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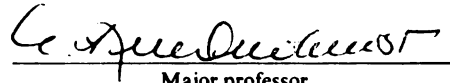
Museums in the Rearview Mirror
Exhibits and Institutional Identity in Michigan Museums
1930-1995

presented by

Maria Quinlan Leiby

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in American Studies


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**MUSEUMS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR
EXHIBITS AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY IN MICHIGAN MUSEUMS
1930-1995**

By

Maria Quinlan Leiby

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

MUSEUMS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR EXHIBITS AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY IN MICHIGAN MUSEUMS 1930-1995

By

Maria Quinlan Leiby

Despite the fact that they are the most numerous category of American museums, the literature discussing the evolution and impact of historical museums is limited. This dearth of documentation and analysis became evident in the 1990s, when both widely reported controversies over exhibitions and blockbuster popularity drew new attention to the role of museums in American culture. Examining in detail the histories of four Michigan museums and the ways in which a singular history, that of the automobile, has been incorporated into their exhibits, "Museums in the Rearview Mirror" seeks to explain not only how decisions concerning exhibits are shaped at the institutional level, but how collective trends in exhibition style and content have shaped museum professionals' understanding of the nature of their medium and its relationship to a larger concept of history.

The dissertation looks at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing, the Detroit Historical Museum and Flint's Alfred P. Sloan Museum, four museums where the automobile plays a significant role in the history each is charged with presenting to the public. These museums offer, respectively, national, state and local interpretations of automotive history and each has a major permanent exhibition dealing with the auto. The four museums and their exhibits share a common context, both

contemporary and historical, which facilitates comparison and reduces the likelihood that differences between exhibits stem primarily from choice of subject.

The underlying methodology of this dissertation is historical and comparative. Discussions of specific exhibits draw on reading in the fields of material culture, museum studies and American studies, as well as personal experience with the practical aspects of exhibit planning and production. The study utilizes museum records and publications of all types: artifact records, administrative correspondence, exhibit files and photos, newsletters and annual reports. Interviews with staff at all four institutions inform the analysis of the development of recent exhibits.

The histories of the Michigan Historical Museum, the Detroit Historical Museum, the Sloan Museum and the Henry Ford Museum demonstrate that issues embedded in their earliest years have continued to influence how these institutions interpret the automobile and its role in American culture. They also show that major exhibits are statements of institutional identity as well as arguments about their particular historical topics. The stories of these four museums reflect the increased complexity and intellectual sophistication of historical exhibits in the late twentieth century and illustrate how these changes have affected the exhibit development process. Finally, together they illuminate differences between historical practice in museums and in the academy, and begin to define the potential role of such institutions in “a healthy, participatory historical culture.”¹

1. David Thelen, “Afterthoughts,” in Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 190.

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2000

To

Steve, Jay and Margaret

for their perspective, patience and encouragement

with love

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I suspect that the longer a dissertation takes to write, the more people there are to be thanked. In my case, there are many. My first debt is to my colleagues in four museums who candidly shared their experiences in developing interpretive exhibits with me. Their dedication to their work was clear; I hope that my interest helped to affirm its value. The archivists and curators who shared my quest for museum records and photographs (and in some cases shared their office space as well) made research a pleasure. I thank the staff of the Research Center at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, David White and Jeff Taylor at the Sloan Museum and Jim Conway and Patience Nauta at the Detroit Historical Museum.

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INTRODUCTION

For American museums of history, the 1990s were both the best of times and the worst of times. As is usually the case, public attention was more focused on the latter. The furor that forced the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum to substitute a circumspect display of the *Enola Gay* in place of its proposed examination of the end of World War II, the atomic bomb and the Cold War is the best known example of the criticisms aroused by particular exhibitions, but it is not an isolated example. Whether protests came from members of ethnic groups depicted in exhibits like *Gaelic Gotham* or from scholars who disagreed with the interpretations presented in shows such as *The West as America* or *Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture*, they attracted unprecedented media attention.¹

At almost exactly the same time, however, some 2100 Americans told the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University that they regarded museums as very reliable sources of historical information. In assessing the results of the 1994 survey, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that museums in general were highly trusted. Respondents appreciated the immediacy of contact with the past through historical artifacts; an Ohio woman observed, "When you sit and look at an object, your own senses

¹Information on the Smithsonian controversy can be found in Philip Nobile, ed. *Judgment at the Smithsonian* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1995) and Edward T. Linenthal, "The A-Bomb Controversy at the National Air and Space Museum," *The Historian* 57:4 (Summer, 1995): 686-694. *The New York Times* covered the other exhibitions: see Charisse Jones, "Museum's Walls Tell a Story of Division," February 1, 1996: B1; Paul Goldberger, "How the Irish Came and Overcame," March 15, 1996: B1 and Paul Goldberger, "Historical Shows on Trial: Who Judges?" February 11, 1996: Section 2:1. See also Eric Foner and Jon Wiener, "Fighting for the West," *The Nation*, July 29/August 5, 1991: 163-166.

come into play.” They also believed that the collective, institutional nature of exhibition authorship meant that such presentations were likely to be more balanced and less distorted by political or commercial agendas than might be the case with books by single authors.²

This evidence that broad trust in museums exists alongside intense and emotional criticism of specific exhibitions points up both the significance and the complexity of their role as cultural institutions. This dissertation contributes to several overlapping, but distinct, conversations which explore that role, conversations in which I participate as both practitioner and scholar. Examining in detail the histories of four Michigan museums and the ways in which a singular history, that of the automobile, has been incorporated into their exhibits, “Museums in the Rearview Mirror” seeks to explain not only how decisions concerning exhibits are shaped at the institutional level, but how collective trends in exhibition style and content have shaped museum professionals’ understanding of the nature of their medium and its relationship to a larger concept of history. It addresses the nature of the exhibit medium and attempts to create a better understanding of both the potential and the limitations of presenting history in that form. These considerations lead in turn to discussions of the relationship between the academic discipline of history and the practice of history in museums. This conversation takes place among like-minded professionals, who share the goal of reaching a broad public, and may include curators, designers, academic historians, and museum educators, to name a few participants.

²Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). See especially pp. 105-108. Press coverage of the Smithsonian controversy began in the early fall of 1994; the exhibit was canceled at the end of January 1995.

Ultimately my research led to conclusions about exhibits and museums on three different levels. The specific histories of the four museums at the heart of this work show how institutional circumstances combine with broader social and professional trends to shape historical exhibitions. They demonstrate as well that major exhibits are statements of institutional identity as well as arguments about their particular historical topics. They express a shared, but not-always-articulated understanding among staff of how a particular museum's past and its professional goals in the present intersect with the topic at hand.

The stories of the Michigan museums examined in "Museums in the Rearview Mirror" also reveal the ways in which historical exhibits in general have become more complex over time. In all four institutions, the earliest exhibits were simply about objects the founders had collected. Later exhibitions attempted to express ideas through the artifacts on display, and finally, all of these museums began to produce exhibits that consciously addressed their audiences and reached out to them on a personal level. In addition to this increasing conceptual complexity, historical museum exhibits have become much more technologically and structurally sophisticated. And although some of the earliest exhibits in Michigan museums were multi-layered and visually complex, their purpose was simply to display an accumulation of artifacts. More recently, exhibit developers have attempted to use visual complexity to express the social and political complexity they see in the American past.

The fact that exhibits have become so much more complex overall has encouraged more conversation among various museum professionals about the nature of the exhibit medium, which points toward even broader conclusions about the relationship of museum historians' work to the definition of history in its broadest sense. Exhibits differ greatly

from articles or monographs, in purpose and content as well as in the process by which they are developed. Collaboratively produced for viewing in the social context of a museum visit, exhibits are “read” (usually while standing) by an audience that varies widely in both age and historical sophistication.³ Such presentations can offer neither the detail nor the intellectual complexity of works written for a historian’s professional colleagues.

Because the study and interpretation of history have long been dominated the scholarly model of research and writing, some in the world of museums and public history have asserted that their work constitutes a completely separate discipline. Others, myself included, believe that despite significant differences in the way they work and in what they produce, both academic historians and museum workers are engaged in a common endeavor.⁴ Academic research offers valuable information and insights to exhibition teams, but an exhibit also embodies what museum staffs learn through their own encounters with the artifacts and through the process of organizing and arranging them in a particular

³For current interpretations of the nature of museum audiences and their experiences, see John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992), Kathleen McLean, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers, 1993) and Lois Silverman, “Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age,” *Curator* 38:3 (1995): 161-170.

⁴Robert Archibald, “Memory and the Process of Public History,” *The Public Historian* 19:2 (Spring 1997): 61-64, argues the separatist point of view. Most of the other brief essays included in this “Roundtable: Responses to David Glassberg’s ‘Public History and the Study of Memory,’” take a more moderate stance. Both Barbara Franco (65-67) and Michael Frisch (41-43) recognize real differences in practice, but as part of a larger discipline of history. See also Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). David Thelen, “Individual Experience and Big Picture History,” *History News* 55:1 (Winter 2000): 10-13, also finds links between museum exhibits and “History with a Capital H” (10).

three-dimensional context. Work with artifacts can build upon the concrete information and less substantial “sense of the past” that come from traditional research, anchoring the latter in the realities of three dimensional objects. At the same time, the artifacts themselves and the stories that they represent can link past and present emotionally as well as intellectually, in a way that the written word rarely can.⁵ Both methods of interpreting the past offer advantages, and the two can complement each other; they should be seen as different but interrelated parts of the larger enterprise of history.

Despite the fact that they are the most numerous category of American museums, the literature discussing the evolution and impact of historical museums is limited. Nor is the larger body of American museums—including the generally older and larger institutions of art and natural science—much better documented. Contrasting the paucity of historical writing about museums and museum practice with “the rich body of historical literature” on libraries and library science, Lynne Teather notes that “few writers have attempted to chronicle the evolution of museum functions such as collecting, documentation, exhibition, and education.”⁶ More specifically, historian and material culture scholar Thomas Schlereth has observed that both history museums institutionally and the individuals who

⁵On learning through the process of working with collections, see Harold K. Skramstad, “Interpreting Material Culture: The View from the Other Side of the Glass” in Ian Quimby, ed., *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: WW Norton and Winterthur Museum, 1978): 175-200. Robert Archibald illustrates the emotional power of artifacts in “Narratives for a New Century,” *Museum News* 777:6 (November/December 1998): 33. My colleagues at the Michigan Historical Museum, particularly Laurie Dickens and Sandra Clark, have shared numerous instances of the ways in which *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* has engaged visitors emotionally as well as intellectually.

⁶J. Lynne Teather, “Professionalism and the Museum,” in Michael Shapiro, ed., *The Museum: A Reference Guide* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1990): 317.

work in them are “often curiously inattentive to their own histories.” He calls for increased attention to “the history *behind* the history museum,” beginning with research “at the level of the individual history museum.” ⁷

Historians Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig have speculated that the variety of historical museums--historic houses, sites and villages; pioneer and big-city museums; living history, third-person and traditional case exhibit interpretation--in addition to their large numbers, may account for the fact that the field lacks an adequate history.⁸ Those circumstances certainly increase the challenge of producing such an overview. If the difficulties of synthesis were the only obstacle however, one might reasonably expect to find several pieces of the story already well told. Instead, most museum history remains buried in museum files.

In the last twenty years university-based historians have become more involved in museums, most often in the role of consultants to exhibit projects, valued for their expertise in a particular field of history.⁹ They rarely need to learn much about the institution or its history. Historians working in museums, on the other hand, often know a great deal about their institutions' histories, and observe first-hand how the past shapes museum operations in the present. Their work is directly linked to those operations:

⁷Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990): 305-306.

⁸Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, “Introduction,” *History Museums in the United State: A Critical Assessment* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989): xvi.

⁹Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” in *History Museums in the U.S.*, ed. Leon and Rosenzweig: 27. Academic consultants were involved in most of the exhibits described in Kenneth Ames, Barbara Franco and L. Thomas Frye, eds., *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1992).

documenting collections, developing exhibit storylines, writing labels and other interpretive materials. Museum staff are rarely granted time on the job to put their interpretations into anything more than the briefest of sketches.

A larger problem may be the long-standing ahistoricism of the museum profession itself. At least since the founding of the American Association of Museums in 1906, periodic jeremiads have bemoaned the perceived shortcomings of American museums. Recurrent efforts at reform or rejuvenation are nearly as old. John Cotton Dana, the forceful and somewhat irascible founding director of the Newark Museum, set the tone of discourse early in the twentieth century with his complaints about “The Gloom of the Museum” and assertion of the need for “The New Museum.”¹⁰ In the 1930s, Arthur C. Parker authored a manual designed to bring history museums from “a state of quiescence” into a more active one, to make them “pulse with life.” Little more than two decades later, New York’s state historian, Albert Corey, apparently unaware of Parker’s work, stated that Carl Guthe’s booklet on *The Management of Small History Museums* was the first of its kind. More recently still, Smithsonian administrator Stephen Weil has argued that American museums until recently been in the “salvage and warehouse business,” and have only begun to adopt a service orientation that is responsive to their communities.¹¹ Writing

¹⁰Dana is currently the subject of renewed (and well deserved) attention, thanks to *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana*, ed. William A. Peniston (Washington, D.C.: Newark Museum and AAM, 1999), which includes both the essays mentioned above.

¹¹Arthur C. Parker, *A Manual for History Museums*, New York State Historical Association Series, ed. Dixon Ryan Fox, no. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935): xi-xv; Albert Corey, Preface to Carl Guthe, *The Management of Small History Museums* (Madison, WI: American Association for State and Local History, 1959): n.p.; Stephen E. Weil, “From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 229-258.

for their contemporaries, these authors have rightly emphasized current issues. But they have tended to overlook both the persistence of these issues and earlier efforts to address them—some of which were quite successful. Consequently, museum literature often asserts the originality of insights and conclusions that are not in fact entirely new. This attitude reduces the likelihood that serious historical consideration of museums will emerge from within the profession.

To begin addressing the lack of museum history, “Museums in the Rearview Mirror” starts, as suggested by Schlereth, with actual museum practice at the level of individual institutions. It looks at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing, the Detroit Historical Museum and Flint’s Alfred P. Sloan Museum, four museums where the automobile plays a significant role in the history each is charged with presenting to the public. These museums offer, respectively, national, state and local interpretations of automotive history and each has a major permanent exhibition dealing with the auto. All of these institutions are museums in the traditional sense of the word, housed in buildings constructed for the display of artifacts, rather than in a historic structure or outdoor village setting.¹² None is strictly a car museum; all encompass their treatment of the automobile within a broader historical context.

In choosing to construct this work as a multi-institutional study, I considered

Neil Harris is one of the few museum writers who consistently recognizes earlier waves of museum reform. See “The Divided House of the American Art Museum,” *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 33-56.

¹²It should be obvious that this excludes the Greenfield Village component of Henry Ford’s museum endeavor, which in any case offers little that is auto-related, even by the broadest definition of that term. Although museum and village are jointly administered, their programs have been largely separate over the years, so that it is possible to focus on the museum alone.

several factors. First, looking at a number of institutions offers a broader base for generalizations about museums. It offers the opportunity of making inter-institutional comparisons that illuminate alternate possibilities in similar circumstances, as well as comparing exhibits over time. Looking at exhibits that are linked thematically within the same state provides a common context, both contemporary and historical. It also reduces the likelihood that differences between exhibits stem primarily from choice of subject.

Exhibitions focused on some aspect of automotive history immediately offer themselves to the researcher considering exhibits in Michigan museums. The automobile is the quintessential icon of twentieth century America. It changed not only how people traveled and what they saw, but where they lived and worked, how they shopped and courted, and myriad other details of everyday life. Because Michigan is the center of the auto industry, the automobile looms even larger here than it does elsewhere, particularly in the state's economy and politics. It is impossible to present the twentieth century in this state without considering the multi-faceted role of the automobile. My definition of "auto-related" is deliberately broad, encompassing not only cars themselves, but the industry that builds and markets them and the people whose lives are shaped by producing and/or using them. This topic also offers the opportunity to use a single class of artifacts—automobiles—to illustrate some of the issues surrounding artifacts and the variety of ways in which they figure in exhibits.

The Henry Ford Museum (HFM) is the largest and most widely known institution of the group. Ford involved himself directly in both planning the museum's building and assembling its collections. Working from personal memory as well as from his technical understanding of the automobile, he developed a synoptic collection of cars. In the context

of what was originally called the Edison Institute Museum, the automotive collection was part of a vast array of artifacts that together represented Ford's belief in the progressive character of technology, as well as its significance in American history. In the half century since its founder's death, HFM has sought both to maintain his vision and to offer an up-to-date museum program. Its collection of cars is not only large, but broadly representative of the development of the automobile in the United States.

Created in the first decade of the twentieth century by an employee of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, the Michigan Pioneer Museum was initially dedicated to preserving the memory of the state's white settlers. It became part of state government in 1913 with the establishment of the Michigan Historical Commission, and thereafter gradually expanded its scope. Brought under the jurisdiction of the Department of State in 1965, the Michigan Historical Museum (MHM) is currently one of five sections in the Michigan Historical Center. Because until 1989 the state's museum occupied buildings constructed for non-museum uses, the logistics of automobile collection and display constituted a significant challenge. Only in its most recent permanent exhibit, opened in 1995, has the MHM been able to address the state's automotive heritage in a significant three-dimensional way. The museum's collection of cars remains small, numbering fewer than a dozen, seven of them on long-term display.

The Detroit Historical Museum (DHM) was founded in 1928 to house the three dimensional objects that the young Detroit Historical Society was beginning to accumulate. A 1945 referendum transferred the museum to city ownership and operation under the governance of an appointed commission. The historical society continues to provide financial support for programs beyond what the city appropriation covers. Rooted

initially in efforts to keep Detroit's past from being overwhelmed by its automotive present, DHM neither exhibited nor collected cars until the 1950s. By 1968, when the museum opened its Kresge Exhibit Hall, the auto industry was considered an essential component of Detroit history. Although beset in recent decades by problems linked to major social and economic changes in the city of Detroit, the museum has sought to refashion itself to meet the needs of its current constituency, and recently opened a permanent exhibit dealing with the city's automotive history. Its collection of approximately 50 vehicles includes cars designed and/or owned by Detroit's automotive pioneers, as well as examples of local automotive production.

The youngest of the four museums examined in this study and the only one not devoted entirely to history, Flint's Sloan Museum opened in 1966. Constructed as part of the city's Cultural Center, Sloan was originally operated by the local school district, using Cultural Center funds. Located in a town long dominated by General Motors, the museum is named for Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., the man who guided GM's development from the early 1920s, through the turmoil of strikes and unionization in the 1930s to unquestioned industry dominance in the 1950s. The Sloan Museum's 70-car collection reflects General Motors' influence in Flint; nearly all the autos are Flint-built, the majority by Chevrolet or Buick. Conflict between Sloan's mission to exhibit local history and its original conception as a Panorama of Transportation resulted in a long period when the twentieth century was represented only by autos in its galleries. More recently, exhibits have achieved a greater balance between Flint's automotive history and the rest of its twentieth century story.

The Henry Ford Museum is the only institution in this group about whose history

there is any appreciable body of published work. Many of those works, however, focus on the museum's role in Ford's life or on the museum's collections, rather than on the museum itself. Museum records were therefore essential to writing this study. Since most museums' exhibition records are incomplete, collections records and administrative files must be used to fill in gaps. Additional sources, such as newsletters, gallery guides and annual reports, which contain not only descriptions of exhibits, but clues to the institutional motivations and planning behind them were also useful. Personal familiarity with museum operations helped me to understand how records generated for other museum purposes might relate to its exhibitions and aided in piecing each museum's story together. Looking at exhibits through these varied lenses, it became clear that exhibitions were not simply intellectual exercises involving artifacts, but were deeply influenced by both institutional pasts and present goals. Conversations with museum staff have confirmed this, producing not only a wealth of information about the development of recent exhibits, but a fuller understanding of each institution's past.

The underlying methodology of this dissertation is historical and comparative. It looks at how four museums and their exhibits have changed over time. My discussions of specific exhibits draw on reading in the fields of material culture, museum studies and American studies, as well as experience with the practical aspects of exhibit planning and production. In addition to the historical arguments (or lack thereof) in these presentations, I am interested in how their components—artifacts, words, ideas and design—are integrated into a whole within a particular three-dimensional space. What “sense of the past” or emotions does an exhibition convey, in addition to historical information? Exhibitions are creative works, and any analysis must consider not only their tangible form and historical

content, but the interaction of those factors and the overall effect of the exhibit, the sources of which may be difficult to locate. Exhibitions are also ephemeral. The experience of viewing one cannot be fully replicated once it is dismantled, although pieces of that experience may be captured in catalogs, photographs or virtual tours. In discussing the most recent exhibits, this work also comes close to the notion of an “ethnography of exhibits,” articulated by Kenneth Ames. Like the authors with whom he worked on the anthology *Ideas and Images*, I found that describing the exhibit development process helped me to “understand the culture from which [an exhibit] sprang and in which it was embedded.”¹³

My interviews with staff members at all the museums were invaluable in helping me to understand the institutional cultures that underlay their exhibits. It was also useful to hear about the exhibit development process from a variety of perspectives at a single museum. By sharing their insights through these conversations, my colleagues also participated in the construction of this larger narrative. At the same time, as a museum curator myself and employee of one of the museums in this dissertation, I was aware of the danger of being too close to the material and of the possibility of distortion. I view museums and exhibitions from the perspective of a museum worker, rather than that of a casual visitor or an academic historian. It was precisely this perspective, however, that I felt needed further exploration. A great deal had been written about museums and exhibits from other points of view, and I believed the conversation would benefit from the first-hand experience of, not only curators, but a cross-section of the people who help to shape

¹³ Ames, “Peering Into the Process: An Introduction,” in *Ideas and Images* ed. Ames, Franco and Frye: 6.

such presentations. As I proceeded, I came to believe, as historian Sara Evans did in her work on women's liberation, that knowing I was a "museum person" gave those with whom I spoke confidence that I would understand them, "that my prior research and my personal experience together allowed me to comprehend what they had to say in a way that no 'outsider' could."¹⁴

"Museums in the Rearview Mirror" begins with an overview of historical museums as a group and a discussion of exhibit evolution over time that culminates in a review of some contemporary thinking about museums. Chapters 2 through 4 examine the development of the four museums from their origins as collections of objects through the development of a more conscious and complex philosophy of exhibition and confrontation of major changes. Over the years, responses to institutional issues with roots in the past were affected by changes in the museum profession and in each institution's external environment, and reflected in the exhibitions of these specific museums. Although these chapters are divided somewhat along the lines of organic stages of institutional development, they are not meant to define a universal pattern.¹⁵ Chapter 5 discusses the four most recent automotive exhibits, each of which represents a resolution of significant institutional challenges. The earliest of these exhibits, HFM's *The Automobile in American*

¹⁴Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). I began working at the Michigan Historical Museum in 1974. Although I participated in the early planning for the major recent exhibit analyzed in this study, *Michigan in the Twentieth Century*, I was on leave when detailed planning and fabrication took place.

¹⁵There is some precedent within the museum world for treating the beginnings of an institution as a period with its own characteristics, but I would hesitate to go beyond that. See *Museums 2000: Reflection, Vision, Change*, Final Program, American Association of Museums 95th Annual Meeting and Museum Expo 2000 ([Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums], 2000): 112.

Life, was completed in 1987, the most recent in 1995.

The histories of the Michigan Historical Museum, the Detroit Historical Museum, the Sloan Museum and the Henry Ford Museum show how issues embedded in their earliest years have continued to influence how these institutions have presented the role of the automobile in local, state and national history. They encapsulate as well the forces that have increased the complexity and intellectual sophistication of historical exhibits in the twentieth century and how those forces have affected the exhibit development process. Finally, the stories of these four museums also begin to define the potential role of such institutions in “a healthy, participatory historical culture.”¹⁶

¹⁶David Thelen, “Afterthoughts,” in Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*: 190.

CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD OF HISTORY MUSEUMS

This chapter outlines the shared professional context in which all four of these Michigan museums developed and operated over the course of the twentieth century. It identifies the conditions and characteristics that distinguish history museums from museums in general. It examines different approaches to historical exhibits and different ways in which museum people have understood the medium in which they work. This general overview provides background to the more specific examination of four museums which follows.

Historical museums collectively share characteristics that distinguish them as a subset of the American museum community. As a group, museums of history are relatively young. They are not well represented among the group of institutions founded in the post-Civil War period, the period usually considered to mark the emergence of museums in the U.S. as significant cultural institutions.¹ Relatively few history museums were established before World War I, and almost none as completely independent institutions. Historical societies were their most common genesis, but historical departments also developed in museums of natural history, especially in communities that lacked historical societies.²

¹Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), documents the wave of institution-founding, but his examples of historical museums both opened in the 20th century.

²The Public Museum of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the Putnam Museum of Davenport, Iowa, both acquired historical collections in the latter fashion. The Smithsonian Institution is perhaps the most dramatic example of a natural history museum developing significant historical collections.

In many ways the history museum field really developed with the automobile. By the end of the first World War, Americans were very conscious of the extent to which their lives had been changed by the automobile. At the same time, the affordability of auto travel now made historic houses and other sites accessible to those who wanted to remember or show their children what life was like in the past.³ Place became much more than political divisions of states and counties. Tourists wanted to know, "What is distinctive about this place?" The increase in the number of historic houses was so great that in 1933 the American Association of Museums published a book about their operation.⁴

Americans continued to establish history museums throughout the twentieth century, particularly around the time of the national bicentennial celebration in 1976. In 1978, an Institute of Museum Services survey found that nearly half of the country's historical museums had come into being since 1960. Fewer than ten percent had opened prior to 1900. Far from becoming more standardized, these institutions have, if anything, increased in diversity. The variety of site-based museums includes houses, farms, battlefields and villages, while traditional museums may be devoted to localities and regions of all sizes or to a particular topic, organization or type of artifact.⁵ Place has

³Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Random House, 1991): 299-309.

⁴Laurence Vail Coleman, *The Museum in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1939): 67-77; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*: 304-305, 338-340; Coleman, *Historic House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1933).

⁵Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the U.S.: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989): xiv-xv. Science-technology centers and children's museums are now the fastest-growing kinds of museums Bonnie

continued to loom large in the definition and location of history museums. This is true, not only for historic sites and museums of city, county or state history, but for more specialized museums as well. Thus Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum, is found in an area of the country where many Norwegian immigrants settled (Decorah, Iowa) and the Whaling Museum is located in the best known port (New Bedford, Massachusetts) of the American whaling industry. An almost infinite divisibility is a particularly convenient characteristic of place for those who wish to establish museums. The existence of the Genesee County Historical Society has not precluded the establishment of museums representing smaller divisions within the county: the Flushing Area Historical Society, the Montrose Historical and Pioneer Telephone Museum, the Grand Blanc Heritage Association.⁶

The divisibility of historical turf, together with the fact that the specific names and dates of local history are always unique, has encouraged proliferation of historical museums. When Laurence Vail Coleman surveyed the nation's museums in the late 1930, they already constituted half the total number. History museums continue to be more numerous than other types, according to the 2000 edition of *The Official Museum Directory*.⁷ They are also smaller, on average than the typical museum of art or science, and are under-represented among the country's largest museums. Smaller museums

Pitman, "Muses, Museums and Memories," *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 7-8.

⁶Scott Peters, telephone conversation with author, August 3, 2000. Most of the smaller organizations were founded in the 1970s.

⁷Coleman, *Museum in America*: 663; *The Official Museum Directory*, 2000 ed., vol. 1 (New Providence, NJ: National Register Publishing Company, 1999): Category Index. The pages for historical categories outnumber those of any other group.

generally have smaller budgets, and historical museums are consistently very well represented among those with the smallest budgets.⁸ Another characteristic of historical museums, often evident in their names, is their origin and operation as collective projects. Unlike an art museum endowed with collections and funding by a single benefactor (or perhaps a handful of wealthy patrons), the typical history museum was established by a group of people, most often a historical society, and continues to be operated by them.

At least three of the museums examined in this dissertation, the Detroit and Michigan Historical Museums and the Sloan Museum, are in many respects typical history museums. All define a geographic area whose history they cover and all are essentially institutions created in the twentieth century. Those in Detroit and Lansing grew directly out of the activities of societies which began by collecting books, papers and manuscripts. Both DHM and (less dramatically) Sloan are smaller, with less generous budgets than the art museums in their respective communities. Although founded about the same time as DHM, the Henry Ford Museum is anomalous in both its vast size and extensive geographic scope. It deals with the past more broadly than any of the other museums, and yet it is not quite national in scope. HFM also differs from most other history museums in its founding and early operation as the idiosyncratic vision of one man.

These four are linked to museums of all types by virtue of their shared identity as institutions using collections and exhibitions to provide informal and voluntary learning opportunities to a broad public. By the early twentieth century, the community of American museums was large enough, and individual museums well enough established, to consider joining forces for mutual benefit. Seventy-one invited delegates met in May 1906

⁸Leon and Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the U.S.*: xv-xvi.

at the American Museum of Natural History in New York to establish the American Association of Museums (AAM). The group included representatives from museums of all sizes and a variety of disciplines including history. Specialized museums, such as university museums and children's museums also sent delegates.⁹

The founders of the new association foresaw that both personal and collective benefits would arise from their affiliation, and established both individual and institutional categories of membership. They sought to facilitate communication within the field by publishing an annual volume of proceedings in AAM's early years, and creating first *Museum Work* (1918), then *Museum News* (1924) as journals for museum workers. The association established a central office in Washington, D. C., in 1923, from which it continued its work of encouraging "the improvement and extension of public museums" and "the education of public opinions concerning the value of such museums." Over the course of the twentieth century, the "improvement" of museums encompassed the development of standards of ethics and operations, as well as strengthening understanding, among museum staff and the public alike, of museums' educational function.¹⁰

Just as they participated in a national museum community from the early days of their existence, the group of Michigan institutions examined in this work also participated in a statewide museum network. In the pre-World War II era, the regional Michigan-Indiana-Ohio Museums Association brought state museum workers together, as did the

⁹Ellen C. Hicks, "The AAM After 72 Years," *Museum News* 56:5 (May/June 1987): 44-45; Kenneth Starr, "A Perspective on Our Profession," *Museum News* 58:5 (May/June 1980): 21.

¹⁰Hicks, "AAM": 45-48. *Museum News*' original title was *The Museum News*.

Historical Society of Michigan for history museum workers.¹¹ The regional association appears to have faded away during the war, but in 1952 the Michigan Museums Conference held its first meeting. Initially sponsored by the state historical society, it was always loosely organized, but consistently held a one- or two-day meeting each year. The museums in Detroit, Lansing and Flint all participated regularly in these get-togethers, although it is hard to say how much they influenced each others' institutional programs. Henry Ford Museum was less involved institutionally, although individual staff members sometimes attended and participated as speakers.¹² The three smaller institutions have been strong supporters of the Michigan Museums Association since its incorporation in 1971; HFM continued its occasional participation until the 1990s, when it became an active institutional supporter.¹³

Every museum or museum department has a disciplinary base in addition to its museum functions, whether it is art or botany, archaeology or history. There is inevitably a degree of tension between an institution's academic discipline and its museum function. In the case of history museums, this tension is increased by the abstract nature of the academic discipline and its emphasis on written sources. In *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*, intellectual historian Steven Conn describes the institutions

¹¹Gracie B. Krum, *The Detroit Historical Society, December 1921-January 1952* (Detroit: [DHS], 1952): 100. Information on the Michigan Museums Conference and Association comes from Winfield H. Arneson, *Thirty-Five Years: A History of the Michigan Museums Association, 1952-1987* ([Flint]: Michigan Museums Association, 1987).

¹²Arneson, *Thirty-Five Years*: 17, 33.

¹³The current MMA president is Steven Hamp of HFM/GV; numerous individuals from the other three institutions have also served as board members and officers.

created in the late Victorian period as built upon what he calls an “object-based epistemology,” in which objects constituted sources of knowledge and meaning and could tell their stories even to an untrained observer. He further argues that museums (and their collections) were displaced by universities as producers of knowledge in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Conn’s argument is convincing with regard to natural science and anthropology, but is much weaker when it comes to history. First, as Conn himself admits, the discipline of history has always been based on written sources. The fact is that only a few idiosyncratic museum founders like Henry Mercer and Henry Ford (the two examples Conn uses) really valued objects over documents as sources of historical knowledge.¹⁵ Far more history museums developed out of the activities of historical societies, which almost always began their collections with manuscripts and documents, the source materials of academic history.¹⁶

The distance between academic history and museum history can also be seen in the long-standing absence of history from university museums. Although art, natural science and anthropology exhibits are commonly found in university museums, history exhibits are

¹⁴Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*: 4-9.

¹⁵Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*: 151ff. Conn demonstrates reasonably well that Mercer and Ford subscribed to an object-based epistemology, but fails to acknowledge how different their museums were from other history museums.

¹⁶Coleman, *Museum in America*: 61-66; Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979): 87-88. At a gathering of historical society personnel in the 1950s, one session moderator implied that Detroit lacked “a true historical society” because the DHS did not operate a library and manuscript collection. (Clifford Lord, ed., *Ideas in Conflict: A Colloquium on Certain Problems in Historical Society Work in the United States and Canada* (Harrisburg, PA: AASLH, 1958): 67, 77.)

not. The essence of Laurence Vail Coleman's observation of some sixty years ago, that "academic departments of history are . . . rarely inclined to pay much heed to museum material," was repeated in 1990 by the editor of *Museums and Universities*, who noted that although some schools had historical collections, "Most universities do not have history museums per se."¹⁷

Their artifact collections and the exhibitions they present are at the heart of history museums' distinctiveness. Nearly any definition of a museum involves a collection of objects. The *American Heritage Dictionary* is typical: "A building, place or institution devoted to the acquisition, conservation, study, exhibition and educational interpretation of objects having scientific, historical or artistic value."¹⁸ The founders of the four museums studied in this dissertation all began by collecting. Collections have been so central to the idea of a museum that institutions have frequently defined their whole purpose as the activities of collecting, preserving and interpreting objects through exhibition.¹⁹

More recently, museum commentators have reemphasized the broader purpose of public education as the appropriate focus of institutional attention. Mission statements no longer describe what museums do, but emphasize the reasons why they collect and

¹⁷Laurence Vail Coleman, *College and University Museums* (AAM: Washington, D.C., 1942): 57; Janet W. Solinger, ed., *Museums and Universities; New Paths for Continuing Education* (NY: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1990): 236.

¹⁸*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1992): s.v. "museum."

¹⁹The classic statement of this view of museums is Joseph Veach Noble, "Museum Manifesto," *Museum News* 48:8 (April 1970): 16-20. See also Stephen E. Weil, "Rethinking the Museum: An Emerging New Paradigm," in *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990): 57-65.

preserve and exhibit their artifacts. Few people any longer treat collections as the museum's *raison d'être*.²⁰ At the same time, those who work in museums continue to believe that artifacts play a significant role in what they do. There is currently considerable discussion in museum circles about de-centering collections, using them differently or even dispensing with them, but most museum commentators continue to assume that collections do and will continue to play a significant role in American museums.²¹ The history museum directors who gathered at AAM's 1999 annual meeting to discuss sustaining their institutions into the next century recognized that collections are "the thing that sets us apart from other kinds of institutions in society." These museum leaders expected to build on and utilize their unique resource as a means toward the end of stronger community ties.²²

Finally, there is the unique attraction of the real thing. Having described how the Victorians' object-based epistemology was superceded by the research labs and libraries of

²⁰Stephen E. Weil, "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 231-235. AAM now accredits institutions such as art centers and science/technology centers that may not have a permanent collection. Such institutions still must use tangible objects and present exhibits to meet accreditation criteria. (Pitman, "Muses, Museums and Memories": 2-3).

²¹Neither Elaine Heumann Gurian, in "What is the object of this Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums," (*Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 163-183) nor Marsha Semmel, in comments about the Women of the West Museum [Americana Foundation, *Museum Symposium Proceedings* (forthcoming, 2001)], finds artifacts essential to a museum. Stephen Weil ("The Ongoing Transformation": 231) and Harold Skramstad ("An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-first Century," *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 118-121) both assert the continuing importance of traditional collections, while anticipating significant change in how those artifacts are used.

²²Rick Beard, "Building Museums That Last," *History News* 54:3 (Summer 1999): 18.

universities, Steven Conn admits that “museums have survived, many have flourished and their numbers have grown.” The explanation he offers is their collections. He believes that “there remains something extraordinary, if finally inexplicable, about the experience of being in the presence of a Cezanne, or a raven-mask from Alaska or a fossil pterodactyl. To see the thing itself, with one’s own eyes and in a public place, surrounded by other people having some version of the same experience can be enchanting.”²³

The other distinguishing feature of museums is the exhibitions which organize and present their collections to the public. Exhibits are the major point of contact between museums and their visitors. The standards by which they are judged have varied over the years, as have the techniques used in their execution, but museum theorists agree that they play a key role. In the 1930s Lawrence Vail Coleman called exhibition “the central function of museums.” Two decades later Edward Alexander, director of interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg and then president of AAM told the Detroit Historical Society that exhibits were “in every sense the heart of the museum function.” Much more recently exhibit specialist and author Kathleen McLean has called exhibitions “the most prominent and public of all museum offerings . . . the soul of a museum experience for the millions of people who visit them.”²⁴

Given the significance attributed to them, it is astonishing how little has been written about exhibits historically. Institutional histories may describe exhibitions, but they

²³Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*: 262.

²⁴Coleman, *Museum in America*: 257; Edward Alexander, *The Museum: A Living Book of History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press for Detroit Historical Society, 1958): 18; Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue,” *Daedalus* 128:3 (Summer 1999): 83.

rarely analyze them in any depth.²⁵ Biographical works may discuss their subject's exhibition philosophy or achievements, but usually in the context of his/her life rather than the course of a museum's development or that of museums more generally.²⁶ Beyond the works mentioned below, the researcher seeking information about exhibits of the past must turn to the museum literature of the day or information in the files of particular museums. Manuals of museum practice are helpful, but their prescriptive nature always begs the question of how museums of any particular period actually planned and produced their exhibits. Periodicals offer some corrective to that idealized view of exhibits, but museum files can be even more useful, especially if they document a museum's exhibitions over a period of time. Hence the need for more research like that on which this dissertation is based.

One of the few pieces that looks at exhibits more generally over time is Neil Harris' "Museums, Merchandising and Popular Taste," which examines the difficult-to-define relationship between art museums and public taste in light of developments in the

²⁵Such works are often mimeographed or photocopied and have very limited distribution. Geoffrey C. Upward's, *A Home for Our Heritage: the Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979*, (Dearborn: Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979) is a rare example of a more substantial and widely available work about a history museum. Even this work lacks critical analysis, however.

²⁶The biographical sketch, varying widely in completeness and insight, figures prominently in the slim historical literature about museums. See for example, Edward Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville: AASLH, 1983) and the same author's *The Museum in America: Innovators and Pioneers* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press with AASLH, 1997); Clifford Lord, ed. *Keepers of the Past* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1965). Both *Museum News* and *The Public Historian* have published "pioneers" series: See for example, Melinda Young Frye, "Pioneers in American Museums: Charles P. Wilcomb," *Museum News* 55:5 (May/June 1977): 55-60 and Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "History in a Natural History Museum: George Brown Goode and the Smithsonian Institution," *The Public Historian* 10:2 (Spring 1988): 7-26.

commercial world, including department stores, expositions and post-World War II shopping centers. Thomas Schlereth makes an initial effort at periodization in his assessment of the relationship between material culture studies and museums. His work is probably more important, however, for his insistence on the need for a broader critical dialogue concerning exhibits.²⁷

“Designing the Past,” by historian Gary Kulik, pioneers (and remains unique in the published literature) in attempting to assess both the form and the content of historical exhibits over time.²⁸ It is particularly useful in that it takes a much-needed first step addressing post-World War II exhibits. At the same time that Kulik recognizes the need for “a real discourse on museum exhibitions” to include “the relation of design to content,” he minimizes the real differences between the exhibition and the more usual scholarly medium of the book or article.²⁹ From the museum perspective that is a significant omission, but it should not obscure the importance of his beginning the discussion.

²⁷Neil Harris, “Museums, Merchandising and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence,” in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M.G. Quimby (New York: Norton/Winterthur, 1976): 140-175; Thomas Schlereth, “History Museums and Material Culture,” in *History Museums in the U.S.*, ed. Leon and Rosenzweig: 294-320. Like many of Schlereth’s essays, this one is available elsewhere in slightly expanded form. See Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992): 376-415; and a related essay, “Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Schlereth (Nashville, AASLH, 1982): 1-75.

²⁸Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” in *History Museums in the U.S.*, ed. Leon and Rosenzweig: 2-37. Also useful is Jane Bedno and Ed Bedno, “Museum Exhibitions: Past Imperfect, Future Tense,” *Museum News* 78:5 (September/October 1999): 38-43, 59-61, which summarizes design developments in all types of museums over the past 30 years.

²⁹Kulik, “Designing the Past”: 31.

Just as historical museums emerged later as an institutional type than museums of science and art, so too were they later in developing distinctive forms of exhibition. Historical exhibits have been shaped by influences from other types of museums, as well as by trends in the discipline of history itself. Sometimes new directions for exhibits have come from history exhibits themselves, when all the pieces come together in a new and creative way. These various forces affect both the content and the appearance of exhibitions.

The earliest approach to exhibiting human history linked it to the natural world, and ultimately involved an effort to construct a rigorous classification system, paralleling that used by natural scientists. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, naturalist George Brown Goode envisioned a comprehensive museum of cultural, as well as natural, history that would exhibit the material—more than forty boxcar loads of material—acquired by the Smithsonian Institution as a result of the Centennial Exposition of 1876. With the natural scientist's passion for system and order, he worked out an elaborate classification system covering both natural specimens and man-made artifacts. His efforts to implement the scheme, even in moveable cases, revealed that it was easier to create such a system on paper than to put it into practice. Goode's exhibit halls were filled with cases, each in turn containing many separate objects and their individual labels.³⁰

By the time of Goode's premature death in 1896, other museum curators had begun experimenting with less rigidly structured, more contextual exhibition arrangements. Charles Wilcomb, curator of the Golden Gate Park Museum in San Francisco, had already installed an exhibit of artifacts of everyday life in early New

³⁰Kulik, "Designing the Past": 10-11.

England, and was now proposing to arrange an entire colonial kitchen in a space “finished in Colonial style.” He believed it would be “a most impressive and instructive exhibit,” and would make the Golden Gate Museum’s colonial period exhibits “the most complete and from an educational standpoint the most valuable in the United States.” Opened in November 1896, the Colonial Kitchen proved so popular, that when Wilcomb later became the founding curator of the Oakland Museum, he recreated it there, adding a bedroom to the installation.³¹ On the east coast, Secretary George Francis Dow of the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, recreated three rooms in 1907: a 1750 kitchen and a bedroom and parlor of 1800. Like Wilcomb, Dow believed the new exhibit technique had great educational potential, “for the rearranged collections will illustrate, in an almost unique manner, the every-day life of our forefathers.”³²

Dow’s rooms, which incorporated woodwork from dismantled houses, served as models for what became the rooms installed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new American Wing in 1924. Although history museums had originated the technique, the influence of the Metropolitan’s rooms (and those installed at other large art museums) was such that some historical museums came to value their period rooms and decorative arts collections more for the quality of their workmanship than for their contribution to an

³¹Melinda Young Frye, “Charles P. Wilcomb”: 57-59. Like others of his day, Wilcomb used the term “Colonial” loosely; many of the objects he showed dated from as late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

³²Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., “George Francis Dow,” in *Keepers of the Past*, ed. Lord: 159-160. See *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* 34 (1904): 6-7, for a similar, unrealized vision for the Michigan Historical Museum.

understanding of life in the past.³³

In the 1920s and 30s, a number of museum leaders concerned themselves with developing more consistent standards of practice and encouraging small museums to strive to meet them. The American Association of Museums hired its first staff in this period, and particularly under its second director Laurence Vail Coleman, began to be a source of information about the condition of American museums. Coleman traveled indefatigably and wrote extensively about what he saw. His *Manual for Small Museums*, published in 1927, is filled with practical advice for the planning and installation of exhibits.³⁴ Case construction, lighting, artifact mounts and labeling: Coleman covers the basics. He also recognizes the need for extensive planning of both content and space. History exhibits should not confine themselves only to what is nearby, but should present some larger context of national, and even world, history against which to present the local story. Finally, Coleman strongly advocates “dual arrangement” of exhibits for all types of museums. Limited numbers of artifacts should be attractively presented for the casual visitor, but the excess was not to be packed away in storage. Rather it should be organized, so that it was accessible on short notice for those visitors who wished to explore a subject in greater detail.³⁵

The growth in the numbers of history museums during the interwar period for the

³³Hosmer, “Dow”: 160. My understanding of the influence of art museums in this area is drawn not only from research for Chapter Three of this dissertation, but from reading about and visiting a number of large urban historical society museums. It is confirmed by Kulik, “Designing the Past”: 15-17.

³⁴Laurence Vail Coleman, *Manual for Small Museums* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927): 147-160, 209-238.

³⁵Coleman, *Small Museums*: 127-129.

first time brought sustained attention to their particular needs. Gary Kulik describes in some detail how a new academic view of history, advocated by Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson at Columbia came together with wealthy patronage and energetic leadership at the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) to establish new standards for historical exhibits.³⁶ In the early 1930s, NYSHA president (and former Beard student) Dixon Ryan Fox proposed a practical manual to guide “the half-trained, part-time caretakers” of history museums and selected Arthur Parker, director of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, to write it.³⁷

Parker had built a reputation for innovative displays and programs that made the Rochester Museum “a model for all the smaller American cities to study.”³⁸ He believed that “the successful museum must have a living appeal that stimulates the imagination and stirs the intellect.” Its exhibits should enable the visitor “to see that he is a part of history . . . All the artistry of the dramatist must be employed by the museum that really succeeds.”³⁹

Arthur Parker distinguished history museums from those of art or science. He argued that in order to “represent life as it existed,” a museum ought to “arrange objects in their natural association,” rather than segregating them by type as a scientific taxonomy demanded. Recognizing the popularity and influence of period rooms in art museums,

³⁶Kulik, “Designing the Past”: 17-21.

³⁷Dixon Ryan Fox, “Foreword,” to *A Manual for History Museums*, by Arthur C. Parker, New York State Historical Association Series, ed. Dixon Ryan Fox, no. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935): viii-ix.

³⁸*Ibid.*: ix.

³⁹Parker, *Manual*: xi.

Parker noted that the ultimate aim of a such a room in a history museum differed from the essentially aesthetic purposes it served in the art museum.⁴⁰ Assuring readers of *A Manual for History Museums* that “it is not difficult to make an exhibit tell a story,” Parker advocated a mix of exhibit techniques, including models, pictures and period rooms in addition to appropriate artifacts, used individually or in groups. Exhibits should be part of the museum’s overall offering of programs, which might include classes and lectures, meeting space for collectors’ clubs, pageants or historical dramas and children’s programs.⁴¹

For all that Arthur Parker wanted “purposeful” history museums that played an active role in their communities, their ultimate goal is decidedly didactic. The museum is to present in visual form, not “a mélange of historical miscellany,” but “sequential history.” Artifacts are neither central to what the museum does nor even necessary (although they are “desirable”). “*The objects shown are merely tools in the visualization of ideas.*”⁴²

Parker’s *Manual* remained in use throughout World War II and well into the postwar years. Museum staffs practiced and refined his methods, developing their own variations. They developed broader repertoires of exhibit techniques, experimenting with new methods of producing labels and illustrations and new designs for building cases. During the postwar period, Parker’s storytelling exhibit, which consisted of discrete elements strung together to tell a story, became an interpretive exhibit, planned as a single unit in which design and content were integrated into a coherent whole. No specific

⁴⁰*Ibid.*: 58, 76.

⁴¹*Ibid.*: 56-63.

⁴²*Ibid.*: 3, 55. The emphasis in the quotation is Parker’s.

exhibit can be identified as the first of this type; interpretive exhibits were not always recognized as such, nor did any museum consistently produce them. An exhibit frequently cited as an early example of the genre is *The Farmer's Year*, opened in 1958 at NYSHA's Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown. Built around the readily grasped theme of seasonal changes in a farmer's worklife, *The Farmer's Year* used a relatively small number of artifacts mounted on platforms or panels and explicated by clearly written, hand-lettered labels. It proved highly effective. Already recognized as a highly successful exhibit by the early 1960s, Gary Kulik's more recent assessment sums up its achievement: "Its genius lay in its studied simplicity and the extraordinarily effective fit between content and design."⁴³

Although few history exhibitions immediately imitated *The Farmer's Year* in its complete abandonment of exhibit cases, the late 1950s and 60s witnessed a growing awareness of design in historical museums. Exhibit design became more visible as a topic in museum literature, and as the use of photos increased in publications like *History News* and *Museum News*, it was harder to remain oblivious to the trend. What those photos reveal is that, in history museums at least, the initial application of modern design principles produced something quite unlike *The Farmer's Year*. Self-conscious design gave exhibits a unified look, but one that often bore little relation to the content they presented.⁴⁴

⁴³Kulik, "Designing the Past": 23; Wilcomb E. Washburn, "The Dramatization of American Museums," *Curator* 6:2 (1963): 124. NYSHA's national stature and the presence, beginning in 1964, of history museum studies students helped to confirm *The Farmer's Year* as a model exhibit. It was not dismantled until about 1980.

⁴⁴Two specific examples can be seen in *History News* 17 (1961-62): 35 and 19 (1964): 213. For discussion of design, see the articles cited in Kulik, "Designing the Past": n61.

Throughout the 1960s, particularly in large museums, designers played an ever-larger role in shaping what visitors saw. By 1971 a few warning flags were already up. Dr. Alma Wittlin, a well known museum writer, observed that designers did not always understand their role as “helpmates of scholars.” “With directives couched in such vague terms as the need for ‘color’ and ‘drama,’ it is not surprising that some artists overstep their authority in situations of vanishing restraints.”⁴⁵ A number of the history museums that began using contract designers during the 1970s had at least one project get out of hand under similar circumstances.

From the mid-1970s to about 1980, historical exhibits, which had previously moved in the direction of the simplicity of *The Farmer’s Year*, became multi-layered and even cluttered. Following the lead of several high-profile exhibits, including the Smithsonian’s *A Nation of Nations* and the bicentennial traveling exhibition *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the number of photos, graphics and labels in exhibits multiplied exponentially. Artifacts were often lost amid the welter of images; in cases like the Franklin/Jefferson exhibit, images and text disguised the absence of artifacts.

To be fair, this situation was not always the result of designers run amuck. As Wittlin noted, they were often not given clear guidance, and staffs were often inexperienced with exhibits on the larger scale that typically triggered a contract with an outside design firm. Finally, although the intellectual complexity of “collage exhibits” did not always match their visual density, there were sometimes content-based reasons for the clutter. History museum staff in the 1970s were better trained than previously, and a

⁴⁵Alma S. Wittlin, “Hazards of Communication by Exhibits,” *Curator* 14:3 (1971): 148.

significant proportion now had been exposed to the “new social history.” History for them was more than past politics or wars; it was about constraints and agency in the lives of ordinary people as well as the rich and powerful. These curators and museum directors saw greater complexity in the past than had their predecessors, and they wanted their exhibitions to reflect that. Unfortunately, this often resulted in exhibits that asked visitors to make too many choices with too little guidance.⁴⁶

Another type of exhibit emerged more quietly in the 1970s and proved to have considerably more staying power. The exhibition environment in history museums is related to both historic sites and immersion experiences like the coal mine at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, which has been hosting visitors since 1933. Exhibition environments allow visitors to walk through a recreated indoor or outdoor space. If there is a need for cases, they are incorporated into the setting. The immediate antecedents of those created in the 1970s at the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Milwaukee Public Museum were the natural history dioramas and period rooms that were already familiar fixtures in museums. By removing the usual glass barrier and allowing visitors to walk through their exhibits, the museums in Milwaukee and Victoria discovered that visitors felt more involved in the exhibits, and less like spectators. Their museum

⁴⁶For illustrations of this style of exhibit design, see “American Arts and the American Experience,” *Museum News* 53:3 (November 1974): 36–41 and Harold K. Skramstad, “Interpreting Material Culture: A View From the Other Side of the Glass” in Ian M.G. Quimby, ed., *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978): 175–200. My discussion of these “collage exhibits” (the term is my own) draws upon Kulik, “Designing the Past”: 27–30. I agree with him that they “sacrificed clarity to inclusiveness and content to design.” Elaine Heumann Gurian, “Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): 180, offers a different view of this exhibit style.

experience was more memorable. Since the 1970s, environments have become more elaborate, incorporating touch, sound and smell as well as sight.⁴⁷

At the same time that designers were becoming a fixture in history museums, educators were also becoming more visible.⁴⁸ In 1982 Chicago's Field Museum began a multi-year professional development project aimed at enabling staffs to realize more of their museums' educational potential. Funded by the Kellogg Foundation, the project encompassed not only workshops for museum educators, but programs on exhibits as well.⁴⁹ These workshops involved curators and designers as well as educators and built on a concept common in other endeavors: the team.

The underlying idea of the workshop *Exhibit Development: A Team Approach* was that involvement of curatorial, design and education staff from the beginning would insure better integration of content, appearance and educational programming. The seminar was run several times for teams from all types of museums. Although the Michigan Historical Museum was the only museum in this study to send a team to the

⁴⁷Bedno, "Museum Exhibitions": 42. Both John Wright (interview with author, March 4, 1999) and Sandra Clark (interview with author, September 3, 1998) mentioned how much more attentive visitors were when they could get into an exhibit. At Henry Ford Museum, Wright specifically contrasted reactions to the diner and the gas station in *The Automobile in American Life*. Visitors are invited to walk into the diner and sit down at the counter, but can only peer into the gas station through its windows.

⁴⁸The term "educator" can be applied to many groups. In this dissertation, it refers to museum educators, who usually have responsibility for planning tours and programs for both groups and casual visitors. Museums of all types hired more of them in the 1970s and 80s.

