pp. 6-52.

new endeavor. Proponents of professionalization in history argued that through objectivity, historians could hope to achieve an "authoritative" status as commentators on the past and thus approach deeper truths about history.[16]

By attaining a degree of authoritative objectivity, professional historians in the late nineteenth century hoped to distance themselves from the apparently more subjective views of American history then being presented in the country's museums. By the late 1800s, history museums were no longer the over-the-top spectacles of the previous decades. Not coincidentally, history museums in the late nineteenth century had acquired a new primary purpose, the "Americanization" of the swarms of European immigrants who arrived in the country daily. These museums hoped to instill a sense of pride in native-born Americans, and to educate new members of the nation about the superiority of American history and culture.[17] While professional historians willfully separated themselves from such celebratory practices, their own attention to objectivity inadvertently spawned Greenfield Village, one of the largest history museums of the twentieth century and an institution that would help to set the standard for history museums before World War II. Their detachment from practices that appealed to the masses inspired a famous American industrialist to construct his own sense of the past.

Henry Ford had already made a fortune and become a nationally known figure by the time he uttered his famous epithet: "history is more or less bunk." Though this statement is often misconstrued as a dismissal of all history, Ford actually reflected his distaste for the type of history that he claimed was the domain of professional historians.

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[15] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 28, 50.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

Ford asserted that historians were too concerned with "great men": politicians, military leaders, and diplomats. As a result, history was too laden with an endless stream of wars, treaties, and presidents, and historians overlooked the "everyday people" who had, in Ford's opinion, truly made America great. He thus set out to create a new kind of history museum, strongly believing that "the only way to show how our forefathers lived and to bring to mind what kind of people they were is to reconstruct, as nearly as possible, the exact conditions under which they lived."[18]

Ford ordered thirty-five thousand of his dealers across the country to "get everything you can find!" Gradually, objects started pouring into Ford's warehouse in Dearborn, Michigan. Meanwhile, Ford also secured buildings connected to America's past and planned to move them to his proposed Early American Village. By 1928, Ford's building collection included such disparate structures as the courthouse where Abraham Lincoln had practiced law, the entire Menlo Park laboratory complex used by his friend Thomas Edison, as well as several others. In the end, Ford created *two* museums: a collection of objects in a reproduction of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, and a sprawling open air museum filled with the buildings he had gathered. When the open-air museum was dedicated in 1929, it had an idyllic name – Greenfield Village – and a clear message. Life, Ford asserted, was getting better and better through the innovations of industrialists and inventors like Edison and himself, and through the tireless labor of America's working men.[19]

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[17] Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 6.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Henry Ford was not the only wealthy American industrialist in the 1920s who was suddenly consumed by a desire to preserve his interpretation of the American past. Perhaps fueled by a competitive spirit that hoped to match Ford's achievements at Greenfield Village, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. spent seventy-nine million dollars to construct Colonial Williamsburg, a massive open air museum dedicated to preserving life in late-eighteenth-century America. Rockefeller's model town was, in the words of Mike Wallace, "clean, tidy, and tasteful." Where Greenfield Village never acknowledged the upper classes in American history, Rockefeller's Williamsburg, situated in Virginia, memorialized the planter aristocracy of the antebellum South and embraced many of the values of the 1920s corporate elite. However, no visitor to Williamsburg when it opened would have seen any evidence that African slavery had existed in the United States. Despite their differences, both open-air museums were nearly devoid of social conflict, and both could be considered shrines to the progress of the American spirit.[20]

When they were founded, Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg capitalized on a perception that had already taken root among the general public in America. By marketing their history in reconstructed settings open to everyday Americans, Ford and Rockefeller vented their frustration at what they saw as an elitist historical profession. They expected the public to share their sentiments and, for the most part, they were right. As one visitor to Williamsburg in 1942 said, "Of all the sights I have seen, and all the books I have read, and all the speeches I have heard, none ever made me see the greatness of this country with more force and clearness than when I saw Williamsburg slumbering peacefully on its own foundation."[21] Visitors to historical

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[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.
[21] As quoted in Miller, 3.

museums in the first half of the twentieth century were greeted with a patriotic celebration of Americanness, and most of them liked what they saw.

Among the dissidents, however, were many academic historians, who viewed the presentation of history in mid-century museums as irresponsible and inaccurate. In a 1957 speech, historian William B. Hesseltine charged that museum practices that focused primarily on artifacts (including the stand-alone buildings of Williamsburg and Greenfield Village) were "at best illustrative rather than instructive."[22] Americans who came away from museums run in this fashion witnessed objects and buildings out of context. It was the job of the historian, Hesseltine and others argued, to examine written documents closely to find more edifying patterns in the past.

By the time Hesseltine spoke out against object-based presentations in history museums, the historical profession itself was on the verge of another radical transformation. Amid the cultural upheavals of the 1960s that lashed out against racial segregation, war, sexism, and other social inequalities, many academic historians began to feel something akin to Henry Ford's earlier revulsion with top-down historical scholarship. The birth of social history in the 1960s, as John Higham pointed out, was a shift from the study of the *dominant* to the study of the *dominated*.[23] Social history opened the doors to scholarship that focused on such previously marginalized groups as African Americans, women, and Native Americans. It also incorporated concepts such as gender, community, personal and collective identity, class, and race into a discipline that had tangentially, if at all, addressed these issues previously. The emerging discipline sparked the study of people otherwise lost to history, including those who may not have

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 1.
[23] Higham, p. 1298.

left behind a wealth of written documents. Census and probate records, for example, could reveal not only a family's numbers and possessions, but provided the evidence for extrapolating other information about their lives. Within the historical profession, as Peter Novick put it, social history was "*the* growth industry." Historians themselves began to describe social history as the radical wing of the historical profession, while scholars who continued to practice political history or other traditional modes of research were deemed members of the historical "establishment.[24]

This new breed of social historians viewed history museums as the territory of the old guard, and rejected their patriotism-instilling frameworks. In particular, historians openly criticized Colonial Williamsburg, the institution that for decades had inspired its visitors to see the "greatness" of the nation. Williamsburg, in the eyes of the new social historians, "pickled the past." It painted a rosy picture of the late-eighteenth century and presented no evidence for slavery, which had been the foundation of the colonial Virginia economy. As social history rose to prominence in the late 1960s, local museums sprang up across the country to preserve local histories and joined in the swell of cultural awareness that came with the grassroots protest movements then sweeping the nation.[25]

The social consciousness of the sixties, along with complaints from social historians, led museums like Colonial Williamsburg to reevaluate their approaches to the past. At Williamsburg, for example, 1972 marked the momentous discovery of slavery at the open-air museum, following numerous complaints from the public. The recreated

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[24] Novick, pp. 440, 445; Some of the earliest forms of social history were small community studies that exhaustively detailed the lives of people in small New England villages in the colonial period who otherwise would have been absent from the historical record. See, for example, Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), and John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[25] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, p. 21.

village incorporated slave cabins, and docent-led tours discussed slavery on a regular basis. Likewise, Greenfield Village in Dearborn adopted this tactic as it adopted strokes of racial diversity into its previously bleached palette of American history.[26] Larger historical museums also began to tackle issues such as race, class, gender, and imperialism, all directed towards a broader, more inclusive sense of the country's past. Even the National Park Service, custodian of hundreds of historical sites across the country, adopted the mission of making its sites accessible to *all* Americans. The previous interpretative thrust at Little Bighorn National Battlefield, for example, had detailed the battle from the perspective of white soldiers in General Custer's forces. After the sixties, Little Bighorn incorporated Native American perspectives about the battle.[27] All of this reflected a growing consciousness that a well-rounded history provided a sense of group identity for the multiple components of the American populace.[28] In the early days of academic social history, historical museums and their approaches to social history mirrored their academic counterparts and incorporated marginalized components of society.

Despite the apparent similarities between academic and museum versions of social history, crucial differences existed. First, museums still relied primarily on artifacts to present their history; academic suspicions about the use of objects as primary sources of historical information had not faded since Hesseltine's speech in the late 1950s. Meanwhile, though social historians gradually infused material culture into their research, it was supplemented by other sources of information. Second, museums are

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[27] Linenthal, p. 387.
[28] Anthony D. Buckley, "Should We Invent the Past We Display in Museums?" in *Making Histories in Museums*, edited by Gaynor Kavanagh. (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), p. 48.

social and visual experiences in which the visitor directs his or her exploration of a given exhibit or display, even when curators provide written information or promote a particular theme or argument.[29] The work of the historian remains primarily literary, with the argument and evidence pre-determined by the author. Third, museums incorporated social history into existing exhibit frameworks. The addition of slavery at Colonial Williamsburg did not necessitate tearing down all of the outdoor museum's other buildings, nor did the re-interpretation of the Battle of Little Bighorn force the National Park Service to reconstruct the battlefield. On the other hand, social historians rely upon new categories of analysis such as gender, class, and race, which were all but foreign to earlier historical work. These categories have changed the ways in which history is interpreted and have negated any grand narrative.

These differences offer explanations for the current divergence in museum and academic definitions and uses of social history. Visitors to historical museums, as they look at artifacts on display, generally feel a closer connection to those visually stimulating objects than they do to written history. This was the case in Henry Ford's day, and the incorporation of social history into museums has not changed that situation.[30] Museum visits also foster a sense of public autonomy, with each visitor in charge of his or her own course of action, an option missing in literary presentations of history.

This third factor is perhaps the most crucial force that separates the museum experience from the activities of academic historians. Social history has incorporated

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[29] Gaynor Kavanagh, "Making Histories, Making Memories," in Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, p. 3; Barbara Franco, "The Communication Conundrum: What is the Message? Who is Listening?" *Journal of American History* 81:1 (June 1994), p. 161.

previously overlooked voices into museum exhibits, and these displays appeal to a far larger percentage of the public. Museum professionals, including exhibits designer Susan Cooper-Finney of the Michigan Historical Museum, have interpreted social history as a means to encompass all aspects of human endeavor. Cooper-Finney believes that the MHM's exhibits on the twentieth century are a "social history of the objects" because they describe the everyday lives of the people who used the artifacts on display.[31] In this sense, today's museum exhibits are not ideologically distant from Henry Ford's goals when he created Greenfield Village; both expand the scope of coverage to include everyday people, thus dramatically enlarging the museum audience.

Although it has transformed museums into publicly accessible institutions, social history has not increased the audience for academic historians. Some scholars, such as Alan Brinkley, contend that while museum social history has become a broad exploration of everyday life and thus more accessible to the general public, academic social history has become increasingly concerned with theoretical constructs that hinder its acceptance by the public. According to Brinkley, while the expansion of scope offered by social history has been a "welcome and necessary" development, it has also "encouraged increasing specialization" as social historians focus their energies upon smaller and smaller groups of people. Specialization, paired with the use of complicated Marxist, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-modern, and other theories, has led to an academic history that is "so specialized and theoretical that it cannot realistically hope to attract an audience beyond other specialists, and some of it is almost impenetrable to people outside

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[30] Cary Carson, "Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists' First Contact With History Museums," *Journal of American History* 81:1 (June 1994), p. 145. Carson argues that museums "teach best" through objects that the visitors can see themselves.

academia (and even to some within)."[32] Peter Novick boiled down the public's perceptions of academic and public history after these transformations this way: public history is now perceived as "populist," and academic history as "elitist."[33] The mistake academic historians make, according to observers such as James William Miller, has been "starting with theory rather than experience."[34] Brinkley, Miller, and Novick argue that, despite the current popularity of certain forms of American history, academic theory staves off public interest.

But academic theory as a polarizing force hardly tells the entire story. After all, not all social historians use such complex theoretical constructs in their work. Also, few among the general public would likely cite historical theory as the reason they no longer feel connected to the work of academic historians.[35] The primary reason that the general public has failed to embrace academic social history is that the discipline is at odds with the public's understanding of the purpose of history. Academic social history is concerned with understanding specific phenomena in the past such as gender roles, social mobility, community formation, race, and other processes, but popular conceptions rely on an image of history as a sweeping march of progress in which successive events accumulate inexorably towards the present.[36] The casualty in academic social history has often been the *narrative*, a component of the past to which much of the public still clings.

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[31] Susan Cooper-Finney, MHM exhibits designer. Interview by author, Lansing, Mich., 28 October 1999; Fleming, p. 1.

[32] Brinkley, p. 304; see also Stuart Davies, "Social History in Museums: The Academic Context," in Fleming, et al, *Social History in Museums*, p. 9.