⁴⁹For background on this project, see Carolyn Blackmon et al., *Open Conversations: Strategies for Professional Development in Museums* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1988) and Mary Ellen Munley, *Catalysts for Change: The Kellogg Projects in Museum Education* (Washington, D. C.: Kellogg Projects in Museum Education, 1986).

seminar, the basics of the approach were widely disseminated and adopted.⁵⁰ Because it offers a practical means for integrating the various perspectives needed to create a successful history exhibition, museums continue to use a team approach to exhibit planning. Almost two decades after the first workshops, the team approach to exhibit development remains a subject of professional discussion.⁵¹

The changes that occurred in the roles played by designers and educators in history exhibits were also taking place, with some variations, in other types of museums. The role of academic historians with respect to exhibits also changed significantly during the 1970s and 80s, largely as a result of action by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Seeing interpretive exhibits as a way to bring humanities scholarship to a public audience, the endowment offered grants for exhibit planning and implementation that required museums to use scholarly consultants. Much research in the “new social history” was taking place in academe at the time, which offered curators material they could use in exhibits and historic site interpretation—rich insights into everyday life in the past at a variety of economic and social levels. The presence of greater numbers of academically trained historians in museums made those institutions receptive, even beyond the welcome

⁵⁰This author was part of the MHM team which attended the team approach seminar in October 1984 and presented a session on the subject at the 1985 annual meeting of the Michigan Museums Association. For examples of the use of teams in history museums, see Kenneth Ames, Barbara Franco and L. Thomas Frye, eds., *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits* (Nashville: AASLH, 1992), especially Chapter 7.

⁵¹*Exhibitionist* 19:1(Spring 2000) contains three articles on the topic. Discussion will continue in the Fall issue (forthcoming).

prospect of potential funding for exhibits.⁵²

NEH-funded exhibit projects brought museum personnel and academic historians together more closely and in more institutions than had ever been the case before. Some excellent exhibits resulted, among them regional exhibitions like *Beads: Their Use by Upper Great Lakes Indians*, as well as nationally recognized exhibits such as the Strong Museum's *Culture and Comfort* and the Chicago Historical Society's Civil War exhibit, *A House Divided*.⁵³ The grant programs assessed applications solely on the basis of written summaries of their content, however, and the resulting exhibits were not universally of high quality. Museum people began calling attention to what they saw as shortcomings in the NEH approach. In addition to emphasizing the importance of design, they contrasted the collaborative nature and institutional character of exhibits with the individually authored scholarly article or book.⁵⁴ With the funding cuts of the early 1990s and a re-orientation of NEH programs, the specific issues of the 1980s all but disappeared.

All of these developments—more sophisticated design, greater attention to the

⁵²Irene U. Burnham, "So the Seams Don't Show," in *Past Meets Present*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987): 105-106.

⁵³This author personally viewed all three exhibits. Their catalogs do not offer the same experience, but at least document their content: *Beads: Their Use by Upper Great Lakes Indians* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Public Museum, 1977); Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930* (Rochester, NY: Strong Museum/University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Eric Foner and Olivia Mahoney *A House Divided: America in the Age of Lincoln* (New York: Chicago Historical Society & W.W. Norton, 1990).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*: 6-7; Susan P. Schreiber, "A Meeting of Minds: Members of an NEH Advisory Panel Speak about Museums and the Humanities," *Museum News* 64:5 (June 1986): 48-58. Robert Archibald's retrospective criticism in *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999): 157-158, is more pointed than that of the NEH advisors.

educational content of exhibits, the team approach and questions about the relationship of historical content to other elements of the total package—all combined to elicit new consideration of the nature of the exhibit medium in historical museums. This thinking informed in a general way all of the recent exhibits presented in “Museums in the Rearview Mirror”.

The new view of history exhibits was more holistic than most earlier perspectives. It recognized the distinctiveness of history exhibits: unlike art exhibits, they do not focus on artifacts for their own sake and unlike many science exhibits, the objects used are not interchangeable with others of similar type. Designer Barbara Fahs Charles calls history exhibits “the most challenging and complex exhibition form,” because they depend upon the integration of artifacts and ideas. The diverse artifacts required for even a simple exhibit must be interwoven with fact and interpretation within a specific physical space. At their best, “historical exhibitions are highly creative efforts.”⁵⁵

Irene Burnham, a curator and exhibit consultant, realized after working at NEH that “the presence of sound scholarship, well presented did not guarantee a good exhibit.” Her effort to define what was missing resulted in a proposal “that we accept interpretive exhibitions as a genre of creative expression whose distinguishing feature is the contextual presentation of objects.” Agreeing with Charles that the whole should be more than the sum of its parts, Burnham acknowledges that there is no formula and no guarantee of success for such endeavors. Instead, this approach “means accepting the creative struggle to find the right interpretive perspective.” That may come from a scholarly treatment of

⁵⁵Barbara Fahs Charles, “Exhibition as (Art) Form,” in Blatti, *Past Meets Present*: 97-104.

the subject in question, but it may emerge from the artifacts themselves.⁵⁶

In a widely cited article, Smithsonian curator Fath Davis Ruffins emphasizes the interpretive, argumentative nature of all forms of history. She, too, understands that “in ways only beginning to be explored, the exhibition itself, as a distinct form, exerts a measure of control over the interpretation.” Those who use the medium must use its “expressive, symbolic and representational language” to create a metaphor that conveys “in some meaningful way the contours of that enormous literal past.”⁵⁷

The variety of these metaphors and the complex process of putting them together is described and analyzed in *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits*. This anthology offers eleven essays about exhibits that opened between 1985 and 1990 in museums of various sizes around the country. The juxtaposition of many stories of how museum staffs created “a dynamic synthesis of objects, words and design” certainly confirms the complexity of the endeavor.⁵⁸ No two processes were quite alike, and several stretched over long periods of time. *Ideas and Images* also highlights the significance of institutional parameters and culture. The conclusions drawn by Kenneth Ames at the end of the volume refer again and again to institutional issues such as mission, resources and leadership.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Burnham, “Seams”: 105-111.

⁵⁷Fath Davis Ruffins, “The Exhibition as Form: An Elegant Metaphor,” *Museum News* 64: 1 (October 1985): 54-59.

⁵⁸Kenneth Ames, “Finding Common Threads: An Afterword,” in *Ideas and Images*, ed. Ames, Franco and Frye: 319.

⁵⁹Kenneth Ames, “Finding Common Threads: An Afterword,” in *Ideas and Images*, ed. Ames, Franco and Frye: 313-324.

Like the essays in *Ideas and Images*, "Museums in the Rearview Mirror" focuses on individual institutions. It extends that focus over a longer period of time, and in doing so further illuminates the importance of institutional conditions in the creation of exhibits. The chapters that follow trace how four institutions of varying size and resources established and modified their exhibits programs during the twentieth century, and how those programs have reflected each institution's understanding of the role of the automobile in local, state, or national history. Their recent exhibits in particular illustrate the role that institutional history and identity play in the complex process of creating an interpretive exhibition in the late twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2

ROOTED IN CHANGE

The purposes with which the four museums in this study were founded shaped their early development and were reflected in their earliest exhibitions. Like other historical museums, each responded to a perceived need in the present for a tangible connection to the past. Their founders began in what seemed the most logical fashion to them, by collecting. The artifacts and information they assembled, and the way they arranged their collections for public display began to create a unique identity for each museum.

The founders of both the Michigan Historical Museum and the Detroit Historical Museum hoped to preserve a past that appeared to be on the verge of disappearing entirely. In the decades following the Civil War, the passing of Michigan's pioneer generation inspired formation of a statewide society to collect and preserve the stories and artifacts of the 1820s, 30s and 40s. By the early 1920s, those who remembered a pre-automotive Detroit marveled at its transformation from a modest, tree-shaded city to "Dynamic Detroit," the acknowledged center of automobile manufacturing. In these circumstances, every trace of the past was valued as a reminder of people, places and activities that were no longer part of everyday life. It followed then that both museums found every reminder of the past worth exhibiting, even if there were already identical pieces on display. Labels focused on the specific individual or family that owned or used the artifact in question. The collective experience being remembered was the sum of these specific stories.

In typical fashion Henry Ford set his own course when he entered the museum world. Collecting at the same time that the Detroit Historical Society was working on its project, he, too, talked about preserving a past that was disappearing. Ford, however, simultaneously emphasized the utility of the past for the future. Thus, he made his museum part of a larger educational enterprise, expecting that students would study his collections, and build on the understanding thus gained when they made their own contributions to technological progress. Following the pattern of his factories, he set his entire collection out in closely spaced rows so that students could compare different examples of various tools and machines. Since he expected visitors to “read” the artifacts, Ford considered labels unnecessary.

The Flint residents who established the Alfred P. Sloan Museum, in contrast to the founders of the other institutions, looked to the past primarily as a means of celebrating the present. Flint was proud to be “General Motors’ Old Home Town,” where nearly all jobs were linked, either directly or indirectly, to the automotive giant. The dozen years between initial proposal of the Sloan project and the museum’s actual opening in 1966 witnessed production milestones and anniversaries that confirmed the city’s self-image. Although the museum’s founders assembled the usual range of local historical artifacts, they put more time, effort and money into the automobile collection. When the museum finally opened to the public, tours and publicity focused on the cars.

In all of these cases, building a collection took precedence, initially at least, over developing an exhibits program. This was natural enough, considering how essential collections were to the concept of a museum. If exhibitions amounted to little more than collections arrayed in an orderly fashion, both museum personnel and visitors seemed to

find that sufficient, at least prior to World War II. Standards change over time, however, and by the time that the Sloan Museum opened in the mid-1960s, good history museums were expected to do more interpretation than had been the case three or four decades earlier.

Michigan Historical Museum: Focus on Origins

The institution known today as the Michigan Historical Museum emerged in the early twentieth century and initially focused on the state's formative years. Its energetic founding curator built it into a well recognized feature of the state capitol. Transfer to public ownership broadened the museum's mission, but at the same time reduced it to secondary status. With the loss of its curatorial advocate, the State Pioneer Museum lapsed into neglect.

It is impossible to define a precise founding date for the Pioneer Museum. Its roots can be found in the 1874 establishment of the Pioneer Society of Michigan, "for the purpose of collecting and preserving historical, biographical, or other information in relation to the State of Michigan."¹ Many of its charter members themselves belonged to the pioneer generation. Largely of white Protestant Yankee stock, they focused, not on the earliest French fur traders or Catholic missions in the state, but on the founding of Michigan as they knew it—part of the Northwest Territory, home of the Republican party and staunch supporter of the Union cause in the Civil War.²

¹"Constitution," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections (MPHC)* 1(1874-76): 10.

²Early membership rosters clearly show the overwhelmingly Yankee origins of early Michigan residents: the list of birthplaces includes few entries beyond New England

Despite being a privately operated historical society, the Pioneer Society received state financial support from its inception. In 1879 the society was also granted the use of two rooms in the state capitol. Its home in the new structure, a symbol of Michiganians' post-Civil War self-confidence as well as the seat of state government, increased the society's visibility considerably. Although publication of the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* continued to be its primary activity, the society now had a place to put the artifacts it was offered from time to time.

By 1901, when the organization—now known as the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society (MPHS)—hired Marie Ferrey to assist its secretary, it had accumulated a modest collection. An energetic and outgoing former schoolteacher and state government clerk, Ferrey saw both educational and public relations potential in the exhibition of the society's artifacts.³ Encouraged by MPHS secretary Henry Pattengill, who was also a well known educator and former Superintendent of Public Instruction, she began acquiring display cases and soon became the society's most active solicitor of artifact donations. Within a few years, Ferrey had also begun using her contacts in women's clubs around the state to promote interest in state and local history. Soon she was speaking to granges, local historical societies, school classes and patriotic societies as well, often taking along items from the collections to illustrate her talks.⁴

states, New York and New Jersey. See also *MPHC* 1(1874-76): 84-93; 2(1877-1897):184-187; 3(1879-80): 266-269.

³Maria Quinlan Leiby, "Museums and the Historical Profession: The Career of Marie B. Ferrey," (Seminar paper, Michigan State University, 1991), includes a more detailed description of the career of Marie Ferrey and the early years of the Michigan Historical Museum.

⁴Ferrey's acquisition of cases is documented in Board of State Auditors, *Annual Report*, 1903: 6, 21, 181; 1904: 7, 184. See Leiby, "Museums and the Historical

The creation of the Michigan Historical Commission in 1913 and the subsequent transfer of the Pioneer Museum to its jurisdiction gave the institution greater status than it had previously possessed, and appeared to insure its continuation. The commission's purpose as "A State Department of Archives and History" was considerably broader than commemoration of the state's pioneer settlers. And its work was to be overseen by a professional historian, George N. Fuller, holder of a doctorate in history from the University of Michigan.

Fuller had completed his dissertation in 1912 on *The Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan* under department chair Claude Van Tyne. When Van Tyne was named a member of the original Michigan Historical Commission the following year, he proposed his student for the position of Secretary to the new body. Fuller was very conscious that his training in "the scientific conception of history" had given him special knowledge and skills. He divided the work of the commission staff into that which was "properly historical" and "work that is popular." It seemed obvious to him that collecting, preserving and organizing documents for use by "the special researcher and trained writer of history" was of a higher order than presenting history to the public. Fuller recognized that work with schools, D.A. R. chapters and women's clubs was necessary "if popular support is to be retained and increased," but preferred to use his training on behalf of the "properly historical." He found it entirely appropriate that his female assistant should oversee the popular work.⁵

Profession," 26-28, for information on Ferrey's travels on behalf of Michigan history.

⁵*MPHC*, 39(1915): 3; Michigan Historical Commission Minutes, October 12, 1923; George N. Fuller, "Historical Work in Michigan," *Michigan History (MH)* 7 (1923): 233-236.

One might have expected the change in the museum's governance to have altered its operations as well. Yet, because the historical commission retained Marie Ferrey as curator, it continued to function as it had for the past ten years. It remained for nearly a full decade in cramped quarters on the fourth floor of the Capitol, with perhaps a thousand square feet of exhibit space. Mrs. Ferrey continued traveling and speaking, as well as performing the more traditional curatorial duties of record-keeping and caring for the collections. One of the first publications of the new Historical Commission noted both the recent growth of the collections and the need for more space in order to exhibit them adequately. Indeed, the creation of the commission had exacerbated the problem by adding additional staff, who needed work space. In 1922 the combined efforts of the commission, Secretary Fuller and Mrs. Ferrey finally succeeded in obtaining larger quarters for the Historical Commission in the new State Office Building (later renamed the Lewis Cass Building).

The Pioneer Museum's new home was large enough for commission staff to separate its work space from the museum's exhibit space. The notion of "exhibits" remained very basic, however; exhibits were simply groups of artifacts on display. Artifacts were arranged by type, with all the cradles together, all the lighting devices, all the farm tools, etc. Labeling was inconsistent, and usually limited to identification of the object and/or the family that had owned it. Only occasionally did labels explain how items were made or used (Figures 1 and 2).⁶

Although the museum would continue to carry the adjective 'pioneer' until the

⁶Photos of exhibits in the State Office Building, Museum History files, Collections Unit, MHM. Artifact files also contain a surprising number of old labels for specific items.

mid-1940s, its collections were no longer limited to the period of statehood and settlement. They expanded to include both earlier and later items. Ferrey collected prehistoric Native American tools, as well as women's clothing and household utensils from the period between the Civil War and the 1890s, which by the 1920s had become quaint and/or historic, rather than simply out-of-date. Items associated with Michigan's governors were recognized as important simply for that connection, and represented one of the first areas of twentieth century collecting for the museum.⁷ There is no evidence, however, that either Marie Ferrey or the historical commission articulated any overall plan for museum collecting.

With the museum's move to the State Office Building, transportation began to emerge as a theme in its exhibits. For the first time, there was room for vehicles as well as the smaller accessories associated with various means of transportation. A mid-nineteenth century stagecoach and Lansing's first fire engine, both accepted earlier in hopes that one day the museum would be able to exhibit them, were brought to the new building from storage. Marie Ferry realized the historical significance of automobiles to the state and apparently wished to collect early models. She lamented the loss to the state of "'Olds' first runabout," sent to Smithsonian—No room in Michigan."⁸ Additional evidence of automotive awareness within the historical commission at this time consists of two

⁷Ethel F. Collingwood, "The State Pioneer Museum (Lest We Forget!)" *MH* 17 (1933): 335.

⁸See photos in Collections Unit, Museum History file. Marie Ferrey to Governor Groesbeck, November 16, 1922; Archives of Michigan, RG 61-34, Box 2. The Olds Motor Works donated an 1897 Oldsmobile to the Smithsonian in 1915. Smith Hempstone Oliver, "Automobiles and Motorcycles in the U.S. National Museum," *U.S. National Museum Bulletin* 213 (1957):55-56.

Michigan History articles, one an overview of automotive history and the other a collection of short histories of various companies operating in Michigan.⁹

Marie Ferrey was sixty-nine years old when the Historical Commission was formed in 1913, but she worked actively on behalf of Michigan history for another full decade. Her effectiveness diminished steadily after 1924, however, although she never formally retired. By the time of Mrs. Ferrey's death in 1932, the State Pioneer Museum in Lansing was stagnant, if not moribund. Commission staff managed to keep the doors open, but it was hardly an active institution.¹⁰

For most of the 1930s, the Pioneer Museum languished. The historical commission had seriously discussed hiring a new curator in the late 1920s, in hopes of reviving the museum. That opportunity was lost with the onset of the Great Depression, which cut the commission's less-than-generous budget to the bone. The museum's neglected exhibits, while not as tightly packed as they had been in the Capitol, degenerated into "a jumbled assortment of antiques overflowing cases, shelves and nooks." When the Historical Commission finally replaced Mrs. Ferrey in 1939, it took several months and the assistance of a WPA Museum Project crew to "recondition" the museum's display space.¹¹

In her two active decades as curator, Marie Ferrey largely realized her initial vision of commemorating Michigan's white, Anglo-Saxon pioneers. She wholeheartedly supported creation of the Michigan Historical Commission, but neither she nor anyone

⁹"The Automobile Industry in Michigan," *MH* 8 (1924): 219-265; Earl G. Fuller, "The Automobile Industry in Michigan," *MH* 12 (1928): 280-296.

¹⁰Leiby, "Museums and the Historical Profession": 32-33.

¹¹"Historical Notes," *MH* 23 (1939): 402-404. See also *Michigan History*, volumes 15-22 for budget information.

else involved gave much thought to its implications for the larger purpose of the museum. Although public ownership probably protected the Pioneer Museum from being closed and its collections dispersed during the depression, its operation was not a high priority for state government. Even those directly responsible for it, George Fuller and the Michigan Historical Commission, considered it a secondary responsibility and continued to ignore the question of what a state history museum was—or ought to be.

Detroit Historical Museum: Preserving the Pre-Automotive City

The state's largest city is also nearly its oldest, but prior to the 1920s, local interest in history had always been expressed in terms of larger political units. Detroiters had formed a large portion of the membership of a pre-Civil War state historical society and later the Wayne County Historical Society, but no organization focused exclusively on the city's history until the establishment of the Detroit Historical Society (DHS) in 1922. Within a few years, members added a museum to the society's activities. The organization struggled through the depression, developing an active program on a shoestring budget. The renewed prosperity that accompanied World War II eventually enabled the society to advance toward its initial goals for the museum, including a building of its own. Like the state historical society, the DHS looked to public ownership to provide a stable foundation for its growing museum.

The initial purpose of the DHS was “to encourage historical study and research” by its members and to add to the already extensive collection of books and manuscripts

donated to the Detroit Public Library in 1914 by Clarence M. Burton.¹² Within a few years members recognized as well the survival of substantial numbers of artifacts in the city, as well as strong popular interest in such items. Following a campaign to increase society membership and provide financial support for the new undertaking, the Detroit Historical Museum (DHM) opened its doors in November 1928.

Both historical society and museum sought to preserve a past that seemed on the verge of obliteration by the automobile. Between its 200th anniversary celebration in 1901 and the opening of the museum, Detroit had been transformed from a diversified manufacturing city and port of some 286,000 people to an expanding metropolis of nearly 1.5 million, and the acknowledged center of the American auto industry. Historian Raymond Miller argued in 1951 that “Detroit itself still does not understand” all the changes that came with such explosive growth. Observing that residents of the city were affected both personally and collectively, Miller compared the effects of Detroit’s early twentieth century growth to those of the fire which leveled the city—then a fortified frontier village—in 1805.¹³

In another city the historical museum might have found quarters in a historic building, but no such structure offered itself in Detroit. In any case, city residents took pride in their city’s growth even as they mourned the loss of familiar landmarks; thus it seemed appropriate that the new Detroit Historical Museum found a home in a skyscraper. Located on the twenty-third floor of the Barlum Tower, a Cadillac Square office building,

¹²Gracie B. Krum, “History of the Detroit Historical Society,” *Detroit Historical Society Bulletin* 1:1 (Jan. 1945):2 (This periodical is cited hereafter as *Bulletin*).

¹³Raymond C. Miller, “Detroit—Old and New,” *American Heritage*, New Series 2:4 (Summer 1951): 41.

it was dubbed—locally at least—“the highest museum in the world.”¹⁴

Tension between concern over loss of the past and pride in modernity is also reflected in a 1930 booklet listing these objectives for the historical society:

First: To preserve historical relics and material of this locality.

Second: To house and centralize the same and prevent their loss or destruction in scattered places of storage.

Third: To make the same available for historical research and educational purposes.

Fourth: To stimulate the interest of the newcomer in local traditions and history.

Fifth: To restore its historic background to our rapidly growing community.¹⁵

Although its emphasis on preserving the relics and evidence of the city’s past implicitly privileges long term residents, the booklet also incorporates a recognition of change. DHS leaders were members of the city’s established elite, which was white and largely—though not exclusively—Anglo-Saxon. They may have wanted later arrivals to accept the city on their terms, but they also acknowledged that the newcomers were a part of the city, linked to its past by helping to create its present.

The DHS booklet appealed to civic pride, listing a number of cities whose historical societies owned buildings “generously supported by large civic-minded memberships.” Including cities like New York, Chicago and Philadelphia in the list implied that, despite its recent growth, Detroit could not be considered in the same class as those cities until it, too, had a substantial historical museum. The enumeration of much smaller

¹⁴George W. Stark, “The Dream and the Reality,” *Bulletin* 15:2 (November 1958): 2. An attempt in the 1930s to raise funds to reconstruct Detroit’s original fort in reinforced concrete represents a similar attempt to make technological progress serve the purposes of history. Gracie B. Krum, *The Detroit Historical Society, December 1921-January 1952* (Detroit:[DHS], 1952): 65, 73.

¹⁵*Detroit Historical Society* [Detroit: DHS, 1930]: unpagged.

cities like Portland, Oregon; Salem, Massachusetts and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania seems to be saying, “Fellow Detroiters, we should be able to do better than these insignificant places!”

One of the ways in which the DHS demonstrated its seriousness of purpose was by hiring a curator. Arthur S. Hampton was a local antique collector, who was responsible for accepting donations, caring for the collection, and operating the museum as well.¹⁶ By 1930 the museum already contained more than fifteen hundred artifacts. Photos in the DHS booklet show a fairly typical assortment of personal and household goods, including utensils for spinning, weaving, lighting and cooking; furniture; clothing and textiles; and decorative accessories such as paintings, needlework and metalwares (Figure 3). The captions indicate that many of these domestic artifacts came from the homes of Detroit’s nineteenth-century elite. The museum also owned artifacts from the city’s fire department and water system, no doubt made available by the need to upgrade city services to keep pace with population growth. The museum’s location on the 23rd floor made it impossible to display very large artifacts, so even pre-automotive transportation was excluded. Supporters of the DHM were not in any case inclined to collect automobiles.

Like the state museum in Lansing, artifacts were grouped by type. One surmises that the entire collection was on display; artifacts in the photographs are crowded closely together, with a triple row of pictures mounted on the walls.¹⁷ A dozen years later, in 1942, curator Hampton noted that the collection had grown to the point that over half the museum’s artifacts were now in storage. His dream—reflecting his instincts as a collector

¹⁶Krum, “History of the DHS,” *Bulletin*: 3; Krum, *DHS 1921-1952*: 94, 119.

¹⁷*Detroit Historical Society* (1930 booklet).

and one old enough to have witnessed Detroit's transformation—was to be able to exhibit everything.¹⁸

In addition to preserving evidence of the city's past, Hampton endorsed the historical society's goal of reaching a broader audience. The 1930 promotional booklet emphasized the direct appeal of three-dimensional artifacts: "Crude utensils of a primitive past show better than the printed word the life struggles of most early Detroiters." It also mentioned the "hundreds of school children" already visiting the museum, as well as scout troops and adult groups. In 1933 curator Hampton initiated what became an annual series of lecture-demonstrations on special topics (including the predictable spinning and weaving, early lighting and lumbering, but also "auto tiremaking!") which continued for many years. By the end of his tenure in the early 1940s, Hampton had developed a good relationship with Detroit's school system, which enabled him to inform both teachers and students about programs at the museum. He made an effort to bring in other sorts of groups as well: camera clubs, sketching classes and even jury members on their breaks from the courtrooms on a lower floor of the Barlum Tower.¹⁹

Arthur Hampton's efforts to develop educational programming at the DHM also involved him more broadly in the museum profession. He sought information from other museums about their programs and in 1938 visited several museums in New York City with a similar goal. He attended the Michigan-Indiana-Ohio Museums Association meeting

¹⁸The historical society began using storage space at the Detroit Institute of Arts, probably in the early 1930s; by the spring of 1938 that space needed to be enlarged. By 1942, at least half the society's collections were in storage. Krum, *DHS 1921-1952*: 93, 120.

¹⁹*Ibid.*: 60-61, 66, 94, 119-121.

in Ann Arbor in 1939, as well as the American Association of Museums gathering in Detroit the following spring. Staff from the Detroit Institute of Arts organized the latter meeting, but as a speaker and local host, Hampton would have had many opportunities to meet visiting curators and administrators. His own programs were severely constrained by both space and budget, but such professional contacts reinforced the importance of public education as a museum goal.²⁰

During the years in which Arthur Hampton built the collections and programs of the Detroit Historical Museum, it was also being shaped by events in the larger community. Barely eleven months after the museum first opened, the 1929 stock market crash forced the historical society to delay plans for its growth. The society rolled back its dues and curator Hampton took a voluntary reduction in salary. With the aid of the city's patriotic societies, particularly the D.A.R. and the Historic Memorials Society, the bills were paid, but there was no surplus.²¹ Despite hard times, the museum maintained its free admission policy, and in 1937 was rewarded with its first annual appropriation via the city arts commission budget. The initial sum was \$1500, which was increased to \$6500 in 1943.²²

The United States' entry into World War II brought further change to the Motor City. Although its rate of growth was not as large as that in some outlying communities, Detroit's population increase—almost half a million people between 1940 and 1943—was

²⁰*Ibid.*: 100, 107-108.

²¹*Ibid.*: 53, 56, 59-60; Krum, "History of the DHS," *Bulletin*, 3.

²²Krum, *DHS 1921-1952*: 60-62, 84, 132.

still significant.²³ Day and night the city was crowded and bustling. New work relationships, a severe housing shortage and a new assertiveness on the part of African Americans, who believed they deserved the full benefits of the democracy they were working (or fighting) to preserve, all led to increased racial tension in Detroit. Two days of rioting in June 1943 not only damaged the city's image across the country, but raised new questions in the minds of Detroiters of both races about the city they called home.²⁴

If the war brought new problems to Detroit, it also brought new energy and money. By the middle of 1943 the city had surplus funds in its accounts. Over the course of the conflict, Detroiters bought more war bonds per capita than residents of any other city in the country. Overall, World War II confirmed the city as an industrial giant, and enabled its residents to come to terms with that identity. Although the race riot provided clear evidence of Detroit's social problems, its industrial production was unrivaled. Detroiters were proud to be recognized as the "Arsenal of Democracy."²⁵

The early years of the war were complicated for the Detroit Historical Society by lack of space for its museum and curator Arthur Hampton's death in early 1943, but the organization appeared to be well on the way to solving its problems and significantly expanding its programs and exhibits by the war's end. The society's efforts to find new quarters, which had begun in 1930 before the museum was even two years old, finally

²³Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 3rd rev. ed. by George S. May (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 535.

²⁴Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979): 130-169; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1996): 24-29.

²⁵Clive, *State of War*: 51, 97; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*: 18-19; George W. Stark, *City of Destiny* (Detroit: Arnold-Powers Inc., 1943): 457-458.

appeared to be close to success. In 1943 Mrs. Charles Pike, the daughter of former Governor and Secretary of War Russell Alger, offered \$50,000 toward the construction of a hall named for her father that would be part of a larger building for which she expected the society to raise an additional \$200,000. Fund raising began almost immediately, and by January 1946 the DHS had achieved its goal.²⁶

As the success of the building campaign became evident, the historical society's board of trustees began to consider how best to assure the DHM's "continued support and proper maintenance." In the summer of 1945 they proposed that the society offer its collections and the building fund to the city. The museum would then be operated by a four-person historical commission in much the same way that the arts commission oversaw the Detroit Institute of Arts. City voters approved the necessary charter amendment in November, and the first commissioners took office in January 1946.²⁷

Finally, the museum had also moved out of its original home in the Barlum Tower, to a large residence on the campus of Wayne University. The move was evidence of the DHM's new, closer relationship with Detroit's Board of Education, which then operated the university. In addition to its new home, this relationship made the resources of Wayne's history department more readily available to the museum, and encouraged an even stronger focus on a mission of public education.²⁸

The Detroit Historical Museum's founders had seen their city transformed in the course of only two decades. They began by collecting evidence of Detroit's pre-

²⁶Krum, *DHS 1921-1952*: 44-45, 131, 135, 147; Henry D. Brown, "The Detroit Historical Museum: A Museum of Ideas," *MH* 35 (1951): 161.

²⁷*Bulletin* 2:1 (Oct. 1946):1,5; 2:4 (Jan. 1946):1; Brown, "Museum of Ideas," 162.

²⁸*Bulletin* 2:1 (Oct. 1945): 6, 8; Krum, *DHS 1921-1952*: 143.

automotive past, whether family heirloom or cast-off city equipment. They exhibited as much of their collections as they could fit in their Barlum Tower headquarters. The historical society's goal of preserving the city's past existed in tension with their hopes of reaching a broad audience of old Detroit families and newcomers alike. As the permanence of the changes in the city was being confirmed by its World War II production accomplishments, historical society leaders took steps to insure the museum's greater visibility in the postwar community.

Henry Ford's Museum

Henry Ford undertook museum-building in the same fashion that he built cars: on a massive scale and on his own terms. He involved himself deeply for a period of almost two decades in the planning and operation of his complex of museum, village and schools. At his death Ford's imprint was clear on both the museum's unparalleled collections and the unique structure that housed them. How his successors would carry forward his very personal vision of the past remained uncertain.

Ford's Edison Institute Museum, which opened in late June 1933, was never a run-of-the-mill historical museum. Its scale alone set it apart, as did its national scope. Its connection with Ford, who was still popularly lionized as the man who put America on wheels, attracted much public attention, but also distinguished the Edison Institute Museum as one of the few history museums founded by a single individual. Nor was the new museum in Dearborn, for all its focus on technology, quite like the other new museums of science and industry that were appearing in major cities in the 1930s. Unlike such institutions as the Museums of Science and Industry in Chicago and New York or the

Franklin Institute Museum in Philadelphia, Ford's museum focused on industry "more as history than as applied science."²⁹

Henry Ford established his museum as part of the Edison Institute, the ambitious "educational project" that he named for his friend and mentor, Thomas Edison. The museum and adjacent historical village were both intended to supplement the instruction given students in the on-site schools.³⁰ Although Ford considered the school system to be the Institute's core, from the very beginning his museum and village reached many more people. Ford himself was unsure exactly how he arrived at the plan for creating this unusual complex. It seems likely, however, that several experiences in the 1910s and early 1920s helped to shape his ideas for the Edison Institute.³¹

The 1919 trial of Ford's libel suit against the *Chicago Tribune* forced him to think about history. Attorneys for the *Tribune* cross-examined him at length, in order to demonstrate that the auto magnate was indeed "ignorant" as the paper had charged. They had little difficulty in showing that—at least as far as the facts and dates of textbooks were concerned—they had a case. Ford did not know when the Revolutionary War was fought and he identified Benedict Arnold as a writer. He could not explain the Monroe Doctrine. Humiliated at having his lack of book-learning exposed so publicly, Ford declared to his secretary that he would "give the people an idea of real history. I'm going to start a

²⁹Laurence Vail Coleman, *The Museum in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1939): 94.

³⁰*Edison Institute Museum and Village* [Dearborn: Edison Institute, 1933]: 2; Geoffrey C. Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage: the Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979* (Dearborn: Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979): 76, 94.

³¹Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 1.

museum.”³²

Ford had done some collecting, specifically Edison phonograph cylinders and McGuffey readers, prior to the *Chicago Tribune* trial. At about the same time as the trial, the farmhouse where Ford had been born was threatened by a road construction project—one ironic result of his success in making the automobile widely affordable. Ford and some of his relatives decided to move the structure in order to save it, and to restore it in the process. This sent Ford on a quest to find specific artifacts to furnish the house as he remembered its appearance from his boyhood. It soon became known that Henry Ford was looking for old stoves, furniture, kitchen utensils and farm equipment. People began writing him about pieces they thought he might be interested in—or simply sending items along. Ford dealers across the country were mobilized to help find objects that proved hard to come by, like the “Starlight” stove that had once stood in the Ford parlor.³³

Once started, Ford did not stop with furnishings for the family home. His funds were, for all practical purposes, unlimited and he appears to have been something of a pack rat by nature.³⁴ Within a few years he had become the world’s largest collector of Americana, receiving thousands of offers of objects—for sale or as gifts—every year. By 1925, the public was becoming aware that Ford planned to open a museum to house his collections. *Michigan History* began a series of articles on Ford’s collections that year, which spoke of their covering “several acres.” Without hesitation the author used words

³²David L. Lewis, “Henry Ford Meets the Press,” *MH* 53 (1969): 275-291. Ford is quoted on p. 290.

³³Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 1-3.

³⁴Ford R. Bryan, *Henry’s Attic: Some Fascinating Gifts to Henry Ford and His Museum* (Dearborn: Ford Books, 1995): 9.

like “comprehensive,” “exhaustive” and “prodigious” to describe the assemblage. The following year Ford openly admitted, “We want to have something of everything.” A 1929 article called him “the super-collector of Americana.”³⁵

Even Henry Ford’s resources were inadequate to collect “something of everything,” but they sufficed to assemble a collection of unprecedented range and depth. His desire to “reproduce American life as lived” led him to collect household utensils and furnishings that in their day had been quite ordinary. Even the pieces that became the nucleus of a highly regarded decorative arts collection had played functional roles in their original households. Wanting to show “how far and how fast we have come in technical progress,” Ford collected machinery: agricultural machinery, power generating and manufacturing machinery, transportation machinery—including automobiles. His focus was the evolution of technology, and not only those machines that had proved successful; Henry Ford knew as well as anyone that the march of progress included a few detours.³⁶

At the same time that he was assembling his collection, Ford was thinking about how he would present it. From the start he envisioned both a museum arranged to present technological and cultural progress, as well as a village showing how many of those same items were made and used. By 1926 he had selected the site for his institute, but construction did not move into high gear until early 1928, when Ford decided that he would dedicate the complex on October 21, 1929, the fiftieth anniversary of Edison’s

³⁵Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 3; Henry Haigh, “The Ford Collections at Dearborn, *Michigan History* 9 (1925):17-35; Ruth Kedzie Wood, “Henry Ford’s Great Gift,” *The Mentor* 17 (June 1929), reprinted in *The Herald* 8:1 (Winter 1979): 29.

³⁶Roger Van Bolt, interview with author, August 21, 1997; Robert Casey, interview with author, March 25, 1999.

invention of the incandescent lamp.³⁷

The museum that Ford constructed was as sprawling and idiosyncratic as his collections, and reflected, albeit in a different manner, his industrial/mechanical focus. He selected Detroit architect Robert O. Derrick to design the building after Derrick suggested that a replica of Independence Hall would make a suitable facade for the structure. Henry Ford himself had made no attempt to acquaint himself with current museum designs, but Derrick did. His research led him to plan a two story structure with numerous courtyards. Storage and artifact preparation were to be housed in the museum's basement. Derrick showed a model to Ford, who immediately recognized features he had learned to avoid in his factories. Derrick later recalled that the auto magnate told him, "I have to see everybody. . . . You have to do the whole thing over again and put it on one floor with no balconies and no basements."³⁸

Derrick did as he was told. His final design maintained the two story facade necessary to replicate Independence Hall, flanked by copies of Philadelphia's Congress Hall and Old City Hall, but the main exhibit space became a vast, eight-acre pavilion supported by concrete columns and flooded with natural light entering through rows of monitors above the steel roof. The similarities between this portion of the structure and a typical Ford factory are hard to miss. Historian and former HFM curator Larry Lankton states succinctly: "You enter Independence Hall and end up in a ca. 1929 Ford factory building, only slightly disguised as a museum." He extends the comparison by noting that the biggest difference between the museum interior and that of the nearby Ford engine and

³⁷Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 21-23, 26.

³⁸Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 50.

electrical engineering building is that “while one has a concrete floor, the other has a parquet floor of teak.”³⁹

The decision to open the museum’s doors to the public in 1933 was strictly a response to demand. Ever since the national radio broadcast of the Edison Institute’s October 1929 dedication, the number of curious passers by and groups requesting tours had increased steadily. With nearly 1,000 requests per day by the spring of 1933, good public relations dictated that visitors be admitted, despite the fact that neither village nor museum was considered “complete.” About a week after the village gates opened on June 22, the museum received its first visitors, who paid \$.25 per adult and .10 per child for admission.⁴⁰

The Edison Institute embodied two of Henry Ford’s key beliefs about education, learning by doing and using the past as a foundation for progress. He himself had always learned by trying things out—taking mechanical devices apart and reassembling them, building and testing cars until they satisfied him. Believing that “a piece of machinery, or anything that is made is like a book, if you can read it,” Ford wanted to offer similar opportunities for hands-on learning (which he considered far superior to textbook instruction) to the students in his schools.⁴¹ Thorough grounding in existing technologies, Ford believed, was the best preparation they could have for making the kinds of advances

³⁹Larry Lankton, “Something Old, Something New: The Reexhibition of the Henry Ford Museum’s Hall of Technology,” *Technology and Culture* 21(Oct. 1980):601.

⁴⁰William A. Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1938): 147; Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 76, 89, 94.

⁴¹Quoted in Henry Ford Museum Staff, *Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972): 6. For Ford’s educational philosophy, see Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village*: Chapters 2-4.

that Edison and he had made in their day. "The farther you look back, the farther ahead you can look," was how he phrased it.⁴² By opening his museum to the public, he was further broadening that opportunity. At the same time Ford recognized how greatly the world had changed since his own boyhood, and believed that twentieth century youth needed to understand the past out of which the motorized, urbanized present had come. In an interview concerning his project in 1928, he said, "Improvements have been coming so quickly that the past is being lost to the rising generation, and I think it can be preserved only by putting it in a form where it may be seen and felt."⁴³

Much has been written about Henry Ford's fascination with the American past. His interest in old dance forms, his collecting of thousands of antiques, the time and money he invested in restoring old buildings are seemingly incongruous activities for the man described in a 1937 article as having done "more than any man, living or dead, to destroy the old America and set up the new."⁴⁴ Certainly some of Ford's personal pleasure in his historical activities can be attributed to nostalgia for his youth. Looking at the Edison Institute project in its entirety, however, and particularly the emphasis he placed on the institute's schools, it is clear that he also wanted to connect the past to both the present and the future. Ford himself spoke to this issue not long after his museum and village

⁴²Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 78, 97-98. Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge: 1915-1933* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957): 504. Ford quoted in Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village*: 14. See also *Looking Forward Through the Past*, a Greenfield Village guide booklet first printed in the 1930s, that was used into the 1950s (Copies in E.I. 16, Box 4, Research Center, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (HFM/GV)).

⁴³Quoted in Robert G. Wheeler, "Something of Everything," *The Herald* 8:3(Summer 1979) 46

⁴⁴Bruce Bliven, "Mr. Ford Collects," *New Republic* 90 (April 28, 1937): 353.

opened to the public:

Many people seem to believe that Greenfield Village and the Edison Institute Museum at Dearborn are just a kind of antiquarian hobby of mine. I do not deny that they have given me a great deal of interest and pleasure. But the project is vastly more than a hobby. . . . One purpose is to remind the public who visit it—and sometimes there are thousands a day—of how far and how fast we have come in technical progress in the last century or so. If we have come so far and so fast, is it likely that we shall stop now?⁴⁵

When Henry Ford told his architect that there were to be “no basements,” he was saying that he wanted to be able to see all his artifacts, as well as his employees, from one spot. He did not want objects hidden away in storage, where they could not be compared with others or read “like a book.” Thus his exhibit plan was simple: objects in each category were lined up in close formation—usually without any labels—in chronological order. Larry Lankton finds another link to Ford’s factory practices in this “congestion of artifacts” in the museum. Descriptions of Ford factories always remarked on the tight spacing of the machinery, Lankton observes and “the same condition held at Ford’s museum. He packed the objects in, and he packed them only by type, using no historical themes or story lines” (Figure 4).⁴⁶

The eight-acre main exhibition hall of the Edison Institute Museum in fact had three major divisions: Agriculture, which included textiles and household arts; Manufacturing, encompassing power generating machinery and electricity as well as production machinery; and Transportation. Automobiles, of course, were part of the transportation collection. Although today the automotive collection is acknowledged as

⁴⁵Quoted in Fred Black, “The Edison Institute, A Museum in the Making,” address to the American Association of Museums, Philadelphia, 1938: 2. Typescript in Research Center, HFM/GV.

⁴⁶Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 601.

one of the outstanding features of Ford's museum, it received far less attention in the early days of the Edison Institute, when many visitors could remember owning or riding in similar models. The earliest visitors' guides simply place "gasoline, steam and electric automobiles" in an enumeration of transportation artifacts ranging from "replicas of chariots found in ancient tombs" to airplanes. Scant mention indeed when even the teakwood floor rated a full paragraph of its own!⁴⁷

The Edison Institute Museum remained visibly unfinished when it was opened to the public. Installation of artifacts and the laying of the teak floor continued for several years, the latter task not completed until 1938. The guidebook given to each visitor sought to make the best of the situation, assuring visitors that not only were they getting a preview of the completed exhibits, but a rare chance to look behind the scenes. "This is believed to be the first time the public has been offered an opportunity of seeing the amount and variety of labor required in cataloguing and arranging a museum." All visitors were guided through the museum by students from the Henry Ford Trade School or area high schools.⁴⁸

Finished or not, people wanted to see Henry Ford's museum and village. What visitors got for their twenty-five-cent admission was perceived as a good value. By 1938—only its fifth year of operation—the complex in Dearborn was drawing a half million visitors annually.⁴⁹ Most visitors to the museum were simply overwhelmed by the size of

⁴⁷*Edison Institute Museum and Village* [Dearborn: Edison Institute, 1933?]: 25-26.

⁴⁸*Edison Institute Museum and Village*: 3. Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 76-77, 94.

⁴⁹Reynold M. Wik, *Henry Ford and Grass-roots America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973): 207.

the space and the quantity of material on exhibit. Reactions ranged from the understated, “the objects are so numerous that it is difficult to form any accurate mental picture of the whole,” to the hyperbolic, “Only part of the museum is open, but even so, the visitor tramps such incredible distances that he yearns for roller skates or better yet, one of Mr. Ford’s own convertible cabriolets with the top down.”⁵⁰

Henry Ford did not simply fund the Edison Institute; he was closely involved in its early operation. From the mid-1920s until the early 1940s, he was actively engaged in collecting and arranging objects in a museum and village constructed under his personal direction, and in devising programs that enabled students to interact with the artifacts and to learn from them. The legacy of Ford’s personal involvement in the ensuing decades has been a collection that continues to bear the stamp of his personality. The agricultural collection is dominated by equipment used in the type of farming Ford knew best, Midwestern grain growing. His pacifism is reflected in the absence of military artifacts. Although Ford intended the complex at Dearborn to honor Edison, it is highly appropriate that the museum today carries its founder’s name.⁵¹

Henry Ford’s automotive collection is a good example of his personal involvement in collecting for his museum. Ford cars understandably constituted a major category within his collection, but they were by no means the only ones exhibited. Ford was interested in representing the progressive development of the American automobile, just as he showed the development of reapers or steam engines, and that meant collecting broadly. He was

⁵⁰J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton, “The Ford Museum,” *American Historical Review* 36(1931): 774; Bliven, “Mr. Ford Collects”: 352.

⁵¹Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: Chapters 2 and 4; Casey interview.

not particularly interested in big, fancy cars, but rather in the trend represented by his company's automobiles—the development of the car as a mass transportation vehicle. He acquired a few European cars, examples of some of the earliest practical work in the field, as well as American cars of all makes that demonstrated important technological developments. He collected electric- and steam-powered vehicles, both of which at the time appeared to have played out their possibilities, along with a few outright failures. The result was a collection that, in the words of its current curator, is “a really good cross-section of the development of the American automobile.”⁵²

Just as Ford ignored conventional wisdom when planning his museum building, so he remained oblivious to museum theory and operational standards in organizing and running his institution. And in fact his museum fell short of the standards of the day in several areas. The shortcomings of Ford and his early staff as record-keepers “will always plague the museum's curatorial staff” in the words of former curator Lankton.⁵³ Nor would the lack of labeling in the Edison Institute museum have passed muster with museum authorities. The museum practice manuals of the day took for granted the need for written explanations of the objects on display.⁵⁴ Ford assumed that his visitors would do as he did, and read the artifacts.

⁵²Casey interview. See also Leslie R. Henry, *The Transportation Collection* (Dearborn: GV & HFM, 1972) and Bryan, *Henry's Attic*.

⁵³Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 599. For the record-keeping standards of the day, see Arthur C. Parker, *A Manual for History Museums*, New York State Historical Association Series, ed. Dixon Ryan Fox, no. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935): 83-89; and Laurence Vail Coleman, *Manual for Small Museums* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927): 174-180.

⁵⁴Parker, *History Museums*: 77-81; Coleman, *Small Museums*: 223-231; Coleman, *Museum in America*: 273-277.

By the 1920s, the dictum stated flatly by Coleman, “A museum should not have all of its material on exhibition,” was an accepted museum principle.⁵⁵ Equally accepted was the “dual arrangement” plan, which consisted of a series of overview exhibits designed for the general public, with collections of greater depth made available, either in the public space or upon request, to those who wished to study objects in greater detail.⁵⁶ Ford’s requirement that his museum have no storage space clearly violated the principle of not showing everything. On the other hand, one could think of his museum as an oversized study collection, complementing what was always the more popular presentation in the village. There is no evidence, however, that Ford thought of his museum exhibits in these terms.

More surprising than Ford’s dismissal of standard practices may be the areas in which, without necessarily being aware of it, he agreed with museum authorities of his day.⁵⁷ The emphasis he placed on the educational value of his museum, including his recognition that he offered something different from the curriculum of most schools, certainly matched that of leaders in the museum field. The fact that the Edison Institute welcomed visitors seven days a week (until World War II) was in keeping with the spirit of making the museum’s resources readily available to the public. Laurence Vail Coleman in fact had proposed that the ideal would be museums that were free to the public and

⁵⁵Coleman, *Small Museums*: 127.

⁵⁶Coleman, *Museum in America*: 249-256.

⁵⁷How much awareness Ford himself had of contemporary museum practices is unclear. His son Edsel and museum employee Fred Black spoke to AAM meetings about Ford’s museums, but whether they attended other sessions or discussed them with Ford himself is not known. (Black’s participation is documented in n.44 above. Edsel Ford’s speech is quoted in William Clay Ford, “Tomorrow’s Edison Institute,” *The Herald* 8:4 (Fall 1979): 2.)

open until 10 PM every night!⁵⁸

The inclusion of automobiles (not to mention tractors, planes and electric lighting) in his museum placed Henry Ford in the forefront of museum practice in considering the present a part of history. In the 1920s, Coleman had noted that “current history seldom finds a place in the museum.” He urged historical museums to “watch for changing times,” citing the recent, Prohibition-induced disappearance of the saloon as an example. “Such facts should be noted and material with data should be added to museum collections before it is too late.” The teetotaling Ford might not have thought that particular piece of history worth saving, but would certainly have agreed with Coleman’s statement that “Industry is a part of contemporary culture, which, though sometimes overlooked, is intimately related to the various primitive occupations commonly represented in museums of history. The spinning wheel is grandfather to the spinning frame, the candle to the incandescent lamp.”⁵⁹ Indeed, a 1930s guide book to Greenfield Village expressed the same sentiment: “The smithy with its bellows, forge, and anvil, is one of the lineal ancestors of the great automobile plants of today.”⁶⁰

Where Ford was most in step, not only with museum practitioners of his day, but with many academic historians as well, was in his rejection of narrow definitions of history. “History doesn’t mean dates and wars and textbooks to me,” Ford said at one point, aligning himself very closely with the AAM’s Coleman, who had written “History

⁵⁸Coleman, *Small Museums*: 243-44.

⁵⁹Coleman, *Small Museums*: 148-149.

⁶⁰*Looking Forward Through the Past*: unpagged.

deals with the whole of man's career—not just with events in war or politics.”⁶¹ It might have surprised him to know that he was very much in step with the “culture history” movement, which advocated presentation of the “tools and activities of the average man and woman.”⁶² Their efforts paralleled the work of academic historians such as Charles Beard, Arthur Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox, who moved beyond the explicitly political to consider economic and social factors in their work.

By the early 1940s, Henry Ford's energy and stamina began to diminish as he neared the age of eighty. The entry of the United States into World War II, followed by the death of his son Edsel in 1943, required that Ford give more attention to his business and effectively spelled the end of his collecting. He was weakened by a stroke in 1945, and died two years later. Ford's stroke began a period of transition, during which his wife Clara and the museum staff tried to maintain operations as they believed Ford would have wanted. With Clara's death in 1950, a new era began. Although other Ford family members remained involved in the governance of the Edison Institute, none was prepared to direct its operations as its founder had.⁶³

Although the loss of Henry Ford's personal leadership had been inevitable, the small staff of the museum was ill prepared to operate without him. Ford had made no explicit provisions for financing or administration of the Edison Institute. The entire project had been so thoroughly the expression of its founder's personal interests and

⁶¹Quoted in Black, “The Edison Institute”: 1. Coleman, *Small Museums*: 147; *Museum in America*: 59.

⁶²Parker, *History Museums*: 62.

⁶³Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 78, 126-127.

philosophy of education that the leadership vacuum was enormous.⁶⁴

Henry Ford set out to create a museum that would present what he thought was important about the country's past, its technologies and its daily life. His wealth enabled him to assemble a vast collection and house it in the manner he found most effective. It was clear that Henry Ford's museum would never be quite the same without him.

A Long Time Coming: Flint's Alfred P. Sloan Museum

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Michigan Pioneer Society was beginning to preserve the stories and artifacts of the statehood era, Flint was building its reputation as a center of carriage and wagon making. Production of horse-drawn transport earned it the nickname Vehicle City even before native son Billy Durant created General Motors in 1908. By the late 1920s, when the Detroit Historical Society and Henry Ford were gathering the artifacts of a pre-automotive world, Flint had firmly hitched its star to that of GM and was second only to Detroit in auto production.⁶⁵ Keeping up with the present seemed far more important than looking back at the past in a city that had only recently overcome a desperate housing shortage and was now constructing stores, schools and community gathering places to keep pace with its population growth. Nor did remembering the past seem to have much value in the 1930s when depression and labor strife displaced prosperity.⁶⁶

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 123-124. The school system had qualified administrative leadership, but faced the same financial uncertainty as the museum and Greenfield Village.

⁶⁵*Progressive Flint* (Flint: [Flint Chamber of Commerce], 1929): 13.

⁶⁶Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987): XX; Lawrence R. Gustin, ed., *Picture History of Flint* (Flint: *The Flint Journal*, 1976):

Even after World War II, Flint focused its attention on the present and future. Both labor and management emerged from the war anticipating better times than ever when General Motors got back to the business of selling cars. And, a few bumps in the road notwithstanding, they were not disappointed. The city celebrated production of GM's 50 millionth car—a Chevrolet—in 1954, the same year it was named an All-American City by *Look* magazine. The following year the city marked its centennial and Buick set an all-time sales record. Yet another celebration and parade in 1958 honored the fiftieth anniversary of General Motors. The city clearly felt confident of its future under the wing of the world's largest automaker, despite the cyclical nature of the industry, which somewhat ironically suffered one of its worst postwar years in 1958.⁶⁷

As had been true since 1908, Flint's ties to GM in the 1950s were more than economic. Not only had the corporation been founded there, but many of its early leaders, whether Flint natives or transplants, felt a strong attachment to the city. Charles Stewart Mott, who brought his Weston-Mott Axle Company to Flint in 1905, and J. Dallas Dort, Billy Durant's partner in the carriage business, led the first generation of automotive entrepreneurs in both personal and financial contributions to the city. A second generation of General Motors executives also included several men who called Flint home. One of these, Harlow Curtice, began a five-year tenure as GM's president and chief executive officer in 1953. As he had throughout his career, Curtice remained a Flint resident, and

169-173; Alice Lethbridge, *Through the Years in Genesee: An Illustrated History*, "Partners in Progress by Connie McAlindon (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1985): 61-65. Flint had a considerably briefer past to remember than did Detroit. The latter community was over a century old when trader Jacob Smith built his cabin on the banks of the Flint River, and the city of Flint was not incorporated until 1855.

⁶⁷Lethbridge, *Through the Years*: 97.

used his influence to direct corporate contributions to the city.⁶⁸

The overall prosperity of the post-war period allowed Flint's civic leaders to turn their attention to providing the amenities that they believed went along with being a major player in one of America's most important industries. In 1954 a group of local notables, led by *Flint Journal* editor Michael Gorman, proposed a College and Cultural Center for Flint. Providing homes for existing cultural organizations in a unified campus-like setting, the center would also provide the opportunity to complete Flint's cultural landscape with new institutions. In addition, the development would expand the facilities of the city's junior college (later renamed Mott Community College). Finally, this eminently optimistic group planned that the capstone of the entire project would be a branch of the University of Michigan, a dream that Gorman had pursued for almost ten years.⁶⁹ The group, which included a number of General Motors officials, incorporated as the Committee of Sponsors for the Flint College and Cultural Development (CCD), offering membership to anyone pledging \$25,000 or more to the project. The Sponsors' initial goal, to be raised as a prelude to the city's 1955 centennial, was \$12 million.⁷⁰

Only three months after the Committee of Sponsors was organized, it announced plans to include a museum of transportation in the Cultural Center. It was to be named for Alfred P. Sloan, then chairman of General Motors' board. The Committee envisioned in this museum "typical buggies, wagons and carts that were made in Flint; representative

⁶⁸Gustin, ed., *Pictorial History*: 238.

⁶⁹Clarence H. Young and William A. Quinn, *Foundation for Living: The Story of Charles Stewart Mott and Flint* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963): 201, 206-207; Robert G. Schafer, *Michael A. Gorman, Flint's Super Booster* (Flint: University of Michigan-Flint Archives, 1982):18-23.