[33] Novick, p. 519.

[34] Miller, p. 4.

[35] Recently, while speaking with some friends in the medical field, I used the phrase "historical theory." One of them, who considers himself quite the history aficionado, responded: "History has theories? I thought you all knew everything that happened!" Not every member of the historically inclined public is aware of the theoretical nature of much of historical scholarship.

When the public looks for narrative history, they rarely find it in academic work. Museum exhibits, on the other hand, often follow a linear path, regardless of the subject under consideration. This design more closely approximates a narrative form, and members of the public with an interest in history have their preconceptions about the past reinforced in that setting.

Museum visitors also find that social history in museums is more accessible than its academic counterpart because they experience a heady dose of nostalgia in the exhibits. A popular perception that the past is "timeless," that the past mirrors the present, leads to the assumption that people in the past were not very different from people today. As David Lowenthal suggests, people believe that we all share, and have always shared, similar values, goals, and vices in life, and our experiences, notwithstanding certain superficial differences in technology or culture, have been essentially the same. The nostalgia element in popular conceptions of history expects that presentations of the past can immerse movie audiences or museum visitors directly into life "back then," making them feel as though they are truly experiencing the past.[37]

Museum exhibits that are stocked with artifacts often nurture this nostalgia factor, whether consciously or not. As they directly observe an object owned or used by someone in the past, museum visitors form a strong personal connection to the past, as a very tangible remnant of a long-ago period. Objects give visitors a sense that they can know what people in the past experienced, creating a bond across history in which the visitors feel that they are basically similar to the people discussed in the displays. On the

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[36] Michael Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, edited by Jo Blatti. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), p. 40; Lowenthal, p. 1265.

[37] Lowenthal, p. 1264; Wash, p. 101.

other hand, some visitors, armed with the conception of history as a broad narrative of innovation and progress, may find amusement in a collection of artifacts, feeling reassured that today's goods are superior to those used in the past. In both cases, objects can foster pleasant feelings, and nostalgia seems to engulf many museum experiences.[38]

It is dangerous to claim that merely viewing an artifact is enough to gain adequate insight into the past, but today's museums rarely present objects in such a vacuum, and the Michigan Historical Museum is no exception.[39] However, since museum visitors anticipate nostalgia to flow from the objects on display, any exhibit that makes use of them is subjected to high expectations from its audience. Not only is the museum version of social history more accessible to the general public, but it is often subjected to more rigorous scrutiny. The personal connections to the past that many hope to find in museum history forces the creators of exhibits to negotiate with several groups. Visitors, government organizations, corporate donors, and the members of museum staffs themselves have expectations of history that must be addressed as exhibits take shape.

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[38] David Peterson argues that although many visitors come to museums expecting to be reassured about the past, it should not be a taboo for exhibits to challenge visitors, and even to disturb them. David Peterson, "The New Social History and Local Museums," *Journal of American Culture* 12:2 (1989), p. 61.

[39] Adrienne D. Hood, "The Practice of [American] History: A Canadian Curator's Perspective," *Journal of American History* 81:3 (December 1994), p. 1017; Loraine Knowles, "Conventional Displays," in Fleming, et al, *Social History in Museums*, p. 372.

Chapter Two
Whose History?: Claims to the Past in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century"

"It doesn't cover everything that a lot of people might think is important, but it does cover the things that one group of people thought were important."
- David Bridgens, Docent Liaison at the Michigan Historical Museum, describing "Michigan in the Twentieth Century"[40]

Who decides what a museum exhibit or educational program should include? In the struggles for control of America's past waged by academic and museum historians as well as the non-professional public, deciding what is important is a challenging issue. The sense of personal connections to the past that the museum strain of social history has fostered among the public, as well as the sense of ownership it inspires, mean that decisions about the content and design of an exhibit or program cannot be made in a vacuum. Museum professionals are aware of the expectations their visitors hold for a presentation of history, and they often find themselves fielding comments from the public when an exhibit does not conform to those notions. But it is not only the general public that exerts its demands upon the creators of museum exhibits and programs. Many history museums rely on corporate and private contributions to remain financially viable, and some institutions, including the National Museum of American History (NMAH) and, to a lesser extent, the Michigan Historical Museum, are conscious of national and state governmental expectations. Even within the museum setting, unanimity does not reign, and some observers criticize the influence of administrative officials on an exhibit's content. The challenge for a museum staff, then, is to create exhibits and programs that hold fast to their interpretive ideas, while also being sensitive to the input of the many people who feel that they, too, own the past being put on display.

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[40] David Bridgens, MHM Docent Liaison, interview by author, Lansing, Michigan, 5 November 1999.

As an exhibit unfolds, one of the first groups with which a museum staff must negotiate is, interestingly enough, itself. Museum historians and interpreters, in the words of Cary Carson of Colonial Williamsburg, "lack absolute academic freedom to study and teach whatever subjects take their fancy." In Carson's view, museum professionals encompass a spectrum that includes the director, historians, educators, and designers, who must work together as a team and sort through the various expectations for an exhibit's content, interpretive thrust, and design features to produce acceptable results. He compares a museum staff to a jazz combo, each with its own part in the larger harmonic structure, but all fairly free to improvise, provided they maintain some thematic cohesion.[41]

Not all museum observers would agree with Carson's argument. In a damning analysis of Carson's own Colonial Williamsburg, Eric Gable and Richard Handler – two academics – have suggested that many history museums practice "a highly stratified business." They contend that at Williamsburg, administrators and high-ranking historians are at the top of a rigidly structured hierarchy that disseminates all of the educational programs and exhibits presented to the public throughout the ranks of a bureaucracy. In this view, little or no input is accepted from other members of the museum's staff, whose only task is to feed pre-determined approaches to history to the museum's visitors.[42] Carson, in turn, refutes this interpretation of museum practice as "consistent with a mythology widely held by university academics." According to him, several large-scale history museums, including his own institution, Greenfield Village, and NMAH, operate

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[41] Carson, pp. 142, 145.

[42] Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "The Authority of Documents at Some American History Museums," *Journal of American History* 81:1 (June 1994), pp. 120, 122. Also see Eric Gable and Richard

on a far more cooperative scale, planning major exhibitions and public educational programs through decentralized committees that consist of members of all of the museum's departments who are encouraged to contribute their ideas.[43]

In the case of the Michigan Historical Museum, the teamwork approach to exhibit planning was fully in effect when the staff shaped "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." The twentieth-century exhibit reveals extensive staff cooperation, as well as individual interpretations that conflicted on occasion. Interesting compromises emerged, and in certain instances staff members were challenged to rethink their hopes for the content of specific exhibit galleries in order to resolve these differences. Even at the MHM, personal expectations fueled contention over interpretation of the past.

When the MHM opened in 1989, the staff knew it would eventually create a permanent exhibition that involved Michigan's twentieth-century history, but the early planning of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" did not begin in earnest until the spring of 1991, when Susan Cooper-Finney and other members of the staff sketched a rough outline of what would become the exhibit. Initially, the MHM had planned to follow a proposal submitted by Jean-Jacques André, a French-Canadian museum designer who had created the exhibits on the museum's second floor. Larry Griffin, an exhibits historian at the MHM, "realized that we had missed the boat" on the earlier wave of exhibits, and the staff chose not to put André's plan for the third floor into action. Griffin felt that, in the case of the second floor, the staff failed to incorporate the perspectives of everyday people, focused too heavily on industry and politics, and did not include enough

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Handler, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[43] I have personally seen this sort of decentralization in action, while serving as an intern in the National Museum of American History's Department of Education and Visitor Services during the summer

on the daily lives of Michigan's citizens. In the view of the MHM staff, any design for the third floor needed to remedy that situation.[44]

The process of planning "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" certainly contradicted the assumptions of Eric Gable and Richard Handler. The entire staff of the MHM, from the director to the communications assistants who operated the visitor's welcome desk in the front lobby, formed small committees, each assigned to a decade in the twentieth century. Each committee was to decide the themes and topics to be covered by their respective portions of the exhibition. Every committee member outlined topics for consideration in essays that were then presented to the entire staff. The final themes and topics of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" arose from the negotiations that followed.[45] In opposition to Gable and Handler's argument that top-level executives are the sole arbiters of exhibit content, Susan Cooper-Finney claims that the "upper management" of the State of Michigan's Bureau of History "bought" the design as soon as it was presented to them. "Upper management" asserted that the staff members were "the experts in history." The only condition was that changes could be suggested as the exhibit developed, if any suggestions sprang to the minds of the museum's director or state officials, including the state's "official historian," the Secretary of State.[46]

The completed exhibit reflects the personal recollections of Michigan's people, culled from oral histories, memoirs, interviews, county histories, and other sources. Nearly every label in the exhibition begins with individual quotations that relate to the

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of 2000. Along with my colleagues in the education department, I was invited to attend planning meetings for a number of upcoming exhibits, and in one instance even helped to shape the labels of a display.

[44] Larry Griffin, MHM exhibits historian, interview by author, Lansing, Michigan, 20 October 1999.

[45] Laurie Dickens, MHM collections historian, interview by author, Lansing, Michigan, 20 October 1999.

[46] Cooper-Finney, interview.

topic in question. These quotes were designed to strengthen the personal connections that visitors associated with the history on display; many are engrossing and often amusing, and they draw visitors into the succeeding message of the label. But the plethora of quotes and reminiscences in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" do not stand as the floor's lone interpretive devices; thousands of artifacts are scattered throughout the exhibition.[47] This was also done as part of a concerted effort to fix perceived flaws in the second floor exhibits. Many staff members felt that the second floor was object-poor. As a result, although the second floor contains roughly 800 artifacts, the third floor's total surpasses 2,000. The increase in artifacts was partially done with the public in mind, as collections historian Laurie Dickens claimed, since "if we did less [than 2,000 artifacts] then we weren't doing the public any kind of service." And, while many history museums have been criticized for loading their exhibits with too many objects without respect to any sort of interpretation, Dickens contends that the combination of artifacts and individual recollections ensures that "there's a personal story for almost every object up there."[48]

The evolution of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" from its beginning as a series of staff-penned essays to its final form followed an occasionally rocky path as the staff debated object selection and placement, thematic choices, and gallery design. Although, as David Bridgens observed, the third floor depicts what "one group of people thought were important," even that group was split on certain issues. At times, some staff members claim, personal biases crept into the exhibits. In one portion of "Michigan in

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[47] Indeed, oral histories as the product of personal memories can often be flawed or incomplete, constructed through the foggy lens of the passage of time. Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back and Kay MacLean, "Understanding Oral History," in *Public History Readings*, edited by Phyllis K. Leffler and

the Twentieth Century," an interactive radio in the 1930s bungalow plays snippets of several speeches or radio programs from the period, including an address by Father Charles Coughlin, the infamous "Radio Priest" from Royal Oak, Michigan. Coughlin, an avid and outspoken opponent of many of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's initiatives, is represented in a speech against banking monopolies and a small label on the radio display. The text interprets Coughlin as a once-powerful commentator who "eventually slipped into vicious attacks on the Roosevelt administration, international bankers, labor unions and Communists. In 1942 Detroit Archbishop Edward Mooney forbade further broadcasts."[49] The implicit tone is that Coughlin's critiques of FDR were evidence of his weakening credibility, since he was removed from the air soon after he "slipped." In light of the relative dismissal of Coughlin's impact, some members of the MHM staff alleged that the exhibit held a bias in favor of the president.[50]

As visitors leave the bungalow, they enter a short hallway coated with newspaper clippings that herald the coming of war in Europe. A motion sensor sets off a recording of Roosevelt's "day of infamy" speech in front of a large mural depicting the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The World War II gallery, "The Arsenal of Democracy," that follows this introduction highlights Michigan's industrial contributions to the war effort in terms of materiel and morale on the homefront in an almost unanimous outpouring of support for the fight. At this point in the exhibit, collections historian Laurie Dickens said, "the Republicans on the staff decided that we had

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Joseph Brent. (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1992), p. 268; Kavanagh, in Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, p. 8.

[48] Dickens, interview.