⁷⁰Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 201.

models of General Motors cars showing the progress in this field; examples of war materiel produced here for two world wars; 'living' exhibits such as are shown in General Motoramas and other features.”⁷¹

In choosing to name the museum after Sloan, the Committee of Sponsors revealed the degree to which Flint's elite identified with GM. Alfred P. Sloan Jr. led General Motors as president or chairman of the board from 1923 until 1956. He was credited with introducing annual model changes designed to build demand and developing the management system that carried General Motors to automotive dominance in the 1950s. He had no connections with Flint, however, other than those that came with his corporate roles. In fact, since Flint was where GM had been forced to recognize the United Auto Workers, Sloan had little reason to feel any particular fondness for the city. He did, however, support the project with a quarter million dollar gift to the Committee of Sponsors.⁷²

In retrospect, it might have been more appropriate to name the institution after GM's exuberant founder, Billy Durant. Grandson of Flint lumberman and Michigan governor Henry Crapo, he was half of the Durant-Dort carriage-making partnership that helped make Flint the Vehicle City. Prior to creating General Motors, he had been involved in developing Buick as a successful auto company and he built a factory in the city for his later Durant Motors enterprise as well. Unfortunately, Durant also lost control

⁷¹Quoted in *College and Cultural Development Bulletin* 1:1 (Sept. 1963): 5. A couple of previous attempts to establish a historical museum in Flint had been crowded out by the city's rapid growth. (Mimeo document, apparently part of "Ten Year Report," Advisory Committee Minutes, Perry Archive.)

⁷²Van Bolt interview; "Sloan Auto Panorama Doors Open," *The Flint Journal*, November 2, 1966: 13.

of General Motors not once, but twice, and Durant Motors failed early in the depression. He was nearly penniless at his death in 1947.⁷³ To Flint leaders who had known him only as an older man, Durant probably was something of an embarrassment; Alfred P. Sloan, the model of corporate success, seemed a far more appropriate institutional namesake in the 1950s.

After the initial fanfare, other Cultural Center projects took precedence over the transportation museum. Once the University of Michigan branch opened in 1956, the Committee of Sponsors took bids for construction of the DeWaters Art Center, the Longway Planetarium and the Bower Theatre, all named for men who had long and successful careers with General Motors in Flint.⁷⁴ Raising its funding goal to \$20 million, the Committee also began laying organizational groundwork for the museum. It named a sub-committee to develop its museum plans, and hired as consultant to that body, Roger H. Van Bolt, who most recently had been Director of Research and Information at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.

Van Bolt had developed an interest in local history while earning a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago. After two years at the Illinois State Historical Library, Van Bolt moved to the Ford Museum in 1952, one of the first professional historians on its staff. Although he was hired in Flint with the understanding he would eventually have a major staff role, his work as consultant for the museum was initially only part time. He collected artifacts and promoted the museum, while also chairing the Social Science

⁷³Gustin, ed., *Pictorial History*: 87, 137, 142, 153, 159-60, 179, 187, 214.

⁷⁴Connie McAlindon, "Partners in Progress," in Lethbridge, *Through the Years*: 133.

Department at Flint Junior College.⁷⁵

It was not until 1963, however, that ground was finally broken for the museum. Although the "Sloan Panorama of Transportation" received most of the publicity, the Committee of Sponsors had long planned to combine that element with exhibits devoted to a more general overview of local history. When Roger Van Bolt first came to talk about joining the project in the mid-1950s, the Sponsors planned at least two museum buildings: one a museum of transportation named for Sloan, the other a museum of history. Van Bolt immediately suggested that it made both administrative and fiscal sense to connect the two structures with a common service core. By the time that actual plans were drawn, they had become a single structure.⁷⁶ Shortly after construction began, Van Bolt, who by now had been with the project for nine years, was named curator of the museum.⁷⁷

On November 1, 1966, the museum was dedicated as the Alfred P. Sloan Jr. Panorama of Transportation. The festivities emphasized Flint's ties to General Motors. About 200 invited guests witnessed an afternoon ceremony in which GM President James M. Roche presented the museum with a portrait of Sloan. Calling Flint a city "where the future has always been more important than the past," Roche stated that Alfred Sloan himself would want the museum to stimulate "new thought and new ideas" as well as recording the city's past. *The Flint Journal* estimated that 1500 citizens attended the public opening that evening.

Press coverage of the museum's opening reinforced accepted notions of what was

⁷⁵Van Bolt interview; *CCD Bulletin*, 3:1 (April 65): 3.

⁷⁶Van Bolt interview; Cultural Center plan exhibited in *Flint and the American Dream*.

⁷⁷"Ten Year Report"; *CCD Bulletin* 3:1 (April 1965): 3.

important in Flint. The next day's *Flint Journal* featured a front-page photo of Roche unveiling the painting of Sloan. The photo accompanied an extensive report of the GM President's speech to the Flint Industrial Executives' Club the previous evening. The city's new museum was relegated to the second section, where a brief article described the previous day's events. Several photos accompanied the story, but showed very little of the museum. Instead they focused on officials of GM, the College and Cultural Development and the Board of Education, which was to operate the new facility on behalf of the CCD.⁷⁸

The Sloan Museum was designed by the Detroit firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls to be built in three stages over a period of years. For a community that prided itself on being forward-looking and doing things right, it was a surprisingly minimal facility and not particularly functional. When plans for the museum were drawn, the Committee of Sponsors had decided to devote the entire structure to exhibits. A building at the edge of the Cultural Center campus was remodeled in 1965 for offices and collections storage, no doubt saving money, but also compromising the ability of the staff to do any work on the collections while the museum was open. Unlike the DeWaters Art Center, Sloan Museum had no classrooms, no storage space and only one tiny office behind the sales desk.

The first segment of the building was designed in a rectilinear u-shape, with a floor plan comprised of several large rectangular blocks offset from one another (Figure 5). This suited the rather severe International style facade, but created an interior path with a number of ninety-degree turns. Maneuvering large objects—like automobiles—through these jogs when the galleries were empty was not too difficult, but once cases and other large

⁷⁸“Sloan Doors Open,” *The Flint Journal*, November 2, 1966: 1, 13. All of the individuals pictured are white males.

exhibit elements were in place, moving a car became a complex, time-consuming task requiring several people. The floors of the new museum were of serviceable asphalt tile, and the walls were painted cinder block. In keeping with what was by then standard museum practice, the Sloan's design excluded most natural light. Blocks of overhead fluorescent fixtures provided blandly uniform illumination. These features may reflect, albeit not consciously, the experience as well as the tastes of the committee that oversaw the museum's construction. If Henry Ford built a museum modeled on a typical factory, Flint's GM executives created one that could have been mistaken for a General Motors office building.

Those overseeing the Sloan Museum's beginnings took a minimalist approach to staffing as well as building construction. The museum opened with a staff of two: Roger Van Bolt and a custodian/handyman. Van Bolt served as administrator, educator and chief tour guide as well as curator.⁷⁹ It quickly became clear, however, that more staff was needed. Van Bolt hired first a curator of collections and next an automobile specialist. The latter position was filled by James Johnson, a Flint native with an interest in old cars and the technical skills to oversee restoration and care of the automotive collection. When the museum doubled its size with the addition of a second U-shaped segment in 1972, a position was created to coordinate the section known as the Flint Institute of Health.⁸⁰ The museum still lacked a staff person with overall responsibility for exhibits, however.

In coming to Flint, Roger Van Bolt had left the vast collections of the Henry Ford

⁷⁹Van Bolt interview.

⁸⁰Van Bolt interview; Scott Peters, interview with author, January 25, 1999. Roger Van Bolt took the title of Director when Merle Perry was hired.

Museum for an institution that owned absolutely nothing. It was essential that he begin by building a collection for the new museum. Rather than focusing only on intrinsic quality or historical significance in his quest for artifacts, Van Bolt coupled his collecting efforts with promotion of the new institution. Although he acquired highly significant artifacts like the only surviving example of the first Flint-manufactured automobile, he also accepted items of dubious value to the museum, like a French-built 1914 Peugeot with no connection at all to Flint.⁸¹

The automotive collection received special attention from the first, although the size and cost of antique autos limited the number of potential donors. Van Bolt recognized that he was collecting on behalf of a public institution, and that “in my role I really can’t indulge my personal likes and dislikes—or let my own nostalgic feelings creep in.” Rather, “I should consider each vehicle as an historical fact” that could contribute to the carrying out of the museum’s responsibilities as an educational institution.⁸² He felt he should look first at what a particular auto represented in the history of Flint and General Motors, not whether it was costly or rare. Since most of the auto collections on public display at the time were in fact the product of personal collecting, which emphasized style and scarcity, others in the antique auto field did not always understand him. He recalls giving a talk to the Society of Automotive Historians in which he tried to explain his point of view. In his words, “I don’t think I was accepted too well.”⁸³

⁸¹Van Bolt interview; “Museum Owned Autos and Motorcycles,” [Spring 1982], list in Perry Archive, Sloan Museum. The Peugeot was part of a donation that included several early Buicks, which probably accounts for its being accepted.

⁸²Roger Van Bolt to Larry [Gustin], 1977. Copy in the author’s possession.

⁸³Van Bolt interview.

The automotive collection also became the focus of another of Van Bolt's efforts to promote the museum within the community. In April 1965 he assembled a group of "active men" from the community to constitute an advisory committee. The Board of Education made the body official with a resolution stating that the committee's job would be "to assist in the acquisition and development of museum collections" and "to provide a basis for community support of the museum program."⁸⁴ It was, however, strictly advisory; the school district continued to exercise both fiscal and policy-making authority. The Advisory Committee members who were most active all had some interest in automotive history; some were collectors themselves. They assisted Van Bolt in seeking out vehicles for the collection, and at times arranged funding for a purchase when a car could not be acquired through donation. In 1973 they developed, with input from staff, a list of ten most wanted cars. The same year, the committee also held the first Sloan Summer Fair, an antique auto show whose purpose was to raise money for acquisition and restoration of automobiles.⁸⁵

Even after the Sloan Museum had opened to the public, Roger Van Bolt placed less emphasis on exhibits than on collecting. The exhibits installed in the Sloan Museum during his tenure did little to warm or humanize the austere structure. Although the title of the inaugural exhibit, *General Motors' Old Home Town*, combined local history with the auto industry, it consisted primarily of cars arranged in the gallery, accompanied by a few cases containing photos and small artifacts. Over the next several years, the development

⁸⁴Van Bolt interview; Board of Education resolution, April 28, 1965, Advisory Committee Minutes, Perry Archive.

⁸⁵Sloan Museum Advisory Committee Minutes, January 21, 1975, February 24, 1973, May 22, 1973.

of the exhibits was measured in terms of the number of cars added. Much of the museum's original space was given over to automobiles lined up in used car lot fashion. Labeling was limited to a terse listing of make, model, year and sometimes the name and location of the maker.⁸⁶ The automotive hobbyists who helped to care for and interpret the collection often provided more detail than the casual visitor really wanted.

The Motorama-style exhibits envisioned early in the museum planning process never materialized. These traveling auto shows of the 1950s, in which General Motors presented cars of the future as well as those currently in production, were the most sophisticated automotive exhibitions of their day, and it is not surprising that they were taken as a model. Featuring turntables, lift devices and operating cutaways of motors and transmissions, and punctuated by elaborately choreographed song and dance shows, Motoramas were anything but static. They were also extremely expensive to produce and only traveled to very large cities—six cities was the longest itinerary for any show. The possibility of the Sloan Museum being able to finance anything remotely similar was slim indeed. In fact, by the time the museum was actually open to the public, Motorama was a thing of the past, done in by both its cost and the much wider reach of television advertising.⁸⁷

A document that appears to date from the late 1960s indicates that some thought was given to developing exhibits that were more interpretive in nature than those installed in the museum. It lists tentative exhibit themes in the areas of transportation history and

⁸⁶“Sloan Doors Open,” *The Flint Journal* November 2, 1966: 13; Sloan Museum photo files, Perry Archive.

⁸⁷Bruce Berghoff, *The GM Motorama Dream Cars of the Fifties* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1995) details the extravagance of the Motoramas.

cultural history, the latter covering what most historians today would call social history. Together, the two outlines provide a reasonably comprehensive overview of local history; the areas of overlap between them indicate that the author (presumably Roger Van Bolt) understood that the two were part of a larger whole. The role of the transportation industry in Flint's history is implied in cultural history topics like "The Growth of a City" and "Flint landmarks—yesterday and today." Social history is explicitly included in the transportation topics "The Automobile and the Changing Face of Flint" and "The Automobile and Its Social Influence."⁸⁸ These exhibit plans were apparently never developed beyond the initial outline stage, however.

When Roger Van Bolt retired in 1978, he knew that development of Sloan's exhibits was "the next big step," but consciously left that for his successor.⁸⁹ That he never seriously attempted to develop the Sloan's exhibits is probably at least partially a result of his traditional academic training, with its emphasis on research and writing. Van Bolt himself had no training in presenting history visually or three-dimensionally and never felt he had the money to hire someone who did. His reluctance to deal with the issue, however, meant that by the mid-1970s, the Sloan simply did not meet current exhibition standards in either content or design.

By the time of Van Bolt's retirement, Flint was experiencing wrenching economic and social changes. General Motors' size had become a handicap as it struggled to meet competition from foreign auto companies. There were fewer jobs and more frequent

⁸⁸"Sloan Panorama of Transportation and Flint Historical Museum, Proposed Working Guide for Collecting," Advisory Committee Minutes, Perry Archive.

⁸⁹ Van Bolt interview.

layoffs. Flint's dependence on GM was now less an asset than a liability. The executive corps no longer included as many Flint natives as it once had, and was more concerned with maintaining career momentum in a time of transition than with civic responsibility.⁹⁰

At the same time, the city's population began to decline. Some of those who left sought greater job security elsewhere; others moved to the suburbs, especially after an open housing ordinance passed by a razor-thin margin—only 38 votes—in 1968. Almost all who left were white. African Americans, who experienced their greatest increase in numbers in the 1950s, constituted an ever increasing percentage of Flint's population simply by staying put. All of the urban problems typically associated with these phenomena beset the city. Power structures in the city did open up as a part of the continuing change, but dealing with urgent social needs took priority over amenities like the Cultural Center. Despite the assertions of those who established it, many in the city who were not white and/or middle class felt unwelcome in Cultural Center institutions. Even the generally boosterish *Picture History of Flint* labeled a contemporary view of downtown, "Flint in 1977—a city seeking revitalization."⁹¹

The Sloan Museum was probably less prepared to weather difficult times than other institutions in the Flint Cultural Center. It had volunteers who would help buy cars and restore them, but no major benefactor for the institution as a whole. With the death of Alfred P. Sloan in 1966, the museum had lost its biggest potential patron. He had

⁹⁰Van Bolt interview; Phillip Kwiatkowski, interview with author, November 20-21, 1997.

⁹¹Van Bolt interview; Stephen Laux, interview with author, October 16, 1997; Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*: 276; Gustin, ed., *Picture History*: 297. See also Rhonda Sanders, *Bronze Pillars: An Oral History of African-Americans in Flint* (Flint: *The Flint Journal* & Alfred P. Sloan Museum, 1995): 22-26, 44-47, 118-124.

apparently made verbal promises of additional funding for his namesake institution, but died before anything definite was arranged.⁹² Nor could the Sloan Museum offer the glamor or status associated with longer established institutions like the Institute of Arts or the Flint Symphony, with whom it competed for smaller contributors and volunteers. Although its status within the structures of both the Cultural Center and the school district appeared to insure its continuity, the Sloan Museum was essential to neither. Consequently the museum found itself free from interference, but also without much active support from either agency.⁹³

In the 1950s, Flint's civic leaders proposed a museum that would celebrate the city's ties to General Motors. By the time the Sloan Museum opened in 1966, it was clear that it would not have the resources at its disposal to be the glamorous "Panorama of Transportation" that they had envisioned. Since the museum was also expected to encompass other sorts of exhibits, its purpose was interpreted differently by different people. Roger Van Bolt attempted to clarify its mission, focusing mainly on history and health, but he failed to take the museum's exhibits much beyond the same sort of collections array with which the three older museums had started.

Each of these four museums found itself on a particular course that was related to the way in which their founders created links to the past. The purpose of the Michigan

⁹²Van Bolt interview; Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*: 214-15.

⁹³Van Bolt interview.

Historical Museum and the Detroit Historical Museum was primarily to remember a particular time in the past, although their founders also hoped to use that past to educate young people and newcomers to state and city about their civic rights and responsibilities. Flint's leading citizens were more interested in using the past to celebrate the present than in remembering all its details. Henry Ford wanted both to remember and make use of the past in equal measure. In addition to his own personal interest in remembering the past, he believed that young people needed knowledge of what had gone before as a basis for the future they would create. He wanted to remember the technology, not the individual users of the objects.

The founders began defining their institutions by collecting specific kinds of artifacts. Those who were primarily interested in remembering also collected information about who used an object, as well as where and when they did so. Those museum founders with a strong interest in using the past were less concerned about the history of the items they assembled. If a car was Flint-made and did not duplicate one the museum already owned, details of its use were of secondary importance to Sloan staff. With the exception of a relatively small number of objects associated with famous Americans, Henry Ford cared only to know what he could learn about the maker of an artifact by studying how the machine or tool worked. Just as they understood that museums were inherently about artifacts, the founders and/or early staff at each institution believed that objects were integral to exhibits as well. The first exhibitions at all four museums were arrangements of their collections. The artifacts and their labels—or the lack thereof—told visitors what each museum was about: these things and this information from this place and time. Only two institutions owned any automobiles, but all four made statements

about them. In Detroit and Lansing, the absence of cars implied that they were part of the present day, a time separate from the past remembered by these museums. The array of autos in Henry Ford's museum not only told visitors that the automobile was, as Ford believed, the culmination of progress in land transportation, but reminded them that his museum enterprise was built on wealth derived from the auto. Flint-built General Motors cars were unmistakably the most important artifacts displayed at the Sloan Museum, reinforcing the corporation's dominant role in the city's twentieth century history.

In addition to collections and exhibits, museum founders provided other resources, including buildings, staff, trustees and financial support. They also created connections to potential resources through a famous name, connections with private organizations whose members were potential supporters or public entities that agreed to maintain the institution in some fashion. These resources and possibilities all created certain expectations for the museum, both within its staff and among the public. Expectations for Henry Ford's museum have always been on a scale well beyond what has been practical—or even conceivable—at the other museums.

Initial perceptions of these four Michigan museums were built on these factors taken together. As they shaped the founding purpose, collections, exhibitions, resources and expectations of their institutions, the founders began to create an institutional identity for each of them.

CHAPTER 3

CHOOSING A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

How long the founding vision carried a particular institution differed from place to place, as did the ways in which new leaders accepted or modified the legacy they received. Each museum eventually reached a point where a new director or board members decided that their institutions needed to expand or restate the founding vision. The leadership of the Detroit Historical Society worked for years to create a post-war opportunity for major development in its museum. Members of the Michigan Historical Commission, dissatisfied with what they saw in their museum in the late 1940s, decided they couldn't wait for change—they needed to make it happen. Henry Ford's death in 1947 confronted Edison Institute Museum staff with a future that would necessarily be different from the past. At the Sloan Museum, the need for change was foreseen by the founding director at his retirement in 1978.

These museums' founders had established basic parameters of institutional identity. The new generation of leaders saw a need to develop a professional identity as well. They adopted a variety of models to guide their institutions. Their choices not only reflected how these leaders viewed their museums' missions, but also influenced how they and their staffs carried them out. A director's choice of professional identity either reinforced or altered the nature of his museum's institutional personality.

The professional model chosen by a particular museum also influenced both the topics and the goals of its exhibitions. In the case of automobiles, it affected the context in which cars were placed, and what information was included in labels. Institutional identity

and circumstances were in play with regard to automobiles as well. Detroit Historical Museum established a car collection and presented the auto industry as part of city life. It also mounted exhibitions that displayed hobbyists' cars as objects to be admired on their own terms. In Lansing, the MHM still had nowhere to exhibit automobiles, although it made an attempt to acknowledge its importance to the state within the somewhat ironic context of a mobile exhibit. After hiring a collector as its first Curator of Transportation, HFM began to value cars for their beauty, cost and associations with famous people. The Sloan Museum continued to collect primarily Flint-built cars. It began adding context to its auto galleries, but its major exhibit improvement efforts were focused elsewhere.

Choosing a professional model inevitably entailed balancing concerns common to museums in general with those of the relevant discipline, in this case, history. A balance also had to be found between general issues and concerns specific to a particular institution. Most institutions developed a professional framework that addressed these points of view. Management communicated this framework, explicitly or not, to staff, who were then expected to operate within the institution's norms. An institution's professional orientation might be embodied in a particular organization in which museum staffers were active, but this was not always the case. The options outlined below represent the general categories into which a history museum's professional outlook could fall.

For institutions whose key professional concerns were common to a broad range of museums, the American Association of Museums (AAM) offered one readily available professional affiliation. It was the primary organization encompassing the entire museum field, having welcomed all types of museums and their staffs to its membership since 1906. AAM emphasized what its members held in common, although it also attempted to

accommodate disciplinary differences in its meetings and programs. Its regional affiliates, including the Midwest Museums Conference, also included a wide variety of institutions, from large, well endowed natural history museums to struggling local historical societies, from museums of modern art to zoos.

At the other end of the spectrum were those museums focused on a particular disciplinary base. Although not uncommon in historical societies, especially those with archives, this orientation appealed to few active history museum staff. The American Historical Association (AHA) was recognized as something of an umbrella organization for those trained in history, but during the first half of the twentieth century, it had increasingly emphasized the academic study of history over other forms of practice. Nevertheless, the AHA remained an important affiliation for many who considered themselves professional historians by virtue of advanced degrees, even though they worked outside the academy.

A variation on the discipline-based orientation with greater relevance for many in history museums was embodied in the post-World War II period by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). This approach was history-based but audience-focused, combining insistence on “solid scholarship” and “a sense of the dramatic.” Recognizing that “we have no captive audiences . . . so whatever else we do, we must seek to interest” the public, members of AASLH worked in historical societies and agencies like the National Park Service to make history both accessible and lively.¹ That the ambitious goal of combining scholarship and popular appeal often proved elusive

¹K. Ross Toole, “The Historical Society and Its Function Today,” *Detroit Historical Society Bulletin*, 14:3 (December 1957): 11.

did not deter those who embraced it.

A fourth option was for a museum to orient itself strongly toward collectors, either those interested in a particular class of objects (automobiles) or a series of groups covering a range of object types (automobiles, pressed glass, needlework, clocks). A focus on collectors meant adopting to some extent the standards of the antiques marketplace: condition, rarity, intrinsic value. A collector-oriented museum might be involved with a wide variety of organizations. Even an institution focused on a single artifact type might have numerous options. For example, car collectors might belong to a broad-based organization like the Veteran Motor Car Club of America or the American Automobile Collectors' Association, but also to a club that focused on a particular make or style of car, like a Model T group or a sports car club.

In the immediate post war period, none of these associations offered any formal certification for meeting a set of professional standards. The American Association of Museums had begun to define good museum practice, but until the establishment of its voluntary accreditation program in 1970 there was no evaluation mechanism for individual institutions. What these professional organizations offered was a common culture, with standards that were implicit rather than formally stated, and the opportunity to exchange ideas with like-minded colleagues.

Professionalization had one potentially negative consequence. Those who began all four museums had believed they saw a need in their communities and moved to fill it. They felt in touch with their audiences. In focusing on a professional identity, the second generation of staff inevitably distanced themselves from their audiences, now defined as non-professionals. Museum staff might still, as in Detroit and Flint, be very conscious of

their audiences and very much in touch with them, but they had nonetheless defined themselves as different from the general public.

“Local History is Living History” in Detroit²

By the end of World War II, supporters of the Detroit Historical Museum were well prepared to move ahead toward a new building. A strong alliance with historians at Wayne University joined intellectual leadership to the financial and political strength the historical society already possessed. When the long-awaited museum opened in 1951, its exhibits attempted to tell the city’s story in terms any visitor could understand. This commitment was reinforced by the museum staff’s active participation in AASLH. Throughout the 1950s and well into the 1960s, the DHM stood as a model of community involvement for other urban historical museums.

At its annual meeting in January 1946 the society celebrated the achievement of three goals seen as laying the groundwork for the kind of museum its leaders believed Detroit deserved. The museum had moved to the city’s Cultural Center, voters had approved creation of the Detroit Historical Commission and, most recently, the building fund for a new museum had exceeded its goal and stood at \$263,000. President George Stark recognized that the society’s work was not yet done; the existing fund would be barely adequate to construct the museum society trustees envisioned. He challenged the members to raise the additional sum necessary to create “a museum comparable to that of other communities of Detroit’s size and importance.” The historical society ultimately

²From Henry D. Brown, “Historical Renaissance: In Detroit Local History is Living History,” *American Heritage* New series 2:4 (Summer 1951): 53.

collected a grand total of almost \$400,000 for the new museum from more than 1600 donors.³ By the time the museum was dedicated in 1951, members had also supported the historical commission in the opening of both a museum of Great Lakes history, housed in a schooner anchored at Belle Isle, and a military museum at Fort Wayne. Throughout this period the society actively recruited new members, growing from about 700 members in early 1946 to almost 3000 when the museum opened.⁴

Leadership within the Detroit Historical Society had been instrumental in creating such a bright future for the city's history museum. George Stark himself played a key role, using his position as a columnist for the *Detroit News* to publicize and build support for a new museum. In seeking creation of the Detroit Historical Commission, Stark and other historical society leaders hoped both to democratize the museum, which they believed belonged to all the people, and to insure its future by placing it in public hands. Nevertheless, they expected to continue to be closely involved in its affairs. George Stark gave up his society presidency to take that of the historical commission, and two of the remaining three original commissioners were society board members. These first commissioners took their oaths, not in a public City Hall ceremony, but at the historical society's 1946 annual meeting. The DHS clearly considered itself a stakeholder in this project, and the city was willing to accept its continued involvement.

If the society and commission together were seen as providing political and financial leadership, there remained the question of intellectual leadership in planning for

³Brown, "Historical Renaissance": 54; *Bulletin* 2:4 (January 1946): 3.

⁴Gracie B. Krum, *The Detroit Historical Society, December 1921-January 1952* (Detroit: [DHS], 1952): 149. *Bulletin* 2:8 (May 1946): 2; *Michigan History* (MH) 35 (1951): 161.

the new building. In this area the cooperative agreement between the Detroit Historical Society and the Board of Education which had brought about the museum's move to Merrick Avenue, also brought a new level of professionalism and a more complex understanding of the city's history to the museum. History department chair Raymond Miller was one of several Wayne University faculty and administrators already participating in planning for the new museum building.⁵ When the trustees of the historical society decided that the museum's administration needed "enlargement" before it could be turned over to the city, they requested the loan of Dr. Miller from the university.

In his two years with the museum, Miller not only managed the transition to city ownership, but laid the philosophical groundwork for an institution and an exhibits program that made connections between past and present. He coupled his skills as a historian and teacher with his vision of the museum's future to begin transforming a small, rather elite and antique-focused institution into one with wide-ranging programs and broad public appeal. Miller outlined his vision as the principal speaker at the historical society's momentous 1946 annual meeting. The new museum—along with its collections and exhibitions—should focus on the history of Detroit. Its collections and exhibitions should reflect that focus, and should carry the city's story up to the present. Reflecting recent trends in the study of urban history, Miller believed the new museum should emphasize Detroit's history as a city, and the evolution of interactions among "governmental units, community agencies, public utilities and private associations." Finally he wanted the museum to help city residents understand Detroit's industrial production, not only its

⁵William Edward Kapp, FAIA, *Museum for the Detroit Historical Commission* [Detroit: Detroit Historical Society, 1949]: A10; Krum, *DHS, 1921-1952*: 134, 136, 142.

nature and quantity, but its international impact.⁶

In addition to directing the museum's move the previous fall and preparing for the transition to city governance, Miller had also found time to begin implementing the principles he outlined in his speech to the historical society. About two months after its move, the Detroit Historical Museum opened an exhibit of naval ordnance, which not only displayed rockets, bombs and shells produced in Detroit factories, but explained how they were made. In his column in the society's newsletter, Miller explained that he believed most Detroiters had far less understanding of their wartime production achievements than did the rest of the world, "for the Detroiter never saw anything whole. If he worked in a factory, he saw a fragment or a single operation in production. If he worked at a desk, he saw a drawing or a statistical table." Now that the war was over, there would be nothing but "rows of statistics" to demonstrate Detroit's accomplishments unless the museum undertook to tell the story.⁷

The gift that insured that the DHM would have a place to tell the city's industrial story grew out of the beginnings of the auto industry in Detroit. The children of John and Horace Dodge made the largest single contribution toward the new museum, enabling the building fund to meet its goal in time for the 1946 annual meeting. Its purpose was to create an exhibit hall named for the Dodge brothers and devoted to industrial history. Writing about the gift in the historical society's newsletter, Raymond Miller acknowledged that Detroit's industrial history was not an easy topic to present. He believed it essential,

⁶Miller's speech is summarized in "An Amazing Score of Years, 1946-1966," *Bulletin* 12:4 (January 1966): 11-12. Raymond Miller, "Remarks," *Bulletin* 22:6 (January 1966): 4-7, offers his own memory of this period.

⁷"From the Big Desk," *Bulletin*, 2:2 (Nov. 1945): 7-8; 2:3 (Dec. 1945): 4.

however, noting, "It has been clear for a long time that if Detroit were to tell its story adequately, this history of its industry must be included in the Museum. . . . Not merely the automobile itself, but much of the world's technical knowledge should be marked 'Made in Detroit.'" Miller also believed that if Dodge Hall enabled Detroit residents to understand their complex industrial society better, they would make better decisions and "this troubled city of ours will have eternal reason for gratitude to those who made it possible."⁸

Part of Miller's motivation in urging that Detroit's industrial story and its role in the war be recorded in a museum of history was his recognition that the postwar world represented a new chapter in the city's story. Awareness of the historical divide created by depression and war automatically conferred new status on what had gone before. In the spring of 1946 the city of Detroit held what was billed as its Golden Jubilee, celebrating both the sesquicentennial of the raising of the American flag over the city in 1796 and the fiftieth anniversary of the beginnings of the auto industry in 1896. The former event was part of the early Detroit history that had always been emphasized by the Detroit Historical Society, and helped to highlight the city's relative age. The birth of the automotive industry was, of course, the beginning of Detroit's twentieth century transformation, and a major impetus behind the creation of both the historical society and its museum. The linking of these two events in a public celebration demonstrated that the car was not just a present reality, but had become a publicly recognized element of the city's history.⁹

⁸"From the Big Desk," *Bulletin* 2:5(Feb. 1946):8.

⁹Charles M. Mohrhardt, "Dodging Pedestrians Fifty Years Ago," *Bulletin* 2:6(March 1946): 3-6; "Program, Detroit Golden Jubilee," *Bulletin* 2:8 (May 1946): 1. It does not appear that the Automotive Jubilee was much celebrated outside Detroit.

Although he often emphasized Detroit's place on a historical stage that extended far beyond the city limits, Miller was also conscious of the role that local history could play in contemporary urban life. In his view, the 1946 Jubilee was more than a commemoration of specific events in the past. It represented the fact that "Detroit is a community. Its people are from different races, religions, nationalities and beliefs; in personal interest they may represent labor or management or commerce or the professions. . . . Over and beyond our disagreements is the one overwhelming fact that the destiny of Detroit is our destiny, and that what happens to any of us affects us all." All Detroit residents could share in exploring the city's history; because they did so, "we have more in common with which to face the future together."¹⁰

Raymond Miller returned full time to his academic duties in 1947. The historical commission quickly named his assistant director, Henry D. Brown, to succeed him.¹¹ A naval veteran, Brown held a Master's degree from the University of Michigan and had been at the museum for about a year.¹² He lacked previous museum experience, but had

Michigan History 30 (1946): 772-773) noted a series of four radio talks presented on WKZO in Kalamazoo and the publication of a commemorative booklet by the Highway Users Conference of Michigan, but noted no other observances of the anniversary outside of Detroit. *Bulletin* 2:3(Dec. 1945): 6 and *MH* 30(1946): 134-136 describe one of the more permanent aspects of the celebration, the creation by the Detroit Public Library of the its Automotive History Collection. The library had been acquiring relevant material on an informal basis since the early days of the industry, but gave the collection formal identity in 1946.

¹⁰"The Big Desk," *Bulletin* 2:9(June 1946): 8.

¹¹*Bulletin* 4:2 (October 1947): 3. Raymond Miller's commitment to Detroit history continued well past his 1947 departure from the museum. He served for many years on the historical society's board of trustees, and continued for at least a decade as secretary of the city's Historical Commission.

¹²Krum, *DHS, 1921-1952*: 150.

rapidly become an enthusiastic proponent of the new museum. In his first commentary for the historical society's *Bulletin*, Brown not only recapitulated key aspects of Miller's philosophy, but his own understanding that a museum was a "group of materials which conveys an idea; it is not just a collection of objects."¹³ Continuing the close relationship between the city's historical commission and the Detroit Historical Society, Brown held the dual roles of museum director and director of the DHS throughout his career.

Planning for the new museum accelerated in 1947, soon after Henry Brown's appointment as museum director. The historical society sent Brown, as it had previously sent Raymond Miller, to gather advice and ideas from museums in other cities. Reporting on his tour of thirty-six museums, Brown focused on the practical. He saw doors and elevators too small to accommodate large artifacts and permanent walls that restricted exhibit options. He heard complaints about inadequate storage space and windows that interfered with both arrangement of exhibits and effective illumination. Brown understood that a well planned building would allow the museum to function smoothly. Staff would then be able to concentrate on developing exhibits and programs for the public. Not surprisingly, the staffs at these museums envied Detroit the opportunity to start from scratch.¹⁴

Architect and DHS member William Kapp had chaired one of the early planning committees and had already given considerable thought to building details, when the city selected him in 1948 to design the new museum. Ground was broken the following summer, with dedication of the museum planned for July 24, 1951, the 250th anniversary

¹³"The Big Desk," *Bulletin* 3:3 (Dec. 1946): 8.

¹⁴"Seeing is Believing," *Bulletin* 4:2 (Oct. 1947):12.

of the arrival of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac and his party in 1701—the beginning of European settlement at Detroit.

Both the DHS and the DHC had envisioned a structure that filled the block between Woodward and Cass, matching the scale of the neighboring Detroit Public Library and Detroit Institute of Arts.¹⁵ Construction costs had risen steeply since the end of the war, however. Even when the city supplemented the building fund with an additional \$500,000, it was able to construct less than a third of the anticipated structure.¹⁶ Utilizing both his subcommittee's report and Henry Brown's practical observations of other institutions, architect Kapp gave first priority to public spaces. As constructed, the new Detroit Historical Museum featured two public entrances, a display window facing Woodward Avenue and relatively large galleries. There was an elevator, although it was not the large freight elevator planners had recommended. Public meeting rooms were located on the third floor, the only space with windows. This floor would house offices and workrooms at a later date, which Henry Brown pointed out would be "considerably more inviting than the basements where most museum staffs are wont to labor." In the interim, Brown and his staff occupied offices in a former residence on the museum property.¹⁷

Comparing this building with the standards presented by Laurence Vail Coleman in his 1950 study, *Museum Buildings*, it is clear that Detroit had indeed constructed a state-

¹⁵Henry D. Brown, "Our New Museum," *Bulletin* 5:9 (May 1949): 7.

¹⁶Brown, "Historical Renaissance": 54.

¹⁷Henry D. Brown, "The Detroit Historical Museum: A Museum of Ideas," *MH* 35 (1951): 163; Floor plan, *Bulletin* 7:9(July 1951): 6-7.

of-the-art museum.¹⁸ Artificial gallery lighting, street-level display windows and visitors' convenience in finding their way around the building are all features he mentions prominently. The Detroit museum lacked air conditioning, then considered desirable but not essential for museums in northern cities, but it did have a modern ventilation system to circulate air. Coleman also stressed "full provision for the efficient work of the staff," which Detroit planners had certainly considered, though not fully achieved in the first round.

As the Detroit Historical Museum's new building took shape, plans for its exhibits became more detailed as well. Henry Brown continued the emphasis on ideas that he articulated early in his tenure at the museum. In announcing the 1949 ground-breaking to historical society members, Brown emphasized that "the Museum will be a museum of ideas and not of objects." Two years later in an article subtitled "A Museum of Ideas," he talked about "the meaning of history" rather than "the objects of history" playing the leading role.¹⁹ Thus a rare or costly artifact might be placed in storage, "while some object of relatively little beauty and no intrinsic worth but which does help to illustrate an idea will be used." Detroit Historical Museum staff and commissioners would judge exhibit plans on their value "in interpreting the story of the development of the community to the average Museum visitor."²⁰

More specifically the new museum would feature exhibits tracing the development

¹⁸Laurence Vail Coleman, *Museum Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1950): 6-10.

¹⁹Brown, "Our New Museum": 12; Brown, "Museum of Ideas": 161.

²⁰Brown, "Historical Renaissance": 54. Brown makes no direct reference to Arthur Parker's *Manual for History Museums*, but it, too, speaks of ideas in exhibits, and it was one of the few works then available that dealt specifically with historical museums.

of urban life and municipal services, period rooms depicting how typical Detroiters of different eras lived and special exhibits on topics such as leisure activities and cultural life and education. Exhibits tracing the city's industrial development would emphasize Detroit's status as a symbol of mass production. There would be "a large diorama, with moving parts, to show how the automobile has changed transportation, has fostered suburban areas, and has created many new types of business." In addition there was to be "a large model of a typical mass production plant illustrating how the work of many people can be combined in the producing of materials in such quantity that they can be purchased by those who make them."²¹ Exhibits in Dodge Industrial Hall would include "an interpretation of the effect upon the worker, the man on the street, and the community at large." All displays would be changed or updated on a regular basis.²²

Brown's descriptions of the proposed exhibits followed the plan laid out by Raymond Miller in 1946, but his rationale for the program was somewhat different. He replaced Miller's emphasis on the need for residents of "this troubled city of ours" to build common ground with assertions of American superiority in the face of an external threat. Brown, a newcomer to Detroit who was serving in the Navy during the 1943 race riot, believed the compelling issue that Detroit's historical museum needed to address was the intensifying conflict between capitalism and communism. In his view the primary purpose of the DHM's exhibits would be "to show Detroiters why people have come to Detroit for 250 years and how, under the American way of life, their standard of living has risen and their opportunities for cultural and intellectual enjoyment have been broadened." Referring

²¹Brown, "Our New Museum": 9.

²²Brown, "Museum of Ideas": 164-165.

to “the two systems of life . . . struggling for world dominance,” Brown said that the DHM “will not argue, view with alarm, or shout. It will merely show how the people who lived in America, worked together and achieved a higher standard of living than is known anywhere else in the world.”²³ By casting Detroit as a case study in American history, Brown widened the museum’s scope beyond what Miller envisioned. By focusing much more explicitly on economic success, he narrowed it.

Brown’s emphasis on how the typical Detroiter lived implicitly recognized that ordinary families, as well as the wealthy and powerful, were part of history. Museum staff recognized that this was a somewhat unexpected approach when they asked in 1950 for “materials which you may not have thought of heretofore as being ‘museum pieces’.”²⁴ The DHM was not the first historical museum to seek out the artifacts of ordinary life; staff were certainly aware of Henry Ford’s collecting, for example, and probably familiar as well with the household and agricultural implements in the state’s collection in Lansing. It was a new departure, however, to propose telling the story of an entire city in terms of the “average man of the past.”

Even before Detroit’s new historical museum was open to the public, both the museum and the Detroit Historical Society were being recognized as leaders in their fields. In his 1951 report as chair of the historical society’s publications committee, former director Raymond Miller observed that Detroit now had the country’s largest local historical society, “and perhaps its most active and vital one.” Although he was

²³Brown, “Our New Museum”: 8,12. Emphasis on a rising standard of living can also be found in *Bulletin* 5:3 (Nov. 1948): 1 and Brown, “Museum of Ideas”: 167.

²⁴Henry D. Brown, “You Can Help,” *Bulletin* 7:1 (Oct. 1950): 8.

singlehandedly responsible for neither society membership nor museum attendance, Henry Brown did a great deal to make Detroit visible in national museum and historical circles. Even before the new museum was opened, he was a frequent panelist at meetings of the Michigan Museums Conference, the Midwest Museums Conference and as early as 1949 chaired the historical section of the American Association of Museums' annual meeting.

The American Association for State and Local History presented the society an award of merit in 1949 recognizing its post-war activities, which had "increased attendance, excited the interest of the schools and made it a living force in the community." The award from AASLH, as well as personal affinity for its efforts to give history popular appeal, were already drawing Brown in that direction. By 1953 it was his primary affiliation, as he began fifteen years of service on its governing council.²⁵

Detroit's 250th birthday—the larger event encompassing the dedication of the city's new museum—was a much anticipated milestone. It identified the city as something more than an auto-driven upstart, enabling it to claim recognition as one of the oldest cities in the Midwest. (By comparison, Lansing and Flint celebrated their centennials in the 1950s.) Articles in *Time* and the *New York Times Magazine* called national attention to the celebration. The new historical museum was one of several of lasting bricks-and-mortar projects that were part of Detroit's festival. Others included Ford Auditorium, the City-County Building, a new building for the International Institute and three branch libraries.²⁶

²⁵*Bulletin* 7:4 (January 1951): 4; *MH* 34 (1950): 71; *MH* 37 (1953):XX.

²⁶"Midwestern Birthday," *Time*, July 30, 1951: 14-18; Sam Boal, "Detroit at 250: Lusty and Young," *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1951: 15; Henry B. Selleck, ed., *Detroit's 250th Birthday Festival Official Souvenir Program* (Detroit: Graphic Arts Association of Michigan, 1951): 40-43.

Although city elites were firmly in charge of planning the festival, they intended to create, as the official program noted, “A Civic Celebration uniting all elements of the community.”²⁷ They assumed that all Detroiters—no matter what their ethnic or racial backgrounds—were entitled to claim the heritage of Cadillac and other French pioneers. This may have been due in part to the fact that the French, despite their continued presence in the city, had long since ceased to dominate it.

A special section in the Summer 1951 issue of *American Heritage* focused on Detroit’s history and how it was being celebrated and incorporated into city life.²⁸ It featured an article by Wayne University’s Raymond Miller describing “three Detroit’s”: “The French and British village, fortified and isolated . . . the Yankee town, beautiful, calm and confident . . . the metropolitan city to which none of these words apply.” Miller noted that the social changes that occurred in Detroit during the first half of the twentieth century meant that there was no longer “social uniformity or even such a thing as a typical Detroiter.” David Henry, president of Wayne University, contributed a short piece advocating “Local History as a Means to Creative Citizenship,” defining creative citizens as those who seek more than efficiency in government services, who work to solve problems and remove barriers between people and groups. Henry Brown described how the historical society, by striving to reach as many people as possible, had initiated the current “explosion” of interest in local history. That interest was being sustained by the cooperative efforts of the society, the historical commission and the Board of Education.

²⁷Selleck, ed., *Official Souvenir Program*: cover.

²⁸“Detroit,” *American Heritage*, New series 2:4(Summer 1951): 32-55. David D. Henry, “Local Studies as a Means to Creative Citizenship,” appeared as the “Educational Page”: 56.

When Detroit opened the doors to its museum in July 1951, the reality of its exhibits was somewhat less than its ambitious plan had envisioned. A very tight construction schedule had left staff only a few weeks in which to do their installation work. One staff member described the first phase as being “rather like a single chapter ripped from a book and not very coherent without the events preceding and following.”²⁹ Visitors were able to view one of four proposed sections of the Streets of Old Detroit as well as the beginnings of a gallery of comparative period rooms, a mid-nineteenth century school room and exhibits on the urban infrastructure that enabled a city the size of Detroit to function smoothly. The Hall of Patriotism was dedicated “to those who defended their country in times of crisis” and the Room of Tradition, constructed with assistance from the Historic Memorials Society, exhibited furnishings from the homes of Detroit leaders of another day, whose names were familiar as those of the city’s schools, parks and streets.³⁰

Dodge Hall featured a temporary exhibit, put together with loans from various automobile companies. Their assistance ranged from a rather elaborate self-contained display from General Motors, to Hudson’s contribution of an early car.³¹ Cars on exhibit in addition to the Hudson included a 1901 Packard touted in the *Detroit News* as the “First Steering-Wheel Car,” a Model T, an early Dodge, a curved-dash Oldsmobile and “an experimental modern model,” one of aeronautical designer William Stout’s Scarabs. All were on loan from their owners. Some of these same cars later became the nucleus of the

²⁹Bartlett M. Frost, “The Work,” *Bulletin* 7:9 (July 1951): 10; Frost, “Walk Through History,” *Bulletin* 11:1 (October 1954): 9.

³⁰“Comparative Period Area,” *Bulletin*, 7:8 (May 1951): 5; Floor plan, *Bulletin* 7:9 (July 1951): 6-7; “Guide,” *Bulletin* 10:8 (June 1954): 12-13.

³¹Henry D. Brown to Ray Kiefer, General Motors Styling Division, March 27, 1951. Copy in DHM Curatorial Department, Industrial History Exhibit Files.

museum's automobile collection.³²

Considering the importance being placed on Detroit industry in planning the museum, surprisingly little attention seems to have paid to collecting the artifacts—including automobiles—needed to tell the story. Raymond Miller's first postwar call for donations listed no industrial artifacts other than examples of World War I and II production from Detroit's factories. Several months later a second list added "items relating to any Detroit industry and its development" to the enumeration of desired objects.³³ The 1950 request quoted above, while not excluding industrial tools and machinery, was cast in terms of household objects rather than artifacts of the workplace. Nor is there evidence that members of the historical society drew on business or professional contacts to attempt to fill the void. Despite the fact that changing technology and the scrap metal drives of two world wars had probably left little in the way of disused machinery in Detroit's factories, an active search would surely have turned up a few finds. On the other hand, Detroit-style auto production is a very large-scale process and no museum could hope to show more than a tiny portion of it using real machinery. Brown and his staff may have decided for practical reasons that they would rely on models and dioramas.

In keeping with Henry Brown's plan of emphasizing ideas over objects, the curators he hired—almost all of them Detroit natives or residents of long standing—had responsibility for specific areas of city history, such as Social History, Industrial History or

³²*Detroit News*, July 21, 1951:18; Patience Nauta, interview with author, March 19, 1998.

³³*Bulletin* 2:4 (January 1946): 6; "Materials Needed for the Museum," *Bulletin* 3:3 (December 1946): 4.

Metropolitan Services. To make the division even clearer to the public, Brown also described what these departments studied: "Detroiters at Home," "Detroiters at Work" and "Living in a Big City."³⁴ In practice each curator did in fact oversee a segment of the collections, but their work was more broadly defined than the study and care of objects. The Curator of Industrial History gave regular gallery talks on automotive topics, accepted donations to the industrial collection and developed exhibits for Dodge Hall. He also worked with groups of hobbyists, some of whom met regularly at the museum, and occasionally showed museum cars at outside events. None of the men who held this job completely ignored other Detroit industries, but all emphasized the auto industry.³⁵

Once past the unique hurdles of opening day, museum staff faced a new set of operational challenges. Staff were now dealing with much more space and many more visitors than ever before. Because the museum's exhibits would necessarily be selective in what they covered, Henry Brown believed that they should be changed regularly. He anticipated not only seasonal and year-to-year changes, but promised that "every exhibit in the building will be reconsidered after a five year period to see if it should be remodeled or removed completely to better serve the museum's purpose."³⁶

Assistant director Bartlett Frost supervised the exhibits program. He had joined the staff in 1948, having previously worked for the National Park Service in California and as

³⁴"Director's Report," *Detroit Historical Commission (DHC) Annual Report*, 1961-62: 1.

³⁵See the *Bulletin* and curatorial files for the 1950s and early 1960s for curatorial backgrounds and activities. Patience Nauta mentions taking museum vehicles to outside events (interview). No woman has ever held the title of Curator of Industrial History at DHM.

³⁶Brown, "Museum of Ideas": 164.

chief preparator at the Illinois State Museum.³⁷ Frost supervised the museum's exhibits staff, who worked out of the Ft. Wayne Military Museum. They built cases and artifact mounts and produced large case titles and gallery signs. Most labels were typed in an oversized font. Although by more recent standards DHM exhibits of the 1950s appear more "laid out" than "designed," they represent a considerable advance in sophistication—both visual and conceptual—over the rows of drily labeled artifacts that were still to be seen in many history museums at the time. Exhibits, even single cases usually included a mix of artifacts, photos and text (Figure 6).

Bartlett Frost fully concurred with the DHM exhibits philosophy as Henry Brown articulated it. His remarks at a Midwest Museums Conference session included an emphasis on frequent exhibit changes, the use of up to three quarters of available space for temporary exhibits and cooperation with outside agencies, organizations and individuals in exhibit planning and production.³⁸ To see how serious DHM was about this, one need only review the listing published for 1954, which includes seventy-five separate exhibits, most of them involving some sort of partnership. Henry Brown's report for 1957-58 mentions "171 displays, from exhibits occupying 10,000 sq. ft. to single case and display windows!"³⁹ Many of the smaller presentations were certainly not full-fledged exhibits, but each one required staff planning time. A few may have been produced entirely by the museum's partners, but most required staff production and installation time as well. No wonder Frost's MMC remarks also stressed the need for "a versatile collection of exhibit

³⁷ Frost, "The Work," 10.

³⁸"Midwest Museums Conference," *History News*, 13 (1957-58): 15.

³⁹Exhibit Schedule, January 1954-December, 1954," *Bulletin* 11:5 (January 1955): 14-16; 14:8 (May 1958): 17.

properties,” that were easy to build, take apart and store!

Like most other spaces in the museum, Dodge Hall accommodated numerous special exhibits between its 1951 opening and the mid-1960s. It hosted traveling exhibits such as *Progress through Patents* and *You and the Atom* that were related to its industrial theme, but community events like the Children’s Book Fair and the Senior Citizens’ Arts and Crafts Show found a home in the museum’s largest gallery as well.⁴⁰ Part of the balcony above the west end of Dodge Hall was given over to recognition of “Automotive Pioneers,” thus insuring that Detroit’s most important twentieth century industry would have a presence in the museum even when the main floor of the hall was otherwise occupied.

One of the first recorded exhibit changes in Dodge Hall occurred in November 1952. In honor of the gallery’s formal dedication, the museum presented an exhibit on the Dodge brothers. This was probably a very small affair, consisting of the Dodge touring car that had been on loan since the museum’s opening, with some photographs and labeling.⁴¹

Other early auto exhibits were more ambitious. In March 1954, the museum launched “a series of automotive exhibits . . . in honor of the industry that put the world on wheels and made Detroit the motor capital of the world.”⁴² Under the general title of *Motor Album*, the series began with *Chrysler Corporation—Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, which was to be followed “in month-long installments by Lincoln, Packard, Cadillac and

⁴⁰Industrial History Exhibit Files; *Bulletin* 13:1 (Oct. 1956): 10; Solan W. Weeks, “The Detroit Historical Museum: Its History, Heritage and New Horizon” (M.A. thesis, Wayne State University, 1960): 80.

⁴¹“Dodge Hall Dedication,” *Bulletin* 9:2 (November 1952): 4, 11.

⁴²Printed guide in Chrysler Motor Album file, Industrial History Exhibit files.

others” (Figure 7). Each exhibit would feature at least one early model, a current production vehicle and the expected high point of each show, “a car of the future.” Collectively, the *Motor Album* series would present “a fairly complete record of the story of the automobile industry in Detroit.”⁴³

The Chrysler exhibit is the only one of these automotive exhibits from which information has survived. The exhibit elements that appear in photographs are more elaborate than the museum would have constructed for a 4-6 week exhibit, so it is likely that they were Chrysler’s own displays. Shows featuring Lincoln and Cadillac followed the inaugural *Motor Album* exhibit, but the series quietly faded away over the summer and was not revived.⁴⁴ Even with help from the auto companies, the amount of staff time needed was considerable for a such a short exhibit. The museum may also have had trouble with scheduling or securing cooperation from the manufacturers.

Presenting the complex process of building automobiles, as Henry Brown had promised the museum would, proved a significant challenge for DHM staff. Visible in Dodge Hall photos from the 1950s is a diorama titled “Mass Production Assembly Line of 1920s,” which may be the only production-related exhibit element the museum installed in this period. Also located in Dodge Hall was a large map of the city showing, “Where to see automobiles built in Detroit” (Figure 8). The panel identified both manufacturing and assembly plants, and included directions for finding them. With a first-hand look at the process so readily available to visitors, museum staff appear to have concluded that there

⁴³“Curator’s Corner,” *Bulletin*, 10:6 (April 1954): 12.

⁴⁴“Exhibit Schedule, January 1954-December 1954,” *Bulletin*, 11:4 (January 1955): 14-16.

was little need for them to mount exhibits on automobile production.

In 1955 DHM began hosting an annual exhibit (which after a few years picked up the *Motor Album* title) featuring cars owned by members of the Detroit chapter of the Veteran Motor Car Club of America (VMCCA). This new series of automotive exhibits proved more successful than the first, and continued into the 1970s. It was more about things than ideas, however. If the earlier exhibits had perhaps skirted the edges of commercialism, they had at least presented some information about the development of the automotive industry in Detroit. The VMCCA shows made little pretense of being more than collections of nicely restored old cars. Curators made an effort to inform visitors about noteworthy features of each automobile, but could not necessarily connect one car to the next. The 1960 VMCCA show was one of the more elaborate. In addition to antique cars, it included a series of original illustrations from *Popular Mechanics*. Two special sections featured recent donations to DHM: a Wagenhals three-wheeled delivery truck and a one cylinder motor and several wood patterns used by one of the many automotive experimenters of the 1890s.⁴⁵

The later *Motor Album* exhibits may have showed automobiles for their own sake, but DHM staff had not given up trying to build exhibitions around ideas. In 1959 the museum proposed an exhibit called *Contemporary Small Cars*, which at the very least reflects a desire to get on the current automotive bandwagon. Copies of correspondence indicate that the museum staff hoped to show the following models: Corvair, Falcon, Lark, Rambler, and Valiant. American Motors turned down requests for the Lark and the Rambler, and in fact it is unclear whether the others were actually exhibited. The

⁴⁵Industrial History Exhibit Files.

companies that said yes initially, did so with the stipulation that cars would not be available for public display until the official unveiling of new models in the fall.⁴⁶ Also unclear is whether the museum planned to compare the new generation of small cars with models of an earlier day, like its 1914 Scripps-Booth two-seater cycle car.

The centennial of Henry Ford's birth was celebrated in 1963. Probably because of its larger neighbor in Dearborn, the Detroit Historical Museum decided to mark the occasion, not with a display of Ford autos, but with a small exhibit titled *The Homes of Henry Ford*. Featuring photos, paintings and furnishings from various Ford residences, the exhibit focused on Ford the man rather than the manufacturer, from the simplicity of the farmhouse in which he was born to the elegance of his Fairlane mansion. In the years that followed, both company and union anniversaries were often marked by special exhibits that, like most such events, tended to be more celebratory than analytical.

The Detroit Historical Museum entered the 1960s enthusiastically. The compilation of its activities for the 1959-60 fiscal year noted higher visitation than ever before, and increased educational services.⁴⁷ Construction was well underway on a new Great Lakes museum, a replacement for the old schooner, which had fallen victim to dry rot. The following month Brown described a new exhibit, located in the museum's entrance hall, that described how the DHM organized its presentation of the city's history, including information on behind-the-scenes activities as well as exhibits. It follows very closely the plan with which the museum had opened ten years before. Satisfied with the museum's success to date, Brown clearly planned to stick with a museum organization

⁴⁶*Contemporary Small Cars* file, Industrial History Exhibit Files.

⁴⁷"Annual Report," *Bulletin* 17:4 (Jan 1961): 11.

that had already proven successful.⁴⁸

Although its basic philosophy of frequent exhibit changes persisted, the Detroit Historical Museum did moderate its schedule and develop its techniques over time. Exhibits scheduled for monthly rotation might be extended. In contrast to the eleven "Historic Citizens" featured in 1954, only four were seen in fiscal year 1964-65. As staff began telling more integrated stories in exhibits, they took up more space and justified more design and production time. Small objects and labels that in the 1950s were mounted on pegboard, now rested on special pedestals and shelves. Graphics and photos were larger and slicker.⁴⁹

In several respects the year 1964 represents the culmination of the Detroit Historical Museum's postwar development. Attendance remained high. Staff and society members continued to work closely together and to take pride in the museum as a community-oriented institution. Society president Gordon O. Rice praised the museum's exhibits in the February 1964 *Bulletin*, adding, "The Detroit Historical Commission has continued a policy of making the Museum a community institution, rather than [being] aloof or static." Citing the Teacher and Policeman of the Month exhibits and constant use of the meeting rooms by hobby clubs and community organizations, a former employee recalls the mid-1960s as a time when "we were very much a part of the city and the city was very much a part of us."⁵⁰

⁴⁸Henry D. Brown, "How the Detroit Story is Told," *Bulletin* 17:5 (February 1961): 14-15.

⁴⁹See photos in the Industrial History Exhibit Files and in the *Bulletin*.

⁵⁰Gordon O. Rice, "To the Membership," *DHS Bulletin* 20:5 (February 1964): 2; Rose Victory, interview by author, May 14, 1998.

The museum continued to be regarded as a national leader in the field of local history. Between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s, Henry Brown sat on AAM's council and served terms as president of both the Historical Society of Michigan and the Midwest Museums Conference. He was also involved in hosting meetings of all of these organizations in Detroit.⁵¹ Active as he was in other organizations, Brown maintained his close affiliation with AASLH. The association's newsletter, *History News*, regularly featured activities in Detroit, and Brown's colleagues in other states provided articles that made the DHS *Bulletin* more than just a local historical society newsletter.⁵² The DHM participated in the trend toward very practical how-to-do-it museum literature, contributing to the new AASLH Technical Leaflets and even publishing its own thirty-five page booklet, "A Look You'll Like in Labels."⁵³ In 1964, Brown concluded a term as AASLH secretary, and his colleagues in historical organizations around the country confirmed his stature by electing him president of AASLH.⁵⁴

The exhibit that occupied Dodge Hall from June to September 1964, *Design on Wheels*, reflected not only the growth of DHM's automotive collection, but the development of a more integrated, interpretive approach to exhibits as well. The museum now owned enough cars to be able to develop more thematic exhibits out of its own

⁵¹See for example: *MH* 37 (1953): 217-218; *MH* 40 (1956): 363; *MH* 42 (1958):511; *Bulletin* 17:7 (April 1961): 5; "Coordinating Director's Report," *Bulletin* 20:8 (May 1964): 10-11.

⁵²*History News* 13 (1957-58): 47; 14 (1958-59): 55; 15 (1959-60): 101-102; 18 (1962-63): 5; 19 (1963-64): 156. See also the series of articles by AASLH leaders such as K. Ross Toole, Louis Jones and Christopher Crittenden in *Bulletin* 17 (1960-1961).

⁵³*History News* 16 (February 1961): 44; "Preparing Your Exhibits: methods, materials, & bibliography," Technical Leaflet 4, *History News* 18 (November 1962).

⁵⁴*History News* 19 (1963-64): 203.

collections. *Design on Wheels* attempted to place cars from the museum's collection in the context of the "evolution of automobile design--both outward appearance and inner mechanics."⁵⁵ The exhibition featured several experimental cars, including a Chrysler turbine car, a donation solicited specifically to represent a "car of the future" in this exhibit. Curator of Industrial History Harvey Versteeg took advantage of another donation to explain to historical society members the philosophy behind the automobile collection: "The vehicles are distinctive for their Detroit association and they also represent a major engineering or design advancement, or are associated with a person or persons in our Detroit story. The Museum's collection of cars will never be large in number--but it already comprises 25 cars of unique importance in the development of the motor vehicle in Detroit."⁵⁶

The most exciting DHM news of 1964 came in the summer. For some time the museum had found its quarters too cramped for all that it wanted to make available to the public. As early as 1958 Commissioner and museum advocate George Stark had observed that the museum was only seven years old and "already it is bursting at the seams."⁵⁷ The following year the historical society had appointed a study committee to gather information. Unlike the 1940s, there was no general fund-raising campaign; all the preliminary work went on behind the scenes. The historical society and the museum simply announced in the summer of 1964 that the Kresge Foundation had pledged \$500,000

⁵⁵Press release, *Design on Wheels* file, Industrial History Exhibit Files.

⁵⁶*Bulletin* 21 (Fall 1964): 3.

⁵⁷George W. Stark, "The Dream and the Reality," *Bulletin* 15 (November 1958):

toward a new wing for the museum, an amount the city had already promised to match.⁵⁸

In 1946, the Detroit Historical Society believed the city needed “a museum comparable to that of other communities of Detroit’s size and importance.” Working closely with their new historical commission, they achieved that and more. If, by the mid-1960s, the DHM still had not reached the physical size its founders envisioned, its level of activity and its visibility in the community were all that could have wished. Detroit’s historical programs were the envy of other city historical societies.

Its exhibits program was a significant part of the Detroit museum’s success. Henry Brown’s desire for exhibits about ideas rather than things was not only ambitious, but a little unrealistic, objects being what distinguish museum exhibits from other forms of history. Such exhibits also require careful thought and planning, and DHM’s busy exhibit schedule did not always include the necessary time. Still, there was always something new to see at DHM. Exhibits developed in cooperation with other organizations, including antique auto clubs, were good for community relations. Moreover, they brought in new visitors, who might become society members and museum supporters.⁵⁹ And over time, the staff developed greater ability to present thoughtful interpretive exhibits as well as those that were nice to look at.

All of this was accomplished by a combined private/public leadership that was committed to the value of history in community life. The strong links between the DHS and the city’s museum lasted throughout Henry Brown’s tenure as museum director. In one report he attributed the success of both organizations to “this tidal action of our

⁵⁸“Museum Addition Assured,” *Bulletin* 20:9 (Summer 1964): 12.

⁵⁹“Midwest Museums Conference,” *History News* 13 (1957-58): 15.

interdependence.”⁶⁰ Forwarding common goals mattered more than jurisdictional lines. In its strong alliance among academic historians, museum historians, the school system and the public, Detroit came as close as any city to achieving the AASLH goal of combining scholarship with popular appeal.

Michigan Historical Museum: Unfulfilled Expectations

After the Michigan Historical Commission was forced to move its museum to new quarters during World War II, it attempted to create a new focus on Michigan history in MHM’s exhibits. However, personality conflicts and the reluctance of the commission secretary (and the MHC itself) to become involved in museum operations hindered progress toward that goal. At the same time, circumstances beyond anyone’s control prevented construction of a new museum and archives building. When a new state constitution transferred responsibility for the museum to the Department of State, its exhibits still told visitors little about Michigan in the twentieth century.

In 1939, after a vacancy of effectively ten years, the historical commission finally filled Marie B. Ferrey’s position at the Pioneer Museum. They hired Kalamazoo resident C. J. Sherman, described in the pages of *Michigan History* as “a specialist in antiques.” His title was “Museum Director,” reflecting both an assumption of male competence (in contrast to former Curator Marie Ferrey’s perceived inadequacies) and an expectation that the museum would be run in a professional manner. It appears that he had no previous museum experience, but gained his knowledge of antiques as a collector and dealer.⁶¹

⁶⁰“Coordinating Director’s Report,” *Bulletin*, 17:8 (May 1961): 13.

⁶¹“Historical Notes,” *MH* 23 (1939): 404.

Given the lack of formal museum training programs at the time, collecting was not an uncommon route into museum work. Collecting had the advantage of familiarizing one with artifacts; its disadvantage was that in the world of antiques objects were valued as objects, rather than for any connections to larger historical themes.

Sherman's initial months at the museum were spent simply making the place presentable for visitors. He was assisted by a WPA Museum Project crew who cleaned and painted the museum's quarters. They also helped to sort artifacts, enabling Sherman to reduce the clutter of artifacts on exhibit. In addition, the project included the reinstallation of exhibits and new labeling. The result was a much neater display, but one whose intellectual organization was somewhat ambivalent, giving equal weight to Michigan history and decorative antiques. Thus, there was an Indian room and a Pioneer room, but the large donations of two individual collectors were given their own rooms as well.⁶²

The entry of the United States into World War II had little direct effect on the museum. It soon became clear, however, that other state agencies, considered more essential to the war effort, needed the historical commission's space in the State Office Building.⁶³ Following a directive from the governor's office, the commission investigated several possible new homes, settling on a site just north of the city's downtown. The property, known as the Turner estate, encompassed two residences, along with enough land for "building expansion." Although both the governor and the auditor general found the property "specially appropriate for the Museum," the historical commission and the

⁶²*Ibid.*, 403. While most historical museum personnel today believe there is a place for both thematic and object-focused exhibits, they usually give priority to the former in permanent exhibits.

⁶³Michigan Historical Commission (MHC) Minutes, October 11, 1943.

construction firm they hired to inspect the buildings thought it only “reasonably adequate.” They did not believe that it could be used to house the State Archives at all. The commissioners debated the wisdom of what they clearly saw as a stopgap measure, but in the end requested that the legislature appropriate \$50,000 to purchase and renovate the Turner property and \$100,000 to construct “the first unit of a permanent historical building.”⁶⁴

The Michigan Historical Commission used the occasion of the museum’s February 1944 dedication ceremonies to call attention to the need for a new building. In its front-page story, Lansing’s *State Journal* quoted commissioner and University of Michigan history professor Charles Sink, who asserted in his remarks that, “This frame building and its annex are overcrowded and present a constant fire hazard. It is the responsibility of the historical commission to see that Michigan’s valuable papers and relics have a better place.” The commission ultimately wanted a “monumental half-million dollar fire-proof structure” modeled on those in states such as Wisconsin, Ohio and Illinois, Sink said. A *State Journal* editorial commended his frankness and expressed optimism that the building would become “part of the post-war construction program.” *Michigan History*’s own coverage of the museum opening, which reprinted the editorial, followed a forty page case statement titled “Postwar Public Works Program for a State Historical Building.”⁶⁵

Given the circumstances of the museum’s move, it is not surprising that exhibits in

⁶⁴“Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Michigan Historical Commission,” *MH* 27 (1943): 370-373.

⁶⁵“Kelly Calls Museum Relics Vivid Chronicle of State,” *Lansing State Journal*, February 9, 1944: 1; “Dedicatory Candor,” *Lansing State Journal*, February 10, 1944: 4; *MH* 28(1944): 247-289; 326-327.

the new facility were similar to those in the State Office Building. "Some Things about the Michigan Historical Museum," a booklet nearly as uninspiring as its title, fails to make any conceptual distinction between exhibits and collections.⁶⁶ Collections such as lighting, glass, historical china, and paperweights are described as decorative arts pieces. A section labeled "Some Unusual Pioneer Relics" might be expected to offer some context for the artifacts discussed, but here, too, the focus is on the artifacts themselves rather what they convey about Michigan's past. Many of the objects shown had been collected by Marie Ferrey and her contemporaries as testimony to settlers' experiences in building homes and communities across southern Michigan. Now they were simply antiques. The few transportation-related items on exhibit were relegated to the secondary residence on the museum property.

The exhibits in the new museum reflected the interests museum director Sherman had developed in his days as a collector and dealer. He established a "Case of the Month" in the new museum, which was announced as featuring "a different exhibit" every month. In practice this appears to have meant changing displays from private collections.⁶⁷ When the museum announced the hiring of an educator in 1945, her expertise in pressed glass and her personal collection of goblets was given more attention than her teaching experience.⁶⁸ Outreach activities also emphasized the decorative arts, for example when Sherman exhibited some of the museum's pottery and paperweights at Lansing's 1949

⁶⁶Copies in MHM Collections Unit, Museum History Files.

⁶⁷"Case of the Month," *MH* 28 (1944):327-328; "Michigan News," *MH* 31 (1947): 93-94.

⁶⁸"Historical News and Notes," *MH* 29 (1945): 115-116.

Antiques and Hobby Show.⁶⁹

Ironically, in light of the concern expressed regarding the museum's susceptibility to fire, it was the supposedly fireproof State Office Building that suffered a devastating fire in February 1951. The conflagration, which was not fully extinguished for several days, destroyed "a great bulk of the records in the custody of the Commission, its equipment, stock of the magazine, catalog, and other records and materials," which had been stored on the most heavily damaged floor. The historical commission's offices, located on the floor below, suffered considerable water damage.⁷⁰ In the fire's aftermath, the issue of records management became a state priority, and the archives eventually moved into a new, state-of-the-art Records Center, shared with the Department of Administration.

Although it is likely that the museum's move to the Turner House saved its collections, the State Office Building fire was nonetheless a disaster for the museum. The focus on fire recovery, and the subsequent housing of only the State Archives in a new structure, effectively ended consideration of a new building for the historical commission. Financial troubles experienced by the state in the late 1950s further clouded prospects for the project. The museum was left to get along as best it could in its "temporary" quarters in the Turner house.

By the time of the State Office Building fire, day-to-day direction of the Michigan Historical Commission's activities had passed from thirty year veteran George Fuller to Dr. Lewis Beeson. He had come to Michigan in 1946 from Minnesota, where he had

⁶⁹"Michigan News," *Michigan History*, 33 (1949): 172.

⁷⁰MHC Minutes, February 28, 1951.

substituted for the state historical society's superintendent during the latter's wartime military service. Beeson had previously held research and curatorial positions in the society's archives.⁷¹ His experience at the larger and better funded Minnesota agency gave him credibility, especially with a commission in the midst of a turnover in its membership. Together these changes in personnel resulted in a new emphasis on professionalism in commission operations.

Beginning in 1949, the historical commission expressed a desire to upgrade its museum. Commissioners first considered appointing "a committee of experts . . . to investigate, analyze and advise the Commission on museum policy, direction, practice, etc." Two years later they voted to ask "a competent person . . . to find out what improvements could be made with the facilities at the disposal of the Commission."⁷² It does not appear that either plan was actually carried out, but in 1952 the commission finally expressed more directly its dissatisfaction with C. J. Sherman's performance as museum director. Stating their unanimous opinion that "the exhibits were displayed in a way to emphasize their appeal to antique collectors rather than to historians," and directed that Sherman (who was not present for this discussion) begin planning a reorganization of the exhibits. He was to submit an outline to the commission within three months for a new arrangement that would "interpret the history of Michigan and the Old Northwest."⁷³

Discussion of just what the museum ought to be appears to have continued over the next several months. At one meeting Commissioner and historian Willis Dunbar, who

⁷¹"New Historical Commission Secretary," *MH* 30 (1946): 371-372.

⁷²MHC Minutes, November 17, 1949, October 25, 1951.

⁷³MHC Minutes, November 17, 1949, October 25, 1951, February 27, 1952.

later chaired the history department at Western Michigan University, proposed abolishing the museum altogether, since “its resources were used mainly in the Lansing area,” and in his view all of the historical commission’s programs ought to have a statewide reach. Dunbar thought the museum might be replaced by staff who could work with local museums around the state. Although it does not appear that this proposal garnered much support, it confirms the museum’s lack of status with the commission. When the commission reappointed Sherman to his post for the 1953-54 fiscal year, he announced (or possibly agreed) that he would retire after that.⁷⁴

To replace Sherman, Beeson and the historical commission hired Eugene T. Petersen, a recent history Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. His academic training provided assurance that he would approach his task in the museum from the point of view desired by the commission. Petersen’s dissertation, a history of wildlife conservation in Michigan, was evidence of his knowledge of the state’s history. Petersen’s hiring reflected a new emphasis on credentials throughout the agency.⁷⁵

By 1952 the commission was well aware of what Henry Brown was doing with the Detroit Historical Museum, and its desire to focus the Michigan Historical Museum on history rather than antiques echoes Brown’s emphasis on ideas over things. Given his academic and archival background, Secretary Beeson certainly would have encouraged this emphasis, if he did not actually initiate it. But because they perceived the problem as one of content rather than presentation, neither Beeson nor the commission really brought the audience into the equation. And unlike Detroit, where members of the historical

⁷⁴MHC Minutes, May 5, 1953.

⁷⁵Two trained archivists had also been hired since the fire (*MH* 39 (1955): 221).

society regularly volunteered at the museum and attended meetings of hobby and collectors' clubs, the Michigan Historical Commission saw relatively little of its public constituency. Although its affiliation with the Historical Society of Michigan continued, a statewide organization was inherently more diffuse than a local society. Lewis Beeson was a researcher and archivist rather than a museum person. He belonged to the American Association of State and Local History, but was not an active member. Along with the two professionally trained historians on the historical commission, he tended to favor its more scholarly activities.

New museum director Eugene Petersen accepted the historical commission's mandate. He fully agreed that the Michigan Historical Museum should tell the story of Michigan "from prehistoric times to the present." His vision explicitly included "the economic development of the state and significant events of the recent past." Petersen boxed up much of the decorative arts material—dismissing it as "china, glassware and bric-a-brac"—to make room for a series of exhibits covering different time periods in the state's history. He created an Indian Room that described Native American life from the post-glacial period through the treaties that opened Michigan to white settlement in the nineteenth century. The Stagecoach Room carried the story through the 1850s.⁷⁶

The new museum director moved quickly and with confidence. Secretary Beeson appears to have been somewhat startled to have an employee who acted as decisively as Petersen did. Both he and the commissioners felt that Petersen, in his first annual report, should have credited the historical commission as the source of the museum's renewed

⁷⁶[Eugene T. Petersen], "Annual Report of the State Historical Museum, 1954-55": 1-4. Copy in Museum History Files.

emphasis on Michigan history. Beeson was careful to mention in the Commission minutes that he had pointed this out to his subordinate. When friction over the exhibit changes developed between Petersen and an older female staff member, Beeson was unable to deal with the situation effectively.⁷⁷

Moving beyond the academic focus of his training, Petersen updated administrative procedures and argued that the museum needed its own budget, rather than competing with other Commission priorities for what little remained beyond salaries and other fixed expenses. He reported that by utilizing materials on hand and a donated drill and power saw, he had been able to renovate the entire first floor of the museum with an expenditure of only \$189.00. Like C.J. Sherman before him, however, he argued that a professional exhibits program required reliable funding; he should be able to count on having at least a modest amount to work with each year.⁷⁸

Petersen was clearly fighting an uphill battle. "Historical Museums—Dead or Alive?" an article he authored for the *Midwest Museums Quarterly* in 1955, reflects some of his frustration, as well as his belief that museums did not have to be dead.⁷⁹ Even had he been more patient and diplomatic, significantly improving the museum's overall status would have been difficult to accomplish. The Historical Commission had always been frugally funded, and had neither the visibility nor the political clout needed to attract more resources. When he was "loaned" to the Mackinac Island State Park Commission in the

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, MHC Minutes, August 11-13, 1955, February 18, 1955, February 17-18, 1956.

⁷⁸[Peterson], "Annual Report, 1954-55": 15-16.

⁷⁹Eugene T. Petersen, "Historical Museums—Dead or Alive?", *Midwest Museums Quarterly* (October 1955):3-8. Petersen avoids identifying the institutions he cites as examples of poor practice, but mention of distinctive artifacts links one or two to MHM.

summer of 1958 to develop its museum, Petersen recognized the potential of a significant historic site located at a major state tourist destination. He resigned his job at the Michigan Historical Museum that November to become director of the Fort Mackinac Division of the park.⁸⁰

Eugene Petersen's position remained vacant for nearly two years, due to a recession in the auto industry that sharply reduced state tax revenues. During that time the historical commission allowed museum assistant Dorothy Barnard, the staff member who had persistently opposed Petersen, to run the museum. Although she did not completely reverse the changes he had made, she brought the decorative arts back to the museum's exhibits, apparently without interference from the commission. Since Petersen had never quite fulfilled his plan of presenting the state's economic development, Michigan's state museum remained without any reference to the auto industry, or indeed other non-military aspects of the twentieth century, at the end of the 1950s.

The arrival of a new director in July, 1960 renewed the potential for change. Solan Weeks came from the Detroit Historical Museum, where he had begun as a guide and educator, but had more recently held the position of Curator of Industrial History. In Detroit he had developed programs for WTVS-TV and organized several VMCCA Motor Album exhibits. Weeks had worked at the Detroit museum since the early 1950s, and had recently completed a Master's thesis for the College of Education at Wayne State University titled "The Detroit Historical Museum: Its Heritage, History and New Horizon." He had been thoroughly grounded in Henry Brown's principles of community

⁸⁰"Annual Report of the Michigan Historical Commission," *MH* 43 (1959): 481-482. Under Petersen's direction, the Mackinac parks earned a national reputation for combining serious historical and archaeological research with popular appeal.

involvement and an active museum program.⁸¹

The historical commission made certain expectations clear to Weeks even before he was officially on the job. They wanted to meet with him more regularly than they had with Eugene Petersen, probably in hopes of curbing any tendencies toward the latter's independent style in the new museum director. The desire to reach beyond Lansing was also clear in the commission's directive "to have the museum director assist the local historical museums throughout the state." The minutes record that he was advised "not to get too bogged down in connection with the state historical museum in Lansing." Solan Weeks supported the plan of service to the museum community and enjoyed his work with other museums around the state, but he must have wondered just a little about this less-than-ringing endorsement of the institution he was to lead.

Weeks did bring some new exhibit techniques to the Michigan Historical Museum. He oversaw regular changes in the museum's exhibits, utilizing pegboard, cardboard lettering and simple graphic cutouts to add visual appeal.⁸² Because he arrived just prior to the Civil War Centennial celebration, that theme figured prominently in his early exhibit work (Figure 9). Although he had an interest in old cars himself, he recognized the limitations of exhibiting in a former residence; models were the closest the museum came to exhibiting Michigan's major industry under Weeks.

Shortly after Solan Weeks began at MHM, the historical commission gave him another assignment that reached well beyond Lansing, and proved to be the museum's

⁸¹Weeks, "The Detroit Historical Museum": 106; "Who's Who," *Bulletin* 13 (Oct. 1956): 3; Solan Weeks, "The Development of the Museum Movement in America," *MH* 46 (1962): 33.

⁸²See clippings and photos in Museum History Files.

most ambitious project of the 1960s. The commissioners wanted him to develop a mobile museum of Michigan history. They had hoped to start such a program since 1954, when Wisconsin's historymobile was a topic of discussion at the AASLH annual meeting. The commission had discussed the project several times, but had taken no practical steps toward actually getting a historymobile on the road.⁸³

Without using any direct state funding, Weeks managed to have the Michigan Historymobile in operation by the summer of 1964.⁸⁴ Creation of the mobile museum, a semi-trailer fitted with 19 exhibit cases, was a collaborative effort among a dozen museums in the state. Each institution produced and installed exhibitry for one or more of the cases. Their content ranged from "Prehistoric Man in Michigan" to "Post War Progress—Michigan Today and Tomorrow." The case dealing with the development of the automobile and Michigan highways was produced by Henry Ford Museum. The Michigan Historical Museum was responsible for the World War II case, which probably at least mentioned the role of the auto industry in wartime production.

The Historymobile proved quite popular around the state, partly because of its novelty, but partly because it brought a statewide perspective on history to communities which had only local museums, if indeed they had any at all. But beyond its first year, the historical commission struggled to find the funding needed to keep it on the road. Weeks' organization of the project brought the MHM an AASLH award, notable in part because

⁸³Clifford L. Lord, ed., *Ideas in Conflict: A Colloquium on Certain problems in Historical Society work in the United States and Canada* (Harrisburg, PA: American Association for State and Local History, 1958): Chapter 4; MHC Minutes, May 11, 1954; August 29, 1954; September 16, 1954; August 25, 1960.

⁸⁴Museum History Files include two scrapbooks about the Historymobile, on which the following discussion is based.

the citation referred to the fact that the sponsoring museum had “a staff of four and exhibit supplies budget of only \$250 per year.”⁸⁵

Not long after they launched the Historymobile, the Michigan Historical Commission and all of its programs experienced a major change in status. As part of a general consolidation of state government under a new constitution approved in 1963, the functions of the commission were taken over by the Michigan Department of State (DOS). The historical commission became an advisory, rather than a policy-making body.⁸⁶ This change in governance initiated a rather long period of transition, during which Solan Weeks left the museum director’s position.

The Michigan Historical Commission had entered the postwar period anticipating construction of a sizeable modern structure to bring its functions under one roof and the development of its collection of artifacts into a professionally run museum. When the commission relinquished its authority to the Department of State in 1965, the reality fell far short of those expectations. Michigan still lacked unified housing for its historical programs, and there was little prospect of new construction. The museum had been in its “temporary” home for over twenty years. It had developed a more active exhibits program, one that was better researched and more professionally presented, but it remained short-staffed and inadequately funded. Michigan’s state museum resembled a good county historical society museum more than it did the historical museums of other large industrial states.

⁸⁵Clipping in Historymobile Scrapbook I: 7.

⁸⁶In contrast, the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, where Eugene Petersen now worked, retained its authority, including the ability to issue bonds to fund capital projects.

Some of the reasons for this lack of accomplishment were beyond anyone's control. The State Office Building fire and the severity of the late 1950s recession could not have been anticipated. But the historical commission failed to develop practical plans or to build a constituency whose support could have helped it move closer to making a new building a reality. Secretary Beeson, who retired just prior to the DOS takeover, had professionalized the operations of the historical commission considerably. He showed no signs, however, of Henry Brown's commitment to making history accessible and relevant to a public audience.

Re-creating Henry Ford's Museum

After the death of its founder, managers at the Edison Institute Museum looked to other large museums for models to help them organize its operations and increase its efficiency. When they looked to these same models for guidance in developing an exhibit philosophy, however, they began to depart from the path Ford established for the museum, which had now been renamed in his honor. The decorative arts took precedence over more utilitarian objects, and even the latter were valued less for their functionality than for their market value, age or scarcity. Henry Ford Museum became a collector's museum.

The leaders at HFM had practical reasons for the approach they took, as well as less tangible assumptions that probably steered them in the same direction. On a very concrete level, the sheer size of the museum and village entailed both advantages and disadvantages. Institutions of comparable scale were a logical place to look for the organizational structures and procedures needed to operate efficiently. Moreover, the Edison Institute had been treated as a museum of some significance since well before it

opened to the public. Those associated with it assumed that its importance would continue to be recognized, and that it belonged in the company of the nation's major museums.

The loss of Henry Ford's distinctive personal vision for the institution posed a challenge that in the long run was to prove more troublesome. Ford had said very little about how the museum and village should be run after his death. His successors used the freedom they were thus given to try to make the operation more efficient and professional. Although they continued to honor Ford as the museum's founder, the model they had chosen made it difficult to update HFM's exhibit strategy effectively, let alone creatively.

The institute's new leadership grappled first with administrative matters. Both museum and village were large institutions in their own right, and the challenge of their operation was compounded by the presence of the school system. The entire Edison Institute operated at a significant loss. Greenfield Village and the museum generated at least some income, and with better management could earn more, but the schools had never been intended to make money. One of the first steps, therefore, in establishing more business-like operations was to close both the high school and the trade school, leaving only the primary grades still operating. Despite these changes, the Edison Institute remained very much a Ford enterprise throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Benson and William Clay Ford succeeded their grandfather in the institute's presidency from 1947 until 1968.⁸⁷ Two Ford Motor Company administrators were tapped to help bring administrative order to the museum. Perhaps most importantly, powers of governance and ultimate fiscal control continued to be vested in a small board of directors dominated by

⁸⁷Geoffrey C. Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage: the Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979* (Dearborn: Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979): 136, 176.

Ford's three grandsons.

Although efforts had been made as early as 1947 to plan for the Edison Institute's future, it was not until 1951 that effective leadership began to take hold. That year Ford public relations official A. K. Mills assumed the newly created post of executive director, overseeing both museum and village.⁸⁸ One of Mills' first actions was to review the overall management situation. He invited Allyston Boyor, assistant to the president at Colonial Williamsburg, to visit Dearborn and offer an assessment based on his knowledge of one of the few institutions in the country that was even remotely comparable to the Ford museum complex. Boyor focused much of his attention on behind-the-scenes issues such as accounting, personnel management, maintenance and security, offering advice on how the institution could be run more efficiently.⁸⁹

Boyor urged Mills to begin by more clearly defining the purpose of both museum and village. "Without a clear definition of what they are and what they are trying to accomplish, they cannot grow intelligently, they cannot do a satisfactory educational job, nor can they assume their rightful place in the field of great American museums." It was not enough simply to have an outstanding collection; it needed to be interpreted. It would take serious thought and discussion to decide what the institution should say and how to say it. Boyor personally believed that the museum was trying to do too much: "You are trying to be an industrial museum as well as a fine arts museum." He proposed removing the fine and decorative arts collections to some other location and emphasizing in the

⁸⁸Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 124-125, 176. *Detroit Free Press*, September 13, 1954: 12.

⁸⁹Allyston Boyer to A.K. Mills, April 3, 1951. Copy in Research Center, HFM/GV.

existing building “the industrial and agricultural sections, which are the true heart of the exhibit.” He also noted the marketing possibilities inherent in a collection with “a unique appeal for men and boys. The appeal of most museums is feminine. Slant your promotion to men and boys.”⁹⁰

Finally, Boyor understood that interpretation would be wasted if the exhibits were not visually attractive. He observed that “the Institute is very weak in the whole question of display. . . . Many items, such as the automobiles, are merely racked in lines without any highlighting of outstanding items, grouping, or effort to present them in an interesting fashion.” He suggested changing the museum’s lighting, breaking up the long aisles and including more up-to-date examples of various technologies that would be recognizable to visitors from personal experience. Boyor thought that simple partitions used to focus attention on particular groups of artifacts would be an improvement on “the mass conglomerative attic-type display approach used now.”

A. K. Mills understood the need to enliven the exhibits and make them attractive to visitors. The museum’s first special short-term exhibit, featuring its collection of musical instruments, debuted in 1951. In the winter of 1953 the museum installed *Sports Cars in Review*, as one former staff member put it, “to liven up the dead time.” It proved popular enough to become an annual event that continued for two decades. For the first such show, space was marked off on the exhibit floor with plain convention hall drapery. The cars were positioned behind pipe railings anchored in concrete bases, identified by

⁹⁰Boyer to Mills, April 3, 1951.

placards mounted on easels.⁹¹ By the late 1960s, the show featured carpeting, potted plants and more sophisticated labeling, but the basic format of the exhibit—a selection of sports cars featured individually like works of art—remained the same, and the concrete and pipe barriers were still in evidence.⁹²

As part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Ford Motor Company in 1953, the newly renamed Henry Ford Museum opened what might be characterized as its first interpretive exhibit: *Henry Ford, A Personal History*. It traced the founder's life and achievements in almost obsessive detail: one case held twenty-two trophies! Located upstairs in the Independence Hall portion of the museum, the exhibit consisted primarily of artifacts, photographs and documents arranged in cases, and a few large artifacts, including three cars. It did include, however, one genuine attempt to bring a particular moment in history to life for visitors. An engine mounted on a reconstruction of Clara Ford's kitchen sink portrayed one of her husband's early experiments with gasoline engines.⁹³

A.K. Mills' tenure at the museum was cut short in 1954 by a fatal heart attack, before he had a chance to address the matter of better exhibit techniques and interpretation in the Hall of Mechanical Arts. Donald Shelley, an experienced curator whom Mills had

⁹¹Roger Van Bolt, interview with author, Aug. 21, 1997; Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 130.

⁹²Henry Ford Museum Staff, *Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972): 219.

⁹³*Henry Ford, A Personal History* (Dearborn: Henry Ford Museum, 1953). With eight acres of exhibit space on the ground floor, easily accessible through wide doorways, the staff chose to locate this exhibit in a space never intended to accommodate artifacts as large as Model Ts. They had to be hoisted over a balcony and turned on their sides to pass through the door to the gallery!

hired to oversee the fine arts collections, was named to succeed him. Shelley held a Ph.D. in American Art from New York University and had curated the New-York Historical Society's collection of paintings and sculpture from 1935-1948. Whatever his predecessor might have thought of the suggestion to remove the fine and decorative arts from the museum, Shelley was unlikely to carry out such a plan. In fact, it was he who made the decorative arts collections a major focus of the museum.⁹⁴

Donald Shelley continued to develop the museum's curatorial staff, following Allyston Boyor's recommendation to hire "experts with specific knowledge in their respective fields." Division of curatorial responsibility according to artifact classification was the norm in large museums, very few of which were history museums. A museum that aspired to be a "great American museum" would do well to follow suit. In any case, the similarity of Henry Ford Museum's decorative arts collections to those of places like the New York's Metropolitan and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, made the art museum pattern a logical one to follow, especially for someone with an arts background like Shelley. Large historical society museums from New York to Chicago were modeling themselves after art museums in much the same way. HFM staff were not particularly active in any of the major professional organizations during this period.⁹⁵

The art museum approach to curatorship entailed consequences for both collections and exhibits at HFM. Because it was artifact-focused, the museum began to accomplish needed inventory, cataloguing and research on the collections. Focusing on

⁹⁴Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 137; Shelley, "Henry Ford—Pioneer Collector of Americana," *Museum News* 39:9 (May 1961): 28-29.

⁹⁵*History News* generally reflects this trend, with which I am personally familiar in the historical societies mentioned.

detailed comparisons among a relatively narrow class of artifacts did not encourage consideration of broad historical issues or interpretive themes, however. It also led to a certain fragmentation of both staff and exhibits, as each curator saw the museum through the lens of his or her artifact specialty, rather than sharing a common overview of the institution.⁹⁶

Not until 1960, after more traditional curatorial slots in the decorative arts were filled, did the Ford Museum hire its first Curator of Transportation. It surprised no one that an automobile specialist was chosen for the position. Leslie Henry was a former president of the oldest car collectors' organization in the country, the Antique Automobile Club of America, and had served as Master of Ceremonies at Greenfield Village's Old Car Festival.⁹⁷ Like other curators at the museum, Henry researched his collections in order to better document their status in the context of others of their type. He used existing records to identify the source and history of individual artifacts and to document vehicle restorations. He also assisted both collectors and personnel from less specialized museums with identification and dating of artifacts. Although he certainly had contact with other curators, Henry's world was largely filled with cars and car enthusiasts.

An artifact-centered approach to the automotive collection meant an emphasis on what made each vehicle in the collection special in relation to other automobiles. The historical development of the automobile was presented as a progression from one car to the next, primarily dependent on the dynamics of technology. Acquisitions during this

⁹⁶Henry Brown's topical organization at DHM, on the other hand, forced curators to think beyond the specifics of the collections.

⁹⁷*History News*, 15 (September 1960): 136.

period were limited, and intended to give HFM's collection greater cachet among hobbyists. These included a Bugatti Royale, FDR's Lincoln limousine and a Chrysler used in ticker tape parades on Wall Street for twenty years.⁹⁸ The broader social context in which cars were made, marketed and used was all but ignored. At the Henry Ford Museum this internalist focus was compounded by the lack of a clear story to be told. Ford's collecting had been broad, encompassing a wide range of American artifacts with a considerable geographic and temporal range. It lacked the unifying focus on a single place (or time period) that enabled the Detroit Historical Museum to link social history with metropolitan services and industrial history.

In keeping with HFM's emphasis on specific types of artifacts, its exhibits staff remained relatively small, especially considering the enormous amount of space to be maintained. Henry Ford Museum continued to mount special, short-term exhibits, including its annual sports car exhibit, in a portion of Mechanical Arts Hall. In addition, HFM occasionally arranged special displays at events like the Detroit Auto Show in Cobo Hall. Its emphasis on the decorative arts continued throughout the 1960s and into the early 70s. However, the accumulation of machinery and utilitarian domestic artifacts that filled most of its vast gallery remained Henry Ford Museum's most recognizable exhibit. Artifacts, including the automobiles, continued to be lined up more or less chronologically within the grid formed by the building's support columns. With its appearance essentially unchanged since Henry Ford's day, the ultimate effect of Mechanical Arts Hall was "to

⁹⁸*The Transportation Collection* (Dearborn: Greenfield Village & Henry Ford Museum, 1972): 12-13; *Mechanical Arts at the Henry Ford Museum* (Dearborn: Edison Institute, 1974): 120.

crush people with numbers,” in the words of one of Donald Shelley’s successors.⁹⁹

Two decades after the death of Henry Ford, the museum he founded had developed administrative systems to increase efficiency and accountability. Edison Institute managers had taken greater responsibility for its finances, although they still depended on various sources of Ford funding to supplement earned income. HFM had also developed a curatorial system that brought knowledgeable staff to Dearborn to document and care for the collection Henry Ford had assembled. The museum patterned that system after the organization of some of the country’s largest and most prominent institutions. While museum leaders emphasized loyalty to Ford and his collection, they had lost sight of the purpose for which he had originally assembled it. In their drive to be counted as “a great American museum,” they forgot that their institution’s distinctiveness lay not only in the individual objects of its magnificent collection, but in their collective identity and purpose as well.

New Energy at the Sloan Museum

Out of the original grab-bag of possibilities—panorama of transportation, children’s museum, history museum, etc.—Roger Van Bolt had developed a museum that emphasized automobiles, health, and to a lesser extent, local history. When he retired in 1978, he recognized that more needed to be done with exhibits and education, but felt that he had done his part by building the collection and opening the museum’s doors. Despite the uncertainty of Flint’s economy, Sloan’s top position was an attractive one. The difficulties

⁹⁹Steven K. Hamp, interview with author, May 12, 1999. Hamp became president of HFM/GV in 1996.

Flint faced in the 1970s seemed very similar to those confronting other cities in the state, especially those dependent on the auto industry. The Sloan Museum's ties to the school district and the cultural center seemed to offer institutional strength. It was also an institution whose professional shortcomings, although obvious, could be readily remedied.

Van Bolt's successor, Phillip Kwiatkowski, clearly represented a new generation of leadership for the museum. More than three decades younger than Van Bolt, Kwiatkowski also had less academic training in history, but a stronger museum background. At Central Michigan University he had combined a Master's degree in history with museum studies courses and work in the university museum.¹⁰⁰ Kwiatkowski also had several years' experience running small historical museums in Michigan and New York. He almost immediately identified exhibits as one of his priorities for Sloan.

Within three months of his arrival, Kwiatkowski had developed an initial agenda for the museum. His summary report to the museum's Advisory Committee reflects the development of more detailed professional standards for museums during the 1960s and 1970s. The new director outlined specific environmental and security measures that he believed were needed. He had already been awarded funds from the Cultural Center endowment to add humidification equipment to the museum's climate control system. Kwiatkowski also identified changes that needed to be made with regard to collections-related policies and procedures to bring them up to current standards. He argued that the museum needed to become more selective in both its acquisition and its borrowing of

¹⁰⁰Phillip Kwiatkowski, interview with author, January 26, 1999.

cars.¹⁰¹

Contemporary standards emphasized the importance of museums' educational role, but left implementation of that function to individual institutions. Kwiatkowski had not yet had time to develop detailed plans for anything new, but he knew that the museum was understaffed. He believed that adding an exhibit designer and an educator to the staff "would increase our effectiveness threefold." These essential positions would enable Sloan to create exhibits that would "immerse you in the total environment," and that would be complemented by special programming for different age groups.¹⁰²

Kwiatkowski's report to the Advisory Committee also announced plans to apply for accreditation from the American Association of Museums, knowing that both exhibits and educational programs would need significant development before it could be achieved. By 1979, the program had operated for nearly a decade, and the process was reasonably familiar to most museum professionals. It involved an initial application to determine eligibility, followed by completion of a rather extensive institutional self-study questionnaire. Finally a three-member visitation committee inspected the museum. Institutions that were judged to meet basic professional standards were accredited. The point was to make accreditation an achievable goal, rather than a mark of outstanding performance.¹⁰³

Sloan's focus on accreditation defined the American Association of Museums, and

¹⁰¹"Director's Report, Sloan Museum Advisory Committee," October 18, 1978: 1-2. Copy filed with Advisory Committee Minutes, Perry Archive.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*: 2-3.

¹⁰³Randi R. Glickberg, "Museums Appraise the Program," *Museum News* 55:2 (November/December 1976): 18-19.

thus the museum field generally, as its primary professional orientation. Like all AAM programs, the accreditation process was open to museums of any discipline. It was designed to judge an institution's performance as a museum; there were no specialized standards for different types of museums. Indeed, since Sloan was a general museum, combining primarily history and health, AAM and the more localized Midwest Museums Conference and Michigan Museums Association offered a better institutional fit than did discipline-based associations.

By the end of 1978, the museum had funding from a local foundation for the first year's salary for both a designer and an educator. Both positions had been filled by mid-February 1979. The educator, Stephen Laux, had begun developing programs for visitors of all ages, and was also recruiting docents to assist him in giving tours of the museum. The exhibit designer, Carol Banfield, also got right to work, and had her first temporary exhibit ready to open in May.¹⁰⁴ Celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Michigan School for the Deaf, it was the first of a regular rotation of special exhibits, which included both in-house productions and traveling shows.

Planning for permanent exhibits on the history of Genesee County began at the same time. In May 1979, the museum newsletter included a plea for old barn lumber to be used in the nineteenth century segment, and the summer issue featured a sketch of the proposed Native American exhibit section. The same issue mentioned that the museum was applying for a planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for the twentieth century portion of the exhibit, which would "detail the development of the

¹⁰⁴"Staff Additions," *Sloan News* 1:1 (March/April 1979): 2; "Michigan School for the Deaf," *Sloan News* 1:2 (May/June 1979): 2.

auto industry and its effect on Genesee County.”¹⁰⁵

Director Kwiatkowski had also taken immediate steps to raise the Sloan Museum’s profile in the community, by establishing a friends’ organization and beginning publication of a regular newsletter. Although the Sloan had utilized volunteers in a number of capacities under Roger Van Bolt, they were nearly always people with a special interest in a single aspect of the museum’s exhibits, whether automotive, health or children’s programs. The Friends of Sloan Museum and the new docent program were the first groups whose purpose was to support the entire museum.

At the same time that it cultivated new supporters, Sloan continued to value its old friends. Auto enthusiasts in particular played a significant role at the museum. Working with Jim Johnson, who had become the museum’s associate director, volunteers assisted in restoration projects. The Summer Fair Committee established under Roger Van Bolt remained a significant source of support, expanding its annual event and funding further additions to the car collection. The committee consisted of representatives of Flint area antique car clubs, and thus kept Sloan in touch with collectors.

By the spring of 1980, construction of exhibits devoted to Flint in the nineteenth century was well under way; work had also begun on the first segment of the twentieth century exhibit, a re-creation of the setting in which Billy Durant signed the papers establishing General Motors. The temporary exhibit for summer 1980 on farming in Genesee County also contributed elements to the permanent display. Following completion of the nineteenth century exhibits in mid-1981, staff began installing a small

¹⁰⁵“From the Director,” *Sloan News* 1:2 (May/June 1979): 1; “Exhibits,” *Sloan News* 1:3 (July/Aug. 1979): 3.

prehistoric gallery.¹⁰⁶

Although not quite the total immersion Kwiatkowski had promised, the new exhibits were unlike anything seen previously at Sloan. For the first time the staff created a number of environmental settings, including a woodland scene for historic period Native Americans, a trading post to represent the earliest white settlement in Flint and a blacksmith/carriage shop as part of the city's development into Vehicle City. Painted murals added color and depth to exhibits. The use of different kinds of wood, metal and fabric added visual texture. Fluorescent fixtures were replaced with incandescent track lighting, which allowed staff to vary light levels, adding drama to the exhibits. The prehistoric gallery featured as its crowning touch a papier mache and fiberglass glacier looming out of the wall.¹⁰⁷

Nor were the automotive galleries being neglected. As early as 1979, they were enlivened by mannequins in costume. Cars were rotated on and off exhibit more frequently and displayed more often with automotive accessories. Staff experimented with varied layouts. In contrast to the tightly packed used car line-up that has been described as "a showcase of radiators," they left more space around each car and turned some so visitors could see the sides and back ends (Figure 10). Occasionally, an automobile was

¹⁰⁶"Museum Receives Grant," *Sloan News* 2:1 (January/February 1980): 2; "Giddap! Or the Story of Farming in Genesee County," *Sloan News* 2:3 (May/June 1980): 3; "New Permanent Exhibits," *Sloan News* 3:4 (July/August 1981): 2.

¹⁰⁷With the exception of the glacier, dismantled in 1998, these exhibits remain in place. The change in lighting systems also represents compliance with new professional standards. By this time the ultraviolet radiation in fluorescent lighting was understood to be damaging to many types of artifacts.

exhibited with its hood up or its trunk open.¹⁰⁸ As Sloan staff implemented these exhibit changes, planning continued for the twentieth century exhibit, now titled *Flint and the Automobile, 1904-1942*. Greater attention now shifted to that project. Automotive specialist Jim Johnson and education director Steve Laux, working with Kwiatkowski and Curator of Collections Scott Peters, had developed a preliminary plan. By the end of 1981, they were ready to begin looking seriously for funding to construct the exhibit.¹⁰⁹

Despite the mixed performance of the local economy, director Kwiatkowski had reason to be optimistic about the Sloan's ability to raise the money needed, which he initially estimated at about \$60,000.¹¹⁰ He had been successful up to that point at raising money for museum programs from a variety of sources. Quite early in his tenure, he had sought assurance from the Cultural Center board that money raised from other sources would not be deducted from their contribution to the Sloan's annual budget. Grant support to the museum during Kwiatkowski's first four years on the job included not only funding for the curators of education and exhibits, but for capital improvements such as an improved fire protection system and start-up costs for a computerized collections database, one of the first in the state.¹¹¹ He had succeeded in winning one of the first General Operating Support grants awarded by the federal Institute for Museum Services,

¹⁰⁸Phillip Kwiatkowski, interview with author, November 20-21, 1997; Photo Files, Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.

¹⁰⁹"Flint and the Automobile, 1904-1942," *Sloan News* 3:2 (Mar/Apr 1981): 3; Kwiatkowski interview; Clint Miller, interview with author, December 11, 1997.

¹¹⁰"Report to Advisory Committee," December 20, 1982, Advisory Committee Minutes.

¹¹¹"Director's Report," October 1978, Advisory Committee Minutes; "Museum Receives Additional Funds," *Sloan News*, 2:3 (May/June 1980): 2; "Does Compute," *Sloan News* 4:2 (March/April 1982): 2.

and had raised money from local foundations, individuals and groups including car clubs and the UAW to support the exhibits program. Fund-raising events were becoming a regular feature of the museum's calendar.¹¹²

Kwiatkowski's grant-writing record was excellent, but he had not managed to increase the museum's base funding from the Cultural Center or any other source. Nineteen eighty-two brought Sloan its first significant setback since his arrival. Curator of Exhibits Carol Banfield left the museum early in the year. Before Kwiatkowski could hire a replacement, he was notified that the local foundation that had supported her position would not renew its grant. Only by reducing several employees to part-time status was education curator Steve Laux' position preserved.¹¹³ During the following year, Sloan's financial picture changed little. The Summer Fair continued to be the museum's single largest money-maker, raising about \$25,000 annually for the automotive collections.¹¹⁴ The museum was able to find exhibit funding in the \$1,000-3,000 range, but not the larger gifts needed to fund the twentieth century exhibit.

Fortunately, there were other sources of professional satisfaction for Sloan's staff. With Phil Kwiatkowski chairing the local arrangements committee, the museum joined other Flint institutions in hosting the 1983 meeting of the Midwest Museums Conference, which brought colleagues from across the region to the museum. At the end of the year,

¹¹²*Sloan News*, 1:3 (July/August 1979): 4; 2:3 (May/June 1980): 2; 3:6 (November/December 1981): 1,3; 4:3 (May/June 1982): 1.

¹¹³"Bon Voyage!" *Sloan News*, 4:2 (March/April 1982): 2; "A Challenging Year," *Sloan News* 4:5 (September/October 1982): 1.

¹¹⁴"Ten Years Old and Better than Ever," *Sloan News*, 4:5 (September/October 1982): 1; "Summer Fair Wrap-up," *Sloan News* 5:5 (September/October 1983): 1.

the American Association of Museums voted to accredit the Sloan Museum. Kwiatkowski and his staff took considerable pride in their achievement.¹¹⁵

Five years after Phil Kwiatkowski arrived at Sloan, it was a much livelier place. Visitation had increased substantially, the museum offered better exhibits and many more programs, and significant improvements had been made in security and environmental conditions. His professional focus on the general museum concerns associated with AAM had paid off in concrete improvements to Sloan and finally in the professional respect that came with accreditation.

Its basic institutional identity established, each of these Michigan museums proceeded to create a professional identity as well. At the Detroit Historical Museum, Henry Brown's choice of AASLH as a model reinforced the direction in which the museum was already moving. When democratic rhetoric about representing the history of the whole city was brought closer to reality with the creation of the historical commission, it became much more important to make history accessible and meaningful in a modern world. Detroit's new historical museum, made possible by the alliance of the older social elite with a newer political and educational one, designed its exhibits to help residents understand their city better and to place it in the context of a story of national progress. The extensive use made by community groups of the museum building encouraged a greater sense of public ownership of the museum and the city's history. Staff knew that their role was to facilitate public access to Detroit's history, whether by giving programs,

¹¹⁵"Midwest Museums Conference to Visit Flint," *Sloan News*, 5:5 (September/October 1983): 1; "Sloan Achieves Mark of Excellence," *Sloan News* 6:2 (March/April 1984): 1; Advisory Committee Minutes, January 24, 1984.

working behind the scenes to care for the collections or mounting exhibits.

The Michigan Historical Museum struggled more than its sister institutions during this stage of its development, in part because the MHC's professional focus was really on scholarly history. The shift from a collector orientation to an emphasis on Michigan history was in keeping with the historical commission's mandate, but one not fully supported by the existing collections. Despite lip service to the notion of history for a popular audience, neither the commission nor its secretary was very enthusiastic about it. Without resources adequate to support the changes they tried to make, both the commission and its museum floundered.

Henry Ford Museum oriented itself strongly toward collectors in the 1950s and 60s, and made them its primary audience. Modeling its business operations and curatorial structure after other "great American museums," many of them art museums, it participated in AAM, but was not particularly visible in the organization. Despite these changes, HFM remained very recognizably Henry Ford's museum in its unparalleled collections, distinctive building and the impression made by the two together in Mechanical Arts Hall.

At the Sloan Museum, professional orientation was a strategic choice. Focusing on a kind of professional certification unavailable to the other institutions so soon after their establishment, Kwiatkowski and his staff transformed the institution relatively quickly. The goal of AAM accreditation enabled Sloan to leverage resources that might otherwise have been unavailable. Swift implementation of changes in exhibits and programs brought larger audiences and a higher community profile. The achievement of accreditation verified to staff that their chosen course was a good one, and they could look forward with

confidence, despite temporary setbacks.

On the whole, professionalization proved helpful to Michigan museums, giving staff a focus and a rationale for their work. Only the Michigan Historical Museum, where the professional model preferred by upper level management was incompatible with a museum that actively served the public, failed to achieve some level of success. The others believed they were meeting the needs of their target audiences.

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CHAPTER 4

CHANGE AND CHALLENGE FOR MUSEUMS

A number of changes occurred in the external environments of Michigan museums from the 1960s through the 1980s. Despite their differing stages of institutional development, all the museums in this study faced the consequences of these external changes, which can be broadly grouped into three categories: social, professional and economic. By the early 1980s, even the youngest institution, Flint's Sloan Museum, had a well established professional identity that framed its strategies for dealing with change. Because developments in various sectors affected each other, creating in effect a web of changed circumstances, museums discovered that their responses had to deal with the entirety of the situation, rather than one or two factors in isolation. In terms of exhibits, these changes meant that Michigan museums mounted historical exhibitions that were not only larger and more expensive than those of the past, but that also attempted to address more complex historical issues and meet new audience needs and expectations. The latter task implied taking a new look at each museum's identity, and it is not surprising that institutions found they could not quite put all the pieces of a successful exhibit together the first time they tried.

Museums could not avoid being affected by the social ferment and conflict of the 1960s. Various groups within society—minorities, women, youth—began to question both exhibition content and the operating assumptions of museums. Neighborhood museums focused on neighborhood concerns, such as Washington, D.C.'s Anacostia Museum, were one response to the perceived indifference of mainstream museums. Special exhibits such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Harlem on My Mind* (1969) and *Drug Scene* (1971)

at the Museum of the City of New York, were among the higher profile and more controversial exhibits through which established institutions attempted to signal their social concerns. The Art Workers' Coalition and the New York Art Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War demonstration at the 1970 AAM meeting was perhaps the most visible expression within the museum field itself of the belief that American museums, far from neutrality in their presentations of art and culture, promoted "the social agenda of the dominant culture."¹ None of the museums studied here faced direct political challenges of this sort. Indeed, historical museums generally did not wield the obvious cultural and financial power of art museums, the most frequent targets of such protests, and rarely faced the same sort of scrutiny. There was, however, a growing expectation among both audiences and museum professionals that history museum exhibits should depict all members of society, whatever their race or economic status.

The new social climate, at once both more open and more contentious, affected all museums. In addition, Detroit and Flint felt the cumulative effects of concrete social and economic changes that had been occurring since World War II. These changes resulted in both significantly altered financial circumstances and very different local audiences for the Detroit Historical and Sloan Museums.