[49] Label in 1930s Bungalow, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

[50] The title of a recent biography of Coughlin suggests that the "Radio Priest" may have actually represented a fair share of the populace, and that many did not see FDR as their ideological leader. See

enshrined Roosevelt enough" by limiting discussions of disagreement with the president. They felt, Dickens recalled, "that there was another voice out there that wasn't really interested in Roosevelt, either in the thirties or today." As a sort of compromise, a kitchen display in the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery includes a small set of political buttons that say "No Roosevelt," and "Vote for Dewey." In Dickens' opinion, "it's a subtle thing," but these Roosevelt opponents are visible "if you're paying attention."[51] Though its resolution was fairly low-key, this internal struggle over the presentation of Franklin Roosevelt demonstrates that even within the staff of a history museum, personal values and expectations have shaped exhibit content.

If personal beliefs play a role in forming exhibits, personal *experiences* also become factors as each member of a museum's staff brings his or her background to the process. Nowhere is this more apparent than in one of the last galleries in the twentieth-century exhibit, a room that explores the turmoil of the 1960s. For most of the third floor, an extensively designed environment intended to surround visitors with a sense of being *in* that period represents each decade. In the 1920s, visitors stroll through a recreated "Street Scene" including a bookstore window (filled with books by Michigan authors from the early century), a mock-up of an old movie theater (which plays "Voices of the City," a piece about urbanization in the twenties), and a Hudson's department store window. In the 1950s, the focus is on domestic life, and the interpretive environment is a pastel-heavy kitchen and living room, complete with a television set playing segments of shows from the period, including "I Love Lucy." No comparable environment reigns in the 1960s gallery. Most MHM staff members were at least teenagers by the end of the

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Ronald H. Carpenter, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

1960s and each had his or her own experiences to draw upon when the gallery was designed. In Laurie Dickens' estimation, these experiences made it "really hard for us, as far as focusing. We're from the Baby Boom generation . . . we had all lived in the sixties, but at different levels, and at different times."[52]

Susan Cooper-Finney encountered opposition when she suggested various overarching thematic environments for the 1960s gallery. With each proposal, someone on the staff said, "Oh, but that's not what I experienced." For example, some members of the staff had been active protesters against the Vietnam War, while others were not. The gallery that resulted from these personal variations is easily the most complex in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," both in terms of its visual appeal and its thematic disparity. One case in the gallery contains tie-dyed "hippie" clothing and flowers, and the opposite corner is stocked with Vietnam paraphernalia, including a Prisoner of War flag and a fully decorated Army uniform. Other portions of the gallery depict the civil rights movement in Michigan with photographs of a march through Detroit led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and testimonies from Malcolm X, a native of Lansing, Michigan. The horrific race riots that scorched Detroit in the summer of 1967 find space here as well. Visitors can also walk into a booth and listen to samples of Motown music, a staple of 1960s Detroit. The staff's insistence that one theme would not suffice for a gallery about the 1960s displayed their own sense of a strong personal stake in a period that they had lived through. Their claims of knowledge about the decade were stronger than they had been to earlier periods, and the gallery's complexity is a testament to the effects of personal memory on the presentation of history.

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[51] Dickens, interview.
[52] *Ibid.*

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Corporate and governmental organizations that fund museum exhibits can also affect the final appearance of museum projects and add another component to the complex web of demands exerted upon museum presentations. Creators of museum exhibits may present history to the public, but as Mike Wallace put it, "they don't get to make it exactly as they please."[53] Corporate sponsorships are crucial for museums that are short on internal funding to launch massive exhibitions. For instance, the National Museum of American History's conservation project on the original "Star Spangled Banner" was sponsored in large part by Ralph Lauren and Polo. Other government-managed museums like the MHM, even though they do not rely as heavily on corporate sponsorships, are subject to certain expectations held by officials in the government. When money or management are issues, the claims of ownership of the past can become concrete; in these cases, there may actually *be* an owner of the history on display.[54]

The staff of the MHM was able to create "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" with almost no interference from what Susan Cooper-Finney referred to as "upper management," but officials in the state government *were* granted the privilege of suggesting changes as the exhibit developed, and the final say on the exhibit's content rested at the top. The government's role in dictating content was minimal, and Cooper-Finney claims that during all of her tenure at the museum, there have been very few instances in which exhibit content has been actively dictated. The staff received some input from state legislators when they viewed early drafts of the exhibit script and floor

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[53] Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in *Past Meets Present*, p. 42.

[54] Wash, p. 94; Victoria A. Harden, "Museum Exhibit Standards: Do Historians Really Want Them?" *The Public Historian* 21 (Summer 1999), p. 98; Larry E. Tise, "The Practice of Public History in

designs, but most suggestions were tongue-in-cheek; one lawmaker joked that he would like to see more of his own childhood possessions on display. There was, however, one notable instance in which state officials insisted that a topic should be included when the staff failed to address it.

In 1961, delegates from across Michigan gathered in Lansing to draft a new constitution; the old document had been on the books since 1908 and was showing signs of its age.[55] The MHM staff was told that the 1961 Constitutional Convention, or "Con-Con" as it came to be called, *must* be included in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." After much wrangling over the wisest placement of a display about the Con-Con, the staff relied only upon a small glass case inserted at the start of the 1960s gallery to address the issue. The display stresses the new constitution's role in the reapportionment of legislative districts based on population instead of land area, and emphasizes the guarantees of civil rights made to Michigan's citizens. Susan Cooper-Finney discussed the Con-Con display with all the enthusiasm of a dental patient, and she reflects the staff's lack of excitement about the display, which is inconspicuously tucked to the left side of the 1960s gallery's entryway. Most visitors simply bypass or overlook the Con-Con display all together.

Despite the relative anonymity of the Con-Con display some staff members believe that visitors to "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" learn a valuable lesson from the changes the new constitution enacted. Exhibits historian Larry Griffin pointed out that the old constitution of 1908 was essentially a "nineteenth-century document, and it

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State Government," in *Public History: An Introduction*, edited by Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp. (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1986), p. 326.

[55] Willis F. Dunbar and George S. May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State, Third Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 565.

did not reflect the needs of the people, or the changes that had taken place in the twentieth century." As the state's racial and ethnic make-up became much more diverse, and as industry expanded in the twentieth century, the state needed a constitution that could adapt to these changing times.[56]

That may have been the lesson the State of Michigan intended when it ordered the Con-Con to be included in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," but the message of a brief film that accompanies the Con-Con display seems somewhat more dogmatic. A small television screen embedded in the wall next to the glass Con-Con case shows a short movie called "Democracy in Action," a filmed narrative about the process of creating the new constitution in 1961. The extent of state involvement in this film is not clear, but the movie's shockingly jingoistic interpretation of the Con-Con is far less measured and analytical than the staff's appraisal of the event. In the closing scene of the movie, the announcer summarizes the proceedings: "In the end, the new constitution included several compromises. So the new constitution didn't solve all of Michigan's problems, and it certainly didn't satisfy all Michiganians, but that's democracy in action." A short pause follows, and the screen cuts to old newsreel footage of a Nazi rally in World War II Germany. As Adolph Hitler gestures to the goose-stepping crowd, the announcer intones, "Just consider the alternatives."[57] The alarmingly jingoistic message of the only component of the exhibit directly dictated from on high stands in even sharper contrast to the rest of the 1960s gallery, in which dissent and disagreement reign over this sort of presentation. The State of Michigan's role in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," small as it may have been, shaped one portion of the exhibit considerably.

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[56] Griffin, interview.

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The MHM staff may have felt some responsibility to the state government when they created "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," but they were even more conscious of their role as a public space in which state history would be presented to a diverse audience. The initial press attention to the exhibit stressed the personal connections that Michigan's residents could find in the displays, and the staff echoed these sentiments repeatedly. "We wanted to show how the people of Michigan made decisions that mattered," said Sandra Clark, the director of the Michigan Historical Center (the building housing the MHM as well as the State Archives and State Library), "and we wanted to make sure that everyone who comes sees themselves reflected."[58] Susan Cooper-Finney likewise asserted that the third floor exhibit was a welcome departure from the format on the second floor that lacked "personalized stories" from Michigan's citizens. The public latched on to this invitation to claim a piece of Michigan's past, especially given the relatively recent subject matter of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." Roger Rosentreter, the editor of *Michigan History Magazine*, called the exhibit's time period "our century," and the public took those words to heart, challenging the design and content of the exhibit when it did not agree with their expectations, and lavishing praise upon the displays when they appealed to their sense of history as a conjurer of nostalgia and a narrative tapestry.[59]

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[57] Michigan Historical Museum and the Chedd-Angler Production Group, "Democracy in Action" Final Script, 15 December, 1994, p. 2.

[58] Quoted in the *Detroit Free Press*, April 19, 1995.

[59] Roger L. Rosentreter, "From the Editor," *Michigan History Magazine*, 79:3 (May/June 1995), p. 2; A magazine article written about "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" after it opened made an even more direct link between the exhibit and nostalgia. *Michigan Living* headlined its description of the new exhibit this way: "Our Century Remembered: New Michigan Historical Museum Exhibit Pushes Your Nostalgia Buttons." *Michigan Living*, Spring 1995, p. 5.

Even before "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" opened in May 1995, the public stake in the exhibit was firmly planted. The museum issued several press releases and advertisements calling for objects from specific periods, in an attempt to flesh out their collections and to spark interest about the new exhibition. The response was enormous, since over 2,000 objects – many of them donated from the public – eventually filled the exhibit. Visitors whose objects are on display obviously feel a strong personal connection to the exhibit, since their own kitchen appliances, articles of clothing, automobile parts, and other effects are in full view. For a small portion of the public, their ownership of history is quite literal.

Even if visitors to "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" did not donate any of the objects, they share similar memories. The radio in the 1930s bungalow plays segments of a comedy routine starring Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, a jazz program with Louis Armstrong, the introduction to "The Lone Ranger," and other memorable snippets from the Depression years. In the "1957 Detroit Auto Show" gallery, visitors can admire a pristine Chevrolet Corvette. Earlier, in a gallery devoted to home life in the 1950s, a television set plays a loop of scenes from period television shows and sporting events, including the Detroit Red Wings' 1955 Stanley Cup championship and an episode of "I Love Lucy" in which Ethel and Lucy try to keep up with a speeding conveyor belt by frantically stuffing their faces with chocolate. For Larry Griffin, the Lucy show is an example of the portions of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" that trigger nostalgic emotions in visitors. Cultural touchstones like "I Love Lucy," Griffin said, serve as "shared memories, collective memories, that we all can identify with."[60]

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[60] Griffin, interview.

At other times, the MHM staff attempted to include subjects that they assumed were universally popular among their visitors, even when the staff was not interested in those topics. Larry Griffin commented that appealing to visitors' expectations was an investment in the museum's future, since any positive experiences in the museum could translate into greater popularity through word of mouth.[61] Susan Cooper-Finney said that a "pet thing" of hers, given the popularity of military history, was to insist that "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" cover the state's involvement in all of the "major wars" so that "all those guys who are interested in that" would enjoy the exhibit. The exhibit discusses both world wars, the Korean War, and the conflict in Vietnam as critical moments in the state's history. The inclusion of these conflicts demonstrates Cooper-Finney's commitment to enhance the accessibility of history at the MHM, even though she describes herself as a pacifist.[62]

In assessing the appeal of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," the MHM staff offers other points in the exhibit that appeal strongly to visitors. For David Bridgens, the director of the MHM's docent program, the most appealing portions are "things relevant to people – how they lived, where they worked." Everyday objects and details, a mainstay of museum social history, enhance the personal connections to the past for visitors. Bridgens frames these components in terms that are accessible to his tour audiences – who range from young children to senior citizens. With children, Bridgens places each object or time period in a family context: "I try to explain to them that these are things from your grandparents' time period, these are things from your parents' time period." When older visitors come through, he encourages them not only to recall their

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[61] *Ibid.*
[62] Cooper-Finney, interview.

own connections to the exhibit's history, but to relate their experiences to their children, all in an effort to make the past more accessible to the MHM's audience.[63]

However, as the creation of the 1960s gallery so clearly demonstrates, there are times when expectations of the past are not universal, and it is misleading to speak in terms of "the public" as a monolith without noting the diversity of experiences that each visitor carries to a museum. Some visitors expect to be reassured, and to hear familiar stories about the past. When a museum exhibit challenges those expectations, accusations of "revisionist history" tend to arise. One of the clearest examples of perceived revisionism came in 1994, when the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum attempted to mount an exhibit that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. According to its critics, the proposed exhibition portrayed the Japanese as noble victims of a pack of racist Americans. These critics believed that the exhibit urged the United States to apologize for using the atomic bomb. Among the most heated opponents to the exhibit was conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who charged that the exhibit was the result of a liberal conspiracy of politically correct revisionism that aimed to persuade visitors that "our country is inherently evil." In the face of this and similar onslaughts, the Air and Space Museum was forced to compromise; it removed nearly all of the interpretive components of the exhibit and instead displayed the Enola Gay in a nearly sterile context, devoid of almost any written content.[64]