Between the 1950s and the early 1980s, the city of Detroit lost some 187,000 jobs. Hardest hit were manufacturing jobs, which declined by nearly 50%, and the city's retail sector, where employment declined by more than 60%. Detroit was no longer the center of economic activity in the metropolitan region; by 1980, it had fallen far behind Oakland

¹Terry Zeller, "From National Service to Social Protest: American Museums in the 1940s, '50s, '60s, and '70s," *Museum News* 75:2 (March/April 1996): 56.

and Macomb Counties in the value of the property on its tax rolls.² Over the same period, the city's African American population grew in both numbers and proportion. Constituting only 16.5% of Detroit's population in 1950, blacks were more than 65% of residents in 1980. The city's overall population declined by some 650,000 during those three decades.³ The shift to a much poorer, much blacker Detroit directly affected both the budget and the audience of the Detroit Historical Museum, and less directly, its relationship with the historical society, whose members continued to be largely white, but now lived in the suburbs.

The outlines of Flint's urban crisis differed somewhat from Detroit's. The growth of its black population in the 1950s was dramatic, more than tripling the number of African Americans in the city. Although it experienced white flight in the ensuing decades, Flint remained more racially balanced than Detroit, with a roughly 50-50 black-white split as late as 1990.⁴ Flint's continued economic dependence on General Motors exaggerated the effects of recessions in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, however, and made long-term recovery more difficult. It mattered little that the Sloan Museum was not tax supported; virtually all local funding, public or private, relied in some fashion on GM.

Historical museums found their professional context reshaped as well, by

²Joe Darden *et al.*, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987): 21-23.

³Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 23; Darden, *et al.*, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*: 101.

⁴Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987): 276; Rhonda Sanders, *Bronze Pillars: An Oral History of African-Americans in Flint* (Flint: *The Flint Journal* & Alfred P. Sloan Museum, 1995): vii.

alterations in both the museum field and the academic discipline of history. Facing a social reality far more fragmented than the consensus emphasized by postwar historiography, academic historians in the 1960s began looking beyond politics to find evidence of past division in American society and to understand how its various segments had operated within the larger whole. A “heightened interest in the agency of ordinary people” led them to seek out records—census data and court records, for example—where ordinary people might be found.⁵ Because such records were often local records, academic historians recognized new value in the libraries of local and regional historical agencies. A few began to explore the non-verbal evidence found in the artifact collections of museums associated with historical societies. Some also recognized such agencies as potential employers; by the mid-1970s, an academic job crisis of unprecedented proportions was sending trained historians, both ABD’s and PhD’s, to seek employment outside the world of college teaching.

At the same time, the national bicentennial celebration generated both interest in and funding for history museums, and prompted the creation of new institutions.⁶ Larger institutions found themselves encouraged, and even compelled, to seek out scholarly consultants in order to qualify for funding, particularly from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The cumulative result of these professional changes was a re-opening of

⁵Alice Kessler-Harris, “Social History,” in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 1990): 165.

⁶Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig cite a 1978 IMS study that identified nearly half the nation’s historical museums as being established since 1960; Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989): xv. On the growth, and subsequent collapse, of funding, see Zeller, “From National Service”: 58.

dialogue between academic historians and those who were beginning to be called public historians.

During the 1960s, museums across the country enjoyed increasing attendance. However, these visitors did not necessarily produce the additional income institutions needed to remain economically viable while meeting new demands on their resources and the pressures of persistent inflation. A cumulative sense that museums needed to position themselves better in the funding world led the American Association of Museums to create a study committee that produced a document commonly referred to as the Belmont Report.⁷ This report summarized the status of American museums and made the case for them to be considered in concrete programmatic terms as educational institutions and therefore eligible for tax concessions and funding under specific federal programs. The Belmont Report and museums' subsequent incorporation into publicly funded arts and cultural programs renewed museums' focus on their educational mission. Curators of education, and indeed, whole departments devoted to developing and presenting programs to enhance museum exhibits, proliferated during the 1970s.⁸

The American Association of Museums had been setting standards for all areas of museum practice since World War II. Increased technical knowledge concerning the care of objects resulted in more specific requirements for the materials used and the environmental conditions maintained in both exhibition halls and storage areas. A more

⁷Zeller, "From National Service": 56; American Association of Museums, *America's Museums: The Belmont Report* ([Washington, D.C.]: American Association of Museums, 1969).

⁸This trend influenced Phil Kwiatkowski's decision to hire a Curator of Education at Sloan in 1978.

fully developed understanding of how children learn led to new expectations for the content and presentation of school programs. At the same time that one AAM committee was working on the Belmont Report, another committee was beginning to develop a certification system that would identify institutions meeting basic professional standards. The voluntary accreditation system, involving a lengthy questionnaire and a visit by a team of professionals from other institutions, was approved in 1970.⁹

All of the foregoing developments were played out in an inflation-ridden economy, and accompanied by the structural changes taking place in the industrial sector. The inflation rate rose sharply during the Vietnam war and remained high throughout the 1970s, making every aspect of museum operation more costly. Coming at a time when museums were attempting to meet more exacting standards of collections care and use more sophisticated exhibit techniques, inflation created an even greater need for funds. The effects of inflation, coupled with the crippling of the Big Three automakers by oil shortages, price hikes and the inroads of foreign competition, resulted in budget shortfalls for many Michigan museums. Both the Sloan and Henry Ford Museums found themselves dependent on poorly performing auto stocks, while the governments of Detroit and the state of Michigan struggled to stretch shrinking revenues to cover growing humanitarian needs. The early 1980s saw retrenchment at all four institutions, as the state suffered through its worst economic times since the 1930s.

The institutional permutations of change were felt in the exhibits programs of Michigan museums. Depending on the professional orientation chosen earlier at a particular museum, some staff had already attempted to use objects to convey ideas. The

⁹H. J. Swinney, "It is Ours," *Museum News* 55:2 (November/December 1976): 15.

Detroit Historical Museum under Henry Brown is the most significant example of this. By the late 1970s however, such integration was considered essential for historical exhibits. Greater use of color, large-scale photography and fabricated exhibit elements were added to the simple cases and platforms common in the 1950s and early 60s. Independent designers, contracted for specific projects, played a bigger role in designing these more complex exhibits. There was no simple formula for producing such exhibits, however, and their rising costs increased the risk. Museums could not afford to fail.

Each of the four museums in this study undertook an exhibit project of major scope and complexity during the 1980's. The Henry Ford Museum attempted, in a single, massive effort, to transform itself from a museum that expected visitors to be knowledgeable enough to "read" its objects on their own, to one that offered interpretive exhibits to aid them. The hopes of generations of Michigan Historical Museum staff and supporters were realized when the state constructed a new library and historical center in the late 1980s. The museum would now have many times the exhibit space of any of its previous locations. Staff misgivings developed during both of these exhibit projects, and although both opened on schedule, neither was as successful as administrators had anticipated. In both Detroit and Flint, the economic difficulties of the 1980s caused serious problems for community museums. Leaders at both Sloan and Detroit Historical Museum struggled to maintain staff and programs. As a city-owned institution, DHM was hit particularly hard. Despite a clear need in both museums for exhibits dealing with the twentieth century, neither was able to bring its exhibition to fruition. The issues involved in all of these exhibit struggles centered on efforts to integrate artifacts and ideas in new and meaningful ways. In grappling with the questions posed by its particular exhibit

project, each museum began to develop a new understanding of its institutional identity.

Henry Ford Museum: Re-Emphasizing History

In the two decades following Henry Ford's death, the museum he founded had developed the infrastructure necessary to operate without his immediate personal leadership and had established its reputation as one of the country's leading decorative arts museums. Combined attendance for museum and village reached 1.3 million in 1968; the annual line-up of special events at Greenfield Village, including its Old Car Festival, was predictably popular.¹⁰ Its Midwest Antiques Forum drew fewer people, but helped to build the museum's reputation among collectors. Each segment of the museum's collection had its audience of collectors or enthusiasts. As befitted one of the country's leading museums, its founder was portrayed as a knowledgeable collector and patron. Henry Ford's idiosyncratic view of history, his understanding of technology as the basis of American progress and his disdain for most museums were rarely discussed.¹¹

During the decade of the 1970s, this picture changed considerably. The national bicentennial celebration renewed awareness of Henry Ford Museum's identity as a history museum, with collections representing more than two centuries of daily life in America. The reconnection with history encouraged the museum to begin changing the ways in which it presented its collections. At the same time, difficult financial circumstances made

¹⁰Geoffrey C. Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage: the Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979* (Dearborn: Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979): 140-141, 153.

¹¹See for example, *Selected Treasures of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum*, [Dearborn: Edison Institute, 1969]: especially 4-7 and Robert G. Wheeler, "Something of Everything," *The Herald* 8:3 (Summer 1979): 46-47.

new marketing and operational strategies imperative. These changes coincided with the Edison Institute's fiftieth anniversary in 1979, which was celebrated with the implementation of a new exhibition plan for HFM's enormous Mechanical Arts Hall. By the early 1980s, the failure of all three strategies precipitated the greatest crisis in the museum since the death of its founder.

In 1969 the Edison Institute celebrated its fortieth anniversary. The Ford Foundation and the Ford Motor Company Fund marked the occasion with a \$40 million gift to be used for capital improvements and endowment. Although these grants constituted in one sense a continuation of traditional Ford support for the museum and village, they also mandated change; they were explicitly intended to enable the institute become financially self-sufficient.¹² This fiscal independence was the final step in the administrative coming-of-age process that began with Henry Ford's death. The prospects seemed good: the museum expected continued growth in combined museum and village attendance.

Since higher attendance represented greater income, Edison Institute executives decided to further develop the acknowledged strength of Greenfield Village as a visitor attraction. Along with construction of a railroad around its perimeter and an early twentieth century amusement park, the addition of historic structures and improvements in service facilities were designed to make the village more attractive to visitors. Even within the museum, the first projects undertaken were enhancements to visitor amenities, such as

¹²Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 153; Larry Lankton, "Something Old, Something New: The Reexhibition of the Henry Ford Museum's Hall of Technology," *Technology and Culture* 21 (Oct. 1980): 594-595. The last of the village schools ceased operation in 1969, and was replaced by Adult Education and School Services departments with wider reach and more cost effective programs (Upward: 138).

restrooms, food service facilities and gift shops.¹³

Collections facilities benefitted from capital improvements as well. Whether they affected visitors' museum experience directly or indirectly, these alterations supported the artifact-focused interpretive philosophy of the museum that had been in place since the early 1950s. A new library, an artifact conservation laboratory, a storage building, a new fire protection systems and two new galleries in the museum all enhanced care for the collections or access to them. Ironically however, as late as 1977, the Collections Department still received only 4.2% of the combined budget for the village and museum. By comparison, buildings and grounds got 22% and public relations 15% of the total.¹⁴

The Edison Institute board and management decided that bringing the Henry Ford Museum's vast exhibit hall up to date would be an appropriate way to celebrate the institute's golden anniversary in 1979. The ambitious transformation of the Mechanical Arts Hall into the Hall of Technology was to be the culmination of the changes that began in 1969. In announcing the project to the membership, Donald Shelley's successor, President Frank Caddy, called it "a complete rearrangement," whose purpose was to make "all of our collections more meaningful to the visitors."¹⁵ Providing somewhat more detail, Vice-President for Collections and Presentation Robert Wheeler described the plan to

¹³Frank Caddy, "A Message from the President," *The Herald* 6:1 (Winter 1977): 8, 45. Lankton, "Something Old, Something New": 594-595; Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 153-154. During the 1970s, publicity materials read "Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum," reversing the traditional order. One assumes this was another attempt to capitalize on visitors' greater affinity for the village.

¹⁴Lankton, "Something Old, Something New": 595. It seems fair to note that the buildings and ground budget most likely included money for care of historic structures that today would be considered part of the institution's collections or historic resources.

¹⁵Caddy, "A Message,": 47.

“provide an interpretive overview of all of the collections,” which would be displayed “with new signage, barriers and lighting systems.” Encompassing the entire 315,000 square feet of the museum’s main exhibit space, the anniversary project was “undoubtedly the largest and most important installation project under way today in this country or, indeed, the world.”¹⁶

In addition to reinforcing HFM’s overall artifact focus, the improvements made to its collections facilities under the renovation program reflected the higher technical standards of care being promulgated within the museum field in the 1970s. The renovation plan was also a response to changing standards. The Belmont Report’s assertion of museums’ status as educational institutions combined with a bicentennial-induced emphasis on history to create a new emphasis on the importance of interpretation in historical exhibits. HFM’s application to the AAM accreditation program at about this time further heightened staff awareness of current expectations with regard to exhibits. To be able to point to concrete plans for improvement in the area of exhibits showed that staff understood what needed to be done. In 1976 the museum and village became the tenth Michigan institution to be accredited.¹⁷

The museum’s plan for change recognized that, by current professional standards, displaying its decorative arts collections in art museum fashion with minimal interpretation

¹⁶Robert G. Wheeler, “Redevelopment of the Mechanical Arts Hall,” *The Herald* 6:2 (Spring 1977): 59.

¹⁷Although it was undoubtedly related to some of the improvements of the 1970s, accreditation did not constitute the institutional focus at the Edison Institute that it later did at the Sloan Museum. HFM was the second historical museum in the state to be accredited. The first was Eugene Petersen’s Mackinac Island State Park. “Accredited Museums as of May 1976,” *Museum News* 55:2 (November/December 1976): 39; *Museum News* 53:2 (November 1974) focused on historical interpretation.

was one thing; exhibiting early steam engines, farm machinery and automobiles in a similar manner was another. Henry Ford had believed that “a piece of machinery or anything that is made is like a book, if you can read it.” But even in the 1920s few people could read machinery the way Ford could; by the 1970s most urban Americans lacked familiarity with even the simplest technologies of the agrarian past.¹⁸ Although the comprehensiveness of the collections on exhibit was appreciated by students, hobbyists and collectors, less knowledgeable visitors were simply overwhelmed. Nor did it make financial sense to maintain such a huge collection in a fashion that so limited its appeal to the public.

The \$2.4 million Hall of Technology renovation had two components. The museum’s curators were deeply involved in the reorganization of each of the major sections of the exhibition hall. They removed duplicate artifacts and examples deemed less significant, but most of the collections remained on exhibition. Even this minimal degree of selectivity was undertaken with some trepidation, with museum administrators careful to note that “there is no intention to reduce the Museum collections.”¹⁹ Staff arranged artifacts in chronological groupings defined by carpet color—a different shade for each major collection. Each section of the hall was identified by an overhead canopy in that collection’s distinctive color. The canopies also called attention to the “focal point” of each section, intended as an area where demonstrations would further interpret the collections displayed there.²⁰

¹⁸Kenneth M. Wilson, “How Museum Collections Communicate History,” *The Herald* 8:4 (Fall 1979): 24.

¹⁹Wheeler, “Redevelopment”: 59.

²⁰Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 596; Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 172-73; Wilson, “Museum Collections Communicate”: 26. The actual design for reinstallation of the collections areas was the work of Ford Motor Company designers

The introduction of the focal points, a limited number of diagonal aisles and carpeting changed the look of the transportation section (Figure 11). The rows of cars all placed at the same angle to the aisles were gone. Reducing the number of vehicles on exhibit allowed them to be placed so that visitors could view them from a variety of angles. On the other hand, the museum still exhibited a large number of cars: 175. The organization of the vehicles remained basically chronological, with exceptions for recreational vehicles, cars of state and cars of famous Americans. All were identified, but with minimal additional information. The style sheet for identification labels allowed a maximum of ten words to describe a particular car's significance. The transportation area also included a dozen "introductory boards," whose chief function was to identify links among groups of autos.²¹

The second component of the Hall of Technology was a 32,000 square foot Interpretive Center. Designed by Herb Rosenthal Associates of Los Angeles, California, this space was intended as "an introduction to the Hall of Technology." It covered the years 1650 to 1950 in fourteen chronological sections that ranged from two years to a full century in length and featured some 700 artifacts and 2000 graphics. Like the museum's collections, the Interpretive Center emphasized the nineteenth century.²² Rosenthal Associates configured the Interpretive Center as a maze of 8-foot partitions and platforms

contracted by the museum. Larry Lankton states that this part of the project cost only \$5 per square foot, which even then was very inexpensive.

²¹Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., "A Walk Through Henry Ford's Legacy: Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum Today," *The Herald* 8(Fall 1979): 6; Upward, *Home for our Heritage*: 173. Rosenthal file, EI 131, Box 2, Research Center, HFM/GV .

²²Wilson, "Museums Collections Communicate": 25; Kenneth M. Wilson to graphics providers, July 31, 1979, E.I. 131, Box 6. The divisions of the Interpretive Center are listed in Lankton, "Something Old, Something New": 603.

placed directly ahead of visitors approaching the exhibit hall from the main entrance.

Although selected large objects were placed on their own platforms, most of the artifacts and graphics were mounted on the vertical partitions in collages that were essentially two-dimensional (Figure 12). Identification labels gave basic information about each artifact, but most graphics were unlabeled, the intent being, in Kenneth Wilson's words, to "create a sense of feeling and character."²³

Presenting as well an introduction to the museum's major collections, the Interpretive Center included sections devoted to Home Arts, Lighting and Communication, Agriculture, Power, and Transportation. The focal point for each collection was visible from the related Interpretive Center area, so that visitors could investigate that collection further if they were so inclined.²⁴ The collections exits also represented the only alternative to winding through the entire maze of the Interpretive Center.

The process of developing the Interpretive Center was contentious. Museum administration, admittedly inexperienced at directing this sort of project, allowed Herb Rosenthal and his staff to shape the intellectual framework for the exhibits with little input from HFM curators.²⁵ Even though they were undoubtedly busy planning reinstallation of the rest of the Hall of Technology, the curators did not appreciate being left out. Files in the museum's Research Center indicate friction, as well as a lack of coordination, between HFM staff and Rosenthal. There were complaints from curators to their supervisor,

²³Wilson, "Museum Collections Communicate": 29.

²⁴Hosmer, "Henry Ford's Legacy": 7-8.

²⁵"Interpretive Center Concepts," January 1977, E.I. 131, Box 1; Lankton, "Something Old, Something New": 603.

Kenneth Wilson, about both Rosenthal and Doug Hough, HFM's Director of Crafts and Presentation and a key manager for the project.

The files for the Interpretive Center project convey a lack of familiarity on Rosenthal's part with museum practices, as well as a belief that curatorial expertise was less important than the design and public presentation skills represented by his firm. Labels were a case in point. Rosenthal Associates produced the first drafts, which were then considerably modified by museum staff. Herb Rosenthal, disregarding issues of accuracy and completeness, felt that the "livelier" original copy had been ruined by "pedantic" curators.²⁶ He was also completely unfamiliar with what was, by 1979, a standard museum conservation practice: filtering ultraviolet light from fluorescent fixtures so that it would not harm artifacts.²⁷ A designer more experienced in working with museum projects would have been better prepared to deal with either situation.

When the Hall of Technology opened in June 1979, it failed to attract the sort of notice that readers of Vice President Robert Wheeler's early description might have expected. What he had termed "undoubtedly the largest and most important installation project" of its time was ignored by the local press. The *Detroit News*' Sunday magazine featured an article celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of "Henry Ford's monument to American history" that focused entirely on Greenfield Village. Both local papers covered the centennial reenactment of Thomas Edison's first successful light bulb with nary a word

²⁶Herb Rosenthal to Kenneth Wilson, February 12, 1979, E.I. 131, Box 6.

²⁷Edward R. Gilbert, Chief Conservator, memo to Kenneth Wilson, January 22, 1979, E. I. 131, Box 6.

about the changes in the museum.²⁸

The failure of the press to pay much attention to HFM's renovations is probably attributable to the fact that the Hall of Technology did not, in the end, differ significantly from its predecessor. Visitors, including this author, found the focal points and the colored carpeting helpful in orienting themselves in the enormous space of the exhibit hall. The more varied layouts, additional labeling and new graphics all made it easier to compare artifacts of similar type and understand how they had changed over time. The fact remained, however, that visitors were still confronted by a huge array of artifacts, grouped according to function. The collections were still presented almost entirely from an internal point of view. Labels now linked cars to other cars, but not to any social context.²⁹

The Interpretive Center, billed as "a museum within the museum" that would "streamline a visit and make it more meaningful," was only minimally helpful.³⁰ Covering 32,000 square feet, it was large enough to be a good-sized museum itself, and its maze-like design was more disorienting than helpful. Visitors entered the Interpretive Center unsure where they might emerge. The large number of unidentified graphics frequently overwhelmed the artifacts mounted nearby. There was little visual distinction among different kinds of labels, making it hard to find or follow any interpretive thread.³¹

²⁸Wheeler, "Redevelopment": 59. Jim Treloar, "Greenfield Village and the American Experience," *The Detroit News Magazine*, October 14, 1979: 16ff; *Detroit Free Press*, October 22, 1979: 14D; *Detroit News*, October 22, 1979: D10.

²⁹Although not aware that I was engaged in research at the time, I visited the new exhibits in October 1979. Interviews with John Wright (March 4, 1999) and Harold Skramstad (May 30, 1999) confirmed my observations, as does Lankton's review.

³⁰Press kit, Interpretive Center file, E.I. 131, Box 2.

³¹Lankton, "Something Old, Something, New": 603-605; Wright interview. Even as a more-knowledgeable-than-average visitor, I was overwhelmed and somewhat

The Edison Institute's golden jubilee celebration continued throughout 1979, with a series of special events and anniversary commemorations, including the fall issue of its members' publication, *The Herald*.³² In that publication Director of Collections and Preservation Kenneth Wilson offered an explanation of the thinking behind the changes to the main exhibit hall.³³ Wilson not only acknowledged the limitations of Henry Ford's exhibition philosophy, but directly contradicted the museum's founder with his assertion that "No museum object can 'speak' by itself." Building on an article he authored in 1967, Wilson made a distinction that had become common by the late 1970s, contrasting the display, "which is simply the presentation of objects for their own sake," with the exhibit, "a museum's most fundamental means of communication, which conveys "not only *information* but *ideas* to the viewer . . . by provoking his interest and stimulating his thoughts as well as his emotions" (author's emphasis).³⁴

Acknowledging that prior to 1979 the Henry Ford Museum presented primarily displays rather than exhibits, Wilson's article emphasized how much the museum was now doing to assist visitors in understanding its artifacts. Visitors now encountered "interpretive aids" like the recorded train sounds and explanatory message that played near the large C & O locomotive, "labels based upon extensive curatorial research" throughout the Hall of Technology and focal points within major collections areas where

confused.

³²Upward, *Home for Our Heritage*: 167.

³³Wilson, "Museum Collections Communicate": 24-32.

³⁴Wilson, "A Philosophy of Museum Exhibition," *Museum News* 46:2 (October 1967): 13-19. Quotations are from "Museum Collections Communicate": 24.

demonstrations were offered.³⁵ He seemed comfortable describing how the reinstallation of the collections helped visitors understand the functions of various historic objects. He recognized that the four kitchens at the Home Arts focal point allowed visitors to see a variety of artifacts in context, as well as to understand how the whole setting of domestic food preparation changed over time.³⁶ The latter example was also the closest the article came to discussing ideas—as contrasted with facts about objects—in the new exhibits.

Wilson had an even harder time with the Interpretive Center. He said that it was “created as an introduction to the Hall of Technology,” but did not explain how it introduced the hall, or what its theme or thesis might be. Certainly it is hard to see how some of the artifacts included in the center—the Lincoln assassination chair and Tom Thumb’s pool table are examples from Wilson’s list—helped to introduce technology at all.

In the same anniversary issue, historic preservation scholar Charles Hosmer reviewed changes in both museum and village since Henry Ford’s day. In discussing the Interpretive Center, Hosmer never mentioned its time capsule aspect, concentrating instead on its presentation of the collections. His choice of words offered clues to his personal reaction, however. He wrote of the “maze-like path” and of visitors who “escape” at the first opening to the collections.³⁷ Hosmer appreciated the reorganization and thinning out of the collections displays, and particularly the opportunity to view artifacts from different angles. He noted, “the idea of chronological development is much

³⁵Wilson, “Museum Collections Communicate”: 26, 29-30.

³⁶Wilson, “Museum Collections Communicate”: 26. One of the few truly interpretive aspects of the new Hall of Technology, the four kitchens were used as examples again and again. Unfortunately, they were not truly representative of the new exhibits.

³⁷Hosmer, “Henry Ford’s Legacy”: 7-8.

clearer now, and there is less confusion in tracing each mechanism through the years.” The human angle remained obscure, however: “The typical visitor may have a hard time conjuring up a mental picture of the people who actually used the equipment.”³⁸

Larry Lankton summed up the problems of the new HFM installation in an extensive review in *Technology and Culture*. Drawing on his experience as Curator of Power and Shop Machinery in the early 1970s, Lankton began with an overview of the museum’s history that emphasized how Ford himself shaped both the collection and the building. Like other visitors, Lankton approved of the addition of the focal points and found the arrangement of the major collections to be somewhat improved. Discussing the lack of context for these collections, he used transportation as his example: “The museum still has some 175 cars on the floor, but no exhibit which examines the impact of the automobile on the American culture or economy.” Lankton also noted the absence of any presentation concerning the infrastructure of transportation; visitors saw wagons, trains, cars and planes, but learned nothing of roads, bridges, tracks or airports, let alone westward expansion, urban sprawl or the role of transportation in the exploitation of natural resources.³⁹

He minced no words in his assessment of the Interpretive Center. It “fails to interpret much of anything and . . . is an intellectual and historical cop-out.” He found the chronological divisions “exceedingly arbitrary and even ludicrous,” and the choice of artifacts “puzzling,” even “bizarre.” The collages of graphics, artifacts and labels were far too busy in his opinion, making it hard to focus, although due to a lack of color and

³⁸Hosmer, “Henry Ford’s Legacy”: 8-9, 14.

³⁹Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 609-611.

ineffectual lighting, “the overall effect is one of dull flatness.” He found the curatorial areas within the Interpretive Center equally lacking in interpretation, comparing them to department store windows whose purpose is “to draw in the street traffic.”⁴⁰ Lankton’s bottom line on the entire project: “The Hall of Technology is just a less congested, slightly more modern version of Ford’s Mechanical Arts Hall. It is still a ‘thing’ museum, not really a history museum.”⁴¹

Larry Lankton attributed the Interpretive Center’s failure in large measure to the lack of curatorial involvement. He clearly believed that his former colleagues could have provided the intellectual coherence that the center lacked. He also recognized, however, that financial problems affected the outcome of the redesign project. According to Lankton, the earliest plan called for an overall expenditure of \$10-\$15 million, a far more generous figure than the \$2.4 million that was actually spent. The museum scaled back the project when it became clear that the money simply was not available. Its endowment was heavily invested in Ford Motor Company stock, and Ford was facing difficult financial times.⁴² The reduction in expenditure was essential, but such a large cut could not be made without affecting the quality of the overall project, especially since the idea of reinstalling the entire museum was retained.

The outlook for the Henry Ford Museum as it began its second half century was not as bright as the organizers of its 1979 Golden Jubilee might have wished. The starkest

⁴⁰*Ibid.*: 603, 605-606.

⁴¹*Ibid.*: 609.

⁴²Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 610; Skramstad interview; Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 3rd rev. ed. by George S. May (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 632-33.

sign of that was an article titled "Who will pay the bills?" that appeared in the otherwise celebratory fall issue of *The Herald*.⁴³ Written by the president's assistant for development, the article acknowledged that both recent inflation and new standards for interpretation had raised significant financial questions concerning the institute's future. Noting that every museum visit was already being subsidized by \$2.00 worth of endowment or gift funds, the author proposed that the solution to the current problems lay in a combination of public and private sector action. It was clear that change would be necessary, but the article gave no indication that any action was being taken, nor was there promise that anything would happen soon. This absence of specifics probably left most readers with the inference that there was no immediate emergency.

Edison Institute President Frank Caddy retired in 1980, and decisions regarding how to deal with the unsuccessful Interpretive Center were deferred until his successor arrived. The Edison Institute's financial picture grew bleaker by the month; even had there been a remedial plan, there was no money to carry it out.

Although 1980 ended with HFM's future still very uncertain, the fact remained that it had changed significantly over the previous decade. Overwhelming numbers of objects notwithstanding, the museum had shed its cluttered appearance and "it didn't look like Henry's attic anymore."⁴⁴ The bicentennial had returned history to a central position in the museum. The Interpretive Center and the Hall of Technology project had introduced a more complex notion of exhibition, one that made room for visitors who were not experts

⁴³R. William Goodwin, "Who will pay the bills?" *The Herald* 8:4 (Fall 1979): 17-22.

⁴⁴Wright interview.

and attempted to link objects and ideas. Although the museum was still organized—and thought about—as a series of discrete collections, the Interpretive Center had integrated a variety of different artifacts into one space in an effort to address a single theme. Despite the shortcomings of the final product, the fact of change was real and significant. Larry Lankton had described the Henry Ford Museum as the “sleeping giant” of the museum world.⁴⁵ It was an apt metaphor for an institution whose exhibits had yet to fully exploit the riches of its collection. But appearances can be deceiving; behind the scenes, there were signs that the giant was stirring.

Michigan Historical Museum: The Difficulties of a Dream Fulfilled

At the time of its 1965 transfer from direct control by the Michigan Historical Commission to the Michigan Department of State (DOS), the Michigan Historical Museum was indeed a backwater of state government. Inadequately housed, poorly staffed and meagerly funded, it appeared nearly incapable of fulfilling its designation as the state’s museum. It neither interpreted much of Michigan’s history nor served a statewide audience in any meaningful way. Two decades later, having implemented change one step at a time, it had gained considerable professional credibility and was on the verge of tremendously increasing its public visibility. New leadership and a series of modest opportunities enabled MHM to shed its stepchild status. The prospect of a new building, its first built purposely to house a museum, focused new attention on the possibilities of such an institution. The museum’s experience in the late 1980s brings to mind the adage, “Be careful what you wish for.” If the opening in 1989 of the museum’s new galleries in

⁴⁵Lankton, “Something Old, Something New”: 613.

the Michigan Library and Historical Center was the fulfillment of a dream, it also brought unanticipated problems and considerable staff frustration.

The museum's change in governance had little immediate impact on its day-to-day operations, but it carried much larger implications. Along with the state's other historical functions, the museum was now part of a large department, which had far greater visibility and political clout within state government than could ever have been possible for an independent Michigan Historical Commission. The department, headed by the elected Secretary of State, operated offices across the state and was always conscious of the public image of its programs. The state's historical agency could now be expected to place greater emphasis on a statewide mission and public responsiveness.

Initially, however, DOS began its oversight of historical commission activities without making major changes. Indeed, the Michigan Historical Commission retained an active role in program planning and decision making, including hiring Executive Secretary Lewis Beeson's successor, Dr. Harry Kelsey. Archival and publishing activities continued to dominate the state's historical programs. The museum's relative insignificance can be seen in the fact that for almost seven years following Solan Weeks' 1967 departure there was no museum director. The staff member in charge during this period was usually the curator.

When Harry Kelsey retired in 1971, the administration of a new Secretary of State, Richard Austin, was ready to take a far more active role in the state's history programs. DOS executives did not consult the commission when they hired Kelsey's replacement to direct what was now called the Michigan History Division (MHD). With a few minor exceptions, the status of the historical commission was reduced to that of a purely

advisory body. Although tension between DOS and the commission continued for some time, departmental control was never seriously challenged.⁴⁶

The new MHD director, Dr. Martha M. Bigelow, brought an updated understanding of historical agency professionalism to the division. Although she had most recently held an academic post, she had previously worked at the University of Michigan's Michigan Historical Collections.⁴⁷ An active member of the American Association for State and Local History, she believed that her division needed staff trained in archival administration or museum studies as well as history. Bigelow immediately began campaigning for additional office and storage space, as well as a new museum building. She argued that MHD staff could never hope to run a fully professional operation in their cramped and often makeshift quarters.⁴⁸

Both Martha Bigelow and her superiors in the Department of State believed that the history division should be the state's primary historical agency. Thus they felt compelled to challenge the Department of Natural Resources after learning near the end of 1972 that the latter intended "to expand its role in the field of Michigan history," asserting "a broad mandate to protect, preserve and restore the historical resources of this State wherever they might occur."⁴⁹ A major jurisdictional dispute ensued, involving not only senior officials of the two departments in question, but the legislature and the attorney

⁴⁶MHC Minutes, April 23, 1971, May 21, 1971, July 16, 1971 and August 13, 1971. Tension was still evident when the author joined the MHM staff in 1974, but by then it was accepted that day-to-day operations fell under DOS authority.

⁴⁷"News Notes," *Michigan History* 55 (1971): 272-273.

⁴⁸See for example "1971 Report of the Director," *MH* 56 (1972):78-79 and "Activities of the Michigan History Division During 1973," *MH* 58 (1974): 67, 72, 96.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*: 54, 64.

general. When the dust settled, the history division had acquired responsibility for interpreting human history in state parks.⁵⁰ Essentially this new duty meant exhibit work, and so it fell to the museum. Field operations initially involved five parks, most of them with visitation far greater than the 35,000–40,000 people who visited the museum in Lansing each year. Because the latter facility was so limited, the field sites quickly became the dominant aspect of the museum section's responsibilities.

The legislature appropriated funding for a number of new staff positions. First hired, in November 1973, was a manager for the Museums and Historic Properties Section, Michael J. Smith. He had studied history at the University of Minnesota's graduate school and had worked with historic sites in both Minnesota and Tennessee. Within a year, Smith more than doubled the museum's staff, increasing the number of professional positions from one to eight.⁵¹ Several of the new staff were products of New York's Cooperstown Graduate Program. They were the first MHM personnel with any specialized museum training. Because most of the new staff served the field sites from offices in Lansing, they turned their talents to improving operations there as well. Smith, like Martha Bigelow, was active in AASLH, and encouraged museum staff to utilize its workshops and publications to increase their understanding of current professional standards.

⁵⁰Natural history interpretation was to remain the province of the DNR. The only exceptions to this arrangement were the historic sites operated by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, which already had independent status. The DNR-DOS dispute also resulted in the transfer of the State Historic Preservation Office from DNR to the Michigan History Division.

⁵¹Personal experience as a member of this cohort of staff informs much of the rest of this section.

The MHM staff had now reached a size that permitted a more regular schedule of exhibit changes. Projects that had consumed months of time and needed research assistance from other division personnel could be planned and implemented more efficiently, even with the added responsibility for field operations. Michael Smith encouraged discussion among staff about various projects and pushed his staff to articulate the ideas behind exhibits. The result in the Lansing museum was exhibits that linked artifacts and ideas more closely than previous exhibits had done. Even decorative arts exhibits produced in 1974 and 1975, when the new staff was still exploring what the collections actually held, clearly linked each section to an overall theme.

The first long-term exhibit at the Michigan Historical Museum with a significant twentieth century component opened in 1976. Called *Making It Work: Michigan Enterprise Before the Great Depression*, the exhibit reworked a gallery that had featured an eclectic mix of nineteenth century military and economic history.⁵² Now it featured extractive industries such as commercial fishing and mining, processing of lumber and grain, and manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, agricultural machinery and automobiles. The automotive component of *Michigan Enterprise* was necessarily small. Car parts and accessories were the only artifacts that could be used, but the photo selection attempted to depict the people and products of the early auto industry.

As the museum staff and programs grew, the need for larger and more functional quarters became acute. By almost any measure—staff size, building size, extent of educational programming or budget—Michigan fell far short of other Midwestern states. A Bicentennial-induced history consciousness in state government produced several

⁵²MHM Collections Unit, Museum History Files.

possibilities for consolidated housing of the history division, including construction of a new building, but budget constraints and other obstacles prevented any of these plans from coming to fruition.⁵³ At the very end of the decade, however, with the Turner House virtually surrounded by Lansing Community College, Michael Smith and Martha Bigelow decided to move the museum to the basement of the Michigan Millers' Mutual Building, an office building located within a block of the state Capitol. In May 1980 the Michigan Historical Museum opened the doors of its fourth home. Although the move gained the museum no additional space and in fact further dispersed museum staff, the new quarters were better adapted for exhibit purposes, as well as being far more convenient for school groups that also wished to visit the Capitol.

The new museum had a lobby suited to small, short-term exhibits and an audio-visual room, but the major exhibit space consisted of a former gymnasium. A timeline of Michigan history carried visitors from the lobby level down a ramp around the outside of the former basketball court, to the gym floor. This lower-level space was used for changing exhibits. At about 1200 square feet, it was not large, but it was bigger than any single room in the Turner House.

The Michigan history timeline was the most extensive overview of the state's history the Michigan Historical Museum had ever presented. Beginning in the present with a satellite view of the state's two peninsulas and the Great Lakes, the exhibit moved backward through time as visitors descended the ramp. Although exhibition of automobiles was no more feasible here than it had been in the Turner home, cars and the

⁵³"Unrealized Plans," Museum History Files.

auto industry were quite visible in photographs, insignia and other graphics.⁵⁴ Three of the key events or benchmarks that punctuated the exhibit were directly auto-related: Ford's Willow Run bomber factory, representing World War II production; the Flint Sit-down Strike that led to recognition of the UAW by GM in 1937 and the founding of Ford Motor Company in 1903. Few visitors studied the entire timeline very closely, but those who paid attention to its first half could not escape the importance of cars in Michigan. It presented the social and political effects of Michigan's dominance by the auto industry. The link between the state's economy and car production was reinforced in every decade, from the hard times of the 1970s Arab oil embargo back to the boom times of the 1920s.

Temporary exhibits in the Mutual Building changed regularly and were more diverse in the subjects and time periods they presented than previous MHM exhibits (Figure 13).⁵⁵ Some focused on particular types of artifacts: *The Art of Needle and Loom* presented quilts and coverlets; while *Sitting Down on the Job* explored the functional seating used in a variety of occupations. Others used many different types of objects to tell a story.⁵⁶ *I'm for Michigan: Settlement, 1820-1855*, one of a series of sesquicentennial exhibits, fell into this category, as did *The Glaciers' Gift*, which described the formation of the Great Lakes and their use since paleo-Indian times as travel routes and sources of food and income. *We Didn't Come Here to Swap Recipes: Michigan Women and the Labor*

⁵⁴"Mutual Building Timeline," MHM Exhibits Unit Files. Ruby Rogers, museum director from 1983 to 1988, frequently likened the timeline to presenting the history of Michigan "in a hallway."

⁵⁵These exhibits are documented in MHM Exhibits Unit Files.

⁵⁶This is not to imply that collections-focused exhibits completely lacked interpretation. They often included considerable background on specific artifacts, as well as explanations of styles or changes in particular kinds of objects.

Movement, 1860-1981, was the only exhibit that dealt in any way with the auto industry; it focused more on the UAW Women's Brigade in Flint during the Sit-down Strike than on women who worked in auto plants.

Throughout the 1980s, these interpretive exhibits reflected Mike Smith's influence and his understanding of how the insights of the new social history could be utilized in museum exhibits. He encouraged debate on the historical issues surrounding exhibits and recognized the need for both broad background and focused research on a given topic. One characteristic of MHM exhibits that began to emerge in these exhibitions was a tendency to illustrate general points with stories of specific people and their artifacts, stories that used direct quotations when possible to give visitors more immediate connections to the past.

Overall, the period between 1965 and 1985 was a positive one for the Michigan Historical Museum. It experienced significant growth in its professional staff and its exhibit program, as well as in historical sophistication. Simply moving out of the Turner House, which both looked and felt like domestic space, made the MHM seem more like what a state museum ought to be. The museum gained considerable professional credibility as well. Division director Martha Bigelow held several offices in the American Association for State and Local History, including that of president (1979-1980). Michael Smith chaired the AASLH awards committee for several years and served as President of the Michigan Museums Association in 1982-83. Other museum staff were active in both these organizations.

Nor, in retrospect, was the small size of the Mutual Building exhibit gallery much of a handicap. The stringent state budgets of the early 1980s would have made it difficult

to maintain a good exhibit program in a larger space. In the small space, museum staff were able to change exhibits regularly and be as creative as the space allowed. By the mid-1980s they had demonstrated that they could produce exhibits that were professional in both appearance and content.

Although the exhibit program escaped relatively unscathed, the effects of recession were felt. Budget cuts delayed implementation of larger projects, or forced changes in scope. The loss of staff was felt most. Only one position was eliminated outright, but several others were lost through attrition. One of these was the museum director's position. After Michael Smith left in 1983, supervision of the museum and field sites passed to Ruby Rogers, one of the Cooperstown graduates he had hired. Although Rogers was eventually permitted to use the title of "Museum Director," departmental administrators refused to promote her, and the museum lost influence within both the division and the Department of State. Not only was there the perception of a vacancy at the top, but Rogers' access to key people in the department was limited by her lower status.

History division director Martha Bigelow had never given up her quest for consolidated quarters for her agency, however, and was ready to take advantage of the first glimmer of opportunity.⁵⁷ Like the state's historical program, the state library had been without a permanent home since the State Office Building fire of 1951. In 1983 the state legislature resumed direct control of the library from the Department of Education and decided to remedy that situation. A contact cultivated by Dr. Bigelow for years,

⁵⁷Martha M. Bigelow, "A Personal Retrospect," *Michigan History* 73 (March/April 1989): 18-19, lists some of the proposals that failed.

Senator William Faust, persuaded his colleagues to include the History Division in the new facility, which was originally scheduled to open in 1987, during the state's sesquicentennial celebration. By the end of 1984, when plans for the building were announced in *Michigan History*, an architectural contract had been signed and exhibit planning was already under way.⁵⁸

In a leap of several orders of magnitude from the two-dimensional timeline of state history in the Mutual Building, the new museum included about 30,000 square feet of permanent exhibit space, as well as 5,000 square feet for changing exhibits. Money for design and fabrication of the exhibits had been included in the overall construction package, which was financed by state bonds. A contract with former museum director Michael J. Smith for production of an exhibit narrative was the first stage in planning the new exhibits. In June 1984 Smith delivered a thoughtfully written and comprehensive, if rather dry, 130-page document that traces Michigan history from the time of the first paleo-Indian inhabitants to the 1980s.⁵⁹

JJA/Design Craftsmen, a single-project partnership created between an independent designer and a Midland design and fabrication firm, was selected to produce exhibit designs. Martha Bigelow had long hoped that Jean-Jacques André (JJA) would be involved and worked hard to insure his inclusion in the contract. The former head of exhibits at the provincial museum in Victoria, British Columbia, André was one of the first

⁵⁸Bigelow, "Personal Retrospect," 19; "From the Editor," *Michigan History*, 68 (Nov./Dec. 1984): 2. This same editorial announced the elevation of the History Division to bureau status.

⁵⁹Michael J. Smith, "Michigan: A Story of the State and Its People," submitted to the Michigan History Division, June 1984. Copies in MHM Exhibits Unit Files.

to create exhibit environments that visitors did not simply look into, but could actually enter. Bigelow understood that no one in the museum had experience that prepared them to conceptualize exhibits on the scale of what was being planned, and she believed that André's involvement would ensure dramatic exhibits that visitors would remember.

Museum staff had little active involvement in the conceptual design phase. They identified five focal points for emphasis in the exhibits: geologic formation/first inhabitants, statehood, lumbering and mining, the automobile and Michigan's role in World War II. After Design Craftsmen produced a white model in late 1985, staff persuaded André and Design Craftsmen to make one significant change, the substitution of the facade of the Territorial Capitol for a reproduction of a pioneer home.⁶⁰ Since budget constraints had already dictated a delay in production of the twentieth century exhibits, staff were satisfied simply to see that there was a car in virtually every gallery.

More detailed design work got underway in late 1985. Museum staff inspected the collections to determine what artifacts were available for various galleries; their review of completed gallery designs also consumed considerable time. MHM continued its normal operations as design proceeded, changing exhibits in its Mutual Building facility at least three times a year and maintaining its field site operations. Indeed, during the next two years, celebration of the sesquicentennial of statehood made unanticipated demands on staff time, and the development of two new field museums, both of which opened in 1987, added to the load. The two people added to the staff were insufficient to deal with this

⁶⁰JJA/Design Craftsmen, Inc., *Library, Museum & Archives Facility: Final Concept for Permanent Museum Exhibits*, unpagged booklet in author's possession. A white model depicts the features of an exhibit without color or detail. It shows the apportionment of gallery space and indicates placement of major exhibit elements.

increased workload. Not only were the pre-1900 exhibits dauntingly large (14,300 square feet) to a staff accustomed to the modest gallery in the Mutual Building, but the space they were to fill was both unfamiliar and inaccessible. Construction delays that postponed the opening of the Michigan Library and Historical Center until 1989 allowed more time to work on the exhibits, but there were too few people to do a thorough job in the amount of time available.

Design Craftsmen, understandably wanting to stay on schedule and preserve its profit, pushed the design along at such a pace that museum staff could barely keep up with the demand for artifact information, let alone provide thoughtful review. There was little opportunity to discuss relevant sections of the narrative, or determine how they related to Michael Smith's proposed themes, whether the museum had or could obtain appropriate artifacts or even whether topics included in the narrative were suitable for treatment in the very concrete, three-dimensional exhibit medium. Neither Ruby Rogers nor Martha Bigelow had the leverage necessary to obtain additional resources. Departmental administrators, long skeptical of Bigelow's management skills, appeared to believe that history was already getting more staff and space than it deserved.

When the museum opened in March 1989, museum staff felt a sense of achievement, coupled with frustration. Jean-Jacques André's environments were indeed impressive. The woodland diorama, Territorial Capitol facade, copper mine interior and lumber baron's mansion evoked widely recognized elements of Michigan's history, and the public response was gratifying. For perhaps the first time in its history, Michigan's state museum lived up to its name.

Although they recognized that they had needed assistance in making a huge leap in

scale, staff also believed that their contribution to the exhibits was not up to their accustomed standards. They knew that better use could have been made of the museum's collections. It had become apparent during the design process that the quality of the labels, produced by a Design Craftsmen researcher to save staff time, ranged from uninspired-but-adequate to a near-duplication of sources that bordered on plagiarism. As rewritten by museum staff, they were much improved from the initial drafts, but still impersonal and pretty dull. The ideas behind the exhibits had not been adequately thought through; insufficient resources were devoted to providing the historical substance needed for good exhibits. Staff were left with the frustration of not having been able to do their best work.

Change continued at the Michigan Historical Museum for another two years. Being in a brand new building meant that there was a great deal of functional detail to be figured out. The size of the building and the location of museum workspaces on three separate floors brought changes in the ways staff related to each other and to members of other sections. Museum staff were also adjusting to the ways of two new administrators. Bette Hulbert began in the position of museum director a month before the museum opened in 1989.⁶¹ She reported to a division director, who had been added to the organizational structure the previous year to oversee three of the bureau's sections. The experience was in many ways like that of creating a completely new institution.

Martha Bigelow announced her retirement just prior to the historical center's first anniversary. Some ten months later, with the bureau director's position still vacant, the division director resigned and his position was eliminated. Then administrative power in

⁶¹Ruby Rogers left the museum director's position in 1988, in part because of frustration over her position within the department.

the Department of State was realigned. By the museum's second anniversary in March 1991, museum director Hulbert was reporting directly to one of three deputy secretaries of state, Philip Frangos, who took an active interest in the museum. Although staff were well aware that they faced at least one more change in the eventual arrival of Dr. Bigelow's replacement, their world was beginning to appear more stable. They were becoming accustomed to working in the new building and knew what was involved in producing exhibits for it. With many of the initial operational difficulties resolved, it was time to begin planning for the completion of the permanent exhibit.

A quarter century after becoming part of the Department of State, the Michigan Historical Museum was very different from the shoestring operation in the old Turner House. It was larger, more technically and historically sophisticated, and served tens of thousands more people than it had in 1965. It was more visible both publicly and within state government. Those realities did nothing to lessen staff frustration over the permanent exhibits; they simply raised the stakes for the next phase.

Henry Ford Museum and the Michigan Historical Museum had remarkably similar experiences in completing exhibition projects whose scope was far beyond that of anything they had previously attempted. Both projects necessitated large contracts with independent designers and fabricators. In neither situation did staff have its accustomed control over either the form or the content of the final product; both staffs felt at the mercy of the designers. Staff at both museums could see that there were significant problems during the course of the work, but neither institution had a leader who was able or willing to say, "Wait a minute. This isn't working." In both cases, issues of schedule

and budget entirely overwhelmed concerns about exhibit quality.

Despite the similarities in their experiences, the project outcomes at the two museums were quite different. As Larry Lankton observed, HFM's exhibits continued to focus on objects rather than on history. The lack of a coherent narrative thread in the Interpretive Center and the fact that the overall impression of the Hall of Technology remained one of vast numbers of things contributed to the continued perception of the Ford Museum, at least in history museum circles, as interpretively challenged. In contrast, the Michigan Historical Museum now presented Michigan history on a visual and spatial scale appropriate for the museum of a large industrial state. The paucity of artifacts and lack of integration between objects and story notwithstanding, MHM was seen by most observers as having taken a major step forward. Staff at the two institutions felt considerable frustration with both process and product, but were unsure how or whether they would be permitted to change either.

A Sloan Museum Exhibit Stalls

By the time the Sloan Museum achieved accreditation at the end of 1983, staff were well into development of the final segment of its history exhibits, *Flint and the Automobile*. They approached the project with confidence, believing that hard work and persistence would extend their record of successful exhibits. Sloan staff understood that Flint's auto-based economy was cyclical, with boom times and recessions, but like many other Michigan residents in the early 1980s, they were not prepared to contend with the extent or the permanence of the changes then taking place.

In addition, the Sloan's successful focus on the American Association of Museums

came, to some extent, at the cost of history. Aiming at the goal of accreditation, staff emphasized technical improvements in storage and exhibition, and the development of Sloan's education programs. They paid less attention to what was happening in the world of historical interpretation. Thus, when they set out to incorporate social history into their automotive exhibits, they tried to maintain a focus on the cars themselves in a fashion that proved to be untenable. After spending nearly ten years trying to produce *Flint and the Automobile*, museum director Phil Kwiatkowski abandoned the effort and sought new challenges beyond Flint.

As the 1980s began, Kwiatkowski knew that his next challenge would be completing the permanent exhibit. He recognized that it would be a larger exhibition project than any the staff had yet undertaken, but he believed they were ready to tackle it. He recalls that "Jim [Johnson], Steve [Laux] and I wanted to highlight the autos of the collection in an exhibit with educational interpretation—social history. Since we had the cars we decided that we could use them as the centerpiece[s] of the exhibit."⁶² They knew they needed to present more interpretation of the automobile and believed that they could integrate a social history of the community into a comprehensive display of Flint-produced vehicles.

In fact, what Sloan proposed doing was not only much bigger than any previous exhibit, but significantly different in character as well. The auto exhibit was to be more integrated than the earlier Flint history exhibits, which were really a series of self-contained vignettes. It was also intended to have a different focus than the other historical exhibits. The latter focused on the community of Flint; the new exhibit would center on

⁶²Phillip Kwiatkowski, interview with author, November 20-21, 1997.

the auto. Although Kwiatkowski sometimes referred to it as “the twentieth century exhibit,” he never anticipated that it would encompass all that might be inferred from that designation. As Curator of Education Steve Laux puts it, once the story of Flint reached 1900, “non-automotive events sort of faded from the picture.”⁶³

After working on the project for a time, the Sloan group felt stalled. Seeking another perspective and “some outside motivation,” as well as more extensive exhibit design experience than they had on staff, Kwiatkowski contacted Clint Miller, principal of the small independent design firm Exhibits with Pull. Miller told them he couldn’t begin designing the exhibit until they had a storyline that was more complete than the brief outline they had given him. Deciding that no one on staff had time to produce such a document, Kwiatkowski asked Miller to develop one that Sloan staff would review.⁶⁴

Miller worked on the storyline for about six months, keeping in touch with Laux and Johnson for guidance and comment on drafts he produced. After further input from Kwiatkowski and curator of collections Scott Peters, Miller revised his first draft. Sloan accepted it in March 1980. Titled *Automobiles in Flint–1904–1942*, the storyline is a compilation of facts and brief interpretive statements, based on a short bibliography that includes works of local history and three standard works on the automobile and its impact.⁶⁵ It is dominated by very specific detail about the development of the auto industry in Flint, primarily Buick and General Motors, and changes in auto styling and production

⁶³Stephen Laux, interview with author, October 16, 1997.

⁶⁴Phillip Kwiatkowski interview with author, January 26, 1999. Clint Miller, interview with author, December 11, 1997. Miller commented that he had had difficulty getting other museums to produce a storyline as well.

⁶⁵ Copies of both initial and revised versions of the storyline in Exhibits files, Perry Archive. By 1982, the exhibit’s title had shifted to *Flint and the Automobile*.

over four decades. Discussion of the infrastructure that grew up to support the automobile and comments on the car's social impact is general; it does not tell what happened in Flint. Because no research was done in newspapers or other local records, workers' lives and community institutions are almost entirely absent. Even when it presents issues such as the community's explosive growth between 1904 and 1920, the storyline's primary focus is what that meant for the industry and how GM responded, not what those conditions were like for the people of Flint. Sloan staff were accustomed to the preeminent status enjoyed by the museum's automotive collection; it appears that no one clearly recognized the sizable gap between the rhetoric of the exhibit plan and its reality.⁶⁶

Everyone involved was anxious to move ahead with the project. Clint Miller began designing the exhibit. He distinctly recalled being told he was to include thirty-four cars in about 10,000 square feet of space.⁶⁷ This proved an unrealistic goal, since Miller needed to present a more varied layout than the old used-car line-up and leave space for additional artifacts and photos, but he came close. The preliminary design accepted in November 1980 included twenty-eight cars. With the exception of furnishings and woodwork from the A.G. Bishop dining room, where the deal to finance General Motors was finalized, all the artifacts identified for the exhibit were directly related to auto manufacture or driving.⁶⁸

More detailed design and planning work continued through the next year. By early

⁶⁶Steve Laux and David White both wanted to include a broader look at Flint in the twentieth century, but neither seems to have been able to articulate the fact that, assertions to the contrary aside, the storyline simply does not present much social history.

⁶⁷Miller interview.

⁶⁸Preliminary Design, Exhibit Committee File, Perry Archive.

1982, Phil Kwiatkowski felt ready to look for funding to produce and install the exhibit. He remained optimistic even after his initial efforts failed, but *Flint and the Automobile* continued to meet rejection. A grant application submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities in late 1982 was unsuccessful. Local fund-raising was hampered by the perception that the Sloan Museum was tax-supported, since it was run by the Board of Education. In fact, its funding came from the endowment of the privately incorporated Cultural Center, which was heavily invested in poorly performing General Motors stock.⁶⁹ With Flint's unemployment rate an astronomical 23.5%—the nation's highest—there were many other demands on local philanthropy in the early 1980s.⁷⁰

Sloan staff originally planned to fabricate *Flint and the Automobile* in-house, which meant that materials would be the biggest expense. As plans became more detailed, however, the initial estimate of \$60,000 began to appear unrealistically low. The addition of video elements further increased both the cost and complexity of the project. Once it became likely that Sloan would need to contract for at least part of the fabrication work, costs escalated. Detailed shop drawings, usually dispensed with for in-house construction, would be needed for construction by a third party. Labor costs and the contractor's profit would become part of the total project cost. By the beginning of 1984, the project's estimated cost stood at \$150,000.⁷¹

In seeking money from local foundations, Sloan was competing with projects that

⁶⁹Exhibit Committee File; 1997 Kwiatkowski interview.

⁷⁰Lethbridge, Alice. *Through the Years in Genesee: An Illustrated History*. (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1985): 97.

⁷¹Advisory Committee Minutes, February 21, 1984, Perry Archive. See also undated budgets in *Flint and the Automobile* file, Perry Archive.

were perceived as having much greater economic potential. On one side of the Flint River, construction of a large convention hotel and the Water Street Pavilion, an upscale shopping complex, were expected to revive the downtown economy. Just north of the river the theme park/museum AutoWorld opened in 1984, directly competing with the Sloan Museum's plans to interpret the auto industry. Billed as "the nation's first indoor urban theme park," AutoWorld was touted as the cornerstone attraction that would bring tourists to Flint, tourists who would stay and spend their money, benefitting local cultural attractions as well as hotels and restaurants.⁷²

The Mott Foundation, long the Flint leader in funding innovative community programs, backed the AutoWorld project heavily. (It may in fact have been inspired by Harding Mott's comment that Flint ought to capitalize more on its automotive heritage.) Early in the planning for AutoWorld, Phil Kwiatkowski and others from Sloan proposed that the foundation "invest in an addition at Sloan dealing with the history of the auto." When that idea received a cool response, "we decided to sit tight and try to attach ourselves to AutoWorld's marketing plan." And they waited. Unsuccessful from the start, AutoWorld operated for six months in 1984 and five months in 1985. It opened for a few special occasions after that, but otherwise ceased operations. As Kwiatkowski put it, "When it closed . . . Sloan was still doing the same quality education programs" as before.⁷³

⁷²Lethbridge, *Through the Years*: 98-99; Connie McAlindon, "Partners in Progress," in Lethbridge, *Through the Years*: 138. This paragraph also reflects what anyone remotely connected with Michigan's tourism promotion efforts in the early 1980s (including this author) heard about the anticipated impact of AutoWorld.

⁷³*Ibid.*; "AutoWorld," *Sloan News* (November/December 1996): 4-5; 1997 Kwiatkowski interview. Ironically, in 1996 the Sloan Museum acquired AutoWorld's

Although the Sloan Museum survived Flint's infatuation with AutoWorld, that fact did nothing to help make *Flint and the Automobile* a reality. In October 1984, Sloan approached General Motors to underwrite a major portion of the cost of *Flint and the Automobile*. Although "impressed with its interesting and ambitious concept," GM's Flint Contributions Subcommittee declined to support it, citing "other priority needs for our limited contribution dollars."⁷⁴ To a company mired in economic difficulties and one not known for its historical awareness, an exhibit on General Motors' early days probably seemed somewhat self-serving and entirely expendable.

Following GM's rejection of the museum's funding request, Kwiatkowski attempted, without much success, to involve the museum's Advisory Committee more actively in fund raising.⁷⁵ Things went from bad to worse in 1985 when the Cultural Center trustees cut their contribution to Sloan's operating budget by \$25,000. A challenge grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1987 was unsuccessful.⁷⁶ Dealing with one fiscal setback after another, Kwiatkowski decided that Sloan would have to complete *Flint and the Automobile* in stages.⁷⁷ Using the modest funding they were able to raise, the staff completed a few components, such as a collage

records, along with pieces of some of its exhibits and rides. AutoWorld is now part of Flint's history.

⁷⁴Kenneth A. Cameron to Phillip Kwiatkowski, November 6, 1984, Exhibit Committee File, Perry Archive.

⁷⁵Advisory Committee Minutes, November 27, 1984, January 22, 1985. Kwiatkowski had never seen eye-to-eye with certain long-time committee members about the function of that body.

⁷⁶Advisory Committee Minutes, October 22, 1985; May 21, 1987.

⁷⁷Stephen Laux interview, David White, interview with author, October 16, 1997.

on early racing that was used as a backdrop for the Buick Bug, an early promotional race car (Figure 14). Another of the components featured several vehicles from the 1910s as part of an early livery stable/gas station environment. A token donation of \$5,000 from Buick in 1988 enabled the museum to re-create Flint's turn-of-the-century "Vehicle City" street arch, a familiar local icon (Figure 15).⁷⁸ These piecemeal projects created points of interest in the automotive galleries, but they did not constitute the single coherent exhibition the staff envisioned.

All of these difficulties took their toll on staff morale. Kwiatkowski in particular, as the person responsible for finding the dollars needed, was disillusioned with Flint and its problems.⁷⁹ In 1988, he began looking for another position. Before he left the following year, however, he led one last attempt to secure funding for the exhibit. A new staff member, after reviewing the storyline for *Flint and the Automobile* and the challenge grant application, said simply, "This is old history."⁸⁰ He coordinated preparation of a new application to NEH requesting money for further research, completion of a detailed design and fabrication. This application included the obligatory listing of academic consultants and humanities themes, but was far from a full reconceptualization of the exhibition.⁸¹ Due to Kwiatkowski's departure about this time, it is not clear that this application was even submitted. In any case, it was not funded.

⁷⁸Photo files, Perry Archive. "Thank You, Buick," *Sloan News*, 10:6 (November/December 1988): 3.

⁷⁹1997 Kwiatkowski interview; Scott Peters, note to author, February 2, 1999.

⁸⁰Clint Miller interview. Miller is the only interviewee who commented on this episode, which is also documented in the exhibit file.

⁸¹*Flint and the Automobile* file, Perry Archive.

Throughout the 1980s, Phil Kwiatkowski focused on Sloan's lack of money as the major obstacle to production of *Flint and the Automobile*. He realized after leaving Sloan that he hadn't been fully prepared to raise the amount needed for such a project, but in Flint's dismal economic climate, funding could have proved elusive even with a well-orchestrated campaign.⁸² Significant as it was, however, money was not the only problem. Although not always obvious to those directly involved in *Flint and the Automobile*, other issues contributed to Sloan's inability to raise the money needed for its big exhibit.

Because it was linked to the identity of the Sloan itself, exhibit content was the most significant of these additional issues. Phil Kwiatkowski approached *Flint and the Automobile* more from a museum perspective than a historical one. He saw a collection that desperately needed some kind of interpretation in a gallery that equally desperately needed renovation. He understood the visual appeal of automobiles (even to those who don't know much about them) and knew that they had quite a faithful audience. Kwiatkowski also knew that social history was 'in' with funding agencies, but he didn't have a clear idea of how to integrate it with cars. Thus he accepted a storyline that was really about *The Automobile and Flint* and included only traces of social history.⁸³

Under Phil Kwiatkowski the idea of the Panorama of Transportation had been banished from Sloan's vocabulary. By the time Sloan was accredited in 1983, his early efforts to appeal to a broader audience had largely succeeded, and Sloan was recognized as much more than a car museum. The mission statement then in use did not even mention

⁸²1997 Kwiatkowski interview.

⁸³Steve Laux reversed the exhibit title as a way of clarifying what he realized (after the fact) was the real subject of *Flint and the Automobile*.

automobiles.⁸⁴ At the same time, however, cars were treated differently than other kinds of artifacts, and collected for condition, technical features and rarity, rather than for a history of use in the community.⁸⁵ The proceeds of the museum's largest annual fundraiser were dedicated solely to the automotive collection. The notion of Sloan as a Panorama of Transportation, with the glorification of the auto (and GM) that entailed, had not completely died.

An issue related to the content of *Flint and the Automobile* is timing. Structural changes taking place in the auto industry were giving the automobile a more complex role in Flint's community life. Just as they had credited General Motors as the source of Flint's early boom and postwar prosperity, by the mid-1980s, many residents perceived the corporation as the cause of the city's plight. There was a sense that recovery could not be counted on as it had in the past.⁸⁶ Sloan staff were too close to this change to be able to analyze it at the time, but an underlying awareness of major change may have contributed to funders' reluctance to support *Flint and the Automobile*.

Lack of consensus on the exhibit team was also a problem for *Flint and the Automobile*. Two of the key staff involved in planning the exhibit favored fundamentally different approaches. Steve Laux, who admittedly "didn't care a lick about cars" when he began working at Sloan, was already using the auto collection to talk about daily life and

⁸⁴Copy in Advisory Committee Minutes, Perry Archive.

⁸⁵Both Steve Laux and Curator of Collections David White commented on this as a continuing source of friction at Sloan. Laux also observed that the space and maintenance required by a collection of automobiles precludes the sort of compromise possible in the case of small objects, when the museum can often accept two items rather than debate between them.

⁸⁶Dunbar and May, *Michigan*: 636.

the history of Flint in educational programs.⁸⁷ He was more inclined than other members of the team to put social history directly into the exhibit, but consistently lost out to Associate Director Jim Johnson's focus on the cars themselves. Having worked closely with the volunteers who ran the Summer Festival and restored museum vehicles, Johnson perceived Sloan's audience as an auto-focused group.⁸⁸

As the outsider on the project, designer Clint Miller observed staff dynamics with some detachment. Noting the importance of team chemistry in generating the kind of enthusiasm and commitment that draws others into a project, his assessment was that the Sloan Museum staff "didn't quite have it." He thought that Steve Laux offered some creative ideas that "could have been taken much farther." Jim Johnson on the other hand never seemed to want to stray very far from the cars themselves. Miller observed that Phil Kwiatkowski would make decisions and settle disputes, but believed he was never quite successful in building the common ground that would have allowed the exhibit development process to become truly creative.⁸⁹

Inexperience with sizable interpretive exhibits was not a major factor in the difficulties Sloan encountered with *Flint and the Automobile*, but it almost certainly compounded other problems. Not only was this project larger and more integrated than anything Sloan staff had worked on previously, it was also Clint Miller's largest project to date as an independent designer. He remembers thinking "these guys must know what they're doing." Sloan staff, while not as explicit, clearly believed the same of him. While

⁸⁷Laux interview.

⁸⁸James Johnson, interviews with author, October 16, 1997 and June 11, 1999.

⁸⁹Miller interview; Laux interview; 1997 Johnson interview.

more experience would not necessarily have saved the project, it did not help that everyone involved was learning as they went along.

The Alfred P. Sloan Museum's attempt to design and produce *Flint and the Automobile* spanned nearly a decade. Phil Kwiatkowski and his staff undertook it optimistically, believing they had a sound exhibit concept and assuming that this project would proceed along much the same lines as others they had successfully completed. When funding for *Flint and the Automobile* proved elusive, they did not give up. They repackaged their plan in an effort to make it more attractive to funders, but they never seriously reconsidered their basic approach. Had it been built in the early 1980s, *Flint and the Automobile* would have been a significant improvement on the museum's previous automotive exhibits and might have broken new ground. But by the late 1980s, the history museum landscape had changed significantly; any auto exhibit would be measured against the grand scale of the Henry Ford Museum's *Automobile and American Life*, which opened in 1987. Although staff did not realize it at the time, Phil Kwiatkowski's departure from Sloan in 1989 marked the end of *Flint and the Automobile*.

Detroit Historical Museum: Multiple Traumas ⁹⁰

Beginning in the late 1960s, the comfortable stability the Detroit Historical Museum had achieved over the previous fifteen years was assaulted by change. City

⁹⁰This section title refers to the collection of insightful essays edited by Elaine Heumann Gurian, *Institutional Trauma: Major Change in Museums and Its Effect on Staff* (Washington, D. C.: American Association of Museums, 1995). Particularly relevant here are Marcia White and Talbert Spence, "The Illness and Death of the Chairman": 103-110; Holly Hotchner, "Life on a Fiscal Precipice": 135-155; and Kathleen McLean and Suzanne LeBlanc, "Remaking the Museum": 167-181.

ownership of the museum, which had once seemed to assure its future, became a liability. The social and economic changes that Detroit had experienced since 1946 began to affect the museum directly. DHM was challenged to rethink its tried-and-true formulas in order to present exhibits and programs for a changing audience whose assumptions and expectations were quite different from those of the Detroiters the museum addressed in the early 1950s. The paths of the city and its suburbs diverged, altering the museum's relationships with both the Detroit Historical Society and city government.

The downside of public ownership was clearly reflected in the DHM budget. Successive cuts in the museum's funding took a serious toll on staff morale as well as on programs and infrastructure. During the late 1970s and early 80s the museum was barely able to stay afloat. When the city regained a degree of fiscal stability, the museum's funding remained inadequate and far more precarious than had been the case prior to 1965. There could be little doubt that change in Detroit, as in Flint, was permanent.

The seventies and eighties were difficult decades professionally as well for DHM. These decades witnessed a contraction, not only in budgetary terms, but in terms of sensibility as well. An institution whose exhibits had been ahead of their time in the early 1950s was no longer quite keeping up. As the museum was drawn more tightly into the orbit of city government, its operation became more bureaucratized and the possibilities for creative innovation were reduced. A staff that began the 1970s with the respect of colleagues in other institutions, ended the decade more often receiving their sympathy. By the close of the 1980s, DHM had begun rebuilding relationships with supporters, and had a plan for updating its exhibits. Events of the early 1990s demonstrated how fragile its balance was, however, and again raised the question of its institutional viability.

Led by Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh and historical commission and society officials, the Detroit Historical Museum broke ground in September 1966 for the long-awaited addition to its building on Woodward Avenue. All present were optimistic that in its expanded building the DHM would continue not only its role as a significant city institution, but also its national leadership in the field of local history. Director Henry Brown and his staff anticipated the benefits that the new wing would provide: space to add to the ever-popular “Streets of Old Detroit” and show more of the museum’s business and industrial collections. It would provide a second room for use with school groups and would enable staff to move their offices into the museum.⁹¹ DHM could still boast the largest attendance of any urban historical museum in the country—well over 600,000 at its three sites—supported by a historical society with membership over 3,000.⁹²

Those who worked to bring DHM into public ownership in the 1940s did so with the 1943 race riot still fresh in their minds. They hoped that by enabling city residents to learn more about each other and about the city in which they lived, the museum could help build bridges between different ethnic, racial and religious groups. That the city still had a long way to go was made painfully clear in July 1967, when five days of violence in black neighborhoods left forty-three people dead, most of them killed by police. Millions of dollars worth of property had been damaged or destroyed.⁹³

None of the museum’s properties was damaged in either the July riot or the smaller

⁹¹“Coordinating Director’s Report,” Detroit Historical Society *Bulletin* 21:8 (May 1965): 13.

⁹²*Detroit Historical Commission Annual Reports, 1963-67*; “To the Membership,” *Bulletin* 20:5 (February 1964): 2.

⁹³Dunbar and May, *Michigan*: 583; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*: 259-260.

civil disturbance that occurred the following spring after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Both events raised questions about the security of historical commission buildings, however, and museum attendance for the 1967-68 fiscal year dropped significantly from the previous year's figure.⁹⁴ In one sense, the Detroit Historical Museum and its programs were far removed from the causes of the disturbances, which were rooted in long-term social and economic trends, coupled with persistent racial inequality that was most visibly manifested in housing segregation and discriminatory hiring practices.⁹⁵ At the same time, the museum was undeniably part of the city's white power structure, and therefore—in the eyes of black Detroiters—part of the problem.

DHM in fact had a better record than many of its sister institutions in both exhibiting black history and hiring African American staff. It opened a special exhibit titled *A Century of Negro Life and Culture* in November 1952, little more than a year after moving into its new building, and had mounted similar exhibits about the history of Detroit's black community with increasing frequency during the 1960s. The museum welcomed African American organizations along with the other community groups that used its meeting rooms. By the late 1950s, the Detroit chapter of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History held its regular meetings there. In addition to holding stereotypical positions as janitors and groundskeepers, blacks also worked at DHM as exhibit preparators and publicly visible guides. John Chavis, Curator of Metropolitan

⁹⁴*DHC Annual Report*, 1967-68: 1.

⁹⁵See Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* and Darden *et al.*, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* for further background on Detroit since World War II.

Services from 1957 until 1966, was the museum's highest-ranking African American.⁹⁶

The public record of the historical society took no explicit notice of the 1967 riot. But the fall issue of the *Bulletin* carried on its cover a simple black and white rendering of the city seal, with its motto clearly legible: *Speramus Meliora* (We hope for better things), *Cineribus Resurgit* (It shall rise again from the ashes). Inside, Henry Brown's brief explanation of the design averred that the motto was "still characteristic of Detroit's indomitable spirit and courage."⁹⁷ The dedication of the museum's Kresge wing took place during the first anniversary of the riot the following summer. The dedication itself was a public event, but the many previews were not, and there was less emphasis on including the citizens of Detroit (whose taxes paid half the cost of the new wing) than there had been when the building first opened. Historical Commission President Leonard Simons, in remembering his predecessor George Stark, emphasized the need for the museum to "justify itself continually by linking our past with the present in a lively and interesting fashion."⁹⁸ But unlike 1951, the new DHM wing offered no innovative approach to exhibiting the city's history; its galleries were simply more of the same. The festivities had more to do with celebrating the museum's status and stability than with changing to meet

⁹⁶Concerning exhibits see "A Century of Negro Life and Culture in Detroit," *Bulletin* 9:2 (November 1952): 2; Museum Cooperates on Afro-American Exhibit," *Bulletin* 24:1 (Fall 1967): 16; *DHC Annual Report*, 1967-68: 25, 37. DHC Annual Reports in the 1950s and 60s list groups meeting in the museum. The Metropolitan Services Division became the Urban History Division shortly before Chavis resigned. *DHC Annual Report*, 1965-66: 47.

⁹⁷*Bulletin* 24 (Fall 1967):1. The fire of 1805, which nearly wiped out the tiny fortified settlement on the banks of the Detroit River, inspired the city's motto.

⁹⁸"Dedication-Kresge Exhibit Hall, Detroit's 276th Birthday Party," *Bulletin* 25 (Fall, 1968); *Kresge Exhibit Hall Dedication Program* [Detroit: Detroit Historical Society, 1968]. A newspaper strike prevented the Detroit News and the Free Press from covering the opening.

the needs of the contemporary city.

In such a climate, the sudden death of director Henry Brown in February 1970 was a serious blow. In his twenty-three years as director, Brown had seen DHM through two major construction projects, and had shaped its supporting society as well as its exhibits and public programs. For many historical society members and community leaders, as well as his colleagues in the museum world, the 59-year-old director had embodied the Detroit Historical Museum; they found it difficult to imagine the institution without his “wisdom, devotion, ability and . . . wonderful wit.”⁹⁹ And although Brown’s death created an opportunity to renew the museum’s relationship to a changed and changing city, the loss of his leadership also made that task undeniably more complicated.

Henry Brown’s long tenure as director was only one factor in DHM’s stability. The city’s historical commission had seen relatively little turnover since its formation in 1946; President Leonard Simons was a charter member of the body and only its second presiding officer. Leadership of the historical society was likewise stable, with many people serving long terms as trustees and/or officers. The museum’s unexpected early success had bred stability in its programs as well. Director Brown had chosen to stick with the kinds of exhibits and programs that worked, and society members, staff and commissioners alike had come to regard those as the norm. Given this institutional history, it is not surprising that the Detroit Historical Commission, when suddenly faced with the necessity of choosing a new director, opted for continuity rather than change. They selected as the new director Detroit native and DHM alumnus Solan Weeks, who now

⁹⁹William T. Alderson, Editorial, *History News* 25:3 (March 1970): 46. See DHS *Bulletin* 26:6 (March 1970):3-6, for additional tributes to Brown.

boasted additional experience at both the Michigan Historical Museum and Old Sturbridge Village.

Weeks did not have to build a museum and its programs almost from scratch as his predecessor had. Instead, he faced a challenge that was in many ways even greater, that of trying to maintain services and present a meaningful program in a city where problems multiplied much faster than solutions. The city of Detroit continued to lose jobs and people throughout the 1970s, particularly in the manufacturing, wholesale and retail sectors. More affluent whites continued their flight to the suburbs, leaving the city increasingly black and increasingly poor. By 1980, African Americans constituted more than 60% of Detroit's population, and close to a quarter of city residents had incomes below the federal poverty line.¹⁰⁰ The financial position of city government inevitably deteriorated in the face of such massive economic and social disinvestment.

Forced to choose among many urgent needs, the city of Detroit could not make its historical museum a priority. In 1972, with the city facing a budget deficit approaching \$30 million and the fiscal year already half over, Solan Weeks was ordered to cut 41%—more than \$112,000—from his budget.¹⁰¹ The museum had barely recovered from that crisis when the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74 and subsequent automotive slump created another. Already operating on reduced schedules, the two branch museums, Fort Wayne and the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle, shut down completely in December 1975. The Detroit Historical Museum itself closed for two months in the spring

¹⁰⁰Darden, *et al.*, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*: 4-5, 16-25.

¹⁰¹Julie Morris, "Three Museums Face Closings in Budget Cut," *Detroit Free Press*, January 21, 1972: 3A, 5A.

of 1976, before being rescued by state aid. It reopened in June, along with the Dossin Museum, but Fort Wayne, site of the city's centerpiece Bicentennial restoration project, was open to visitors only one day out of the entire summer.¹⁰²

Under such circumstances, there was little money for extra embellishments, but DHM exhibits continued to change on a regular basis. Like his mentor Henry Brown, Solon Weeks believed that regular exhibit changes helped to bring more people into the museum, whether as repeat visitors back for another look, or people with an interest in a particular topic. Construction of the Kresge wing had precluded auto exhibits for about two years, during which time movement of such large objects in and out of the building was impossible. The reopening of Dodge Hall to automobiles was celebrated with *F.O.B. Detroit*, which focused on "breakthroughs in engineering and design," and included models drawings and accessories, in addition to cars themselves.¹⁰³ The Detroit Historical Museum continued the practice begun in the early 1960s of commemorating important automotive anniversaries, such as the 50th anniversary of Chrysler Corporation in 1975 and GM's 75th birthday in 1983 (Figure 16). Most—but not all—automotive exhibits still presented cars as cars, with interpretation focused at the level of the individual artifact. Certain topics made regular appearances, including the UAW and Packard, as did certain distinctive cars from DHM's collection. Auto racing was featured at least twice in the early 1980s, when Detroit hosted a Grand Prix race.¹⁰⁴

The museum's first substantial recognition that automotive history includes blue

¹⁰²"Coordinating Director's Report," *DHS Annual Report*, 1976-77:5.

¹⁰³*Kresge Exhibit Hall Dedication Program*.

¹⁰⁴DHM Curatorial Department, Industrial History Exhibit Files.

collar workers came in a 1976 exhibition on the UAW, subtitled *Forty Years of Struggle*. In a variation on the usual cars-in-the-gallery exhibit, DHM presented the UAW's history by means of photographs and extensive labels mounted on large panels among the automobiles. Unfortunately, artifacts were not integral to the exhibit, and the quantity of text was far too much for visitors to read standing up. *Forty Years of Struggle* was a classic example of the cardinal exhibition sin: the book on the wall.

Within a few years, however, the museum was ready to do more. The 1968 title *F.O.B. Detroit* was reused in 1980, with the subtitle *Automobiles and the People Who Make Them*. The curator's exhibit files are more extensive than for any previous exhibit, reflecting the research and programming that were part of the project. Still primarily a photo exhibit, it was divided into seven sections: Early Years, Sit Down Strikes, War Years, Organizing Ford, Post-war–Fighting for Equity, Fighting for Justice and Struggles of the Seventies. For perhaps the first time, DHM produced a teachers' guide to labor history resources and suggestions for class activities. The UAW may have assisted with production of the guide; it subsidized the copies sent to schools in the Detroit area and also mailings that publicized *F.O.B. Detroit* among UAW members and retirees.¹⁰⁵

The Detroit Historical Museum made one significant attempt to move its auto-related exhibits in a new direction during Solon Weeks' tenure as director. Recognizing that outside funding would be essential to any major exhibit change, DHM applied (or proposed applying—it may not actually have submitted the application) in the late 1970s to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a planning grant to work on an exhibition called *The Automobile and Southeastern Michigan*. This exhibit was to focus on “the

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, File for *F.O.B. Detroit: Automobiles and the People Who Make Them*.

social, economic and environmental impact of the automobile both as an industry and a means of transportation.”¹⁰⁶ The proposed exhibit on Southeastern Michigan would recognize change in the automotive industry, including how the closing of plants in Detroit affected both the city and the region. Indeed, the museum hoped that by educating people about the economic role of the auto in the area, planning for the future would become more realistic.¹⁰⁷ This project represents DHM’s first acknowledgment that the automobile was not an unmixed blessing for the city—that Detroit’s relationship to its flagship industry was in fact very complex.

As described in the grant application, *The Automobile and Southeastern Michigan* sounds extremely dry and impersonal—not even its title is dynamic. Southeast Michigan is certainly an identifiable region of the state, but it lacks the instant recognition that the name “Detroit” generates. The proposal is very abstract, dealing neither with concrete artifacts nor with specific individuals. However laudable the educational goals of the exhibition, there is little evidence in the proposal that it will engage visitors long enough to communicate its message. The existing file does not indicate why DHM dropped the project, but it probably failed to interest any potential funders.

The early 1980s were bleak years indeed for the Detroit Historical Museum, with both city and state sinking deeper into another recession. The museum, which began the decade with eighty-seven staff positions, had lost thirty-one people by 1983. Even when annual operating budgets were not actually cut, sharp increases in utility costs forced

¹⁰⁶Grant proposal, *The Automobile and Southeastern Michigan*, Industrial History Exhibit Files: 2

¹⁰⁷*The Automobile and Southeastern Michigan*: 4.

reductions in museum programs. Financial support from the historical society also dropped significantly.¹⁰⁸ Businesses in southeastern Michigan were feeling the effects of recession, and the increasing polarization of city and suburbs probably also affected contributions. In addition, museum director Weeks was unable to provide consistent leadership due to a protracted illness. The most important legacy at his death in October 1984 may have been the simple fact that Detroit still had a historical museum at all.¹⁰⁹ With morale at a low ebb, but an economic outlook that was brightening ever so slightly, the city began its search for a new museum director.

Barry Dressel, the former assistant director of Baltimore's Peale Museum, came to Detroit to direct the city's historical department in 1985. Dressel had a Master's degree in history and considerable museum training, including graduate-level course work at the University of Delaware, Williamsburg's Seminar in Historical Administration and the Museum Management Institute in Berkeley, California.¹¹⁰ Young and ambitious, he set about revitalizing the Detroit Historical Museum. Dressel re-emphasized the museum's links to the Detroit Historical Society and began rebuilding private sector financial support for the museum. In addition to funding for publicly visible exhibit projects, he raised the money needed to transform a structure at Fort Wayne into a state of the art storage facility for DHM's social history collections. He found money to rebuild the staff needed to run a reinvigorated program. Unlike his predecessors, Dressel looked beyond the city for new

¹⁰⁸"Detroit Historical Department Report," *DHS Annual Report*, 1980: 15; 1981: 15, 1983: 14.

¹⁰⁹"Solon Weeks, Director of Detroit Historical Museums," *Detroit News*, October 15, 1984: 2-E.

¹¹⁰"Participant Orientation Packet," April 1988, DHM Director's Office, *Motor City Files*.

employees, hiring several people who brought experience at other large urban history museums and a fresh perspective on Detroit.¹¹¹

Until the mid-1980s, virtually all the cars in the Detroit Historical Museum's collection had been acquired through unsolicited donations. It is characteristic of Barry Dressel's approach to running the museum that he not only wanted to change that, but he wanted to change it on a large scale. He collaborated in 1988 with recently hired Curator of Industrial History Robert Casey on a list of 100 significant Detroit cars, which included the 1901 Curved Dash Olds, the first car manufactured in Detroit; the 1912 Cadillac, which featured the first electric starter and light system; the first Jeep model produced for civilian sale (1948), a car from Packard's final year of production (1956) and a 1981 K car, "Chrysler's savior."¹¹² The museum owned fewer than twenty of the desired vehicles (plus a few listed as alternates), and Dressel intended to use the list as the starting point for a more active collecting program. Because DHM could exhibit only a small number of cars at once in its main building, the museum director planned to renovate another of the fort's storage buildings to enable interested visitors to see virtually all of the collection. Both Casey and Dressel left DHM without doing much collecting, but they were able to prune the collection, disposing of vehicles whose condition or lack of significance to Detroit made them not worth the cost of long-term care and storage.¹¹³

¹¹¹*DHS Annual Reports*, 1986-1988/89; Vicky Kruckeberg, interview with author, February 19, 1998; Robert Casey, interview with author, March 25, 1999; "Participant Orientation Packet." Renovation of the storage facility was not completed until after Dressel's departure from DHM.

¹¹²"Detroit Historical Department Targets 100 Most Significant Cars for Collection," Photocopy in DHM Design Department, *Motor City Files*.

¹¹³Casey interview; Patience Nauta, interview with author, March 19, 1998; *DHS Annual Report*, 1988-89: 2; James V. Higgins, "Detroit needs a well-planned auto

Dressel recognized the need for Detroit's historical museum to come to grips with the city's twentieth century history more thoroughly than it had thus far. The auto industry meant far more to Detroit than could be represented by an exhibit that was dominated solely by automobiles themselves. His initial effort to bring more sophisticated interpretation into automotive exhibitions focused on a single aspect of the industry: the advertising that sold the cars produced in the city. Like earlier exhibits that had included advertising for its nostalgia value, *Selling American Dreams* capitalized on the color and familiarity of car ads, with original posters and billboard-size blow-ups of well remembered ads alongside some of the cars they promoted from all decades of the twentieth century. The exhibit, which opened in October 1986, was not confined to Dodge Hall, but took up most of the museum's first floor.¹¹⁴

The other major auto exhibit developed under Barry Dressel also broke new ground for DHM. The intertwined nature of changes in automotive technology and design was the theme of *Under the Skin: The Changing Anatomy of the American Automobile*, which opened in March 1989. Although previous DHM exhibits, such as 1964's *Design on Wheels* and the 1968 version of *F.O.B. Detroit*, had discussed changes in technology and styling, they had not traced the relationship between the two over time. Curator Bob Casey carried through the evolutionary metaphor with section titles like "The Origin of the Species" and "The Age of Dinosaurs." He also worked with designer Lynne Friman to make sure that the internal features he talked about could be seen by visitors, another departure from previous exhibits. They used mirrors under cars, opened hoods and trunks,

museum," *Detroit News*, May 23, 1988: C1.

¹¹⁴"Museum Director's Report," *DHS Annual Report*, 1986; Nauta interview.

and borrowed a cutaway Ford Escort from the Henry Ford Museum.¹¹⁵

In addition to encouraging more sophisticated interpretation in the museum's changing exhibitions, Barry Dressel also reviewed DHM's permanent exhibits program. A new master plan for the building designated the first floor for an overview of Detroit history. Dodge Hall, the larger of the two galleries available, would be used to tell the city's twentieth century story. Dressel recognized the importance of this story to visitors, noting that "it addresses the history of the city that our visitors will relate to the most, the history that is the story of their lives and of recent generations, and the factors that have determined the shape of their own lives now."¹¹⁶ Although both institution and exhibition had changed extensively before *Motor City* finally opened in December 1995, Dressel was responsible for the basic idea of a long-term exhibition that would tell how "The City Builds Cars and Cars Build the City." Dressel also arranged the acquisition of the centerpiece artifact for that exhibit.

When General Motors announced in the fall of 1986 that it would close its Fleetwood and Clark St. Cadillac plants, Dressel approached GM management about collecting a part of the assembly line. Although other segments of the line were considered, the body drop, where bodies produced in the Fleetwood plant were lowered

¹¹⁵Casey interview. Although it was well received, Casey thinks in retrospect that *Under the Skin* might have been more effective with a thematic, rather than a chronological, organization. That would have enabled him to make some unexpected comparisons, such as one between the museum's replica of the first car ever driven in Detroit and a prototype of the Pontiac Fiero. They were too far apart in the chronological exhibit for most visitors to notice the similarities between them: both are two-seaters, with four cylinder engines mounted transversely behind the seating.

¹¹⁶"Participant Orientation Packet."

onto Clark St. chassis, was the front runner from the beginning. The entire operation was documented while it was still running. By late 1987, plans were being made for staff to dismantle the body drop the following spring. A great deal of staff time was invested in the project; the entire curatorial division spent weeks photographing, numbering pieces and supervising the dismantling and moving of all the parts.¹¹⁷

At the same time that they were planning the acquisition of the body drop, the staff team met with three consultants: Dr. Richard Rabinowitz of the American History Workshop, a New York-based public history consulting firm, and two historians from Wayne State University. These meetings, as well as internal discussions, led to agreement that the exhibit would “tell the story of how the growth of the automobile industry transformed Detroit However, Motor City is not a history of the automobile industry. It is the history of the city.” They also realized that the limitations of space and the exhibit medium itself meant that they couldn’t include everything: “The exhibition cannot explain in detail how Detroit grew and changed; but it can explain why.” Helping visitors understand “how that history continues to affect Detroit’s present and future” was the exhibit’s ultimate goal.¹¹⁸

Dressel and Chief Curator of Collections Maud Lyon used a modest grant from the Michigan Council for the Humanities to bring two groups of historians to the Detroit Historical Museum in April 1988. These consultants were selected for their knowledge of

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*; Maud Lyon, interview with author, March 5, 1998. Lyon was the only staff member who was part of the *Motor City* team from start to finish. She provided a chronology of the project in her interview, most of which I was able to both supplement and confirm in various museum files.

¹¹⁸“Participant Orientation Packet.”

some piece of the social, technological or labor history that the exhibit was expected to cover. The museum wanted to come out of the meetings with a clear idea of the time period the exhibit would cover, a list of themes essential to understanding Detroit in the twentieth century and ideas about how they might present those themes by means of three dimensional objects.¹¹⁹ They were extremely disappointed with the results of their discussions. The historians seemed narrowly concerned with their own specialties, and DHM staff were unable to coax them into discussion of the broader picture. In the end staff decided not even to bother having all the discussion notes typed up.¹²⁰

The staff team had also by the time of these meetings begun reading and discussing histories of the auto industry and of Detroit. This was a regularly scheduled and relatively structured activity; different staff members were assigned to lead discussion on specific topics. This staff seminar, which continued into 1989, had the effect of immersing people in the topic and giving them a common background. They familiarized themselves with the latest literature, without the whole burden of research falling on one or two individuals.¹²¹

Over the next year however, the *Motor City* project almost stalled out. Barry Dressel resigned as director of the museum in August 1989, in the midst of work on a proposal for an NEH planning grant. The acting director, a political appointee who had disliked Dressel, tried to block any further work on the project. The executive director of

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰Lyon interview.

¹²¹DHM Design Department, *Motor City* Files; Lyon interview. Most local museum staffs find that there are few scholarly resources directly relevant to their exhibit topics. A city as important as Detroit in the twentieth century attracts much more attention from historians.

the Detroit Historical Society felt unsure of his ability to raise the money needed. Maud Lyon, who had applied for Dressel's position, and a few others believed that *Motor City* was critical to DHM's ability to demonstrate that it had some relevance in the contemporary city, and that history could play a meaningful role in city life. "At some risk to her job," Lyon circumvented both directors to submit the NEH proposal, and the museum received a grant. Finally, at the beginning of September 1990, she was named DHM director.¹²²

Although Maud Lyon was eager to move ahead with *Motor City*, factors beyond DHM control intervened. In the early 1990s the auto industry had once again slid into bad times. Although by this time few auto plants remained in Detroit, the economy of southeastern Michigan was still auto-dependent. To a city already on its knees economically, even a mild recession was devastating. As if that were not enough, by January 1991 it was clear that support from the state of Michigan, an essential component of the museum budget since the mid-1970s, would probably be dramatically reduced under the administration of newly elected Republican Governor John Engler. Anticipating the loss of much of her curatorial staff, Lyon decided that the labor-intensive task of moving the collections to the recently completed Fort Wayne storage facility had to take precedence over other projects. By the end of the summer of 1992, the artifacts had been moved, and the Detroit Historical Museum had lost 40% of its staff. The curatorial staff

¹²²Casey and Lyon interviews. Lyon downplayed her role in keeping the project alive, but admitted that "subterfuge" was needed to get the NEH application submitted. Casey, who was Curator of Industrial History at the time, was blunt about the "small-minded internal political motivations" of the deputy director. He credited Lyon with keeping the project alive, although "she was too discreet ever to admit it."

was reduced from seven people to two.¹²³

Lyon and her staff had struggled through the past eighteen months doing the best they could to follow the plan they had laid out for their NEH grant. The curatorial staff were preparing to move artifacts and most were worried about losing their jobs; *Motor City* was not uppermost in their minds. Now that she was director, Maud Lyon was not able to work as closely with them as she had when she was Chief Curator and found that she had trouble getting them to spell out the exhibit's key ideas. Their point of view was strongly oriented toward the experience of workers and the struggles of unionization, to the exclusion of other significant issues. Lyon believed that the labor story was an important element, but she was not at all convinced that the project as a whole was on the right track.¹²⁴

The situation came to a head with a June 1992 staff presentation on the exhibit for historical society trustees, the people to whom the museum looked to find the money needed for *Motor City*. Looking back, the shortcomings of that presentation were obvious enough to Lyon: "We were stupid enough to talk about a 'dynamic new exhibit' and only have black-and-white slides. We were thinking intellectually, not thinking visually or in terms of communication to an audience." The ineptness of the presentation, combined with the labor-oriented content of the exhibit, did not go over well with the trustees. In a nutshell, "The whole thing crashed and burned."¹²⁵

¹²³Lyon interview.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*; David B. Driscoll, "Proposed Outline for the Motor City Exhibition from a 'Work Experience' Perspective," July 24, 1991; Thomas Dietz, "Motor City: Labor & Unions," April, 1992, and "From Open Shop to Union Town: Industrial Relations, 1900-1941, June, 1992, all in DHM Design Department *Motor City* Files.

¹²⁵Lyon interview.

In fact, the reaction of the historical society's board was similar to reactions museum staff had gotten since they began presenting the Motor City idea to individuals and groups shortly after Maud Lyon took over as director in 1990. Curators in particular had expected people to respond positively to the man-on-the-line approach. They were taken aback when many of those who saw a model of the body drop at the museum's 1990 Fall Arts Festival booth said, "That doesn't really relate to me." The museum's business manager was more direct: "I worked in an auto plant one summer when I was in college. I hated it. I couldn't wait to get out of there. Why would I bring my kids here [to see that]?"¹²⁶ Looking back, Maud Lyon realized, "Nobody . . . got excited about it." In September 1992, it was not at all clear how to get the project moving in the right direction; Lyon decided to focus on other issues.

After two decades of dramatic alteration in its environment, DHM's *Motor City* project represented a significant opportunity to reconnect with its visitors and the identity that Raymond Miller and Henry Brown had constructed forty years before. *Motor City's* early goal of helping visitors to think about Detroit's present and future in light of its past embodied that thinking. It proved difficult, however, to maintain that focus while also coping with the substantial handicaps imposed by personnel changes and a still vulnerable fiscal condition. By the time of the staff presentation for DHS trustees in 1992, *Motor City's* big picture goals had lost their prominence. Newer curators lacked the vision of the exhibit as a broad history of the city itself. Although other elements of Detroit's twentieth century story were never eliminated from the exhibit outline, it is clear that staff put more detail and greater passion into the labor/union sections. The result was a plan that was

¹²⁶*Ibid.*; Kruckeberg interview.

perceived, with some justification, as one-sided.

Major projects at both Detroit Historical and Sloan Museums had stalled. The economic positions of both institutions were seriously compromised by structural change in their local economies. The additional difficulties at DHM: plummeting attendance, loss of staff, leadership vacuums associated with the loss of directors, all contributed to a loss of confidence among staff and supporters. Barry Dressel began to repair that situation, but by 1992, most of his achievements were unraveling. When the presentation to DHS trustees failed, a few staff blamed the conservative management-oriented perspective of the upper middle class. Maud Lyon believed there was a larger problem, that the exhibit concept presented by staff was flawed. At Sloan, in contrast, the hard economic times actually overlapped a period of major success that increased the museum's visibility in the community and among professional colleagues. Its leaders approached potential funders for *Flint and the Automobile* with confidence and simply blamed the poor economy when they were turned down. They never seriously considered the possibility that part of the problem lay in their exhibit plan.

Despite similarities in some of their early exhibit descriptions, Sloan and DHM approached the relationship between their cities and the auto industry very differently. The Flint museum emphasized the artifacts and did a minimal amount of research. Staff focused on the goal of getting the exhibit designed and installed. They did not really explore what it meant to include social history in an automotive story, nor did they investigate its local manifestations. In Detroit, on the other hand, staff read works in social, urban and industrial history and engaged, if not entirely successfully, academic

historians with a variety of perspectives in their discussions. This more analytical approach served them well initially, but the delays forced by other circumstances permitted almost too much analysis and articulation of sophisticated arguments that simply were not broad enough to carry the exhibit. If Sloan's exhibit plan lacked the historical substance it needed, that of the Detroit Historical Museum suffered from an excess of the same. Neither situation produced an exhibition plan that was attractive to potential funders.

Each of these Michigan museums had developed an institutional identity based on certain basic assumptions. During the period between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s, some of those assumptions were called into question; others were rendered completely invalid. The collections, purposes and historical scope of the institutions did not change, but their potential audiences did. How museums communicated with their audiences changed as well. Museums found they needed to incorporate the social, economic and professional changes taking place around them into their notions of what kinds of institutions they were and what they were about.

Beginning with Henry Ford Museum, all four museums attempted to put their new understandings of themselves and what they were about into practice in a major exhibition project. They succeeded in varying degrees: from the Michigan Historical Museum's increased public notice and visitation to the failure of the DHM plan to win any support at all. Staffs and administrators at all four museums knew they had not accomplished all they had anticipated. They understood—at a couple of institutions in very stark terms—that additional change and hard work would be needed if their museums were to remain viable. Both public support in some tangible form (audience numbers, friends' organizations) and

financial support from foundations and corporations would be necessary for the creation of an identity that was more broadly meaningful.

CHAPTER 5

NEW INTERPRETIVE BALANCE

The four museums in this study began to change in significant ways during the 1970s and 1980s, whether those changes were initiated within the institution or imposed by external conditions. None of these Michigan museums was immediately successful at producing major new exhibits in its new circumstances. The staff isolation that was fostered by change, and particularly by traumatic change, had disrupted relationships, not only among staff and between staff and management, but between institutions and their audiences and supporters as well. Each museum now looked to a major exhibit project as a means of re-energizing itself as an institution. Although all four museums were driven to some extent by political and economic necessity in their efforts to reconnect with audiences and supporters, they discovered benefits from those conversations that extended well beyond their initial goals. Indeed, flourishing and multi-directional conversations proved to be a hallmark of both process and product in all four institutions, and a key to their success.

The exhibit projects examined in this chapter share a number of similarities beyond the fact that the automobile and the industry that makes and markets cars are prominent in all four. Although their size ranges from about 8,000 square feet at DHM to more than 60,000 at HFM, each exhibit is large in proportion to the size of the building it occupies. Each cost more than any previous exhibit project at its institution and required significant contributions from sources other than the museum's usual funders. The Sloan and DHM staffs had already experienced the consequences of not making a convincing case: people

who weren't intrigued by an idea would not write checks to cover its costs. Being able to articulate what an exhibit was about and what would make it interesting to visitors was important to securing funding; having to make this sort of case at different points in the process helped to build a common understanding of the project among staff. And while potential funders are admittedly a select group, their reactions to various exhibit possibilities provided a rough gauge of the broader public's likely reaction.¹

Every institution committed unprecedented quantities of staff time and energy to its project, adopting some form of exhibit team. The period when these exhibits were produced, from the mid-1980s through the mid 1990s, coincided with the greatest popularity of this approach to exhibition development. All four museums in this study involved people with varied expertise in their projects. No two teams were quite alike in the way they functioned, but all fostered a considerable degree of give-and-take among members. The process of arriving at consensus not only strengthened team members' understanding of a project, but enabled them to describe it to others clearly and enthusiastically. Three of the teams found ways to include designers from commercial firms in their work, while still maintaining museum control of the process.

The process of shaping the exhibits' content was informed by recent scholarship, but also by attention to audience interests, expectations and levels of understanding. The insights of the "new social history," which had already transformed much first-person

¹Michigan Historical Center director Sandra Clark (interview with author, September 3, 1998) and DHM director Maud Lyon (interview with author, February 26, 1998) spoke most explicitly to these points, but others, including John Wright (interview with author, March 4, 1999) and Steve Germann (interview with author, June 11, 1999) touched on them as well. All recognized that the importance of more formal front-end evaluation, although only HFM was able to conduct such studies.

interpretation at historic sites, were, by the mid-1980s, finding a home in traditional indoor museums. Exhibits more frequently included artifacts and information related to the lives of ordinary people, in contexts that visitors could readily understand. Interactive exhibit elements encouraged visitors to take a more active role in discovering the past. The result was exhibits that moved beyond ideas and objects to include people. At their best, such exhibits enabled visitors to make connections between their own lives and those of people in the past. These new interpretations of the recent past, which opened to the public between 1987 and 1995, all brought their institutions new visitors, as well as new attention from both press and profession.

The Henry Ford Museum chose the reinstallation of its automotive collection as the most visible way to demonstrate how it had changed institutionally in the 1980s. *The Automobile in American Life* was developed by a team headed by a museum educator rather than a traditional curator. It integrated many different kinds of objects into a single exhibit that told a story about a familiar aspect of American life in the twentieth century. The exhibition was supported by a sesquicentennial grant from the state of Michigan, as well as by contributions from all the major auto companies. Heralded by unprecedented media coverage, *The Automobile in American Life* proved extremely popular with visitors.

The arrival of a new director at Flint's Sloan Museum provided an opportunity to rethink its twentieth century exhibit plan. The decision to focus broadly on local history rather than on the automobile itself enabled the museum to contribute to the discussion of contemporary community issues. It was also a conscious attempt to interest a larger group of potential funders and reach a wider audience. The public and professional recognition

that followed the opening of *Flint and the American Dream* positioned Sloan to create as well the Buick Gallery and Research Center in response to the desires of its long-faithful automotive constituency.

Concerned that the museum's twentieth century exhibits not duplicate the shortcomings they perceived in the pre-1900 phase, staff at the Michigan Historical Museum asserted themselves collectively to take control of the exhibit development process. A new historical center director was successful in articulating their vision to funders, while staff generated grass roots interest as they collected artifacts, photographs and personal stories for the exhibition. Visitors to *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* find the social, economic and even political importance of the automobile to the state interwoven with the continuing importance of geography, agriculture, natural resources and tourism.

Faced with the possibility of complete institutional collapse, DHM staff and supporters found common ground in an exhibit plan that focused on "how the city builds cars and cars build the city," rather than on any particular group of participants in that story. In addition they forged a new relationship between the city-owned museum and the private historical society, which formed the basis for a successful endowment campaign. Staff, contract employees and community representatives collaborated in the development of *Motor City*, which incorporated its key artifact in a fashion staff had not thought possible: as a working body drop.

“Always in Motion”: Henry Ford Museum²

As the Henry Ford Museum entered the 1980's, it had not yet successfully resolved the dilemma it had faced, if not always acknowledged, ever since its founder's death: how to incorporate Henry Ford's very real and continuing influence into exhibits and programs that were meaningful to generations that had not experienced first-hand the transition from the nineteenth century to the motorized and electrified twentieth. In fact, that dilemma revealed itself perhaps more starkly than it had previously. The museum's Ford connections supported the widespread assumption that HFM was financially secure, when in fact its endowment could not keep pace with inflation, let alone support new initiatives. Interpretively, the museum's first serious attempt to move beyond Henry Ford's assumption that visitors could read his artifacts themselves had failed dismally. The two issues were linked, and a plan for the museum's long term revitalization would have to address both. Financial stability depended to some degree on income from admissions and sales; at the same time interpretive changes that might attract more visitors would be expensive. Achieving these goals required institution-wide change, change that was embodied in *The Automobile in American Life*.

Frank Caddy, the man who had presided over HFM's fiftieth anniversary celebration, including installation of the Interpretive Center, retired in 1980. It was clear that the selection of his successor would be a critical decision for the institution. For the first time ever, the Edison Institute board looked beyond Ford circles and chose Harold K. Skramstad, Jr., director of the Chicago Historical Society as its new president. His

²Harold K. Skramstad, "Keeping the Experience Fresh," *The Herald* 12:3(1984): 106.

qualifications included a Ph.D. in American civilization from George Washington University and experience at the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology. It would be his task to lead the entire institution back to fiscal health and to provide new intellectual direction.³

Skramstad had a broad grasp of American history and had begun a much needed revitalization in Chicago. He enthusiastically took on the challenge before him, setting in motion changes in Greenfield Village in his first month on the job and stressing the need for staff to be "kind of like evangelists" in bringing history to the public. The museum's collections were at the center of his vision for the institution. Skramstad admitted making his initial visit to HFM reluctantly, but said, "The collections seduced me. . . . This is the best historical collection anywhere in the world, period. Superlatives really pale in terms of describing the unique range and diversity of this collection."⁴ He also proved tough enough to weather the criticism that inevitably accompanied what one curator has described as "kick[ing] the whole institution in the tail."⁵

The Edison Institute's endowment continued to shrink following Skramstad's arrival, paralleling the declining value of Ford Motor Company stock in the early 1980s. Operating deficits reached staggering levels. One of the new director's first communications to museum members in *The Herald* noted that the deficit had reached

³*Museum News* 48:5 (January 1970): 2. The Museum of History and Technology is now the National Museum of American History.

⁴Denise Crittendon, "A Boy's Curiosity: New Edison Institute chief got an early start," *Detroit News*, February 5, 1981: B-1; Sandra Rubin Tessler, "New Ideas vs. The Old Guard," *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, July 26, 1987: 10.

⁵Robert Casey, Curator of Transportation, interview with author, March 25, 1999. For a summary of the criticism Skramstad encountered, see Tessler, "New Ideas."

nearly \$1 million in 1980. The following year brought even more red ink, and about halfway through 1982, he predicted a shortfall of \$1.5 million for that year. Ford's announcement that it would not pay a 1982 dividend took things from bad to worse. In contrast to the 1979 article on museum finances, however, Skramstad could report on action already taken. Gift support rose by 70% in 1981. In a move that was not popular, but which he felt necessary, the Edison Institute doubled its admission prices "to bring them into line with those of other major outdoor museums." A comprehensive development program and an annual giving campaign had already been instituted and *The Herald* was redesigned in preparation for a national membership and marketing drive. The institute reduced operating costs in both 1981 and 1982, by taking measures that included freezing salaries and laying off about one third of the staff.⁶

The board of trustees, at Harold Skramstad's urging, also made significant changes to its composition. Previously made up exclusively of Ford family members and high ranking staff, the board seemed to confirm the perception of outsiders that Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village were subsidized by Henry Ford's descendants and/or his car company. Increasing the board's size and the diversity of its membership signaled that museum and village were indeed a non-profit corporation operating for the benefit of the general public. Skramstad also dropped the confusing Edison Institute name and added a standard line to all museum and village publications, asserting its independent status and disclaiming connections with either the car company or the Ford Foundation. Like other independent museums, HFM/GV needed to develop a diverse funding base including

⁶Harold K. Skramstad, Jr., "Making a Future for the Past at The Edison Institute," *The Herald* 10:3 (1981): 5; Skramstad, "Making Progress," *The Herald* 11:2 (1982): 52; Tessler, "New Ideas," 10, 14.

earned income, gifts from supporters and grants from both private and public sources.⁷

“To bring a more focused intellectual coherence to all of our activities,” Skramstad established two committees. The Collections Committee was to develop guidelines to shape the Edison Institute’s collections, while the Curriculum Committee was to recommend how the institute should define and structure its offerings to the public. He stressed that the work of both groups was critical to putting the institute on a sound financial footing; because there simply was not enough money to do everything, “We must concentrate on doing very well those things that our particular combination of collections and talents fit.”⁸ Together the two committees represent the first time that staff were called upon to consider the institution and its holdings as a unified whole, rather than as a series of collections and individual buildings. It was almost inevitable, given their institution-wide point of view, that the two committees would confirm and complete the shift begun in the 1970s toward conscious identification of HFM as a museum of history.

The Collections Committee’s job was a standard one for such a body: to review the existing collections, set some limits on their scope and establish guidelines for future collecting.⁹ Its members took as their starting point the museum’s new mission to document change in American life. They developed a plan to focus the collections around artifacts needed to tell the story of how America was transformed from an agrarian nation

⁷Harold Skramstad, interview with author, May 30, 1999. Successive issues of *The Herald*, document the gradual expansion of the board through the early 1980s until a majority of its members were neither part of the Ford family nor HFM/GV staff. Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, *The Automobile in American Life* (Dearborn: HFM/GV, 1989), includes the disclaimer statement inside its back cover.

⁸Skramstad, “Making a Future”: 3.

⁹*Ibid.*: 5.

to an industrial one.¹⁰ The resulting guidelines eventually led to sale of a considerable number of artifacts judged redundant or unrelated to the mission. Proceeds of such sales were used to establish a collections fund, to support the acquisition of needed artifacts and their often equally costly conservation. The deaccessioning included both automobiles and portions of the decorative arts collections, the two categories with the most active collector constituencies. During the mid-1980s, the collectors were vocal—and not entirely unjustified—in their criticism of the museum’s disposal process.¹¹

Skramstad borrowed the idea for the Curriculum Committee from Colonial Williamsburg. Its underlying premise was that Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, as an educational institution, needed a curriculum, a course of study. The committee, which included representatives of curatorial, interpretive, educational and public relations staff, along with one member of the board of directors, undertook an integrated review of the Edison Institute’s historical resources, asking two questions: “What is special and unique about this institution? What should we do about it—how do we make our resources accessible to the public?”¹² The Curriculum Committee found that the rich collections of museum and village, along with the variety of ways in which they were—or could be—presented, allowed them to tell a story of change—technological, but also social change—in ways that few other museums could match. This committee also

¹⁰Carroll Pursell, “Telling a Story: *The Automobile in American Life*,” in *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits*, ed. Kenneth L. Ames, Barbara Franco and L. Thomas Frye (Nashville: AASLH, 1992): 235.

¹¹Tessler, “New Ideas”: 8-11, 16-17. The removal of objects from the collections was certainly a legitimate staff function, albeit a politically touchy one. Once the decision to sell had been made, however, staff had an obligation to obtain something close to fair market value, which did not always happen.