Other attacks on so-called "revisionist" museum exhibits are legion, and recent examples attest to the continued contention over the past by the public. Many Civil War

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[63] Bridgens, interview.
[64] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, p. 292.

battlefield sites administered by the National Park Service have begun to incorporate slavery into their exhibits, and the response has not been entirely enthusiastic. Although slavery and the Civil War are closely interrelated, many visitors see no reason for the subject to be discussed in exhibits about the military dimensions of the conflict. Gettysburg superintendent John Latschar insists that "the greatest majority of our visitors are far more interested in why [the soldiers] died than in how they died." On the other hand, Joe Avalon, who owns an Internet magazine devoted to the Civil War, claims that "what we have here is political correctness running rampant."[65]

"Michigan in the Twentieth Century" has not been immune to disputes over versions of the past that contradict visitors' expectations and sensibilities. A small display about the Prohibition Era in Michigan rests at the top of the staircase leading to a balcony that overlooks the "1920s Street Scene." Part of the display discusses the emergence of bootlegging gangs who smuggled Canadian liquor into Michigan across the Detroit River, including the infamous Purple Gang. The gang was primarily composed of Jewish immigrants and Jewish American residents of the area. A label next to a group portrait of the Purple Gang originally pointed out that the gang was Jewish. Soon after the exhibit opened, however, a group of Jewish visitors to the museum complained that, as Susan-Cooper Finney phrased it, "that's not all there is." They felt that the label unfairly suggested that Jews were the only gangsters in Detroit during Prohibition. As a result, the staff "massaged the label" to incorporate another ethnic group in this revised caption: "In the 1920s, organized crime was often built on ethnic ties. These members of Detroit's Purple Gang came from Jewish neighborhoods and many had attended the same

[65] *Detroit News*, September 17, 2000.

eastside high school. Sicilians dominated the Pascuzzi Combine and the Licavoli Gang."[66]

The relative infrequency of public complaints about the history in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" is probably the result of the staff's concerted effort to offer the public the nostalgic experiences expected from a history museum. And, given the alarming trend of public criticism of alleged "revisionist" history in museums and historic sites that do *not* offer comforting visions of the past, one may be compelled to wonder if "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" plays it safe, only telling the public what they want to hear. In fact, this is not entirely the case. The exhibit is not merely a curio cabinet of charming objects and personal anecdotes designed to warm the hearts of the public. Throughout the third floor of the MHM, visitors are presented with the histories of groups who have faced discrimination and oppression, as well as episodes in the state's history in which dissent and social unrest reigned. At many points in the exhibit, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" explores race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other salient issues pertinent to any well-rounded discussion of Michigan's twentieth-century history.

[66] Cooper-Finney, interview; Label in 1920s gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

Chapter Three
Everybody's History: Social Inclusion in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century"

Academic and museum versions of social history, despite their differences, share a view of history that is more than the old top-down approach that dominated early historical scholarship. Both disciplines have rounded out our understanding of America's past by revealing the lives and experiences of many other groups of people. When Susan Cooper-Finney described the content of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," she insisted that the exhibit did not follow the pattern of a "dull gray historian," in which "the winners wrote the history."[67] At the Michigan Historical Museum, as at most other history museums in the country, social diversity and dissent against society's dominant elements figure prominently in the scope of the exhibits, especially on the third floor. Although it fulfills visitor expectations of nostalgia in many instances, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" also challenges visitors' understanding of the state's history by incorporating issues such as ethnicity, race, gender, and class into its displays. Despite occasional missteps, Michigan's African Americans, ethnic immigrants, women, and working classes are active participants in the galleries on the MHM's third floor. As Saralee Howard-Filler of the MHM's education department put it, "We didn't sugarcoat history."[68]

Museums are, in a sense, democratic institutions since they are open to all people. Museum historians know that their audience is far from monolithic, and creating exhibits that incorporate a broader cross-section of society will hopefully strengthen the personal connections visitors can garner from museum history, at the same time that it reminds visitors that the past has not always been a rose garden of pleasant experiences and

[67] Cooper-Finney, interview.

cheerful nostalgia.[69] If museums help visitors to feel that they own a piece of the past, then a more encompassing picture of that past should make it easier for each visitor to find a connection.[70]

The bottom-up approach to history at the MHM, although its content mirrors the focus of many academic social historians, is more audience-friendly in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" because of one of the fundamental differences between academic and museum social history. For academic social historians, such categories as race, class, gender, and ethnicity are tools of analysis used to interpret the past in radically different ways. At the MHM, these categories are included within the larger narrative of the museum's third floor, in keeping with traditional public conceptions of history. There is no single gallery that focuses, for example, on African Americans in Michigan's twentieth century, nor is there a special room devoted to women in Michigan history. The experiences of all of these groups are woven into the overall fabric of the exhibit.[71] This narrative format may make these people more accessible to the MHM's visitors, but it also hinders the presentation at some crucial junctures. At times, the exhibit paints groups such as women and African Americans in generalized strokes, obscuring differences among them.[72]

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[68] Saralee Howard-Filler, quoted in the *Detroit News*, April 27 , 1995.

[69] Commentators like Anthony Buckley have suggested that more well rounded museum histories are instrumental in providing visitors from various backgrounds with a stronger sense of their own identity and their place in the larger society. Buckley, "Should We Invent the Past We Display in Museums?" in Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, p. 48.

[70] Jo Blatti calls museums "sites of multi-cultural negotiation," and the same can be said of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." Jo Blatti, "Public History and Oral History," *Journal of American History* 77:2 (September 1990), p. 619.

[71] *Detroit Free Press*, 27 April, 1995.

[72] Many museums that address gender, ethnicity, and so on are finding that these topics are not always best examined in linear exhibits, for these very reasons. See Franco, p. 154.

In the wave of inclusion and diversity that washes over "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," it is worth noting that not all members of Michigan's society receive much-needed attention in the exhibit. The state's Native American population, for example, is all but absent from the third floor. In fact, Michigan's Indians virtually disappear from the museum after the introductory gallery on the second floor introduces Europeans into the seventeenth-century Great Lakes. After that, Indians vanish until a brief label in the 1930s hallway addresses the Civilian Conservation Corps in Michigan. A CCC camp near Sault Ste. Marie was reserved especially for Indians; the display includes a photograph of the workers at the Indian camp. There is little else in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" to indicate that Indians have continued to live in Michigan after a rash of treaties in the early nineteenth century appropriated much of their lands for incoming white immigrants. This oversight is considerable, given the ongoing activism of Michigan's Indian tribes as they assert their own economic autonomy and property rights. They are a vital part of the state's population, numbering nearly 60,000, and deserve inclusion in an exhibit that purports to tell the story of all Michigan people.[73]

In contrast to the relative invisibility of Native Americans, Michigan's ethnic diversity is one of the better-addressed subjects on the third floor. Ethnic immigrants into Michigan make up one of the most prominent voices in the first few galleries of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." Larry Griffin points out that "you cannot talk about Michigan... when you start talking about the twentieth century, unless you talk about ethnicity, because the bulk of the immigrants that came to this country between the period of about 1890 to 1920."[74] By 1920, approximately one in every five people in

[73] STF1A-3A, Census of the State of Michigan, 1990.
[74] Griffin, interview.

Michigan were of foreign origin, and that figure jumped to around one in four in the state's urban areas.

The first gallery in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" does not merely present a sentimental portrait of ethnic contributions to the state's history, but instead acknowledges obstacles immigrants faced as they tried to retain their cultural identity in the face of mounting pressures to assimilate seamlessly into American society. "Farm and Factory" contains a large mock-up of a Model T assembly line as it might have appeared at Henry Ford's plant in Highland Park. The central theme here, aside from the obvious stress on Michigan's burgeoning automobile industry, is the ethnic make-up of Ford's Highland Park workforce. A massive photographic mural of the workers at the plant adorns the top of gallery's back wall, and the label beneath the picture notes that the image contains representatives from over fifty-three different nationalities. Ford is not generally recalled as a champion of ethnic diversity (and was in fact quite the anti-Semite[75]), so it is not surprising that his company worked to "Americanize" the immigrants he employed. A visitor standing in front of the assembly line display can read the following quote from *Ford Factory Facts*, a 1915 publication by the automaker that outlined the company's views on immigrant workers.

> It is almost essential that a workman have a knowledge of English, from a safety standpoint as well as to thoroughly understand the requirements of his work. This knowledge also helps make better citizens and protects them against the many pitfalls which lurk in the path of the unwary foreigner.[76]

After the Ford gallery comes the "1920s Street Scene," in which immigrants often succeed in their quest for economic security. Inside a detailed façade of an ornate movie

[75] For an account of Henry Ford's anti-Semitism, see Alfred Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews.* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980).

[76] Label in "Farm and Factory" gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

house, a fifteen minute film called "Voices of the City" addresses urbanization and its attendant problems in the twenties, heavily relying on the "voices" of immigrants who recall their experiences after moving to the state and working to stay afloat. Among voice-overs read by members of the MHM staff and others, an Italian discusses his years as an autoworker and a Polish woman reminisces about her shopping trips to downtown Detroit, as well as her excursions to see matinees at the local movie hall. The Italian man, identified in the film's script only as "F.A.", credits the auto industry and its "damn good jobs" for lifting him and other immigrants from a life of digging ditches. F.A.'s view of his life in Michigan is obvious, since in the film's closing lines he says that the 1920s were "a time when the American dream was being achieved."[77] Egalitarianism is the watchword for immigrants in this film, and even movies themselves formed part of the "American dream" of participation, since immigrants who put their nickels down for early silent films did not need to know a word of English to follow the action.

After the 1920s, a curious thing happens at the MHM. The fifty-three nationalities pictured in the Highland Park mural and the ethnic pride displayed by Italians like "F.A." in "Voices of the City" fade quickly after the "Street Scene" becomes the 1930s hallway. The Great Depression crashes into the museum's narrative, and the overarching theme of individual perseverance through adversity subsumes any attention to ethnicity. Ethnic diversity among whites ceases to be an issue in subsequent galleries, and immigrants to Michigan seem to be "Americanized" instantly and without fanfare, at least in galleries relating to the Lower Peninsula. Henry Ford seems to have gotten his wish of ethnic assimilation. Indeed, the work of historians such as Matthew Frye

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[77] Michigan Historical Museum and the Chedd-Angler Production Company, *Voices of the City* Final Script, December 15, 1994, pp. 2-10.

Jacobson apparently supports the idea that white ethnicity has become a less salient factor in recent decades.[78] Jacobson's argument that "whiteness" has become a more inclusive identity than ethnic diversity is disputable, however, since Michigan's Lower Peninsula continues to harbor several regions in which residents continue to celebrate their ethnic diversity and cultural differences. People of Dutch ancestry commemorate their ethnic heritage in annual events like the Tulip Festival in the aptly named city of Holland. Hamtramck, a village nestled within the city limits of Detroit, is almost entirely Polish, and many of its residents do not speak English. The Detroit area is also home to thousands of Arabic-speaking people. These are just a few examples of ethnic persistence in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, making the dissipation of ethnicity in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" fairly peculiar.

The exhibit fails to address ethnicity fully after the 1920s, but it does surface once again in a gallery devoted to the culture of the Upper Peninsula that is oddly sandwiched between galleries on World War II and the domesticity of the 1950s. The Upper Peninsula gallery notes that ethnicity has continued to be a force in the region and dates back to the influx of immigrants in the heyday of the mining and logging industries in the nineteenth century. The gallery asserts that the region's geographic isolation from the rest of the state has helped it to retain its culturally diverse flavor. The area boasts residential enclaves of Finns, Swedes, Italians, Germans, and Norwegians, among other nationalities. This gallery, however, is the last gasp of ethnicity in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

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[78] See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 91-137.

Although ethnicity fades from the exhibit after the 1920s, the museum continues to focus on immigrants and others in its discussion of the working class. Labor issues weave through nearly every gallery, including the Model T assembly line in the "Farm and Factory" gallery, "Voices of the City," "The Arsenal of Democracy," gallery about World War II, and most noticeably the Union Hall gallery in the 1930s hallway. The Union Hall is sparsely designed, consisting of greenish concrete block walls and cracked glass windows. The gallery addresses Michigan's labor movements throughout the early twentieth century, including the tumultuous strike that besieged the copper mining regions of the Upper Peninsula in 1913 and 1914. The main feature of the gallery is a short film about the 1937 sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint; to watch the movie, visitors sit on cold metal folding chairs with "Local 7" stamped on the backs. The movie celebrates the achievements of the strikers and presents the strike in nostalgic tones. The narrator's opening lines are: "This is the story of a group of men and women who were prepared to risk everything to change the way Americans worked. They transformed the factory from a place of drudgery to a place of dignity."[79] Although the film's progressive tone is part of the MHM's effort to inspire its visitors, this gallery also acknowledges that Michigan's citizens faced serious obstacles in their quest to achieve the "American Dream."

Those obstacles have been especially difficult for Michigan's African American population to overcome, and race serves as an important component of the narrative throughout the third floor. African Americans play a prominent role in many portions of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." History museums across the country, even those

[79] Michigan Historical Museum and the Chedd-Angler Production Company, "Flint Sit-Down Strike," Final Script, 15 December 1994, p. 1.

which do not focus directly on African American history, are making a concerted effort to increase the level of black voices in their exhibits.[80] The first concentrated discussion of blacks in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" is in the Ford assembly line gallery, as part of a segment on the Great Migration northward around World War I. African Americans were disproportionately represented in the auto industry, since by 1930 they made up nearly 4.8 percent of the state's population, but nearly 9 percent of the workforce in car factories. The gallery's discussion of black autoworkers acknowledges that they were often given the least desirable, most dangerous, and dirtiest jobs, but there is not much analysis of the social repercussions of blacks in the workforce. A telling symbol of the segregation that occurred in the plants is the fact that, of the 53 different "nationalities" depicted in the massive wall mural of Ford's Highland Park, labor force, not a single member of the throng is an African American.

As the exhibit progresses, it pays more attention to the difficult social plight of Michigan's black population, all the while relying on the strength of the exhibit – quotations from individuals used to illustrate broader themes. In "Voices of the City," a black man recalls that the housing situation in Detroit during the 1920s was far worse for blacks than for whites. While the average monthly rent for white families was roughly twenty dollars, for black families it was closer to fifty.[81] A display in the "1920s Street Scene" outlines the formation of the Detroit Urban League, which was concerned with helping blacks find a niche after they arrived in the city. Sam Fanray, one of the first African Americans elected to an office in the United Auto Workers (UAW), appears in a gallery in the 1930s hallway devoted to the rise of labor unions.

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[80] Spencer R. Crew, "African-Americans, History and Museums: Preserving African-American History in the Public Arena," in Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, p. 80.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, general trends in Michigan's African American population emerge. The hallway about life in Michigan during the Great Depression discusses Charles C. Diggs, the first African American elected to the state legislature as a Democrat. The larger purpose of the label about Diggs is to point out the shift in political allegiance among blacks that took place around the time of the New Deal, in which most African Americans shifted their allegiance from the Republicans to the Democrats. A pair of life-sized firefighter mannequins in the Civilian Conservation Corps is flanked by labels that point out the continuing practice of racial segregation in all walks of life. African Americans, like Michigan's Indians, were assigned to racially-specific CCC camps. Segregation is also the issue behind a testimonial from Hondon Hargrove, a black Michigander who served in an African American battery of artillery during World War II. "We were not only fighting battles as soldiers, we were also fighting something called 'segregation,' 'separation,' 'apartness.'" Henry Peoples, a Detroit native and member of the famous Tuskegee Airmen, recalled, "We had two goals: to fly, and to prove we could. A lot of people didn't think blacks could fly."[82]

These quotations appear at the top of a flight of stairs leading into the exhibit's extravagant World War II gallery, "The Arsenal of Democracy"; the gallery continues the pattern of addressing racial issues. In an effort to infuse an international conflict with a local perspective, the theme in this gallery is Michigan's industrial contribution to the war effort, as most auto factories converted to military production. But the picture of life on the homefront during World War II, despite the generally cooperative atmosphere, was hardly one of complete unity towards a common goal. Detroit and other Michigan

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[81] "Voices of the City" Final Script, p. 6.

cities were becoming increasingly divided racially, and many observers began to call Detroit the "northernmost southern city," because of its growing racial schisms.[83] Detroit's simmering racial discord erupted in a horrendously brutal riot in the summer of 1943. In a gallery so expansive that it includes the nose of a B-24 Liberator bomber mounted on the ceiling, this is the entire text devoted to the 1943 riot:

> Racial tensions increased as more than 60,000 African Americans migrated to the Detroit area. On June 20, 1943, Detroit exploded in a race riot that resulted in 1,893 arrests, 675 injuries and 34 deaths. Federal troops calmed the city within 24 hours. Afterwards, several groups began to work for better race relations.[84]

The impression a visitor (at least one not aware of the racial climate of postwar Detroit) is likely to garner from this treatment of the riot is that it was a brief aberration followed by sensible cooperation. In fact, the 1943 riot was part of a long snowball effect in deteriorating race relations that eventually exploded again in 1967 with a string of riots that were even more severe than those during World War II.

The label that addresses the 1943 riot is in the back corner of the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery, opposite the staircase that leads to the room. As a result, it is removed from the general flow of visitors who pass through the gallery. This sort of placement also hinders the message of a label in the 1950s gallery about the struggle for racial tolerance in Michigan. "At Home in the Fifties" includes an ornate kitchen, a living room, and a television set with period broadcasts. The overall theme is one of postwar prosperity, domesticity, and security, but one label on a side wall reminds visitors who notice it that not all was as rosy as the display suggests. "Redlining" in real

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[82] Labels at the top of the stairs before the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

[83] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 23.

[84] Label in the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

estate kept African Americans confined to less desirable tracts of housing and property, adding fuel to the fire of racial segregation that plagued Michigan's urban areas. The gallery's label on this sort of racial profiling quotes Ze'ev Chafets, who remembered that the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe "had a point system to keep out undesirables. Prospective buyers were rated by skin color, accent, religion and other criteria, including a typically American way of life."[85] If the television screen grabs a visitor's attention, as it often does, it would be difficult for the message of this redlining label to sink in. After all, the visitor would have to look up and to the left to catch the label, and since the entrance to "At Home in the Fifties" is also to the left, it is more likely that a visitor would see the TV screen before he or she gets a chance to glance around the room. So, while Michigan's black population is addressed in nearly every gallery of the exhibit, it is often not readily observable to those who decide not to read every label thoroughly.[86]

Another difficulty with respect to the exhibit's references to African Americans is that, at least until the anomalous 1960s gallery, blacks are depicted as monolithic. While the MHM is careful to distinguish among white beliefs, political views, and other aspects of behavior, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" largely gives the impression that all blacks shared the same goals and sought to achieve them in the same ways. Only the sixties gallery breaks from this monolithic approach as it notes the disintegration of the civil rights movement into its non-violent and more militant factions. It connects the movement to Michigan with a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march through Detroit and addresses the movement's more aggressive wings with a discussion of Malcolm X, who spent his childhood in Lansing.

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[85] Label in "At Home in the Fifties" gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."
[86] Indeed, few visitors to museums read the labels in any detail. See Peterson, p. 63.

A careful reader will notice that this investigation into the presence of African Americans in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" has failed to invoke the experiences of black women. The black presence in the exhibit is primarily in the form of the activities of African American men in politics, labor, and race relations, which serve to represent the entire race. If ideological differences among blacks are obscured, the same can be said for their gender differences. Again, the sixties gallery avoids this criticism, since Rosa Parks (who moved to Detroit shortly after her refusal to change seats on the bus in Montgomery) and black female delegates to the 1961 "Con-Con" have their places here.[87] But overall, when the exhibit *does* discuss women, as it does quite frequently, they are white.

White women are everywhere in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." Their first appearance is in the "Farm and Factory" gallery, the room containing the Model T assembly line. Across the room is a two-story barn that towers over visitors. The exploration of twentieth-century Michigan agriculture includes a tractor made, appropriately enough, by Ford, as well as several pieces of farming equipment developed during the period. A prominent figure in the farming display is Sarah Van Hoosen Jones, a female farmer whose many accomplishments included the development of a new strain of dairy cattle. Laurie Dickens felt that Jones' achievements would have merited her inclusion regardless of her sex, but it seems curious that no other women are

[87] Deborah Gray White has argued that black women have historically struggled under two burdens that often marked them as socially inferior: race *and* gender. They seem to succumb to this double burden here. See Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 17.

memorialized in a gallery about agriculture, an endeavor that has benefited from women's labor longer than most other topics covered in the exhibit.[88]

After the farming gallery, women show up next in the "1920s Street Scene" when they achieved the right to vote. The display on the women's suffrage movement that culminated in the passage of the 19th Amendment is fairly small, and it covers the struggle for voting rights in only two labels, a photo of a suffrage march, a few small artifacts, and the heading "Michigan Women Become Real Citizens." The only objects in the suffrage display are a small collection of buttons and a Pendell Watch. The watch passed from supporter to supporter, each of whom would "pay" for it with a small donation to the cause. The accompanying document that describes the watch is dated May 6, 1874. The suffrage movement began long before the dawn of the twentieth century, but the early date on the only substantial artifact in the display seems to confuse the otherwise strictly chronological thrust of the exhibit. According to the MHM staff, it is impossible to locate artifacts closer to the passage of the 19th Amendment. Susan Cooper-Finney acknowledges that the women's suffrage movement is crucial to any history of Michigan (and the rest of the nation) but that it "has no artifacts!" She calls the story of suffrage "an important written-down academic story. It's not a good museum exhibit." This opinion sheds some light on the paucity of coverage the exhibit gives to the suffrage movement, but it obscures interpretations of the movement that could be

[88] Dickens, interview.

garnered from more commonplace artifacts. Newspaper clippings from the period, for example, could certainly highlight women's activism in efforts to achieve the vote.[89]

At any rate, women become "real citizens" in the MHM after they gain the vote, and the exhibit's attention to women continues at a consistent pace throughout the next several galleries. The Union Hall gallery in the 1930s hallway, through various labels and a short film, argues that women were instrumental in the labor movement both as women's auxiliaries, who formed a "vital force" in generating sympathy for the Flint sit-down strike at General Motors in 1937, and as strikers and laborers themselves. In one label, Helen Piwkowski recalled that women faced pressures in the workplace that never troubled their male counterparts. "No matter where you went to work," she said, "if the foreman wanted a date with you, you had to go, sister, or else you'd be fired the next day."[90] The gallery notes that by the rash of strikes in the 1930s, the sight of a woman in the workplace was common, particularly in clothing factories and other low-wage occupations.

In keeping with the theme of women in the workplace, the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery focuses predictably on "Rosie the Riveter." Many women who worked for the war effort speak up from the gallery's labels. Despite these female voices from the workplace, the postwar era is presented as the idealistic "family wage" era, when "some women willingly dropped out of the labor force; others lost their jobs to returning World War II and Korean War veterans." The tone of "At Home in the Fifties" is overwhelmingly domestic and simultaneously stresses women's involvement in the

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[89] Cooper-Finney, interview. Elizabeth Carnegie has argued that *every* artifact can be interpreted in such a way as to include women in the analysis. See Elizabeth Carnegie, "Trying to be an Honest Women: Making Women's Histories," in Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, p. 56.

[90] Label in the Union Hall gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."

growth of a mass consumer culture. The gallery credits this symbiosis of stability at home and greater purchasing power for apparent domestic tranquillity. Betty Friedan's lamented "feminine mystique" seems to reign.[91] One gets the sense that all homes in Michigan were this idyllic and domestic. In fact, the number of women in the workplace actually *increased* after World War II, and has not dipped since.[92]

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"Michigan in the Twentieth Century" offers its visitors an image of a century in which various marginalized groups in Michigan inched closer to a more participatory role in society. The objects and topics on display allow the museum's adult visitors to establish personal connections with the past. The larger narrative framework of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" makes the material accessible to many of the exhibit's visitors, since the public generally expects history to be presented in narrative form. This contradicts the foundations of academic social history, in which categories of analysis including race, class, ethnicity, and gender reshape our understanding of history to explain *why* certain events unfold. In contrast, the narrative structure of a museum exhibit such as "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" seeks primarily to describe events that have occurred, while planting diverse actors into a pre-determined storyline. The museum approach may appeal to a larger audience, but the exhibit's format has a tendency to paint these categories in broad strokes and occasional generalizations.