¹²Skramstad interview. See also Skramstad, “Making Progress”: 50-51.

proposed that the museum and village change its fundamental notion of history. Rather than presenting history as the institution had since Henry Ford's day, as a mix of "nostalgia, patriotism, progress, trivia and consensus" embodied in individual artifacts, they argued for a more complex and integrated view of the past. The fundamental question that emerged was "How has America been transformed from a nation based on farms and villages to one based on cities, factories and offices?"¹³

The changes that began with Harold Skramstad's arrival at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village continued as the Curriculum Committee did its work. Village mills that had been static now operated. Daily domestic activities enlivened the houses. Museum staff opened a new exhibit, *Mass-Produced Elegance*, which looked at how nineteenth-century decorative arts reflected the changes of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁴ The Interpretive Center was removed, its passing neither marked nor mourned. Visitors were now greeted by an "introductory concourse" which updated the museum's presentation on Henry Ford for the first time since its original exhibit was installed in 1953. The new exhibit not only sketched the founder's biography, but explained to visitors the museum's relationship to Ford's life and his understanding of history.¹⁵

By early 1984 the financial situation at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village had stabilized and programming was better coordinated around the new mission. Harold Skramstad was ready to take the next step. Looking back, Harold Skramstad defined HFM's scale as one of the major exhibit challenges he and the staff faced. The eight-acre

¹³Pursell, "Telling a Story": 235.

¹⁴Skramstad, "Making a Future": 5.

¹⁵Steven K. Hamp, "Subject Over Object: Interpreting the Museum as Artifact," *Museum News* 63:2 (December 1984): 33-37.

exhibit hall is so huge: “How do you begin to change exhibits so that it makes a difference?” Making an impact on visitors’ overall perception of the museum meant that the change had to be big, which necessarily meant it would also be both expensive and time-consuming to produce.¹⁶ The transportation collection was one of the museum’s largest and had long been recognized as one of its most significant. The Curriculum Committee had suggested it as a prime candidate for re-exhibition, in keeping with its mandate to develop the institution’s strengths.¹⁷ Skramstad concurred with that choice because ultimately he believed it could build the institution in three ways: by demonstrating to the public that the museum had changed, by building both intellectual and practical capacity in the staff and by moving the museum’s trustees into a more active fund raising role. He also saw the redevelopment of transportation as an opportunity to dismantle the museum’s Street of Shops, which dated to the earliest days of the museum, but which after half a century looked “shabby and antiquarian.”¹⁸

In February 1984, Skramstad appointed a working group “to examine the entire transportation exhibit in the museum and develop an exhibit plan that is consistent with our collection and interpretation objectives.”¹⁹ Its chair would be Director of Education John Wright, who had also chaired the Curriculum Committee and was a strong supporter of Skramstad’s program. In addition to Wright, the initial group included transportation curator Randy Mason and Steven Hamp, curator of archival and library collections. All

¹⁶Skramstad interview.

¹⁷Wright interview; Pursell, “Telling a Story”: 235.

¹⁸Skramstad interview.

¹⁹Harold Skramstad to Tom Elliott, Steve Hamp, John Wright and Randy Mason, February 6, 1984. EI 316, Box 13, Research Center, HFM/GV.

had an interest in the subject. Wright, with a doctorate in popular culture from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, was intrigued by the social impact of the automobile. Mason's primary expertise and interests were automotive, and his detailed knowledge of cars and familiarity with the HFM collection were essential to any transportation exhibit. Hamp was interested in both racing and automotive design. Director of Marketing and Public Affairs G. Donald Adams was not named in Skramstad's initial memo, but his knowledge of automotive and bicycling history, combined with his understanding of who the museum's visitors were and what appealed to them, soon made him part of the core group that in John Wright's words, "sat in my office and argued for about six months." Tom Elliott of the Exhibits Department was named project manager, and although he played a key role in moving the exhibit through design and production, he was less involved in its conceptual planning.²⁰

At the same time that the exhibit team was beginning its work, a parallel effort to define the scope and purpose of the transportation collections was already under way. Randy Mason was responsible for much of this work, but Wright and Hamp also sat on the committee. Detailed discussion of the collections appears to have been one way that they sorted through various potential exhibit approaches.²¹ The document finally presented to the trustees clearly reflects integration of the museum's collections and exhibition goals. It defines its collecting approach as "cultural," in contrast to the "traditional, collector-oriented categories" previously employed, noting that HFM is the first museum to take

²⁰Both John Wright and G. Donald Adams (interview with author, May 5, 1999) provided general information about each staff member's expertise and roles.

²¹Memos dealing with the collections for the most part predate those developing possible exhibit ideas in EI 316, Box 13.

this approach with an automotive collection. "This has been done intentionally to bring the collections more in line with future exhibit goals and to make the collections more meaningful and educational to the mass audience which we serve."²²

As Mason was wrapping up work on the collections document, the exhibit plan was beginning to take shape. Both John Wright and Randy Mason wrote planning memos outlining ideas for the exhibit. Mason produced several proposals over a six-month span. Read in succession, they show him feeling his way from the "traditional, collector-oriented categories" around which earlier exhibits, both temporary and permanent, had been structured, toward a broader, storytelling approach. Wright on the other hand began by summarizing the current state of HFM's exhibits and setting out goals for a new transportation exhibit. Like Kenneth Wilson in 1979, Wright distinguished between displays and exhibits; unlike Wilson, Wright did not believe that simply adding factual information about an artifact and placing it in its evolutionary relationship to others in its class could transform a display into an exhibit. An exhibit required a "larger framework for understanding the meaning of the artifacts." In keeping with the museum's redefined mission, the new exhibit should "tell the central story of change in American transportation," appealing to the average, non-specialist visitor with a story that is "engaging and interesting in human terms." Wright wanted "to deal with themes and topics rather than types of vehicles" and "to combine many kinds of objects to make new connections."²³ Nevertheless, at this point the group was still thinking and talking in terms

²²Randy Mason to Board of Trustees, Harold Skramstad, et. al., April 23, 1985, EI 316, Box 13.

²³Randy Mason to John Wright, December 11, 1984, January 22, 1985, February 2, 1985, July 19, 1985. EI 316, Box 13. All quotations are from John Wright, "The

of dealing with one of the old categories—the transportation collection.

John Wright divided his proposal under nine topics that included ideas like speed, technology, mass transit, transport of goods and sales and marketing. All except car culture encompassed several forms of transportation. According to Wright, the working group realized fairly quickly that focusing on the automobile alone would probably exhaust their budget and be challenge enough in itself. The museum's automotive collection was both the most significant and the most comprehensive element of its transportation holdings. President Skramstad and the board of trustees made the final decision, but it seems to have been a comfortable one for all involved.²⁴

It is at this point that John Wright really seems to have taken hold as leader of the group. He knew that he wanted “a socially contextual kind of treatment” about “the automobile in American culture in the largest sense.” His background in popular culture made the idea of “car culture” extremely important to him. He believed it would appeal to visitors, who were primarily users of cars and automotive services rather than car buffs. Don Adams, the self-described “visitors’ advocate” on the team agreed. He knew that to all but a small number of car aficionados, “Every car looked like every other one after a few minutes.”²⁵ The title on which the team ultimately settled, *The Automobile in American Life*, clearly conveyed the message that this exhibit was about cars in context, rather than as isolated objects.

Steve Hamp and Randy Mason, despite automotive interests that were more

Transportation Exhibits of Henry Ford Museum: A Redevelopment Plan,” February, 1985, EI 316, Box 12.

²⁴Wright interview; Pursell, “Telling a Story”: 236.

²⁵Wright and Adams interviews.

traditional, recognized both the significance and the potential of Wright's approach to the subject. The work of the Curriculum Committee, particularly the idea that the museum should teach by telling stories, had resonated with Hamp. An article he co-authored after the new automotive exhibit had opened strongly echoes a point from the committee's report: "History is not things, it is people, and the function of a museum is to tell about the people by using the things."²⁶ Mason did not want the museum to lose the support of car buffs, one of its traditional constituencies, but as his collecting program demonstrated, he also knew that there was more to the story than an internally focused chronology of automotive development. In that document he had expressed his hope that a reshaped transportation collection would give visitors "an unprecedented awareness of the paramount roll [sic] which transportation (or the lack of it) has had in shaping our society, our ideals, our landscape, our lifestyles, our concept of freedom, and, indeed, America itself."²⁷

In addition to proposing the contextual approach, Wright advocated a thematic organization to the exhibit. Admitting that he himself prefers "a sort of browsing approach to history," he argued for a structure that would allow greater freedom in how visitors approached the exhibit than he believed a chronological exhibit would permit. Other members of the team were not at all sure that a thematic organization, which was a radical

²⁶Steven Hamp, interview with author, May 12, 1999; Steven K. Hamp and Michael J. Ettema, "To Collect or to Educate?: Some History Museums Discover They Can't Do One Without the Other," *Museum News* 68(Sept./Oct. 1989): 41-44; Curriculum Committee quoted in Albert Woods Design Associates, "Henry Ford Museum Transportation Exhibits and Preliminary Master Plan," July 1, 1986 (E. I. 131, Box 15): 4.

²⁷Randy Mason to Board of Trustees, Harold Skramstad, et. al., April 23, 1985, EI 316, Box 13.

departure from almost everything HFM had ever done, would work. In the end Wright's non-linear approach won out, but it took considerable persuasion on his part to reach that conclusion.²⁸ The exhibit ultimately included eight sections: The Evolution of the Automobile, The Car as Symbol, Automotive Landscape, Designing the Automobile, Advertising and Promotion, Driving for Fun, Getting Away From It All, and Bicycles and Motorcycles.

While the issue of how to structure the exhibit was probably the most contentious for the exhibit team, it is clear from both memos and interviews that everyone involved held strong opinions that they defended passionately. Harold Skramstad, who was the arbiter of last resort, recalled that "There was blood on the floor all the time," but also that very few issues were not ultimately resolved within the group.²⁹ Once the large issues of the exhibit were decided, everyone interviewed remembered a fair amount of compromise and trading off of one item for another. In addition, different people took leadership roles in different sections, and their views carried greater weight in those areas. Thus, Steve Hamp tended to lead discussions about the design section, while Randy Mason often had the last word about presenting the evolution of the auto and John Wright was the primary shaper of the section on the automotive landscape.³⁰

Fairly early in the process, the team decided that some outside expertise was needed, and the museum hired James Flink, a respected historian of automobile culture

²⁸Wright interview. Admitting that "chronology is a very compelling way of organizing historical exhibits," Wright acknowledges that it is part of any historical presentation, the "really tough question" being whether it constitutes an exhibit's main framework or is less evident but still present.

²⁹Skramstad interview.

³⁰Wright, Hamp and Adams interviews.

from the University of California, and George May, author of several works on the early development of the auto industry, as consultants. Flink worked primarily at the conceptual level, helping the team determine what was truly important, while May worked closely with Mason on details of the history of the industry and the cars themselves. Each was respected in his area of expertise and each helped to resolve conflicts among the team.³¹ At the same time, the consultants were definitely one step removed from the exhibit development process. Responsibility for decisions on content and presentation remained with the team, subject always to the realities of space and budget.

By fall 1985 Henry Ford Museum was ready to select a designer. The staff team had made basic decisions about the exhibit's structure and content, but were just beginning to think about specific details. Their list of themes—the basic structure for the exhibit—remained somewhat fluid. Harold Skramstad, who had more experience in developing interpretive exhibits than anyone on his staff, wanted the designers to participate in refining the plan. He wanted both the experience for staff and the project outcome to be different than working with Herb Rosenthal Associates in the 1970s, which he described as an attempt “to contract out the change.” He believed that designers and staff needed to work closely together on this project.³²

Several design firms made presentations at the museum, but HFM staff had little difficulty agreeing on the selection of Albert Woods Design Associates of New York. Woods had experience designing large scale exhibitions for both world's fairs and museums. He was also enthusiastic about the educational potential of his medium, as well

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Skramstad interview.

as being “a fanatic about cars.”³³ Enclosing a bibliography with the letter he wrote following his initial visit to the museum, Woods expressed sensitivity to, if not in-depth knowledge of, the intellectual orientation of Harold Skramstad and his team.³⁴

Albert Woods and his staff presented their preliminary design to the museum at the beginning of July 1986. It is easily recognizable as *The Automobile in American Life*. There is a curving central “spine,” crossed near the front by another “road.” Tourist cabins, Holiday Inn rooms and a diner are all there, as are a drive-in theater and a circular platform featuring auto camping and other aspects of “Getting Away from It All.” Although changes were still to come, including a couple in how the organizing themes were divided, the “look” of the exhibit is clearly established.³⁵ The team had wanted something up front that would attract visitor attention, and Woods, from his first conceptual sketches had concurred that roadside services, designed in the first place to attract the attention of people in their moving cars, would do that (Figure 17). By making the central design element of the spine a chronological procession of about 50 cars, Woods also insured that change over time would be clearly evident in the exhibit, despite its thematic organization. Even the ardent champion of a thematic approach, John Wright, thought the idea of the spine was “very cool” (Figure 18).³⁶

Because the state of Michigan was the largest single contributor toward the cost of

³³Wright interview.

³⁴Albert Woods to Harold Skramstad, September 13, 1985, E.I. 131, Box 11.

³⁵See floorplans in Albert Woods Design Associates, “Henry Ford Museum: Transportation Exhibits and Preliminary Master Plan,” July 1, 1986, EI 131, Box15; and Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, *The Automobile in American Life*: 16-17.

³⁶Wright interview.

the new automobile exhibit, it had to open during 1987, the year of the state's sesquicentennial celebration.³⁷ With little over a year between approval of the preliminary design and the exhibition's opening, everything had to move as quickly as possible. Project manager Tom Elliott played a critical role in keeping track of the very complex production process. His files bulged with lists and schedules covering everything from building modifications to label writing. He had files on neon, trees, curbs and graphics; his task was not unlike managing construction of a small subdivision. It is clear that he needed the authority given him to use any museum staff as necessary in order to keep the project moving forward.³⁸

Another mechanism to keep the project on schedule was a Review Committee, consisting of the core team members plus Elliott and Harold Skramstad, which met weekly to decide exhibit-related issues. This was an innovation for the institution, as was the hiring of short term staff with project-focused job descriptions.³⁹ The Review Committee was one way for Skramstad to stay in touch with what was going on, something he felt he needed to do, given the degree of institutional change built into the project and how critical its success would be for the museum's future. Team members have noted that he had "his hand on the tiller" at all times, and that his interest was not limited to financial or conceptual issues—he was also interested in how things would look and what colors would

³⁷Roger M. Williams, "Tin Lizzies in a New Landscape," *Americana* 16 (March/April 1988): 36.

³⁸Elliott's files are found in the HFM/GV Research Center, EI 316, Boxes 12, 13 and 15. Pursell, "Telling a Story": 237, also discusses his role.

³⁹Wright interview; Pursell, "Telling a Story," 237.

be used.⁴⁰

Although Henry Ford Museum already possessed an outstanding automotive collection when exhibition development began, it became clear very early in the process that staff would have to put considerable time and money into acquiring additional artifacts in order to have what was needed for the exhibit they wanted to produce. A few post-World War II additions had been made to Henry Ford's car collection, but more were needed. None of the structures needed for the automotive landscape had yet been acquired—by HFM or any other museum. Two members of the team took on this responsibility, Randy Mason for vehicles and Don Adams for structures and other artifacts. As a result of the team's intense debates, they knew in most cases exactly what they were looking for. John Wright knew that he wanted pieces for the landscape section that were "important historically and iconically." He specifically wanted a Holiday Inn room and sign because it was the first and the most recognizable among standardized roadside accommodations. It became important to spell out the rationale for collecting particular items, so that when Big Boy and Burger King called—as they did—because they wanted to be included along with McDonald's, museum personnel could articulate why the latter had been chosen.⁴¹

There were artifact difficulties as well. Randy Mason, as Curator of Transportation, was closest to the museum's collector constituency. He expressed concern at several points along the way about the reduction in the number of vehicles on display. The new exhibit involved not only removal of the entire fire fighting collection and many

⁴⁰Skramstad interview; Hamp interview; Wright interview.

⁴¹Wright interview; Adams interview.

horse-drawn vehicles, but reduction of the number of autos on exhibit by about half. In the summer of 1986 Mason listed some of these in a memo that began with an assertion of his support for the notion of interpretive exhibits and his awareness that "interpretation takes up space and normally reduces the number of artifacts that can be exhibited." He made the point that some highly significant cars were among those "destined for storage/oblivion."⁴²

The team had in fact discussed with Albert Woods the need to be able to change automobiles on a regular basis. Mason had cause for concern, however; maneuverability was one of the refinements that was ultimately sacrificed in the rush to meet the sesquicentennial deadline.

Mason also expressed concerns about the compromises with realism that any interpretive exhibit has to make. With the exhibit opening only a few months away, he protested emphatically that placing a gas pump directly in front of the service bay of the Texaco station would make the museum look silly. Project manager Tom Elliott who by this point was focused on simply finishing the installation, returned Mason's memo with a copy of the relevant meeting minutes and a curt note reminding him that exhibit decisions could not be revisited.⁴³

When *The Automobile in American Life* opened in November 1987, its success was immediately apparent. The press attention was unprecedented for an HFM exhibit. The *Detroit News* previewed the exhibition in its Sunday cultural section and followed up

⁴²Randy Mason to Steve Hamp and Don Adams, August 15, 1986, "Cars not being used in *The Automobile in American Life*." EI 316, Box 13.

⁴³Mason to Tom Elliott, Steve Hamp and John Wright, July 9, 1987. EI 316, Box 13.

on opening day with a front-page article.⁴⁴ The latter piece noted how much attention the exhibit was getting beyond Detroit: articles in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Sun Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, as well as coverage on the *NBC Nightly News*. Both the *News* and the *Detroit Free Press* praised the exhibit and predicted great popularity for it.⁴⁵

Notice of *The Automobile in American Life* beyond the daily press was also gratifying. History magazines like *Americana* and *Michigan History* took note; the former featured the exhibition in a colorfully illustrated article, "Tin Lizzies in a New Landscape." Attempting to give readers something of a behind-the-scenes view of exhibit development, the author described artifact acquisition and conservation efforts and discussed the motivation behind the dramatic shift in exhibition style. He found the result appealing, even though he was clearly a bit surprised that "the likes of Texaco, Holiday Inn and McDonald's" should find a place in a reputable museum. He called the Automotive Landscape section of the exhibit "by far the most distinctive—and questionable" of the themes, but then quoted Harold Skramstad on the historical importance of the commercial features.⁴⁶

How did auto aficionados and collectors respond to *The Automobile in American Life*? Complimentary articles appeared in automotive publications such as *Car and Driver*

⁴⁴Joy Hakanson Colby, "The Automobile in American Life: Ford Museum is Taking a Trip Down the Strip," and Anne Marie Biondi, "The Guardians of Gaudy Architecture," *Detroit News*, November 1, 1987: K-1; "Traveling Backward in Time," *Detroit News*, November 6, 1987: A-1.

⁴⁵"Dusting Off Henry Ford's Attic," editorial, *Detroit News*, November 2, 1987: A-10; *Free Press* quoted in "Report to Supporters," EI 131, Box 15.

⁴⁶Williams, "Tin Lizzies in a New Landscape," 37.

and *Road and Track*.⁴⁷ The museum also received awards for the exhibit from the Society of Automotive Historians and the Antique Automobile Club of America.⁴⁸ As the team member most concerned about the reactions of automotive hobbyists, Randy Mason had reason to be particularly satisfied with such recognition.⁴⁹ In fact, Don Adams' visitor studies showed that with few exceptions "even the buffs . . . didn't realize there were fewer cars," a further validation of Mason's initial support for an interpretive exhibit.⁵⁰

Several scholarly journals also reviewed Henry Ford Museum's new exhibition. The overall tone of these reviews was also highly positive. Stanford historian of technology Joseph Corn pointed out that *The Automobile in American Life* was "the first significant exhibition to place automobiles in a broader context than simply other cars," and John Staudenmaier noted that the institution Larry Lankton had called "a sleeping giant" showed "unmistakable signs of awakening."⁵¹ Two reviews particularly noted the integration of a variety of different artifacts.⁵² Among the weaknesses noted by reviewers was the section called "The Car as Symbol," which suffered from an initial lack of signage,

⁴⁷Mary Beth Lewis, "History in Neon: *The Automobile in American Life*," *Car and Driver* 33 (April 1988): 38; Robert Mothershead, "The Wheels of Time: A New Exhibit for the Henry Ford Museum," *Road & Track* 39 (April 1988): 76-77.

⁴⁸Pursell, "Telling a Story": 238.

⁴⁹Wright interview.

⁵⁰Adams interview.

⁵¹Joseph J. Corn, Review of *The Automobile in American Life*, *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 223-224; John M. Staudenmaier, S.J., Review of *The Automobile in American Life*, *The Public Historian* 10 (Summer 1988): 89.

⁵²Corn, *JAH*: 224; Charles K. Hyde, "The Automobile in American Life, An exhibit at Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan," *Technology and Culture* 30 (January 1989): 110.

but which was also based on a more abstract concept than other segments of the exhibit.⁵³ Several reviewers commented as well on the failure of *The Automobile in American Life* to come to grips with what might be called the downside of the automotive industry: its contributions to pollution, urban sprawl and the decline of mass transit services. One popular reviewer complimented the museum on bringing the auto story up to the present and at least recognizing issues like foreign competition. Academic reviewers, however, consistently criticized the museum for not presenting these difficult subjects in greater depth.⁵⁴

Although staff were gratified by favorable reviews, they most appreciated the changes they observed in visitor behavior. The most striking of these was that families and couples no longer split up, with men gravitating toward Transportation, women toward Home Arts. John Wright observed, "By creating an exhibit that had a lot of visual appeal and was much more social and contextual, . . . we immediately saw families and many, many more women going into the exhibit." Don Adams felt they had achieved their goal of "humanizing the museum."⁵⁵ Harold Skramstad commented that the new exhibit created a more social environment within the museum. Staff noticed more conversation among visitors, and between visitors and staff, especially in the diner, where visitors would often "spill out their life stories" to the interpreter on duty. At the end of the exhibit's first year, visitation figures showed that the exhibit was indeed popular. Attendance for the museum, normally only about one third of the overall total, had increased significantly. It remained

⁵³Hyde, *T&C*: 108; Corn, *JAH*: 222.

⁵⁴Williams, "Tin Lizzies": 36; Hyde, *T&C*: 106-108; Staudenmaier, *TPH*: 91-92; Pursell, "Telling a Story": 247.

⁵⁵Wright interview, Adams interview.

less than visitation at Greenfield Village, but the split was much closer to fifty-fifty.⁵⁶

Another mark of both the success of *The Automobile in American Life* and the magnitude of the change it represented at Henry Ford Museum was the stark visual contrast between the new exhibit and everything else in the Hall of Technology. Don Adams noted that the entire team had “underestimated the extent to which the rest of the museum would suddenly pale.” He also indicated that visitors’ views of the older exhibits changed after the new exhibit opened. Prior to the change, visitors expressed considerable satisfaction with what the museum offered, and were not really sure that major changes were needed. It was difficult for them to visualize the kinds of changes that were being proposed. Once *The Automobile in American Life* opened, however, with the contrasting exhibition styles spread out before them, visitors overwhelmingly preferred the newer look.⁵⁷

As with any project of this magnitude, there were disappointments and some unexpected visitor reactions. Beyond the usual fine tuning that any exhibit needs, it soon became apparent that an appreciably large group of the museum’s visitors expected more direction than they got about how to view the exhibit. A number of staff seemed uncomfortable as well with an exhibit that lacked a well defined beginning point. John Wright concluded that the split is about half and half between those who want structure and those who don’t, and that most of the staff and volunteers on the exhibit floor came from the structured half. He also thought that the vastness of the exhibit hall exacerbated

⁵⁶Skramstad interview; Wright interview.

⁵⁷Adams interview. John Wright said that visitors’ inability to visualize anything other than what was in front of them taught museum personnel “that we had to carry some of the vision ourselves.”

the problem—that if HFM had typical walled galleries, the lack of a rigid exhibit organization would have been less of an issue.⁵⁸

Both Wright and Don Adams expressed disappointment that visitors did not grasp all the nuances they had built into the selection of artifacts, particularly in the Automotive Landscape section, where juxtapositions of various roadside service signs and structures compared individual entrepreneurs with the standardized, “mass produced” world of identical Texaco stations and Holiday Inns.⁵⁹ The contrast between McDonald’s and Lamy’s Diner in particular seems unclear to many visitors. Some visitors have thought the McDonald’s arch was placed near the diner because it wouldn’t fit elsewhere; others that the diner was actually the first McDonald’s. Visitors also seem to think that many of the franchise artifacts were chosen because the companies involved gave money to the exhibit. In some cases they did, but only after being contacted because the exhibit team had identified their company as historically important. John Wright attributes at least some of this confusion to the team’s spending too much time thinking about fairly abstract issues and text, and not enough time “thinking about how things communicate non-verbally.”⁶⁰

Among the shortcomings most noticed by staff are the inability to change cars readily and the fact that car interiors remain nearly invisible, not to mention inaccessible to visitors. It is particularly difficult to make changes to the spine, since it means moving all the vehicles ahead of or behind the car in question. The preliminary visitor focus groups had indicated a real desire to see inside cars and even to sit inside them. The latter, of

⁵⁸Wright interview.

⁵⁹Wright interview; Adams interview.

⁶⁰Wright interview.

course, would raise serious conservation issues, but John Wright felt that the team did not respond to that interest in car interiors very well. He noted that “people’s experience of cars is mostly from the inside” and thought that staff should have been “more imaginative” about at least giving visitors a peek at more interiors.⁶¹

The Automobile in American Life attracted the widespread attention it did in part because of its size and location. Together, the scope of the project and the recognition accorded it also enabled management at Henry Ford Museum to achieve the major institutional changes that Harold Skramstad and others had looked for. In addition to helping to put the museum on a more realistic financial footing and visibly updating its interpretive style, the exhibition realized other changes at HFM. A team approach to exhibition development became the norm at HFM, as did the involvement of non-curatorial personnel in such teams. The museum shifted from a focus on categories of continuing operations to one that was more project-based. Finally, all staff—not just those dealing directly with the public—became more attuned to the visitor’s point of view.

Automobiles: Only One Facet of Flint History

At the Sloan Museum, as at HFM, opportunity came in the form of a new director. When Phillip Kwiatkowski had taken the director’s job in 1978, most residents of Flint believed that General Motors’ recent problems were simply the downside of a cyclical industry, which would eventually rebound as it always had before. Arriving a decade later, Steven Germann could see that long-term economic restructuring was underway. Although he recognized the importance of Sloan’s automotive collection, he believed that

⁶¹Wright interview.

there was both need and opportunity to shift the emphasis in the twentieth century exhibit from cars to the city. Sloan was in a unique position, Germann felt, to help Flint residents understand their city in the context of its long relationship with the automobile and the auto industry. His enthusiasm and fresh perspective on the museum and its community role enabled him to renew the drive to complete Sloan's permanent exhibits.

In 1989, the city of Flint was still unsure where its economic future lay. The American auto industry in general had rebounded from the worst of its earlier woes, but General Motors, which had initially appeared to be less severely affected by the recession than either Ford or Chrysler, made several missteps just as its two smaller competitors were again becoming profitable. From the mid-1980s into the 1990s "a seemingly endless series of reorganizations, reductions and hurried introductions of new models" made the huge corporation seem like "a giant blindly stumbling about."⁶² GM was never as seriously threatened as Ford and Chrysler had been, but like its smaller competitors, it faced the need to cut labor costs and make its workforce more efficient.⁶³ This meant reducing the number of people employed and closing out-dated factories. Since Flint had one of the corporation's largest workforces and some of its oldest plants, the effects of these moves fell heavily on the city. It was clear that Flint was entering a new era. The days of the 1950s and 1960s, when economic slowdowns were only bumps in the road along the way to ever greater prosperity, were a thing of the past.

Steve Germann, former administrator of the Montana Historical Museum, arrived

⁶²Willis F. Dunbar, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 3rd rev. ed. by George S. May (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 633-635.

⁶³*Ibid.*: 636.

in Flint in October 1989. A native of Dayton, Ohio, he was familiar with the history of the industrial Midwest, having earned bachelor's and master's degrees in history at Wright State University and interpreted Dayton's past at the Montgomery County Historical Society.⁶⁴ Like previous directors at Sloan, Germann was given considerable latitude by the Board of Education. According to him, there were no programmatic mandates for exhibits, school programs, special events or anything else. It was immediately clear to Germann, however, that the automotive exhibits were in need of further upgrading. While the changes made under his predecessor had alleviated some of the used-car-lot look, the gallery's ambience still left something to be desired. Germann's first impression of the auto gallery was of lots of cars "on a bare tile floor."⁶⁵

One of the new director's first tasks was to review the storyline and design for *Flint and the Automobile*. He quickly concluded that it was essentially a car exhibit, and although "it wasn't a bad plan, . . . it wasn't what I thought this museum needed." Germann decided that Sloan needed to make a new start on its twentieth century project. He was concerned by what appeared to be imitation of the Henry Ford Museum's *Automobile in American Life*. It was clear that Sloan, with its far more limited resources, could not hope to compete with that nationally recognized exhibition. Nor did he feel any obligation to the idea of the Sloan Museum as a "Panorama of Transportation," exhibiting lots of cars. More importantly, Germann recognized that Sloan was already telling the story of Flint as a trading post, sawmill town, agricultural market and center of the carriage industry, but believed that the existing plan would not tell "the real story of

⁶⁴"Welcome Steve Germann," *Sloan News* 11(Nov./Dec. 1989): 1.

⁶⁵Germann interview.

Flint,” which he believed to be its twentieth century history.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, Sloan staff expected to continue working on *Flint and the Automobile*.⁶⁷ Within “weeks, not months” of his arrival, Germann called a meeting of the exhibit development team. Curator of Education Stephen Laux took along his “great big, giant, thick file on *Flint and the Automobile*,” expecting to be asked to brief the new boss. Germann, however, had already made his decision. Laux recalls, “As soon as he convened the meeting, he said, ‘We’re not doing it.’ . . . I was stunned, I was absolutely stunned.”⁶⁸ In retrospect, Laux realizes that he had developed blinders during his years of work on *Flint and the Automobile*, losing sight of the fact that there was more than one way to tell the story. In the end, he says that dropping the project was “almost like a divorce”; although it was difficult to put aside his long relationship with the previous project, it was at the same time a relief to be rid of the frustration it had entailed.⁶⁹

Once he recovered from his initial shock, Steve Laux quickly became a supporter of rethinking the exhibit. Curator of Collections David White and his staff saw an opportunity to use a greater variety of twentieth-century artifacts in an exhibit that focused on the community rather than the automobile. White recognized that one reason

⁶⁶Germann interview. Curator of Collections David White (interview with author, October 16, 1997) also commented on the lack of local history in the plan for *Flint and the Automobile*. White also emphasized the lack of full support for *Flint and the Automobile* within the collections and education departments as a reason for abandoning it. My own assessment is that the factors Germann cited were more influential.

⁶⁷White interview; Stephen Laux, interview with author, October 16, 1997.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

that other collections hadn't been utilized is that "cars took up all the room." It was much harder for Associate Director Jim Johnson to accept the change in direction. As *de facto* Curator of Automobiles, the car collection was his reason for being at Sloan in the first place. He had always worked closely with the collectors on the museum's advisory board and the Summer Fair Committee, and shared their automotive focus, rather than the broader view developed over the years by other staff of the Sloan Museum's scope and purpose. In his view, Germann's approach shifted the museum's focus too far away from the automobile.⁷⁰

Steve Germann did not wait for staff to come around, but moved ahead with content development for the new exhibit concept. Steve Laux soon became his chief collaborator. Over the previous five or six years, Laux had developed public programming to present Flint's twentieth-century social history when there was barely a trace of it in the exhibits. He had done programs dealing with work life, the development of consumerism and the experience of women and minorities in the auto industry. He had also developed games designed to introduce students to the pressures of the assembly line in pre-union days.⁷¹ Thus Laux had already pulled together some of the information that would be needed.

Germann and Laux began pooling their knowledge of Flint and social history

⁷⁰White and Laux interviews; James Johnson, interview with author, October 23, 1997. Johnson's position with respect to the exhibit was made more difficult by the fact that his relationship with Germann was more distant than the close friendship that he had with Phil Kwiatkowski.

⁷¹Germann interview; Laux interview. Interestingly, Laux said the assembly line exercises never led to unionization of the workforce. He thought the outcome might have been different if the games had extended over a longer period of time, giving students more time to react to coercive management practices.

generally, reading more and discussing various possible approaches to the new project.

One work that influenced both of them was Ronald Edsforth's Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan, which attempts to explain, in the context of local political and economic history, why working class political and social activism never became a permanent feature of the Flint community. Using Edsforth as a springboard, Germann and Laux developed a concept with the working title *Flint in the Twentieth Century*.

In the March/April 1990 issue of *Sloan News*, Steve Germann began sharing their plans with the museum's members. Using Michael Moore's 1989 movie *Roger and Me* as a foil, he explained that the new exhibit would "consider questions of geography, economics, transportation, technology and social organization and control," rather than attributing Flint's current state, as Moore did, to the actions of a single powerful man. Instead of focusing on a period of a few years, the Sloan exhibition would look at developments over the entire century. On a subject about which Moore's film had generated heat, the museum hoped to shed light.⁷²

Germann had noted in his comments to the membership that exhibit planning could be "slow, tedious and expensive." The museum found a way to offer its public a few previews, however, while it awaited development of the major project. An exhibit on Flint in the 1950s, planned under Phil Kwiatkowski, was in place when Steve Germann arrived at Sloan. He followed this up in 1990 and 1991 with exhibits that looked at the 1940s and 1960s. These exhibits provided opportunities to do focused research, assess material in the

⁷²"Director's Corner," *Sloan News*, 12(Mar./Apr. 1990): 3. The film itself had generated controversy in Flint. At the same time that it gave voice to real disillusionment with General Motors, many people felt the movie presented Flint very negatively.

collections and identify additional needs. For the exhibits on the 1940s and the 1950s, the museum also solicited memories from people in the community.⁷³

Next the museum hired social historian Sandra Shapiro to carry out the additional research that was necessary. She had the academic credentials Germann was seeking, as well as experience on public history projects. Although she had never been involved in a museum exhibit, per se, Germann and Laux both felt that she showed “the right sensitivity” when they interviewed her. They devised a short training course of readings, field trips and discussions to give her a better understanding of what they needed from her research. Shapiro proved to be a quick study. At their first progress review meeting Germann was “overwhelmed with her . . . ability to visualize what it was we needed, to visualize what an exhibit needed.”

Germann, Laux, Shapiro and sometimes Dave White met regularly to discuss Shapiro’s findings and to work on the development of themes for the exhibit. They had agreed that they wanted a unified exhibit with identifiable themes, rather than a collection of separate mini-exhibits. As the team met through the early months of 1991, they sorted Flint’s twentieth century history into a matrix with about twenty topics across the top and a chronology down the side. Identification of the final themes came quickly in a single meeting, when they all recognized links between various topics until they had traced four themes through the entire century.⁷⁴ Shapiro then wrote a report for each theme: Boom

⁷³“The Fifties Were Fantastic,” *Sloan News*, 11(Mar./Apr 1989): 2; “Flint in the Forties Survey,” *Sloan News* 12(July/Aug. 1990): 2; “Flint in the Forties,” *Sloan News* 12(Sept./Oct 1990):1; “Flint in the Sixties,” *Sloan News* 13(Sept./Oct.1991): 2; “Flint in the Sixties Opens,” *Sloan News* 13(Nov./Dec. 1991): 1; Stephen Laux, interview with author, August 26, 1999.

⁷⁴Laux (1999) interview.

Town, Company Town, Newcomer's Town and Blue Collar Town. Each had clear connections to General Motors' growth and dominance in the city, but the focus was on Flint and its residents rather than the corporation and its products.

Sloan publicized its exhibit plan, now titled *Flint and the American Dream*, through talks to community groups and articles in the paper concerning the artifact search. The temporary exhibits on the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s also helped to inform the community about the project, as did a targeted effort to collect artifacts, photographs and information within the African American community. Focused as Flint had been on General Motors and those who counted within its hierarchy, neither the museum nor other sources of local history like the *Flint Journal* had done much to document the presence and local story of a group that had grown to make up half the city's population.⁷⁵

Although Sloan had not done much formal evaluation of its previous exhibits, staff were not working blind. They had conducted systematic evaluation of educational programs on related topics, and were reasonably confident that "we knew what visitors wanted."⁷⁶ Germann and Laux believed they understood a fundamental division in their audience, between those with a serious interest in cars—whether or not they had the money to collect them—and another group with a more general interest in local history. The new exhibit plan was clearly aimed at the latter group. Germann, Laux and White all believed that it was better history, more complete history and did more to help the community

⁷⁵Germann interview. Sloan's efforts in the African American community yielded few artifacts, but a wealth of photographs and stories of life in Flint. See Wanda Howard, "Flint African American History Enriches Exhibit," *Sloan News* (July/ August 1993): 1.

⁷⁶Laux (1997) interview.

understand itself than a traditional car exhibit.⁷⁷

Steven Germann also believed that telling a broader story of Flint in the twentieth century was a project that would interest a wider group of funders than *Flint and the Automobile* ever had—or could.⁷⁸ Very little in the earlier exhibit plan had appealed to non-automotive funders, leaving Sloan with few options when General Motors declined to support *Flint and the Automobile*. Convinced that the museum needed to broaden its base of support, Germann approached a variety of local foundations and philanthropists with the new exhibit plan. It was undoubtedly more work than cultivating a single major donor, but he was able to find the funds the museum needed without going to either GM or the Mott Foundation.⁷⁹

With the basic content well defined, Germann brought in Geoff Wyatt, an independent designer with whom he had worked previously. Germann trusted Wyatt to work within the museum's budget and deliver his design on time. Unwilling to take any chances on ending up with someone he found difficult to work with, he hired Wyatt without seriously considering anyone else.⁸⁰ Still unsure how successful his fund raising efforts would be, Steve Germann asked for a design that could for the most part be fabricated in-house. Taking research reports, artifact lists and the simplified matrix that the team had developed for the exhibit, Wyatt had generated an interpretive outline and a preliminary floor plan by late 1991.

⁷⁷Laux (1997), Germann and White interviews.

⁷⁸Germann interview.

⁷⁹*Sloan News* (November/December 1993): 2.

⁸⁰Germann interview.

The preliminary design and outline allowed staff to identify where they needed more information and artifacts. The exhibit included not just cars and accessories, but auto production, the lives of workers and the development of the community around the auto plants. It thus drew more heavily on the museum's twentieth century industrial, domestic and commercial collections than any previous exhibit. Collections staff set about acquiring objects the museum still needed. This was the first active non-automotive collecting that had been done since the earliest days of the museum. Although newspaper articles produced some response, Curator of Collections Dave White found that his contacts in local history circles proved more valuable in locating the items he sought. Adjustments eventually had to be made in the exhibit for items that proved elusive, such as artifacts relating to immigration and Flint's ethnic communities. Nor was it possible at the time to locate much factory machinery or other artifacts related to actual automotive production. Overall, however, White felt that the museum not only acquired needed items, but learned to make good use of artifacts already in the collections.⁸¹

The staff working on *Flint and the American Dream* functioned at times as a truly egalitarian team. At other moments, however, Steve Germann asserted his authority as museum director and made unilateral decisions, especially on matters like design, which had significant implications for the project budget.⁸² He also used his authority in the perennial debate over the number of cars to be included. Since the balance of power was now firmly on the side of those who favored more social interpretation, Associate Director

⁸¹White interview.

⁸²Germann, Laux (1997) and White interviews.

Jim Johnson never participated as actively in planning the exhibit as other staff.⁸³

Although he had definite opinions on some issues, Steve Germann found others less clear cut, and more difficult to deal with as a result. Both he and Steve Laux mentioned labor-management conflict as a challenging topic to present in the exhibit. Both recognized that the Sloan name tended to associate the museum with the management side. Laux in particular, a Flint native, was aware that Alfred P. Sloan had been “a hated name in Flint when it came to the rank and file.” Balancing between the two perspectives, Laux and Germann tried to tell the story of the 1937 Sit-Down Strike in particular, “without being proselytizers for the UAW or defenders of management.”⁸⁴

An even greater challenge proved to be finding a way to end the exhibit, that would, in Laux’ words, “be accurate, but not too depressing.” Writing the storyline at a time when Flint “led the league in bad statistics,” Laux and Germann knew that a too-optimistic view would be immediately recognized—and dismissed—as unrealistic. They settled on an approach that acknowledged both the reality of change in Flint and the magnitude of the city’s problems, but denied that current conditions alone determined what Flint might be in the future. Pointing out that people could make changes, they tried to leave the future open.⁸⁵

The 10,000 square foot exhibit that Sloan Museum staff opened to the public in November 1993 is not glitzy. Budget caution and Geoff Wyatt’s rather austere design

⁸³James Johnson, interviews with author, October 23, 1997 and June 11, 1999.

⁸⁴Germann and Laux (1997) interviews. Both men also noted that they thought the Sloan Museum had developed its own name and reputation in the community, distinct from that of the GM president.

⁸⁵Laux (1997) and Germann interviews. *Flint and the American Dream*, exhibit labels.

style combined to produce a design that is as straightforward as the rectilinear configuration of the building that houses it. Most period settings are suggested rather than fully fleshed out; Steve Germann called the postwar patio design “very Zen.” Still, there is plenty to look at, with a rich mixture of objects and photographs (Figure 19). *Flint and the American Dream* features dark wood and neutral colors, which make the brighter artifacts such as a huge neon supermarket sign stand out emphatically (Figure 20). The four main themes, each with its own graphic icon appear on overhead signs that are easy to find and recognize when surveying a section of the exhibit. Visitors encounter Flint residents from well known figures like Billy Durant and C. S. Mott to assembly line workers and their families in photos and quotations.

As Curator of Education, Steve Laux had to consider how the new exhibit would be presented to school children, the majority of Sloan’s visitors. He knew that Germann wanted a “sophisticated, adult-type exhibit.” He found both the restrained design, which did not include full environments as the nineteenth century permanent exhibits did, and the level of interpretation being planned a challenge to present to elementary level students. He also discovered that he had been “spoiled a little bit” by the earlier layout, which offered both space and flexibility in presenting programs.

The reaction of the general public to *Flint and the American Dream* was extremely positive. It brought back memories of decades past, whether of War Bond rallies, Flint’s 1953 tornado, shopping at Hamady’s Supermarket, the 1967 sleep-in for equal housing on the front lawn of city hall or the opening of the Buick City production facility. The *Flint Journal* promoted the exhibition in its editorial space, and about a month after the opening ran a commentary by Steve Germann that used the history presented in *Flint and the*

American Dream to talk about present and future possibilities for the city.⁸⁶

The response to the new exhibit was all the more gratifying in that it was somewhat unexpected. Steve Germann remembered talking to community groups about the exhibit and sensing that his audience didn't quite understand the new exhibit as a major change for Sloan or for the city of Flint. Similarly, the mayor's office initially treated the exhibit opening as a run of the mill event, one of dozens to which the city's chief executive was routinely invited. Germann spent time with the aide who was sent to check out what was going on at Sloan; he explained the storyline, the research and especially the museum's efforts to include the African-American story. Soon after, the mayor showed up in person, and after his tour of the still-under-construction gallery, enthusiastically agreed to attend the opening.⁸⁷

Steve Laux believed that *Flint and the American Dream* made the Sloan "the community's museum" to a greater degree than it ever was before. He observed that the exhibit helps visitors understand what has happened to the city, and "I think if you . . . understand some of the processes and the pressures that have created some of these situations, then you do feel better about it." Understanding what led to the present can enable people to see greater possibility in the future. The museum has hosted events that offer members of the community, including both management and labor, a chance to talk

⁸⁶"Sloan Exhibit Helps Explain Flint and the American Dream," Editorial, *The Flint Journal*, November 14, 1993: D4; "Flint and the American Dream," *The Flint Journal*, December 5, 1993: F-1.

⁸⁷Germann interview. *Flint and the American Dream* represents both the ordinary and the distinctive sides of the African American experience in Flint. Like their white co-workers, African Americans lived with the ups and downs of a cyclical industry; blacks, however, also endured discrimination in housing, employment and accommodations.

with each other and share community history. Speaking of museums as “de-fusing environments,” Laux asserted that they offer a context in which it may be just a little easier to see the other side of an issue. Museum staff have also been able to contribute a historical perspective to community forums on Flint’s problems and its future.⁸⁸

The public notice and approbation that came with the completion of the Sloan Museum’s largest exhibit project ever were gratifying to staff. Those who had been at Sloan since the days of *Flint and the Automobile* were pleased simply to have finally completed the twentieth century project.⁸⁹ They took more pride in the museum and felt that they had regained a certain measure of professional credibility. Steve Germann was particularly gratified when Sloan was asked to join an informal group of the state’s larger history museums. The invitation came after several directors from other institutions in the group attended a Michigan Museums Association board meeting at Sloan and saw not only *Flint and the American Dream*, but other revamped galleries as well.⁹⁰

Although the general public was pleased with *Flint and the American Dream*, car collectors felt they had really lost out. The new exhibit featured only eight cars out of the Sloan’s collection of about seventy. Serious auto enthusiasts, unlike the rest of the community, still wanted the Sloan Museum to be a Panorama of Transportation. Anticipating their reaction to the new exhibit as early as 1991, museum staff redesigned another gallery to hold a changing selection of automobiles. The twenty-five-year-old Carol Pierson miniatures were removed with little fanfare, and the gallery fitted with a

⁸⁸Laux (1997) interview.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*; White interviews. Even Jim Johnson appreciated the fact of completion.

⁹⁰Germann interview.

raised walkway to allow visitors, including those in wheelchairs, to look into the cars. The Pierson Gallery holds about a dozen cars for exhibits focusing on a specific automotive theme, such as *Selling the Automobile* or *On the Road*, which described the development of roadside services. The cars themselves are the center of attention, but they are presented with additional artifacts, graphics and audiovisuals to convey an interpretive message. The gallery is the right size to present a single aspect of the automobile in enough detail to be thorough, but without overwhelming the average visitor. Auto enthusiasts still wanted to see more cars, however.

The most recent automotive development at the Sloan Museum brings the museum full circle. Like the museum itself, it is also linked closely to the continuing evolution of Flint's relationship to General Motors. As Buick prepared to move its headquarters from Flint to Detroit in the mid-1990s, its management recognized the need for a parting gift to the city where GM had its beginnings. Buick contributed a quantity of artifacts and archival material to Sloan. It also agreed to fund the acquisition and renovation of the rest of the structure housing the collections, and provide an annual operating subsidy for the Buick Gallery and Research Center. Steve Germann is convinced that *Flint and the American Dream* brought Sloan the recognition and visibility necessary to be considered by Buick as the recipient of such a gift.⁹¹

Opened in spring 1999, the new space includes a gallery whose point is to show lots of cars. The vehicles are labeled, but there is no overall interpretation. Accessories and advertising materials (some of them from the collection of the ill-fated AutoWorld) augment the automobiles on exhibit, and natural light is supplemented by incandescent

⁹¹*Ibid.*

spotlights, so that the new gallery is brighter and more colorful than the old, fluorescent-lit car galleries in the museum. Although collectors would still prefer to be able to see all the cars in one place at one time, they appreciate the new exhibit space as a reasonable and practical compromise. Several auto clubs, including one as far away as Nashville, Tennessee, have provided additional support for the Buick Gallery.⁹²

Flint and the American Dream was designed to tell a local story, but one to which all Flint residents could relate. By presenting both the good and the bad in the city's relationship with the automobile, Germann and his staff hoped that visitors would see that General Motors' influence in the city had been neither inevitable nor total. The next step would be recognition that the corporation's diminished presence in Flint did not necessarily mean a desolate future. By establishing its commitment to interpreting all aspects of local history, Sloan could then reaffirm the special role that its automotive collections have in its own history and identity. The end result was not the overshadowing of the automobile's role in Flint, but a better interpretive balance.

The Michigan Historical Museum: The Automobile State's Museum

By early 1991 both staff and administrators at the Michigan Historical Museum knew that the time had come to think about completing the permanent exhibits. Staff understood the importance of this task and were determined to take a larger role than had been allowed them in the first phase. No longer content to simply react, they wanted to shape the exhibit themselves and thereby avoid the flaws they saw in the pre-1900 exhibits. After convincing both their director Bette Hulbert and Deputy Secretary of State Philip

⁹²Johnson (1999) interview.

Frangos that they could improve on the existing design, they were aided by the arrival of new Michigan Historical Center director Sandra Clark, who both sharpened their historical vision and helped to interpret it to funders and others outside the museum. The process of producing *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* not only enabled MHM staff to take full ownership of their new space, it integrated them into a more cohesive working unit and gave them a collective source of pride. *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* completed the Michigan Historical Museum's transformation from a little known backwater of state government to an essential stop for visitors to the state capital.

The first two years in the new historical center were difficult for the museum staff. Initially, they were exhausted by long days of installation, exhilarated by the flurry of opening excitement and frustrated by awareness of problems in both the exhibits and the building itself. They dealt with operational issues ranging from trash in the mine shaft to mechanical breakdowns and the practical aspects of handling far larger numbers of people than the museum had experienced in any of its previous homes. These issues were all exacerbated by tension in the administrative structure of the bureau and the Department of State. Finally, as with any major office move, working relationships, both formal and informal, were disrupted. Contacts that once were taken for granted now required conscious planning.⁹³ By early 1991, however, staff had recovered from the initial disruption and had developed basic operational procedures. They had accustomed themselves to new routines and established new relationships. They welcomed the return

⁹³The description of MHM staff during this time is based on personal recollection, informed by Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Moving the Museum: The Children's Museum, Boston," in *Institutional Trauma: Major Change in Museums and Its Effect on Staff*, ed. Gurian (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1995): 33-57, which discusses all of the issues mentioned in this paragraph.

of a degree of administrative stability in Philip Frangos, and looked forward to having a new bureau/center director soon to complete the picture.

With two years' experience, the staff was also beginning to understand what was involved in producing exhibits in the new space. They had produced several special exhibitions for the new building's first floor gallery (by itself several times larger than the museum's previous home), and had familiarized themselves with the elements of the walk-through environments in the permanent exhibit. By March 1991, planning was well under way for the exhibition that would complete the pre-1900 exhibits. Called *Growing Up in Michigan*, it would prove to be a crucial training ground for the twentieth century exhibit. The exhibit team, for the first time at MHM, included staff other than unit heads. The team surveyed visitors, also a first, to learn what interested them about children's lives in the past, what they knew (or thought they knew) about them and what they would like to learn more about. The exhibit design included the first major use in a staff-designed project of environments similar to those in the rest of the permanent exhibit. Finally, the team further developed two characteristics of exhibits from the museum's previous home and included a plentiful array of artifacts and the immediate presence of five children, in the form of quotations from their diaries or reminiscences. Although in March 1991 there was nothing as yet for visitors (or DOS administrators) to see on the floor, staff had confidence that *Growing Up in Michigan* would be both enjoyable and educational for visitors.

JJA/Design Craftsmen had produced detailed design drawings for the twentieth-century exhibit galleries as part of its original design contract. In reviews at the time, museum staff had expressed reservations, but were too preoccupied with the first phase of

exhibits to spend much time on the twentieth century. Few museum staff were involved in the early discussions, but now director Bette Hulbert brought the design issues to the full staff. She gave them a week to review the second floor exhibits, an assignment she says everyone took “very seriously.” She then held a meeting of the full staff to discuss the problems they had identified and to propose possible solutions. Inevitably people also spoke up about what they didn’t like in the existing twentieth century design.⁹⁴ Despite the internal conflict that had accompanied adjustment to the new building, staff now found themselves united on the design issue, at least as far as agreeing on what they did not want.

Based on their assessment of Phase I and the plans for Phase II, staff developed a list of things they wanted to do to “humanize history,” including exhibiting more artifacts, using direct quotations and personal stories, opening up galleries to allow glimpses of other spaces, including surprises and showing “the hard truth, the violent events, the opposing views.”⁹⁵ Additional meetings followed, in which they discussed their options for the twentieth century exhibits, which included accepting them as they had been designed, modifying them or completely reworking the existing plan. There was trepidation about undertaking a complete redesign, but also recognition that it was the best way to shape what visitors would see. They could not afford to dismiss such an opportunity lightly. By early April, a consensus emerged: staff would propose undertaking a complete redesign on

⁹⁴Bette Hulbert, interview with author, May 15, 1998.

⁹⁵“Humanizing History,” undated sheet from MHM Exhibits Unit files; Hulbert interview.

its own.⁹⁶

Bette Hulbert arranged a meeting with Philip Frangos, whose approval the museum needed before proceeding. There museum staff presented him with a document that summarized the problems with the existing design, as well as the pros and cons of re-design. In hindsight, not all the reasoning, particularly in terms of where money could be saved, was completely sound, and some arguments were purely speculative, such as the assertion that there would be sound spillover to the second floor from AV components in the existing design. The staff presented a stronger case when it came to exhibit content, however. They argued that the current design was not Michigan-focused, but rather told a generic American story of the twentieth century using very few artifacts. They presented a preliminary floor plan which they believed provided for more Michigan-based content, greater use of artifacts and better traffic flow.⁹⁷

The author of the floorplan, designer Susan Cooper Finney, thought the drawing “made it more real,” and in fact probably “made it look . . . further along than it was.”⁹⁸ Despite the concreteness of the plan, staff still weren’t sure as the meeting drew to a close that they had persuaded Frangos to let them go ahead. A junior member of the collections staff, feeling somewhat intimidated, nonetheless forged ahead with an impassioned plea that has become part of museum folklore. Taking a point from the museum’s list of arguments, Laurie Dickens noted that the *Growing Up in Michigan* exhibition would use

⁹⁶Scott Peters, interview with author, May 8, 1998; Hulbert interview; Susan Cooper Finney, interview with author, June 25, 1998. Trepidation was most evident in the comments of Scott Peters and Stephen Ostrander (interview with author, May 28, 1998).

⁹⁷“Proposal,” and “Agenda,” April 9, 1991, 20th Century Administrative files, MHM; Floorplan, dated April 8, 1991, Exhibits Unit, 20th Century files.

⁹⁸Finney interview.

about the same number of artifacts in 3,000 square feet of space as the rest of the pre-1900 exhibit did in over 14,000. Dickens observed that the final third of the twentieth century design—approximately 4500 square feet—included only 21 objects and, in reference to three plastic fish in a section on water pollution, “three of those are dead fish!” Laughter broke up the tension, but at the same time, it was clear that Frangos now understood how strongly the museum staff felt about the redesign. He told them to go ahead. Afterward, Bette Hulbert had no doubt, “Laurie turned the tide for us.” Dickens herself felt that “It was courageous on all our parts” to make such a commitment.”