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[91] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

[92] This view of "At Home in the Fifties" was similarly expressed by Craig R. Olson in his review of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century": Craig R. Olson, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of American History* 84:1 (June 1997), p. 185; Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *Journal of American History* 74:9 (March 1993), pp. 1455-1482.

Chapter Four
The Sensory Factor: Reaching Out to the Museum Audience with Both Style *and* Substance

Although it is true that history is remarkably popular today, any discussion of the public's affection for history and museums must be tempered with the realization that only a minority of the population watches historical documentaries like *The Civil War*, visits historic sites managed by the National Park Service, or passes through exhibits at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. As Gary Edson and David Dean have noted, there are "endless diversions elsewhere" to capture the attention of the public, and museums must wrestle with the competition offered by other venues as they attempt to draw visitors to their exhibits.[93] At the same time, shortages in funding and other financial realities are driving museums to inject elaborately entertaining components into their exhibits, in the hopes of attracting larger audiences. In the process, observers such as Mike Wallace argue, history is in danger of becoming little more than another commodity in an ever-growing consumer culture.[94] If museums focus too heavily on flashy and entertaining displays and exhibits, there is a very real risk that any educational message may be lost on visitors who leave museums recalling only the exciting sights and sounds that flurried about them during their visit.[95]

The challenge for museums is to continue to educate visitors of all ages while they make their exhibits more entertaining and exciting. Without an educational message underneath all of the glitz, exhibits risk becoming little more than the "diversions" visitors can find elsewhere. Much to the chagrin of academic historians, David

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[93] Louis R. Harlan, "Broadening the Concept of History," *Journal of Southern History* 57:1 (February 1991), p. 13; Gary Edson and David Dean, *The Handbook for Museums*. (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 147.

[94] Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in Blatti, *Past Meets Present*, p. 39.

Lowenthal may have been correct when he suggested that visual media such as motion pictures and documentaries has replaced "bookish" learning among the public.[96] If this *is* the case and people do seek educational value in visually stimulating media, then the potential for museum exhibits to entertain and educate simultaneously can be impressive and powerful, making museums far more than mere "diversions." Susan Cooper-Finney of the MHM insists that the growing entertainment factor at museums has only enhanced the educational impact of exhibits, asserting that "unless you get someone's attention, you cannot educate them."[97]

"Michigan in the Twentieth Century" has dozens of ways to "get someone's attention." The period designs of the galleries are often visually enticing, and nearly every gallery has some sort of audiovisual component to spark visitor interest. At various places around the exhibit, visitors can try out interactive computer stations aimed at instructing them about topics from early twentieth-century agriculture to the design features of 1950s automobiles. At times, entertainment outweighs education, but in many respects the exhibit succeeds in imparting educational messages to its audience in innovative and engrossing ways.

These entertaining facets of the exhibit appeal to nearly all visitors, but particularly to the many school-aged children who come through the museum each day. The risk of style superseding substance is especially significant for the youngest museum-goers. On any given day, most of the visitors to the Michigan Historical Museum are children on school-related field trips. Although young visitors to "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" will find plenty of places that stimulate their imaginations, no

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[95] Elizabeth Frostick, "Education," in Fleming, et al, *Social History in Museums*, p. 416.
[96] Lowenthal, p. 1277.

part of the exhibit is geared specifically for children. As the core of the MHM's audience, it is especially imperative that children in school groups are intrigued enough by their visit that they feel compelled to return with family and friends. More child-centered components of the exhibit would likely increase the visitor base the museum could look forward to in the future, no matter how successful the current mix of entertainment and education may be.

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Lessons abound for museum historians looking to judge the intellectual merit of their entertainment-oriented exhibits. Museum historians who are conscious of the precarious balance between entertainment and education at their institutions often cite attractions like Disneyland and Walt Disney World as an illustration of what can happen when entertainment far overwhelms any educational value. Seekers of what Mike Wallace calls "Mickey Mouse History" need look no further than the "Hall of Presidents" at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. The attraction stars "audioanimatronic" robots representing each American President. Originally, the theme of the show was a thoroughly patriotic celebration of Americana, complete with a set design recalling an eighteenth-century Philadelphia mansion. The booming voice that introduced the Presidential robots hailed them all as "defenders of the Constitution." But the "squeaky clean" images gradually became obsolete as patrons began to expect more honesty from their history; this was especially evident when visitors started laughing at the Richard Nixon robot. The "Hall of Presidents" has received something of a makeover in recent

[97] Cooper-Finney, interview.

years to make its themes more contemporary and less lionizing, but the attraction's legacy is one of style squelching substance.[98]

Larry Griffin and Laurie Dickens of the MHM, interestingly enough, both called upon Disney's theme parks as the epitome of entertainment in America, but they qualified their assessments by asserting that museums must be cognizant of what Griffin called their "primary mission." They must "educate the public, and...create a cultural awareness, a historical awareness, and a social awareness...for people." Griffin acknowledged the pressures facing museums to cultivate a solid base of visitors who will not only enjoy their visit, but will be compelled to make return visits and, hopefully, support the museum financially if the need arises. In his view, this is the value of exhibits that succeed in their dual mission of educating and entertaining an audience. The more a visitor enjoys his or her educational experience, the more he or she is likely to remember the messages of the exhibit, and to come back to the museum.[99]

Given the general preference for visual history over books, it should hardly be surprising that museum visitors are reluctant to spend a great deal of time reading lengthy labels in exhibits, and many visitors read no labels at all. As a result, museums must also find alternative ways to reach their visitors.[100] The theory of "multiple intelligences" or "M.I." advanced by scholars such as Howard Gardner has found widespread acceptance and application as museums plan their exhibits and programs. Gardner has asserted that people possess different strengths and weaknesses in learning that can determine their ability to absorb information. For example, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is exhibited

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[98] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, p. 139.

[99] Dickens and Griffin, interviews.

[100] Peterson, p. 63; Warren Leon, "A Broader Vision: Exhibits That Change the Way Visitors Look at the Past," in Blatti, *Past Meets Present*, p. 133; Edson and Dean, p. 147; James Miller reinforces

by individuals who learn best through physical activities. People with a strong musical intelligence are likely to recall material expressed through music and often say they need music playing in order to concentrate. Those with spatial intelligence are attracted to artwork and design. Individuals possess many different "intelligences," but one or two often dominate. Susan Cooper-Finney reinforced M.I. theory's pervasiveness, arguing that museums need to "address all the different learning styles." Labels alone, even if visitors made a habit of reading them exhaustively, cannot adequately deliver the exhibit's messages.[101] The audiovisual spectacles in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" complement the exhibit's written material, in order to enhance the impact of the galleries and make them appealing to visitors with each of the "multiple intelligences."

Well designed galleries can be thrilling to the senses, a joy to behold, and of particular appeal for those with a strong spatial intelligence, but they can also be *too* ornate and overwhelm historical interpretation. Most of the galleries on both floors of permanent exhibits at the MHM are "environments" set up to make visitors feel as though they are actually *in* the periods under consideration. The benefits of galleries like this can be remarkable. They can attract visitors' attention to subjects they might otherwise walk past without a second thought and cause them to spend more time studying a topic in a stimulating atmosphere. They also conjure up feelings of nostalgia (if the period is recent enough), and inspire visitors with the notion that they are personally experiencing the

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the notion that museums must "appeal to all the senses" to ensure that the public is satisfied with exhibits. See Miller, p. 3.

[101] In all, Gardner claims that there are nine intelligences that he has classified through his research. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Cooper-Finney, interview.

eras on display. When the visual impact is pronounced, the effect on the visitor can be profound.[102]

On the museum's second floor where designed environments dominate, the effects are often impressive. Two galleries stand out as a feast for the senses with mixed substantive impact. Near the beginning of the floor, a vast "woodland diorama" towers over visitors. The diorama consists of a floor-to-ceiling wall painting of a lake surrounded by a forest in autumn, complete with brilliant oranges, reds, and yellows in the trees and fluffy white clouds in the sky. At the base is a well-stocked shore scene filled with drying leaves, reeds, and artificial mud. A canoe laden with furs rests against the land. Overhead, speakers play a looping recording of geese and other birds. As a sensory experience, the diorama is magnificent. But the theme of the gallery – the clash of cultures between Michigan's Native Americans and the newly arrived French – is relegated to a series of labels at the base of the diorama. There is nothing wrong with the labels themselves – they do a fine job of detailing the story of fur trading, cultural negotiations and the colonial Great Lakes economy – but the rest of the gallery offers no other media to reinforce these themes. Visitors not inclined to read the labels are likely to come away with little more than a pleasant memory of an ornately decorated diorama and little edification about this crucial period in the region's history.[103]

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[102] Donna R. Braden, American Association of State and Local History Awards Nomination Form for "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," 26 January, 1996. Braden is a curator at Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village; According to David Lowenthal, the potential peril in designed environments like those in the Michigan Historical Museum is that visitors may be lulled into a false sense of perception, being "conned into thinking they are reliving the event[s] exactly as [they] happened." Generally, though, the environments at the MHM are not so thoroughly sanitized, as the examples in Chapter Three demonstrate. Lowenthal, p. 1266.

[103] At times, visitors with more tactile learning approaches can be satisfied in the woodland diorama. On occasion, the museum lays out a series of animal pelts for visitors to handle, in order to see the sorts of furs the French and Indians were using during the heyday of the fur trade. However, these pelts are not a permanent part of the exhibit.

In the gallery on the second floor that focuses on copper mining, the design likewise threatens to overwhelm any substance. Simulation is again the key: the room is set up to look like the interior of a late nineteenth-century copper mine in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The ceilings are considerably lower than in the rest of the museum, and the entire room, including the floor, is covered in artificial copper-colored "rock". The design creates an exciting sensation as visitors tread over bumpy ground and duck to accommodate the low ceilings. Off to one side, a diorama of a mine shaft, complete with a mannequin dressed in heavy work clothes, adds to the effect. A recording in the shaft plays a dialogue between two miners with ambiguous accents talking over the sounds of clanging rock and metal. This gallery, in isolation, would provide little in the way of interpretation or education to its audience – few of the components of the room are identified by any labels or other devices. But the room's value is in the mood it creates among visitors. It engulfs them in an exciting atmosphere that entices them to explore the next gallery, which explains the experience and processes of copper mining in much richer detail.

For the most part, the environments in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" offer a more integrated approach. They are ornately designed and decorated, but they generally contain a more well rounded presentation of their material that appeal to the "multiple intelligences" of viewers in original ways. Most of the galleries intersperse room design with audiovisual components to good effect. The Union Hall's spartan brick walls and folding chairs complement the short film about the 1937 Flint sit-down strike. In the 1930s bungalow, the living room environment is emotionally appealing, and the radio programs and images of impoverished citizens balancing domesticity with

economic fears manage to relate experiences of life in the Great Depression. The 1957 Auto Show gallery pairs the visual impact of a sparkling orange Corvette with multimedia discussions of the booming 1950s economy and postwar affluence.

One exception to the relatively successful balance of style and message comes at the end of the exhibit. The "Lakes and Lands" gallery that closes "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" contains an artificial shoreline of sand set against a painted lake, a reproduced hunting cabin under a plastic tree with bright orange leaves, a lighthouse with painted white bricks, and a stream of actual running water coursing over a snowy riverbed. In the center of the room, a long wooden canoe rests atop support beams. At first glance, the room is a celebration of Michigan and the Great Lakes as recreational havens where tourists can enjoy all four seasons equally. But the gallery contains another theme that is far less apparent to visitors without a propensity to read labels. Texts in the beach diorama stress the recent rise in ecological awareness among Michigan's citizens.

> Nature's gift to Michigan is the largest freshwater system in the world – the Great Lakes. Michigan's 3,288 mile Great Lakes shoreline touches four of the five lakes: Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior. During the 19th century, municipalities and industries along the shores of the Great Lakes used the lakes' water for drinking, manufacturing, transportation, fishing, and pleasure. Twentieth-century Michiganians began to realize that the precious and limited lakes, as well as the land they surround, must be used more wisely. They began to understand the Native Americans' respect for Mother Earth, and to regard the lakes and the land as valued resources held in trust for future generations.[104]

The gallery is more complex than it would seem, given the elaborate design and attention to decorative detail. This is one gallery in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," though, where style trumps substance soundly.[105]

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[104] Label in "Lakes and Lands" gallery, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century."
[105] Braden, Exhibit Review.