Since the entire staff had participated in the decision favoring redesign, an effort was made to include as many people as possible in all stages of the process. This very democratic approach, combined with an extremely tight timetable that almost necessitated the overlapping of different stages, created a process that was quite fluid. Staff were energized, feeling—in many cases for the first time—that they were “controlling [their] own destiny.” Curator of Collections Rose Victory led the storyline phase of the process, which began in early summer 1991 with research assignments. Nearly everyone on staff except the designers and carpenter shop personnel researched a decade and wrote a report.¹⁰⁰

These pieces varied considerably in length, depth and insight, but the assignment involved

⁹⁹Hulbert interview; Laurie Dickens, interview with author, May 28, 1998. Bette Hulbert also stated that Phil Frangos himself told the story a number of times during work on the project.

¹⁰⁰Rose Victory, interview with author, May 14, 1998. Her comment about controlling one’s own destiny is echoed in one of the early statements of the “Main Exhibit Messages”: “The story of Michigan in the twentieth century is a story of people who believed and demonstrated that they could determine their own destiny.” (Document in “Objectives and Critiques” Notebook, Exhibits Unit, 20th Century files) The research reports are found in the Exhibits Unit Files as well. They vary from a carefully footnoted, academic style to much more disjointed jottings.

people in what was going on. It also meant that nearly everyone had something to contribute in meetings. From the reports and staff discussion of each decade, Victory and her storyline committee developed a master matrix of themes and time periods to organize the information and provide continuity.

From the very beginning there was implicit recognition that the twentieth century would have to include the automobile in a major way. All staff interviewed expressed consciousness of the importance of the automobile, but they were also aware that it was only one piece of a larger story. The original design featured the auto prominently. It focused the early years of the century entirely on the development of the auto, and included a car in every major section. In their critique of that plan, staff had complained that the automotive story presented was not specific to Michigan. Thus one of the first changes they agreed upon was to replace an elaborate auto showroom (actually based on a New York auto show) with a factory scene.¹⁰¹ Staff also recognized the importance of unionization of the industry in the 1930s, the industry's contributions to the war effort in the 1940s and "nostalgically, people wanted to see a car in the 50s." But there was no overarching plan for which galleries would emphasize cars. Decisions were made decade by decade, for the most part, allowing each gallery team to ask, "How does [the auto] fit in with the total story? Is [this aspect] being covered somewhere else and are we telling the Michigan story?"¹⁰²

While the museum staff was beginning its work, the Department of State finally

¹⁰¹JJA/ Design Craftsmen, Inc., *Library, Museum and Archives Facility: Final Concept* and final design drawings, Exhibits Unit files; "Proposal," 20th Century Administrative files.

¹⁰²Victory interview.

selected a successor to Martha Bigelow. Sandra Clark, a former doctoral student in history at Michigan State University who had edited *Michigan History* from 1979 until 1988 and subsequently served as assistant director of the Michigan Travel Bureau, took over in September 1991 as director of the Michigan Historical Center. Although most museum staff were acquainted with the new director, they had never worked for her, and there was some concern that she might not agree to the staff-led redesign. By this time, however, Philip Frangos was firmly on their side, seeing this project, in the words of Bette Hulbert, "as a chance to make his mark on the museum." In addition, Clark had been involved enough as magazine editor in the first phase of exhibit planning to be aware of some of the problems with that process and was willing to let the staff continue what it had begun.¹⁰³ Rose Victory observed that the staff, after several months of "flying by the seat of our pants," welcomed the added stability that Clark brought, and were relieved to have "someone to steer the ship." Bette Hulbert had gotten the redesign effort off the ground, but had never seen such a large project through to completion; to all appearances she was content to have Clark to deal with the budget and external relations.¹⁰⁴

Sandra Clark very quickly realized that she was needed as a spokesperson on behalf of the project, not only to the board of the historical center's fund-raising foundation, but to other outside groups as well. Clark was conscious of speaking for her staff, of "boiling down and articulat[ing]" discussions that were often wide-ranging and not a little disjointed. When asked about phrases like "We want visitors to see themselves in our exhibits," that became watchwords of the project, she said, "I don't think that they

¹⁰³Sandra Clark, interview with author, September 3, 1998; Hulbert interview.

¹⁰⁴Victory interview; Hulbert interview.

were things I dreamed up. I think they were things that I articulated out of listening to staff and talking to staff.” It was not until much later in the project that she realized the importance of that “boiling down and articulation” to staff as well. Her summaries enabled them to see beyond the immediate detail of each gallery to ideas and principles that united the project as whole.¹⁰⁵

Clark’s introduction to the twentieth century exhibits consisted of a series of meeting held during her first few months on the job. Initiated by Bette Hulbert, they were gallery-by-gallery discussions intended to define key story points and exhibit goals. Storyline chair Rose Victory moderated these meetings, which were not limited to committee members, but in Victory’s words, were “pretty much a committee of the whole.” There was lively discussion. Describing herself as more often a “referee” than a moderator, Victory tried to write down major points on an easel as the discussion moved along, and she “made sure we had some kind of consensus” before the meeting ended. The group identified themes and subthemes as well as educational and design goals for each gallery. They also identified key artifacts, visual and topical “surprises,” exhibit components that could change periodically and links to other galleries.

Along with listening to staff in these storyline meetings, Sandra Clark also established another aspect of her role in the project, that of “a good historian, occasionally saying ‘wait a minute.’” Staff were becoming accustomed to free-ranging discussions among themselves, but were unused to questions from the boss. She admits that “I made people nervous when I asked questions,” but also believes that her questions helped staff

¹⁰⁵Clark interview. Susan Cooper Finney and Rose Victory commented the most directly on this aspect of Clark’s contribution, but it was reflected in other interviews as well.

to clarify their thinking. Her questions resulted in a key change to the automotive story of the exhibit, one that reinforced the decision to treat it in the context of the state as a whole. Due in part to the influence of Exhibits Coordinator Scott Peters, a former Sloan Museum staff member and veteran of the early work on *Flint and the Automobile*, the staff design had maintained the original plan's focus on the development of the automobile industry as the main story of the century's first two decades. After some of her initial contacts with people outside the museum, Clark brought back questions about the dominance of industry, not only in the first gallery, but throughout the exhibit. After some discussion of the continuing importance of agriculture in the state, and the tension throughout the century between rural and urban, Detroit and out-state interests, the staff consensus was to shift the gallery to what became known as Farm and Factory. It firmly established that, despite its importance, the auto industry was never the only thing happening in the state.¹⁰⁶

The process of working together with such give-and-take was messy and noisy, but with Rose Victory insuring that they summed up at the close of every meeting, they made progress. This very democratic process ran into difficulty, however, as staff tried to think about the recent past. Their discussions of the 1960s were as divisive and contentious as the decade itself.¹⁰⁷ When they got to the 1970s and 80s, however, staff discovered that

¹⁰⁶Clark, Peters, Dickens, and Victory interviews. More importantly for the exhibit overall, this change helped to set up a one of the interpretive threads that runs throughout the exhibit, the contrast and coexistence throughout the century of urban industrial elements and a rural agricultural world within the state.

¹⁰⁷Everyone interviewed at MHM commented on how contentious discussions of the 1960s were. It proved difficult as well to sum up concisely; notes for this gallery are considerably longer than those for others.

their conversations lacked even the focus of argument. One result is that the final appearance of the auto industry in the exhibit is an unlabeled copy of Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* in the 1960s gallery. These problems also resulted in a vote to cut off the exhibit at 1975.

Both Bette Hulbert and Sandra Clark, neither a native Michiganiaan and thus a little more detached from the issue than some of their staff, believed that although there was intellectual recognition of bad times in the American automotive industry, it was difficult emotionally for staff to come to grips with issues like the Arab oil embargo, safety and quality problems in the auto industry and the impact of foreign competition. Staff themselves offered other rationales, including not having time to work through the issues fully and the fact that there were very few well documented artifacts available to use in connection with these topics. Only auto advocate Scott Peters was willing to say, in reference to the whole range of negative effects of the auto, "We did pull punches."¹⁰⁸

The museum staff now divided themselves into gallery teams, each of which included a designer. Most of the staff who were actively involved in this phase sat on two or three of these teams, chosen in most cases on the basis of personal interests. The smaller groups identified artifacts and photos for use in each gallery, while the designers began actually drawing out how the gallery would look. Having to deal with an allotted space and to design an exhibit that could be built and maintained forced teams to make hard decisions about what to include and how to present it. They also had to be prepared

¹⁰⁸Hulbert and Clark interviews; Finney and Ostrander interviews; Peters interview. In other situations where artifacts were lacking, staff went out and located what was needed.

to defend their choices in reviews with their colleagues, Clark and Philip Frangos.¹⁰⁹

The storyline meetings had identified design goals for each gallery, but both practical considerations and new ideas that emerged as the total exhibit evolved caused those to change. Thus, what staff had identified as a 1950s auto dealer's showroom became a version of the 1957 Detroit Auto Show. Wanting to emphasize the importance of auto styling in the 1950s while maintaining an unmistakably Michigan focus, and having already planned a small showroom in the 1920s, the team seized upon the auto show idea without hesitation despite the installation challenges posed by the new plan (Figure 21). The transformation of a scene from the 1937 sit-down strike into a union hall was compatible with the planned use of the space for a video presentation on labor in the 1930s, as well as being relatively simple to install.¹¹⁰

In the early stages of their work, staff thought of the auto industry in much the same way they were accustomed to thinking about lumbering or mining in the nineteenth century, "very much in economic terms." When they talked about the automobile's social impact, they were at a loss as to how to present that in an exhibition format. Eventually, however, they came to the conclusion that they were showing more than they had realized. Sandra Clark noted that "not until we were really into it, did we realize that the twenties street scene was not just a slice of life, it was a world changed by the automobile." In this and other instances the links are "not fully spelled out," but they are there.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Clark, Ostrander and Victory interviews.

¹¹⁰Peters and Ostrander interviews.

¹¹¹Clark and Victory interviews. The antique shop setting above the storefronts of the 1920s is another example of the subtle links to the impact of the automobile. It illustrates one response to the new, more mobile world, that of looking backward at what had been superseded. In addition to the glass and china wares of the shop, this space

Early in 1993 Clark brought in a group of consultants to help staff consider the question, “What are we missing?” The academic historians made specific comments related to the exhibit’s content, but those with exhibit experience were better able to visualize the exhibits and speak to questions of how the content was being presented. Since the staff was only a few months away from sending out a bid document, what they needed was the latter. Two of the museum-based consultants, Michael Smith (author of the original narrative) and Nicholas Westbrook, pushed the staff to include real people—their photos, their artifacts, their stories—wherever possible. Smith suggested ways of using audiovisual programs and sound in the galleries to add even more people and life to the exhibit. Westbrook thought inclusion of real people would help staff to address larger historical issues, in addition to “underscoring the point that history is real individuals.” The museum staff was too focused on exhibit detail by this point to register much of the consultants’ advice, but Clark heard them. She believed that the exhibit labels and audiovisuals were already headed toward including real people and made sure she continued to emphasize that point with staff.¹¹²

The bid package that was released in June 1993 was recognizably related to the original plan, but also differed from it in significant ways. Staff had accomplished their major goals of increasing the number of artifacts, making it a more specifically Michigan exhibit and improving traffic flow. Although they had tossed around the idea of “a car for

includes information on two Michigan institutions founded at least partially in this spirit, the Detroit Historical Museum and Henry Ford’s museum complex in Dearborn.

¹¹²Clark interview; Notes from consultants’ on-site review and their written comments are located in the “Objectives and Critiques” Notebook, Exhibits Unit files. The consultants’ visit did not impress any of the museum staff as a significant part of the overall process. They barely mentioned it in their interviews.

every decade,” that never became a serious goal. In the end, however, every decade through the 1950s featured at least one auto, and overall there were more cars than appeared in either the JJA/Design Craftsmen plan or the initial staff drawing. When *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* opened in 1995, the automobile was woven throughout the exhibit, both directly and indirectly. The people that staff had wanted to include and that their consultants had pushed them to incorporate were there as well, in artifacts and labels, in photographs and in video clips.

The new exhibit’s opening was nearly as widely covered in the Michigan press as the initial exhibits had been. In addition to good newspaper coverage, Craig Olson of the Sioux City (Iowa) Public Museum reviewed *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* for the *Journal of American History*.¹¹³ He responded very favorably to the exhibit, appreciating the way spaces were used to set a mood as well as to display artifacts, and the “subtle physical changes” used to convey the passage of time. Olson recognized that “although the impact of the automobile is evident throughout the exhibition, it does not become the focus through which Michigan’s twentieth century history is interpreted.” He predicted that the exhibit’s richness would reward returning visitors with stories they had missed on previous visits.

As normal visitation patterns resumed following the initial congratulatory period, staff could begin to assess visitors’ response to *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* more reliably. Visitors were spending noticeably more time in the twentieth century galleries than they did in the pre-1900 exhibits, and talking to each other more while they were

¹¹³Craig R. Olson, Review of *Michigan in the Twentieth Century*, *Journal of American History* 84 (June 1997): 181-187.

there. Parents and grandparents used various sections of the exhibit to talk to the children they brought to the museum about incidents in their own families. Staff observed visitors reacting emotionally to various galleries. Having set out to produce “kind of a people’s history,” they were gratified to see evidence that they had succeeded.¹¹⁴

MHM staff used their focus on *Michigan in the Twentieth Century* to put a difficult period in their work lives behind them. In producing the exhibit they discovered new talents among their co-workers and new sources of creativity. Staff then applied their new approach in turn to other exhibits in Lansing and at the museum’s field sites. Their sense of accomplishment was enhanced by their awareness of the risk involved. Bette Hulbert summed up staff sentiment, saying, “To this day, I can’t walk through those galleries without feeling very, very good about it.”¹¹⁵

Michigan in the Twentieth Century changed not only the way the Michigan Historical Museum produced exhibits. It changed the institution itself by at last aligning the reality of its exhibits with the rhetoric of its identity as the state museum. Following decades as an afterthought of state government, the museum presented a picture of Michigan’s past that was complete and colorful enough to attract public attention. And visitors could finally see the role the automobile had played in the history of the auto state.

¹¹⁴Victory and Finney interviews.

¹¹⁵Finney and Hulbert interviews.

Including Stakeholders in *Motor City*

Detroit Historical Museum director Maud Lyon was unsure, at the end of the devastating summer of 1992, what the future held for her museum, now that the Detroit Historical Society board had declined to raise money for *Motor City* and she had lost a substantial portion of her staff. She was convinced that museum's very survival was at stake, but saw no way to move forward with the project she believed essential to reshaping the museum and its public image.¹¹⁶ Lyon's refusal to give up, coupled with her willingness to adopt a new approach, ultimately positioned DHM to finalize and install *Motor City*. Bringing a revamped plan to fruition still taxed the DHM's limited personnel and financial resources, but by incorporating not only funders, but other interested parties as well, into the process, the museum built enthusiasm, momentum and a belief that problems could be solved. By the time *Motor City* opened to the public at the end of 1995, the Detroit Historical Museum had built a new relationship with the DHS and developed a new model for exhibit planning.

Although it was certainly a critical issue for DHM in late 1992, in another sense *Motor City* was only one piece of the museum's overall predicament. For that reason, Maud Lyon turned her attention first to strategic planning for the entire institution. A variety of staff members, including maintenance supervisors participated, as did key leaders of the Detroit Historical Society. Their report reflected the new financial and staffing realities of the museum's situation. With public funding adequate only for staff salaries and building operations, the planners emphasized privately funded long-term exhibits and repeatable programs. The museum would collaborate with other organizations

¹¹⁶Lyon interview.

and utilize contract workers as needed, with permanent staff taking a greater role as managers and coordinators, rather than trying to do all the work themselves.¹¹⁷

The plan also called for much closer coordination with the Detroit Historical Society, stating that the two would “act as one organization.” The independently operated historical society was to be responsible for development, membership and marketing, while the tax-supported Detroit Historical Department continued to have charge of museum operations and public services. The planners devised a new joint budget format and agreed to launch a joint campaign to raise \$3.5 million over three years (which a separate study had determined to be feasible). The money raised would fund the *Motor City* exhibition and establish a \$1 million endowment for the museum.¹¹⁸ In some respects these arrangements represented a return to the close relationship that existed between the two entities during Henry Brown’s directorship, although they lacked the informality that characterized the earlier time. The new agreement was more significant in that it reflected an understanding that the economic changes of the past two decades were permanent, and that the museum would continue to need substantial private support. It contrasts with the reaction to the budget cuts of the 1970s and 80s, which had widened divisions between city institution and suburban supporters, between rich and poor in the metropolitan area.

Motor City would be the first real test of the new strategy, and would ultimately be described by the museum director as a “lever of change for the entire institution.”¹¹⁹ It was the only exhibition among the four programs emphasized in the strategic plan, and it

¹¹⁷*Five Year Strategic Plan*, 1992, Director’s Office *Motor City* files, DHM: 3-7, 10.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*: 1-2, 8-10.

¹¹⁹Lyon interview.

would be the largest exhibit ever undertaken by the museum. Since “the majority of residents in Metropolitan Detroit have a personal or family connection to the history of automotive manufacturing,” the museum anticipated not only attracting that audience to the finished exhibit, but “inviting visitors to share their memories, perceptions and artifacts” as partners in its creation. While the plan did not discuss *Motor City* in detail, its listing of themes reflected a shift away from a strictly chronological approach. Two new themes, “White Collar Work” and “Supplier Industries” responded directly to input from DHS board members.¹²⁰

Formation of the *Motor City* Advisory Committee in early 1993 was the other critical step in restarting the project. DHS board member Oscar (Bud) Marx III, grandson of a former Detroit mayor and Vice-president for Automotive Components at Ford, had been present when the project was voted down in June 1992. He reacted as unfavorably as other trustees to the staff presentation at that meeting, but at the same time believed, as Maud Lyon did, in the importance of the basic *Motor City* idea. He suggested to Lyon that they form an advisory committee to help shape the content of the exhibition and also raise funds to implement it. His plan was not without risk; at the very least it meant staff giving up a certain amount of control of the project. Despite feeling “a little trepidation,” Lyon believed that “it was go with this or die.” She believed that in the larger scheme of things there was actually little to lose—and potentially a great deal to gain—by the arrangement.¹²¹ The old modes of operation had brought the museum to a dead end, and it was time to try something completely different.

¹²⁰*Five Year Strategic Plan: 5.*

¹²¹Lyon interview.

The *Motor City* project had stalled in 1989 when director Barry Dressel left the museum, and it had taken more than three years to get it restarted. According to Maud Lyon, two factors really kept it alive during that time, albeit in very different ways: the museum's NEH planning grant and the body drop. Despite the fact that the planning process laid out in the NEH grant was seriously disrupted by the financial and staff turmoil of the early 1990s, it forced staff to continue to think about the exhibition, to begin collecting artifacts, and if nothing else to face the fact that some of their ideas simply would not work. The body drop on the other hand, was real and the entire staff believed it should be the focal point of whatever exhibit they produced. Working on the engineering needed to install such a complex artifact in the gallery was one thing that could be done despite the uncertainty about what story would ultimately be built up around it.¹²²

Once the *Motor City* Advisory Committee began meeting, the project regained momentum. DHM staff submitted a planning report to the committee in June 1993, summarizing *Motor City*'s content, timetable, the various services that would be required and what they expected it all to cost.¹²³ The report called for a phased installation over a period of three years beginning in 1994, an idea adopted earlier for financial reasons, which had become one of the project's working assumptions. A historical overview of the auto industry in Detroit and the body drop installation would comprise the first phase, to be followed by "Getting the Job Done," which would describe the evolution of the

¹²²*Ibid.*; James Conway, interview with author, February 19, 1998, confirmed the importance of the body drop to keeping the project alive.

¹²³Detroit Historical Museum, "*Motor City*: Exhibition Planning Report," (June 1993, Director's Office *Motor City* files) is the basis for this paragraph.

automotive workplace, both technologically and in terms of labor-management relations. The third phase, "Beyond the Factory Floor," would focus on non-manufacturing functions like marketing, finance and design, as well as issues like safety and regulation and the consumer movement. The *Motor City* planning report also focused on how the proposed exhibit would differ from previous DHM exhibitions. It would be "participatory and active," beginning with input from visitors in the planning stage and including interactive exhibit components, community bulletin boards and special programs. *Motor City* would be "personal and tangible" in its use of individual stories and related artifacts, and "inclusive" in presenting the contributions of different cultural groups and showing how the history of the auto industry links them together.

The June 1993 report also outlined the advisory committee's membership and purpose. It was composed of representatives of the Big Three, the automotive supply industry, the automotive press, historians from museums and the academy, and DHS trustees, DHC commissioners and DHM staff. (Several delegates from the United Auto Workers joined the committee later.) The committee would not only assist with fund-raising and offer feedback on exhibit plans, but would approve those plans as well under guidelines that included consideration of both content (Is it complete, coherent, balanced?) and presentation (Is it entertaining, visually attractive?).¹²⁴ With the acceptance of this report, the Detroit Historical Museum crossed the Rubicon; it committed to sharing authority with people whose perspective on the auto industry differed significantly from that of staff. The two sides were still in many respects unknown to each other in terms of the amount of effort they expected to see and their willingness to listen and compromise.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*: 68-72.

The historian/curator selected for the first phase of *Motor City* began work that fall. He proved to be a key contributor to the overall project. Michael O. Smith was a Ph.D. candidate in urban history at the University of Michigan. A specialist in neither labor history nor the auto industry, his work as an archivist in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University's Walter P. Reuther Library had familiarized him to some degree with both. He had also served as an interviewer for oral history work in the early stages of *Motor City*, and DHM staff knew they could work with him. Indeed, Smith's initial four months as curator proved so successful that at the end of December 1993, he was hired for the rest of the project.

In the process of working on the first section of the exhibition script, Smith concluded that a single installation phase would create a more unified exhibit. It would be less expensive, and it would reduce the chance of the completed exhibition being noticeably disjointed in either content or appearance. This recommendation led off the "Proposal for Improving the *Motor City* Exhibition" that he prepared in October 1993. His other suggestions were built on the first and focused on the exhibit's content, incorporating suggestions from staff, advisory committee and DHS trustees.¹²⁵

The *Motor City* Advisory Committee adopted the idea of a unified installation, along with the faster-paced fund-raising it would require. By December, Smith and museum staff had prepared two documents reflecting their new exhibit concept, an Exhibition Outline and an Educational Perspectives statement. They had agreed upon four themes:

¹²⁵"Proposal for Improving the *Motor City* Exhibition" in *Exhibition Outline*, October 1993, Design Department *Motor City* files, DHM

1. People: Visionaries and Builders of Automobiles
2. Technology: The Cutting Edge
3. Suppliers: Parts and Innovations
4. Market Share: Selling and Marketing Automobiles

The number of discrete sections in the exhibit was reduced from the phased plan presented the previous June. The labor story was less prominent, and a section called “Motor City in the 21st Century” was added. Whereas the earlier outline had mixed chronology and thematic organization in each phase, the revised version began chronologically, but later clearly shifted to a thematic approach. The Educational Perspectives booklet emphasized “Take-Home Objectives,” the key ideas that staff wanted to convey, for both the exhibit as a whole and each of the eight sections. It also related each section of *Motor City* to the main themes and explained how ideas would be conveyed through the use of combinations of artifacts, photos and labels.¹²⁶

By end of 1993 the exhibit’s content closely resembled what was ultimately installed in Dodge Hall. Intensive work began on the details of the presentation, with advisory committee members, staff and consultants all actively participating. The process did not always work smoothly. It was time-consuming to sit down and talk through exhibit plans, and it was sometimes hard to reach agreement on how to present a topic. Staff found it frustrating to have to revisit issues they thought were settled when advisory committee members who had missed a meeting questioned decisions that had been made.¹²⁷

¹²⁶*Exhibition Outline*, December 1993, and *Educational Perspectives*, December 1993, both in DHM Design Department *Motor City* files.

¹²⁷Both Lyon and Michael Smith (interview with author, February 5, 1998) noted the time-consuming nature of the process; Lyon and Vicky Kruckeberg (interview with author, February 19, 1998) spoke of frustration at revisiting earlier decisions.

Meetings with the *Motor City* Advisory Committee and its subcommittees also produced much that was positive for the exhibit. Staff discovered that committee members could offer a fresh perspective on exhibit issues. The committee gave the museum access to the industry, which enabled them to locate photos and artifacts. In some cases subcommittees worked on the content of specific sections of the exhibit; in others they dealt with particular challenges, such as the engineering of the body drop.

Discussion and participation in decision-making gave the advisory committee real ownership of *Motor City* and increased members' willingness to work on its behalf. Both Maud Lyon and Michael Smith attributed much of the committee's success to chair Bud Marx. He set an example, being "totally committed" to the project. As a volunteer himself, he was able to push everyone involved to stay on track. His leadership was particularly critical in the area of fund raising, where the visibility of his commitment was an important factor in generating and sustaining momentum.¹²⁸

Curator Mike Smith played a key role, not only in research and conceptualization of *Motor City*, but in working with the advisory committee and others from outside the museum. Although he believed that as curator he should have "the final say on the history" presented in the exhibit, he was unusually willing to have his work critiqued by people whose credentials were automotive rather than historical. Smith himself believes that a curator has to be willing to listen, but he earned Lyon's respect as well for maintaining historical integrity; when "somebody was just plain off the beam, he would say so." He successfully withstood pressure from a few members of the advisory committee's historical perspectives subcommittee to drop a section on the UAW. When they tried to

¹²⁸Lyon and Smith interviews.

argue that the exhibit didn't need a section on labor, he responded that the section in question was specifically about the UAW, "an integral part of the automobile business," and needed to be there. (The UAW appears in the "Car Business" section of *Motor City*.) By the time Smith began writing detailed labels, most of the members of the advisory committee were comfortable with him. His openness in sharing what he had written up front defused tensions and made it clear that he was working to present a balanced picture. In the end he was able to say, "No one ever told me what to write." A veteran of the Marine Corps who had worked for a time in the parts division of an auto dealership, Smith was also comfortable operating within the very masculine culture of the auto industry. This enabled him to work closely with individuals in the automotive supply business to locate information and artifacts highlighting the significance of suppliers to Detroit's automotive economy.¹²⁹

DHM Director Maud Lyon was the other critical figure in developing the content of *Motor City*. As the only staff member involved from the earliest brainstorming days under Barry Dressel, she had considerably more invested in the project than anyone else. She had risked her job to keep the project alive and spent sleepless nights worrying when she sensed that DHM simply wasn't on the right track. But there were few specific points Lyon felt the exhibit had to make; her role was rather to be a catalyst in the development of the exhibit's content. A highly creative person, Lyon proposed innumerable ideas, not all of which were practical or even historically sound. Mike Smith referred to these bursts of creativity as "Maud's soliloquies," and found himself more than once having to inject a

¹²⁹Smith, Lyon and Kruckeberg interviews.

note of historical reality into the discussion.¹³⁰ She did not mind being brought back to earth, especially if her ideas provided a springboard for others. But Lyon also recognized the right ideas when they came along. And as the exhibit plan became more concrete, Lyon was able to offer very specific suggestions for making it more visitor-friendly. Thus, “What will the nature of automotive work be?” became “Who will have auto jobs?” She also pressed for details like the inclusion of Ed Davis, Detroit’s (and the nation’s) first African American auto dealer.¹³¹

Motor City was designed by Frank Madsen of the Chicago firm of Abrams, Teller, Madsen (ATM). Hired early in Maud Lyon’s tenure as museum director, ATM indicated from the start its willingness to work with museum staff and accept the constraints of the project. Madsen’s willingness to stay with the project during long periods when almost nothing was happening allowed staff to learn the process as they went along, rather than having something created for them in which no staff were really invested.¹³²

Once the concepts for *Motor City* were finally in place, artifacts in general and the body drop in particular still posed challenges. Most previous DHM auto exhibits had started with the cars and built a story around them; this one started with the story. Staff were more accustomed to building exhibits around categories of artifacts than around a historical narrative.¹³³ Another problem was the nature of the story. As Director Maud

¹³⁰Smith interview.

¹³¹Detroit Historical Museum, “*Motor City*: Exhibition Planning Report,” May 1994, DHM Design Department files; Script for Sections 3 & 5 (partial), DHM Director’s files.

¹³²Conway and Lyon interviews.

¹³³Lyon interview. Even relatively recent DHM exhibitions like *Selling American Dreams* and *Under the Skin* had started with assessments of the collection.

Lyon put it, "The auto industry is about process. A lot of it is guys sitting around with drawing pads—or now computers—and in the early days they were in the Detroit Athletic Club or Pontchartrain [Hotel] bars." Evoking this white collar work experience through artifacts proved to be both difficult and unsatisfying. In addition to these problems, Mike Smith was inexperienced at both seeking out needed items and at dealing with the standard museum acquisition process. The overall result is that artifacts are rather sparse in the completed exhibit.

There was never any question that the Cadillac body drop was both evocative and unique. DHM staff had never wavered in their intention to use it, but they had assumed it would be static. "It was totally beyond the imagination of anybody on staff that we'd be able to . . . get this thing to run." The advisory committee, however, saw little point in having it if visitors could not see how it worked, so they raised extra money to make it operative and helped to solve the engineering problems of conversion from hydraulic to electric operation.¹³⁴ Not surprisingly, staff memories of the final frantic days of exhibit installation are blurred. The single exception is the moment the body drop finally worked. It was such a large part of the exhibit, both physically and symbolically, that Chief Curator Vicky Kruckeberg had tears in her eyes when the Cadillac body dropped gently over its chassis. Project director Ida Hendrix, who had been responsible for coordinating many of the practical details of the installation, let out a scream.¹³⁵

¹³⁴Lyon and Kruckeberg interviews. Ironically, Detroit city government—DHM's parent body—created the biggest obstacle to operating the body drop. The electrical inspector insisted on extensive (and in some eyes unwarranted) changes to the museum's electrical system before he would approve the plan (Conway interview).

¹³⁵Kruckeberg interview; Fred Stubbs, interview with author, March 5, 1998.

The *Motor City* exhibition begins chronologically with automotive pioneers and explosive growth in "Detroit Becomes the Motor City." Then comes "Building Cars," featuring the assembly-in-place method used in Detroit's first auto factory, across from which is the body drop. "A New Job, A New Life," presents workers' experiences, including the benefits and constraints of automotive employment. The next section on "The Car Business" is the exhibit's largest in terms of content, covering everything from the rise of the Big Three to suppliers, auto dealers and the role of the UAW. After viewing "The Motor City in the 21st Century" visitors move to the mezzanine where they find "Cars Build the Motor City." The final section to be incorporated into the exhibit outline, it shows how communities in Southeast Michigan grew with the auto industry, the road system that facilitated that growth and the architecture of factories, office buildings and auto dealerships that is still a part of the cityscape today. The mezzanine also offers a different vantage point from which to see the body drop.

Detroit's *Motor City* exhibition includes proportionately more video and interactive exhibit features than the recent auto-related exhibits at other Michigan museums. Video is used to add people and motion to the exhibit, as well as to provide a greater depth of information than is possible in the limited space of Dodge Hall. A simple matching game encourages visitors to test their knowledge of early innovations in auto parts. "Where Would You Work?" is more personal, and probably more effective for that reason, allowing visitors to choose an identity during one of three time periods, to see what jobs would be open to them in the auto industry. It is effective without belaboring the point that opportunity is always circumscribed, whether by race and gender, as in the early twentieth century, or by lack of education, as it is today. The interactive video in the

21st Century section is more complex, but allows visitors to explore a topic that interests them. And a few, such as “Stop the Line” in “The Car Business,” seem to offer nothing more than a chance for button-pushing.

The Cadillac body drop occupies nearly a third of *Motor City*’s 8,000 square feet, and it looms that large in the visitor experience as well (Figure 22). People who have watched it once and moved on often return when they hear the audio starting up again. They are mesmerized by the precision that brings two very large metal constructions together. The Detroit Historical Museum is now the only place in Detroit where visitors can see any part of the auto assembly process on a regular basis.

The education staff and docents were initially uncertain whether very young children would understand or appreciate the body drop. Maud Lyon knew that concern was behind them when she observed a large group of three- and four-year-olds sitting open-mouthed as the body dropped. She realized that for them the learning experience was “as simple as ‘Oh my gosh—people make these things.’” Other features of *Motor City* that have proved successful with young children are the Model T that can be “cranked” and sat in by visitors, and the Design-a-Car interactive, which prints a drawing that children can take home and color.

The single journal review of *Motor City* appeared in *Technology and Culture*.¹³⁶ Reacting favorably overall, the reviewer recognized that the exhibit’s “diversity of materials and topics is both the exhibit’s strength and its weakness.” In 8,000 square feet, it was impossible to treat subjects in much depth. The reviewer also seemed puzzled by

¹³⁶Russell Olwel, “*Detroit–Motor City*, at the Detroit Historical Museum,” *Technology and Culture* 37 (1996): 813-816.

what he perceived as *Motor City*'s "strikingly optimistic" view of the future for both Detroit and the auto industry. In fact, although "The Motor City in the 21st Century" is indeed positive about the future of the auto industry, the exhibit says relatively little one way or the other about the future of the city itself.

DHM staff understood that *Motor City* could not solve all the museum's problems. But they believe that by joining a more inclusive process of exhibit development with a realistic approach to the museum's finances, they have established a pattern for future projects. Simply completing a large new exhibit, especially one whose look and atmosphere differed noticeably from the rest of the exhibits, gave staff a boost.¹³⁷ *Motor City* demonstrated DHM's renewed viability and symbolized its renewed commitment to the city of Detroit.

All four of the exhibit projects discussed in this chapter "changed the way we do exhibits here."¹³⁸ Larger in almost every respect than previous projects at their respective institutions, these four exhibits required that staffs work with each other in new ways, and create new relationships with supporters outside the museum. The exhibits needed contributions of artifacts, photographs and information, as well as financial support. Success in bringing such complex projects to fruition gave museum staffs with considerable satisfaction.

From *The Automobile in American Life* to *Motor City*, these exhibits all added

¹³⁷Conway and Lyon interviews.

¹³⁸Susan Cooper Finney, MHM, interview. Similar statements were made at the other three institutions.

people to the objects and ideas the four museums were accustomed to presenting in exhibits. Teams accomplished this both by presenting individuals within their exhibits, as part of the story, and by providing opportunities for visitors to connect historical events and experiences with their own lives. Although most of the people who appear in photos, labels or videos in *The Automobile in American Life* are white and male, nearly all visitors can find something in the exhibit's presentation of the car's role in American society that resonates with the experience of their own family. Sloan and MHM both used a more diverse array of artifacts, photographs and quotations from people at all levels of society. Even visitors with no direct connections to auto-making, Flint or any part of Michigan get a sense of the real people who participated in the events depicted. Motor City combines extensive use of photos and quotations with computer interactives that ask visitors to think about how they might deal with situations faced by people in the past.

All four of the recent exhibits also make statements about cars and their social context. What each museum says about the automobile reflects its own institutional history, including both collections and interpretive focus. Each presentation also reflects how these four museums define their communities and how they understand the roles played by the auto in that community. The distinctiveness of these four interpretations is testimony to the truth of Stephen Weil's observation that "the real guts and glory of every museum is in its particularity, not in what it does in common with others."¹³⁹

The automobile is integral to the identities of two of the museums in this group; they have always had cars in their collections. These two, the Henry Ford and Sloan

¹³⁹Stephen Weil, "The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?" in *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990): 50.

Museums, both needed to place their collections in a context that would be meaningful to visitors with widely varying degrees of interest in automotive history. As with earlier exhibits at HFM, cars are at the center of *The Automobile in American Life*. Through the use of additional artifacts, video and labeling, the exhibition places cars in the context of some of their uses in twentieth century American life. But it is still about cars in a way that none of the other recent exhibits is, about the ways in which the automobile itself has affected life in the U.S. Since the exhibit offered the opportunity to update HFM's collection by adding post-World War II vehicles that represented cars as transportation for the average family, rather than the cars of the rich and famous, it also linked the museum to its founder's collecting preferences.

As an institution very much embedded in a particular local community, Sloan Museum needed to provide a context of local history for its automotive collection. Concluding that context was ultimately more important to its community than cars alone, Sloan turned more sharply away from its institutional past than any of the other museums. The city of Flint is the focus of *Flint and the American Dream*, although visitors can also learn a great deal about the auto industry from it. The Pierson Gallery and the Buick Gallery and Research Center both represent an effort to recognize the past and present significance to Sloan of cars and the collector constituency.

The Detroit and Michigan Historical Museums not only did not collect automobiles in their early years, their initial purposes excluded them, albeit not explicitly. These two institutions in effect built the context before adding cars to their exhibits. Construction of a building for DHM that was large enough to accommodate vehicles occurred at about the same time, shortly following the Golden Jubilee of 1946, as popular

realization that the earliest days of the auto industry were now “historic.”¹⁴⁰ Although DHM exhibits often focused pretty closely on the cars themselves, they offered the context of the rest of the museum and the city itself to demonstrate their role. Not until the end of the 1970s did museum personnel make their first attempt to address the overall impact of the auto on the city and the region, in their abortive proposal for *The Automobile and Southeastern Michigan*. It would be more than fifteen years before such an exhibit became a reality in *Motor City*. The availability of other galleries in which to exhibit various aspects of the city’s twentieth-century history (a feature that was lacking at Sloan), allowed DHM to center its exhibition on the auto industry than on the city, a decision which also brought it desperately needed funding.

Until 1989, the Michigan Historical Museum lacked the physical facilities to exhibit cars. In addition, there was little recognition of the auto’s importance to the state, or effort to represent it in exhibits, prior to installation of the timeline of state history in the museum’s Mutual Building location in 1980. A decade later, when staff began discussing how to include the automobile in *Michigan in the Twentieth Century*, they had little difficulty coming to agreement. Everyone involved understood that their exhibit’s focus needed to be broader than a single industry—it was the story of a state.

The exhibit teams at these four museums combined the ingredients of their exhibits in ways that look and feel very different. Through conversation, questioning and argument, each of the four exhibit teams arrived at an integration of content, artifacts and

¹⁴⁰In addition to the jubilee itself, the 1947 deaths of two significant early pioneers, Billy Durant and Henry Ford contributed to this recognition. The formation of a number of auto collectors’ organizations in the post-war period also marks a popular change in perception of the auto.

design that broke new institutional ground, but was at the same time true to their mission and history. They also created exhibits that have stimulated further conversation, among visitors, between visitors and staff, and within communities.

CONCLUSION

The changes that have taken place in the appearance of historical exhibits since 1930 are obvious, even to a casual observer. Exhibits today feature fewer cases, more complete environmental settings, more large graphics, more color and sound. Recent exhibits are considerably more elaborate structurally and technologically than the sparsely labeled arrays of artifacts discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

These dramatic changes in appearance have evolved in tandem with less obvious changes in exhibit content. One can trace the increasing complexity of content from Henry Brown's "Museum of Ideas," through the efforts to interpret the Henry Ford Museum's collections in the 1970s and the Michigan Historical Museum's story-telling temporary exhibits of the 1980s, to the four recent exhibits discussed in Chapter 5. Museums' increased awareness of their educational role, has led to a greater focus on visitors, what and how they learn and how their learning is affected by other aspects of their visits. Recent research and experience have given museum staffs new insights into creating exhibits that will engage more of their visitors in meaningful ways.

"Museums in the Rearview Mirror" has traced these changes through seven decades at four Michigan museums. All of them began with exhibits of the simplest sort: literally objects on display. The changes that took place at different times in different museums came in response to various forces. Sometimes they were professional trends: new standards of design or theories of education in the museum world, new interest in ordinary people and new approaches to traditional source material in the academic. Altered economic and demographic conditions have certainly affected exhibits, as have

social changes that have eroded the unquestioned authority of many types of institutions, including museums.

These two sets of changes have, almost of necessity, paralleled each other. It is difficult to imagine incorporating the insights of the “new social history” into exhibits without the tools of more sophisticated design and interactive technology. At the same time, the latter would be little more than extra bells and whistles without more complex content. The significance of the four recent exhibitions for their institutions may lie in part in the consolidation and balancing of both these aspects of exhibits. They gave staffs a new understanding of the potential of the exhibit medium and set new institutional benchmarks for both content and design.

In addition to reflecting the development of historical exhibitions generally, the four museums represented here also illustrate the challenges faced by history museums in attempting to present good history in an accessible format. Even when the need for change seems clear, it may be difficult to accomplish. “Museums in the Rearview Mirror” has noted several instances in which efforts at change proved unsuccessful. Lack of resources, both financial and human, is often a factor, as for example in the post-war Michigan Historical Museum or at Henry Ford Museum in the late 1970s. Both of those examples entailed a failure of leadership as well. The sagas of *Flint and the Automobile* and *Motor City* demonstrate the dangers of exhibit developers focusing too little or too much, respectively, on academic research. Finally there is the danger that museums will go beyond what is historically defensible in their need to please those funding expensive exhibit projects. Both directors and curators at all four institutions believed that they had balanced competing points of view, but the potential for conflict remains in similar

projects.

Having achieved unprecedented success for their museums, staffs faced yet another challenge, the post-completion let-down. John Wright at Henry Ford Museum, the institution with the greatest perspective on the post-installation period, observed that staff had “tried to replicate the experience” of producing *The Automobile in American Life*.¹ Although HFM has achieved other successes since 1987, the project most closely modeled on the auto exhibit, *Made in America*, proved considerably less satisfying for staff who worked on it. It is not nearly as popular with visitors.

Where might further change lead these four Michigan museums as they move into the twenty-first century? Will they continue to be able to change their exhibits and their interpretations while maintaining continuity with their institutional pasts? “Museums in the Rearview Mirror” has identified objects, ideas and people as key elements in the twentieth century evolution of historical exhibits. They are also keys to thinking about their future. The role of artifacts in exhibits, the relationship between museums and the academy and the ways in which exhibits enable visitors to understand the past are all likely to continue to change. All play a part in the relationship of museums to the larger enterprise of history and to museums’ role in developing a broader and more useful understanding of history in American culture.

The use of artifacts, as historical sources and vehicles for interpretation, distinguishes museums from other institutions of similar educational purpose. Within exhibits, objects do not merely “illustrate” the past as Arthur Parker put it, they provide a

¹John Wright, interview with author, March 4, 1999. I have noted this phenomenon at the Michigan Historical Museum, and seen evidence pointing to similar situations in Detroit and Flint.

direct link to it, particularly if we know when, where and by whom a particular item was used. Indeed, respondents to the Indian University survey analyzed by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in *The Presence of the Past* cited this relatively unmediated contact with the past as one of the reasons they trusted museums.² Thus, whatever new ways of looking at artifacts may be developed and however their use may be supplemented by other exhibit devices, I believe that artifacts will remain part of the best exhibits. In the words of Michael Frisch, this is “the most traditional virtue of museums: the unconstrained imaginative power of objects from the past.”³ At the same time, artifacts continue to offer greater challenges to interpretation than do traditional documentary sources. They are not easy to “read.” I agree with Edward Linenthal and Thomas Schlereth we need to do more to “probe the explanatory power of the artifact,” as Schlereth puts it, in order to better understand what and how these pieces of the past communicate in the present.⁴

The recent exhibits discussed in Chapter 5 reflect an increasingly complex understanding of the exhibit medium, and of the role that scholarly research plays in them. All of the exhibitions utilized academic consultants in some fashion, but the museums retained control of the structure and content of their exhibits. This differs from the early NEH model for such projects, which (despite its very egalitarian rhetoric) assumed that

²Roy Rosezweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 106-107.

³Michael Frisch, “The Presentation of Urban History in Big-City Museums,” in *History Museums in the U.S.*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989): 46.

⁴Edward T. Linenthal, “Problems and Promise in Public History,” *The Public Historian* 19:2 (Spring 1997): 47; Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1990): 30.

museums' role was to "translate" the work of university-based historians for public audiences. Both academics and museum staff now recognize that their relationship is not so simple. Museums need the knowledge and insights of academic historians, and their push for intellectual rigor. Museum professionals have come to realize, however, that what they contribute is equally important: their understanding of how scholarly research and interpretation must be integrated with artifacts and design in the exhibit medium. Museum historians will continue to use different skills in their work than do their academic colleagues, but continued partnership on specific projects can increase not only understanding and respect on both sides, but the potential for such partnerships to encourage broad public dialogue.

The museums studied in this dissertation all made a start in their recent exhibit projects toward understanding their audiences and serving them better. All recognized that they had only made a beginning, that they needed to improve communication with visitors and learn more about them. Rosenzweig and Thelen's findings in *The Presence of the Past*, particularly those concerning the high level of trust in museums, have encouraged many in the museum field that efforts to forge stronger links to their audiences might prove even more fruitful than they initially imagined.

The same findings, however, have also raised a significant question, especially among non-museum practitioners of history. Respondents to the survey overwhelmingly focused first on personal uses of the past. Among white Americans in particular, there was little sense of a collective past that had much relevance to individuals' lives, except as it offered context for personal events.⁵ A roundtable discussion in *The Public Historian*

⁵Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*: 187-189, 196-200.

focused on this absence of larger concerns.⁶ The reactions of commentators, most of whom are university-based, ranged from “deeply disturbed” and pessimistic, to concerned, but willing to acknowledge that “to care deeply about oneself, one’s family and one’s legacy is the start of historical consciousness.” Most commentators took Rosenzweig and Thelen’s findings as a challenge to all types of historians to work harder at “narrowing the gap and promoting collaboration between ‘popular historymakers’ and ‘professional historymakers.’”⁷

In their comments on the roundtable, both Rosenzweig and Thelen recognized the validity of many of the issues raised. Rosenzweig agreed with the Smithsonian’s Spencer Crew that “This is not a simple task,” but asserted that continued conversation with popular history-users was important and could only take place on terms of mutual respect. Thelen, in *TPH* and elsewhere, proposes using individual experience to help construct a collective past that could stand as common ground in American culture.⁸

If museums can build on the trust the public has placed in them and use the resources of their collections to engage visitors with the individual stories that those objects make so memorable, they may be able to begin a broader dialogue on some of the issues of the collective past that are of particular concern to academic historians. It may

⁶“Roundtable: Responses to Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*,” *The Public Historian* 22:1 (Winter 2000): 13-44.

⁷Michael Zuckerman, “The Presence of the Present, The End of History”: 19; Shelley Bookspan, “Editor’s Corner”: 11; Otis Graham, “Dealing Ourselves Back In: Professional History and the Public”: 28.

⁸Rosenzweig, “‘Not a Simple Task’: Professional Historians Meet Popular Historymakers”: 35-38; Thelen, “But Is It History?”: 39-44. See also Thelen, “Individual Experience and Big Picture History,” *History News* 55:1 (Winter 2000): 10-13.

prove to be, as one commentator observed, “harder than rocket science,” but if we believe that “a healthy, participatory historical culture” would benefit us all, then we ought to try.⁹

⁹Graham, “Dealing Ourselves Back In”: 29. Thelen’s phrase emerged from the roundtable as something of a watchword.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Wolverine and antiques, Michigan Historical Museum, mid-1920s. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Historical Museum.

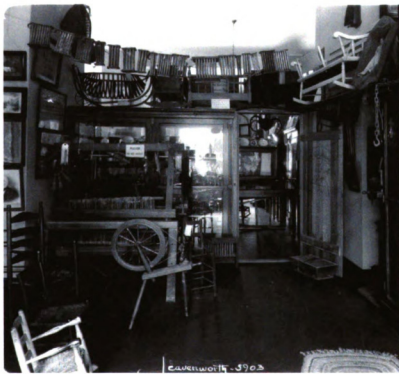


Figure 2: Using all available space at the Michigan Historical Museum, mid-1920s. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Historical Museum.

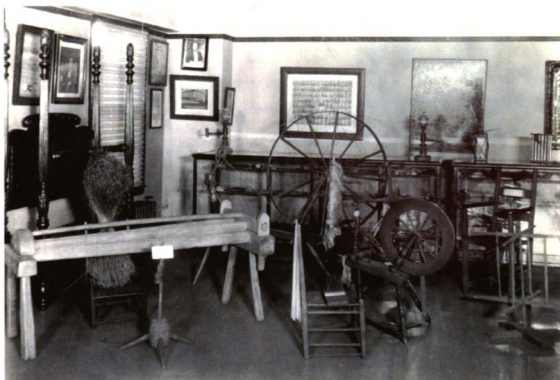


Figure 3: Spinning wheels in a skyscraper, Detroit Historical Museum, c. 1930. Photo courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum.



Figure 4: Rows of cars in Henry Ford's Museum, 1936. From the collections of the Research Center, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (2000.0.25.2).

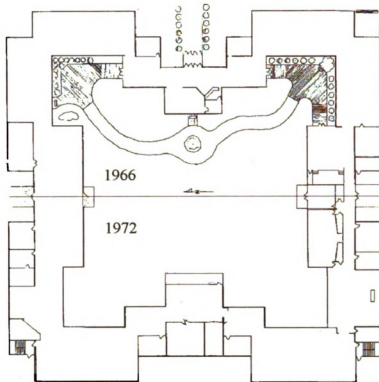


Figure 5: Sloan Museum floor plan. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.

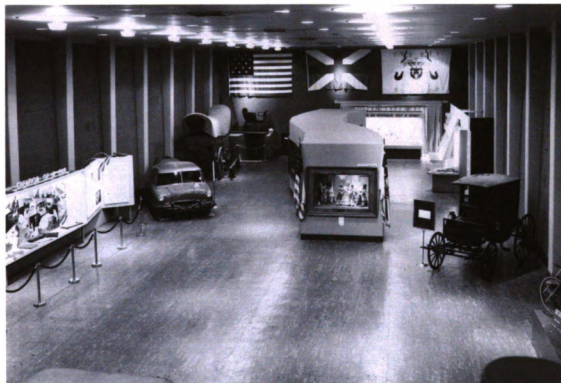


Figure 6: In its early years, Dodge Hall usually accommodated several small “exhibits” at once. Photo courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum.



Figure 7: The Motor Album series began ambitiously with this Chrysler exhibit. Photo courtesy of Detroit Historical Museum.

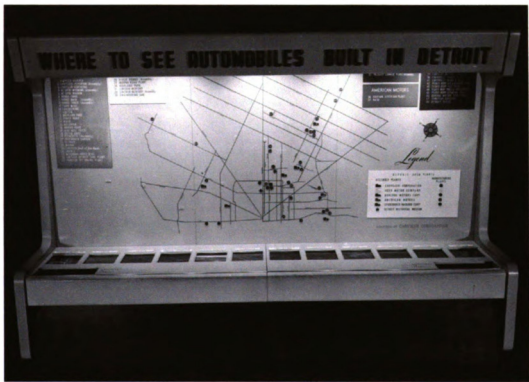


Figure 8: In 1956, the Detroit Historical Museum encouraged visitors to see the auto industry first-hand. Photo courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum.

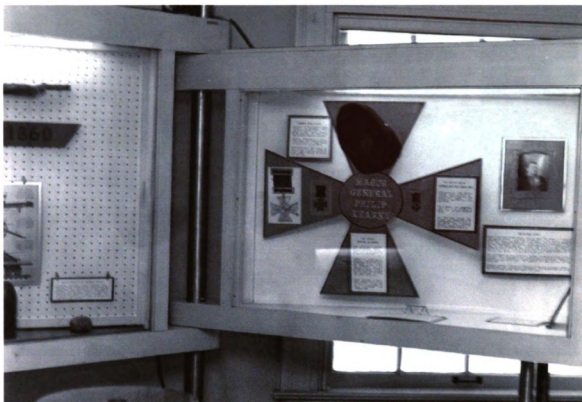


Figure 9: Basic exhibit techniques in the Turner House, early 1960s. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Historical Museum.

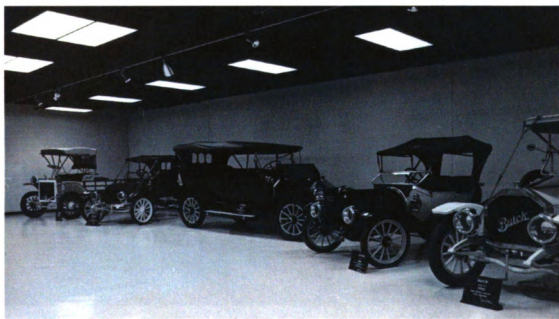


Figure 10: An early attempt to break the monotony of the radiator lineup, c. 1979. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.



Figure 11: HFM's still vast auto display after reinstatement, 1979. From the collections of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (B80263).



Figure 12: The Interpretive Center, 1979. From the collections of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (B83261-8).



Figure 13: Entrance to the Special Exhibit Area in the Mutual Building, 1987. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Historical Museum.

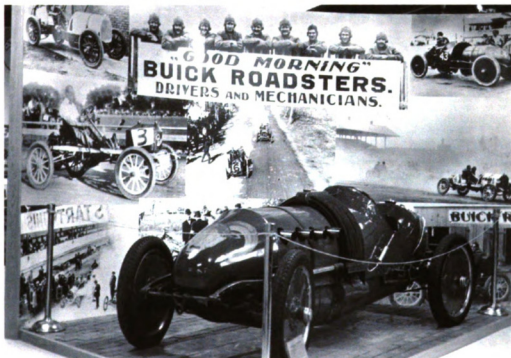


Figure 14: The Buick Bug in *Flint and the Automobile*, mid-1980s. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.



Figure 15: The Sloan Museum recreated a familiar local landmark, but not the bustle of its original Saginaw Street location. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.



Figure 16: With the city's budget cut to the bone and automakers struggling to sell cars, the Chrysler 50th anniversary exhibit was simple. Photo courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum.



Figure 17: Visitors' first glimpse of *The Automobile in American Life* includes colorful signage from the automotive landscape. From the collections of the Research Center, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (T30685).



Figure 18: The spine presents the chronological development of the American auto, but visitors cannot see the interiors of these sedans. From the collections of the Research Center, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (T30687).

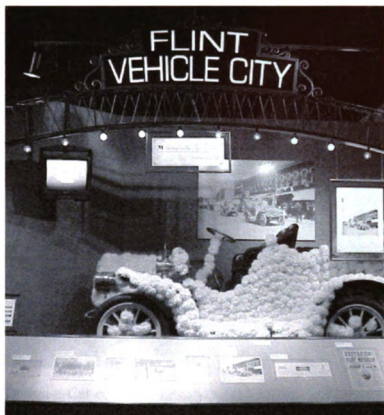


Figure 19: *Flint and the American Dream* opens with Flint's 1905 semi-centennial parade. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.



Figure 20: A local supermarket sign dwarfs consumer goods of the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Perry Archive, Sloan Museum.



Figure 21: The Design-a-Car computer interactive is a popular feature of the 1957 Auto Show gallery. Photo courtesy of *Michigan History Magazine*.



Figure 22: *Motor City*'s operating body drop is the focal point of the exhibit. Photo courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum.

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