Aside from the this less-than-successful design, most of the gallery environments, and especially the audiovisual components of the exhibit, enhance the educational impact of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" far more often than they hinder it. The exhibit's films, such as "Voices of the City," from the "1920s Street Scene," complement the themes of their galleries substantially. The Union Hall film about the 1937 Flint sit-down strike is both an honest portrait of industrially influenced class divisions and a tool to spark visitor interest in the labor issues presented in the rest of the gallery. The television programs in "At Home in the Fifties" are not limited to snippets of "I Love Lucy" and old sporting events, but they also discuss pertinent issues from the period. One particularly striking segment has a youthful Congressman Gerald Ford talking about fears of Communist influences from "Red China." In another part of the program, labor leader Walter Reuther espouses labor organizations as bastions of American "progress." In each case, the films in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" go beyond their potential for inspiring nostalgia among visitors in order to discuss relevant social issues.

The use of sounds and music in the exhibit also enhances the atmosphere in several galleries and appeals especially to visitors with a strong musical intelligence. At the top of the flight of stairs leading from the "1920s Street Scene" to the mezzanine level of the exhibit, visitors arrive at an imposing gray doorway with a sliding panel labeled "LIFT." This is a recreated "speakeasy" entrance, the centerpiece of the exhibit's brief examination of Michigan during Prohibition. Lifting the panel reveals a pair of eyes behind a peephole as ragtime music plays from an overhead speaker. The doorman's voice bellows:

> Good. Thought you might be the law. Got word the Feds are keeping a close eye on boats running the river. They might even raid this place tonight so we're trying to get everyone out. See yah around.[106]

The doorway and its audio components work rather well as a companion piece to the rest of the display's material about the rum-running gangs that sprang up in Detroit and the social impetus behind the 18th Amendment.

In several other portions of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," music appropriate to each era enhances the overall effectiveness of the galleries. In the 1930s hallway describing the hardships of the Depression years, Bing Crosby croons "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?" Big band music serenades visitors in the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery. At two other points, stations in the galleries give visitors the opportunity to choose from a variety of period radio programs or songs. The interactive radio in the bungalow is an effective merger of written and audio information; each program on the dial is paired with a brief label describing the performer or speaker and the track's historical significance. The Motown booth in the 1960s gallery offers visitors a brief respite from the relative chaos of the rest of the room as they listen to songs like "My Girl" by the Temptations. These songs address the growing participation of African Americans in popular culture.

Much of the audiovisual content of the exhibit is passive and played on overhead speakers or permanent video screens throughout the third floor of the museum. However, three interactive computer stations scattered throughout the exhibit allow visitors a more active chance to construct their own learning experiences. This approach is often the most successful in restating the themes of each gallery. The first interactive station, in the

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[106] Michigan Historical Museum and The Chedd-Angler Production Company, "Speakeasy" Final Script. 15 December, 1994, p. 1

"Farm and Factory" gallery, offers programs in which visitors can learn about innovators in the early automotive industry, take a test to decide if they would rather work in a turn-of-the-century factory or on a farm, and/or design an early automobile. The "Auto Pioneers" program gives visitors the least amount of freedom. Its menu of figures including Henry Ford and Ransom E. Olds leads to a series of short biographies on each person – visitors choose which "auto pioneer" they wish to see by touching the screen. "Farm or Factory?" asks a visitor a series of questions, resulting in a score that tells them if they would be better suited in industry or agriculture. "In the factory," one question begins, "you'll work indoors, using tools and machines to make other machines. On the farm you'll work mostly outdoors with animals and plants. Which would you rather work with: tools and machines, or animals and plants?"[107] At the end of the questionnaire, visitors see a bar graph that tells them how their answers rate when compared with other visitors to the museum.

The third program in the "Farm and Factory" interactive station offers the best combination of entertainment and information of the three. A mechanic named Clyde strolls onto the screen and welcomes his audience to his workshop. "I heard you wanted to try your hand at putting together one of those new fangled automobiles," he says. "Well, you've come to the right place." Step by step, Clyde guides visitors through a selection process that allows them to choose components for their car, including wheels, and engine, and a steering mechanism. For each step, Clyde provides a choice of four parts. To steer the car, for example, viewers choose from a set of bicycle handle bars, a tiller and rudder, a steering wheel, and a set of horse reins. The instructional component

[107] Michigan Historical Museum and The Chedd-Angler Production Company, "Farm or Factory" Final Script, 15 December 1994, p. 2.

in the program comes whenever a visitor makes a choice, whether it is correct or not. If someone chooses horse reins, Clyde says, "Wait a minute. We're making a *horseless* carriage. Let's try something else." Either a steering wheel or a tiller would work, says Clyde, since most early automakers used one of these on their products. In either case, the program then displays early cars that used these components.[108] Clyde's response when people choose the reins mixes amusing commentary with a lesson: consumers at the turn of the century were confused at times by the *lack* of a horse in front of these vehicles! In turn, the illustrations following correct responses educate visitors about variety in early automobile manufacturing.

The next interactive computer station in the exhibit is not as flexible as the "Farm and Factory" car design program, but it does let visitors direct the information being presented to them. A touchscreen station in the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery describes the industrial contributions of various regions in Michigan during World War II. After a short introductory film about the transformation of peacetime manufacturing to wartime production, viewers choose from four parts of the state to learn about the supplies and material produced for the war effort. Short films follow each selection, the content is straightforward, and visitors can proceed at their own pace and pursue their own interests. The short movies are made to look like newsreel footage from the period, thereby augmenting their effectiveness. Also, by detailing the production of each region of the state, the program creates personal connections for each visitor. Chances are that if visitors are learning about the history of the region they call home, then their interest will be piqued even further.

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[108] Michigan Historical Museum and the Chedd-Angler Production Company, "Create-a-Car" Final Script, 15 December 1994, pp. 4, 6.

The last interactive computer station, in the 1957 Auto Show gallery, gives visitors another opportunity to design an automobile; the format is different here, but the impact is similar. The interactive "Design-a-Car" station in this gallery helps visitors construct a "concept car" that resembles some of the more outlandish proposals of auto executives in the 1950s. Few concept cars were ever produced on a massive scale, but their designs illustrated the wide range of experimentation attempted by carmakers in the postwar era. As the announcer in this interactive attests, the main feature of fifties concept cars was "chrome, chrome, chrome," as if the yards of sparkling silver metal on the walls of the gallery did not offer enough of a hint!

The exterior design of the fifties "Design-a-Car" computer conjures up a draftsman's table, complete with wood paneling and rulers laid out above the screen. The on-screen layout resembles a sketch pad, with a blank white page situated next to an open book of design components. The program presents visitors with a choice of three styles of car bodies, grilles, bumpers, headlights, and fins. Each component's style choices pop up in the book, and visitors "drag" their choice over to the sketch pad by touching the style they like and holding their finger down over the screen as they move it towards the page. Piece by piece, they construct a car that often looks like something out of a Buck Rogers comic strip. After each selection, the announcer describes other concept cars with similar features, and the program displays images of these singularly odd vehicles.[109]

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Taken as a whole, the multimedia portions of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" are effective tools for reaching museum visitors who might not be inclined to

[109] Of all of the interactive stations in the exhibit, Susan Cooper-Finney professed this to be her favorite. Cooper-Finney, interview.

soak up all of the information on the exhibit labels.[110] Children, especially, gravitate towards these parts of the exhibit. As the majority of the MHM's visitors, children are a crucial part of the audience of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." Approximately one-third of all museum visitors nationwide are children, and the ratio is even higher at the Michigan Historical Museum, where nearly 60,000 children (over half of the museum's annual visitors) pass through each year in school groups and many more come with their families.[111] Much of the museum-going public is not a captive audience, and their patronage of museums often depends upon the degree of entertainment within. On the other hand, one could consider the children in organized school tours as very much a captive audience.[112] They have been bused into the museum en masse, and they generally must stay together as a group throughout the visit.

Most of the schoolchildren who tour the museum are fourth-graders, since the state-mandated Michigan history class is taught during that year. However, David Bridgens points out that the scope of the class rarely reaches the twentieth century. The burden on "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," then, is to educate these children about a period too recent to be addressed by their elementary school history class but so far removed from their lives that even the events in the exhibit's final gallery occurred long before they were born. That burden becomes heavier given kids' relative inability to place events in an historical context. In a broad sense, as David Bridgens put it, "most school kids don't have a sense of time."[113]

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[110] Technology is not always the easy answer for museums that wish to increase their visitor base, but at the MHM, the effect seems to be generally positive. See Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, p. 110.

[111] Gaynor Kavanagh, *History Curatorship* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), p. 154; Griffin, interview; MHM visitor statistics courtesy Mark Bennetts.

[112] Miller, p. 3; Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in Blatti, *Past Meets Present*, p. 43.

[113] Bridgens, interview; In a survey of school-aged children from grades five through eight, Keith Barton and Linda Levstik confirmed that children possess a relatively simplified awareness of the

There is no specific portion of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" aimed directly at children, but nearly all of the design elements and entertaining aspects of the exhibit appeal to them as much as to the rest of the museum's visitors. Children flock to each of the computer terminals in the exhibit quite enthusiastically. But many members of the MHM staff, including Susan Cooper-Finney, insist that computer kiosks are not a "panacea" to get kids involved in the exhibit.[114] In the spirit of Gardner's "multiple intelligences," other forms of presentation need to reach out to children who visit the exhibit. In fact, the computers are often not as intriguing to the MHM's younger audience as some of the thousands of unique objects that stock "Michigan in the Twentieth Century." David Bridgens noted that the exhibit's seven automobiles never fail to bring out "the 'oohs and 'ahs'" from children. For most young visitors, the most exciting object on display is the nose of a B-24 Bomber perched near the ceiling of the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery. The gallery's design makes the plane almost impossible to notice until one enters the room via the stair case below the B-24, so children "walk around the corner and then they get excited."[115]

Despite their enthusiasm, it would not matter much if children got "excited" about these objects unless they understood both what they were looking at and why it mattered. But there are ways to help children place these objects in context, even when their

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complexity of history or the significance of various historical events. For example, most of the children in their study assumed that the nation had never experienced periods of social unrest or dissent prior to the Vietnam era. They likewise seemed to know that groups such as African Americans and women had at one time lacked certain rights, but all they needed to do was to "ask" the government for the rights they needed, and they would receive them. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, "'It Wasn't a Good Part of History': National Identity and Students' Explanations of Historical Significance," *Teachers College Record* 99:3 (Spring 1998); pp. 478-513; Children generally begin to have a firm grasp of chronological time and historical spatial relationships by around age nine. Interestingly enough, that is the target age for the Michigan history class taught in fourth grade. Grove, et al, NMAH Docent Manual, p. 98.

[114] Cooper-Finney, interview.

[115] Bridgens, interview.

Michigan history fails to offer them a firm grasp on the last century. Most children come through the museum with either a docent or a family member nearby who can provide some instruction if necessary. Furthermore, Bridgens and the museum's docent corps work to help children understand the 20th century by framing events around their parents' or grandparents' lives. Docents often point out that "this is the car grandpa [would have] bought," or that "this is something that your father would have had as a child." Bridgens also encourages children on school tours to return with their older relatives who will hopefully describe their own experiences in the time periods addressed by the exhibit.[116] When children use the interactive elements of the exhibit, they also learn from the programs on the computers. They rarely observe the "exciting" objects in a vacuum.

Even though the *sight* of a B-24 Liberator bomber might thrill children in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," they often express frustration at their inability to *touch* any of the objects. Most of the objects that excite them, including the automobiles, are sequestered from visitors by either glass cases or metal railings. Bridgens acknowledges that, for many of the children he takes through the third floor, the exhibit is not as "glamorous...or exciting" as the richly designed galleries on the second floor that include the walk-through copper mine. The second floor also includes a recreated one-room schoolhouse, complete with individual desks for school groups to sit in during tours, and small slate boards and marking pencils for each child to use in the schoolhouse setting. In a gallery about the settlement of Michigan Territory during the early nineteenth century, children enjoy riding a simulated stagecoach across a horrendously bumpy "plank road." Once children ride the elevator to the third floor, their inability to touch things in the exhibit becomes increasingly frustrating.

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[116] *Ibid.*

"Michigan in the Twentieth Century" could more effectively appeal to their youngest audience by following the lead of many history museums across the country, which deal with tactile frustrations by incorporating more "hands-on" components into their exhibits. One successful "hands-on" facility is the Hands On History Room (HOHR) at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The HOHR is filled with reproductions of artifacts drawn from most of the museum's exhibits. Each of the thirty-five activities in the room incorporate these objects to help visitors to see how the pieces were used in the past, as well as the larger historical contexts of the objects. At one station, visitors to the HOHR take a speed test, racing to sort a stack of letters in order to gauge their fitness for a job as a nineteenth-century postal clerk. The materials surrounding the activity describe the expansion of transportation and industry in the 1800s, as well as the effects of westward settlement.[117] "Hands-on" activities such as this, when paired with pertinent historical contextualization, can be quite effective in reaching children (and adults, for that matter, since these activities are hardly age-specific) whose strengths may lie in the realm of Howard Gardner's bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

For the most part, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" lacks any portion that could be called "hands-on" besides a voting machine in the 1957 Auto Show gallery where visitors pretend to vote for their favorite period automobiles. The interactive computer terminals could also loosely be considered "hands on," since they incorporate

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[117] "Hands on History Sampler," National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1993, p. 1; Visitors to the HOHR who entered their comments in a book in the room expressed their satisfaction with the ways the room educates people of all ages. "It's nice to physically interact with some things in the museum," said one visitor, "All this looking, finally some interaction. Thank you!" Visitor Comment Book, May 1999-March 2000, unpublished, held at the Department of Education and Visitor Services, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

digital manipulation of icons on the screens, but nothing on the third floor approaches the tactile accessibility of the earlier galleries or of the Smithsonian's Hands On History Room. The museum does offer several special events throughout the year that incorporate active approaches to the events and issues addressed in the exhibit, such as "Aviation History Day," "Michigan Agriculture Day," and "Great Lakes Day." On these occasions, the museum welcomes experts on various subjects to speak to visitors and describe sample artifacts that visitors are encouraged to examine.

These special events help to offset the relative lack of tactile stimulation in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century," but it seems as though the third floor exhibits could offer more permanent "hands on" opportunities, especially since the second floor galleries are fairly well stocked with them. As the innovative design of the HOHR attests, not every tactile station in a museum exhibit needs to contain original artifacts; reproductions can quite capably appeal to visitors. "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" might benefit from periodic "hands on" stations that present objects representing important themes from the exhibit. One prime location for some sort of "hands on" station might be the "Arsenal of Democracy" gallery, which is usually the most popular gallery in the exhibit among both children *and* adults. The B-24 Bomber is off-limits to visitors for obvious reasons, but perhaps the room's theme of Michigan's industrial contributions to the war effort could be broached by such touchable items as reproductions of the sort of tank treads produced by the Chrysler Corporation or the engine parts made at Ford's Willow Run plant. Or, since the bomber itself is so thrilling to children, a reproduced B-24 cockpit might excite them even more. Some of these suggestions may be impractical due to financial constraints, but surely additional "hands

on" components, especially in light of the popularity of such stations on the second floor, would draw children further into the learning process in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" by appealing to the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

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The quality of history presented within the multimedia components and environment designs of "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" surpasses the "Mickey Mouse" variety Mike Wallace found at Walt Disney World. More often than not, the films, sounds, and interactive computer stations in the exhibit convey serious historical messages through techniques aimed at appealing to a variety of senses and methods of learning. For the most part, they also attract many of the children who visit the exhibit with school tours or with their families, although more direct appeals to children in the exhibit would likely create a stronger attraction for the most crucial part of the museum's audience. "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" demonstrates that museum exhibits that successfully merge entertainment with education offer attractive presentations of history.

The "Lakes and Lands" gallery in the exhibit, however, serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of style defeating substance. If too many museum displays err on the side of entertainment at the expense of educational content, then museums might one day become little more than "diversions" for a listless society, reminiscent of the museum sideshows of the nineteenth century. It is all the more necessary, then, that museums continue to find innovative ways to attract visitors while maintaining a professional level of historical content and interpretation. This imperative is especially strong since museum exhibits may provide the sole exposure to history for many people not inclined to read historical scholarship.

Conclusion

In spite of the multitude of external and internal pressures faced by the Michigan Historical Museum staff, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" is a remarkably well crafted exhibit. The creators of the galleries on the museum's third floor joined together to sort through their own expectations, as well as those of the public at large and the state government, in order to form an exhibit that incorporated social diversity and entertaining presentation techniques. From the Model T Ford that rolls off of a facsimile assembly line at the beginning of the exhibit to final glimpse of the state's natural panorama, "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" engulfs visitors in a series of intricate environments layered with a wealth of inviting sights and sounds. Over 2,000 artifacts trigger largely nostalgic emotions in the exhibit's audience and conjure individual and "shared" memories of the past in visitors of all ages.

As successful as "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" is in most respects, it is hardly immune to the sort of criticisms that academic historians direct at museums. Consider, for example, the gallery designs. Richly crafted museum environments may appeal to the senses and imaginations of visitors, but the potential for simplified views of the past can trick museum audiences into thinking that the processes of history are as static and sterile as the meticulously swept streets and polished light posts in the "1920s Street Scene." The 1920s gallery in the exhibit is hardly devoid of unpleasant topics, since it addresses ethnic discrimination and socioeconomic inequality, but the sense of historical immersion the gallery offers can provide visitors with a false sense of comfort and security despite the tumultuous events the room explores.[118]

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[118] Lowenthal, p. 1277; Albert Eide Parr, "History and the Historical Museum," in Leffler and Brent, *Public History Readings*, p. 475.

"Michigan in the Twentieth Century" may not "sugarcoat" the past, as Saralee Howard-Filler of the MHM put it, but a sense of optimism about the state's history pervades the exhibit despite attention to social conflict in places like the Union Hall gallery, the film "Voices of the City," and the 1960s gallery. The labor movie in the Union Hall trumpets the victory of organized labor over the forces of corporate control, and the immigrants in "Voices of the City" succeed in achieving the "American Dream." Although the perspective in "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" is not completely rose-colored, academics that criticize museums for sacrificing "historical truth on the altar of public relations" would not be wholly satisfied with the essentially progressive tone of the exhibit. The nostalgic flavor of the exhibit contradicts the aims of scholars such as Alan Brinkley, who has said that history must be occasionally "jarring" to have an instructive impact on its audience.[119]

Conversely, museum professionals who respond to the criticism of academic historians remind their scholarly counterparts of the ironic dichotomy between the public's appetite for history and their simultaneous distaste for historical scholarship. Academic history has departed from traditional narrative structures and relies increasingly upon virtually incomprehensible theories and jargon. Observers including Thomas Schlereth suggest that, in large part because of the many external demands facing them, today's museums interpret historical events in far more original and innovative ways than academics. Others claim that the museum form of history, which

[119] Miller, p. 2; Brinkley, p. 305.

stresses physical objects and visual stimuli, offers a stronger image of the past than written materials.[120]

In order to patch up this division and provide solutions for the valid concerns each side has expressed, it would seem that some sort of cross-disciplinary cooperation is in order. Despite the often bitter rhetoric of the schism, perhaps the climate for collaboration is within our grasp. After all, historians working in both academia and museums tend to demonstrate cooperative impulses within their own disciplines. Academic historians meet to share ideas and interpretations on a regular basis at conferences, in scholarly journals, and in various other forums. Likewise, museum historians must stow their egos for the sake of cooperation to plan exhibitions and programs; as Cary Carson put it, "museums are no place for prima donnas."[121] Potentially, these collaborative traditions could stretch across the gulf in order to address each side's concerns about the ways in which the other practices its craft. In such a cooperative scenario, each participant would be able to provide a remarkable wealth of expertise and experience. Rather than the current climate of distrust and suspicion, each side could rely upon its own professional pride and commitment to excellence to paint a more compelling picture of the past.[122]

Work on a museum project could provide invaluable assistance for academic historians who hope to reach out to a larger audience. In a recent survey taken by the *Journal of American History*, many academic historians emphatically responded that they longed to communicate with a broader segment of the population besides others in their

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[120] Novick, p. 587; Lowenthal, p. 1277; John T. Schlebecker, "The Use of Objects in Historical Research," in Leffler and Brent, *Public History Readings*, p. 243.

[121] Alfred F. Young, "A Modest Proposal: A Bill of Rights for American Museums," *The Public Historian* 14 (Summer 1992), p. 72; Carson, p. 143.

stresses physical objects

written materials.[2]

discipline. Input into the content of a museum exhibit would fulfill that wish and perhaps challenge historians to take stock of their own methods of historical interpretation. In many ways, as Hal Rothman suggests, communicating complex historical ideas to a wide public audience can be *more* challenging than similar practices aimed only at scholars. While serving as an intern at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, I faced this sort of hurdle during work on a project intended for visitors to the museum. A staff member returned my initial draft of the materials with the comment, "the writing is excellent, but it's too 'academic.' Try to make it more accessible." My training as an historian had not included a seminar on appealing to the public! Other historians in similar situations could benefit from such an experience.[123]

Academic historians would not be the only beneficiaries of such an alliance; museums and the public as a whole would be well served by a stronger spirit of cooperation between academic and museum history. Some academic historians express concerns that their counterparts in museums are not versed in the latest research and scholarship. Although this is often an unfounded suspicion, input from academics would certainly offset such a situation. Likewise, the occasional lack of historical complexity that marks an exhibit such as "Michigan in the Twentieth Century" could be remedied through the input of academic historians who are well aware that the path of history rarely follows a progressive track towards perfection. The narrative of nostalgia and

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[122] Robert A. Gross, "Exhibition Review: 'After the Revolution: Everyday Life in America, 1780-1800,'" *Journal of American History* 76:3 (December 1989), p. 861.

[123] Peterson, p. 66; Michael Cassity, "History and the Public Purpose," *Journal of American History* 81:3 (December 1994), p. 969; Hal K. Rothman, "Museums and Academics: Thoughts Toward an Ethic of Cooperation," *Journal of American Culture* 12:2 (1989), p. 38. One of the most prominent complaints in responses to the *JAH* survey was that academic practices place too much emphasis upon specialized publications aimed at achieving tenured faculty positions. As one respondent put it, "Those who take broad perspectives and try to inform the largest public are scorned. Its disgraceful." Quoted in Hood, p. 1015.

optimism at the MHM does not need to be swept away for the sake of a story of tragedy and loss, and museums can retain their cachet of public appeal. However, exhibits formed out of a sophisticated dialogue between museum professionals and academic scholars could remind the public that history is, ideally, a serious intellectual pursuit with the potential to illuminate much about the causes and consequences of events in our past and present. Despite accusations of "revisionism" that some portions of the public lobby at exhibits that challenge traditional perceptions of history, people are often more than willing to encounter challenging subjects in museums and other such forums. After all, motion pictures like "Schindler's List" could hardly have succeeded if the public refused exposure to difficult subjects from the past. Greater cooperation can incorporate greater complexity into public forums of history.

Collaboration between academic historians and museum professionals is not merely a far-off possibility. Several instances of cooperation already exist, and programs promoting such cross-disciplinary teamwork are rising at a rapid rate. The American Association of State and Local History, for example, manages a program called "Common Agenda" that encourages joint work between the two disciplines in order to foster the sort of revitalization that history in both academic and public spheres needs. The *Journal of American History* publishes a special section of museum exhibit reviews twice each year; the authors of these reviews have come from both academic and museum backgrounds. As Thomas Schlereth, the editor of the *JAH* exhibit review series, points out, museums "are important to all historians interested in promoting wider historical understanding among diverse audiences."[124]

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[124] Miller, p. 1; Thomas Schlereth, "Editor's Report: Reviewing Reviewing," *Journal of American History* 81:1 (June 1994), pp. 183-184.

One intriguing suggestion for augmenting the public's awareness of the work of both academic historians and museum professionals proposes a departure from traditionally linear exhibit formats to adopt dual interpretations of objects on display. Jo Blatti posits that long-held public beliefs about certain historical events could be paired with professional interpretations in order to alert museum visitors to the vitality of ongoing historical pursuits.[125] Such a practice would point out to the public that history is not written solely by "the winners"; historians continually reinterpret the past as new evidence and research trends dictate, and this is a positive process designed to further our understanding of not only the distant past, but of our own lives as well. As long as academic historians and museum professionals acknowledge that each side brings its own particular skills and expertise to the endeavor, we can work together to promote an active and healthy historical consciousness in our audiences.

[125] Jo Blatti, "Introduction," in Blatti, *Past Meets Present*, p. 6.

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