

Producing Memory: Public History and Resistance in a Canadian Auto Town¹

Christine McLaughlin, York University

In a city forged by the automobile industry, public history and memory have been deeply shaped by the forces of automobile production. Homages to R.S. McLaughlin, who is widely celebrated as founding General Motors of Canada in Oshawa, Ontario, have powerfully informed public memory in the city. Yet Oshawa is also the site of a storied labour history that also deeply informs public memory, albeit largely through the medium of working-class oral histories.

This paper explores public history creation in the industrial city of Oshawa, Ontario. This has been a highly political process. Public memory in Oshawa has been significantly shaped by the forces of power, money and privilege, while challenges to this status quo have been largely eliminated from the city's streetscapes. However, these moments of challenge and resistance offer an important legacy for future generations and ought to be preserved. Oral history provides one of the most important means of collecting, preserving and analyzing these challenges to the 'official' narrative. By contrasting the creation of an official narrative, sanctioned by those with power, with the counter narrative, created through working-class oral history, we can see the value of interviews in rendering history a contested class process. Resistance is a paramount theme in working-class history in Oshawa; many oral narratives stress events where working people empowered themselves by direct action, and through challenges to corporate, government and legal authority.

Oshawa, like so many industrial casualties in this so-called era of post-industrialism, is undergoing a fundamental break with its past. Home to the

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corporate headquarters of General Motors of Canada, and the historical site of one of the largest production facilities in North America, the city's manufacturing base has eroded in the wake of a long and slow process of deindustrialization. Plant closures and lay-offs have rocked the city, upsetting thousands of lives in the process. Manufacturing is history, we are told, at least in those countries where unionized workers have won considerable gains and benefits. Critics of deindustrialization have uncovered many problems with this term; industrial production has not stopped. More often, it has shifted within a global economy to areas with lower labour and environmental regulations, with the maximization of profits as a driving force.²

If we accept the premise that wealth is generated by a society, then the way that wealth is distributed within that society becomes highly contestable terrain. In cities and towns across North America, especially in the wake of the Great Depression and Second World War, many working people actively contested this terrain, seeking a more equitable and democratic distribution of wealth and power. One of the main vehicles workers used was the newly forming industrial unions. While miners were among the first to put industrial unionism into practice, many of the earliest major victories for industrial unionism emerged from the automobile industry.³

My main focus here is the automobile industry and Oshawa, but it is important to bear in mind that developments in Oshawa were part of a larger

² There is a growing body of literature dealing with factory closures in North America; see, for example, Bryan D. Palmer, *Capitalism Comes to the Backcountry: The Goodyear Invasion of Napanee* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1994); Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); "The Politics and Memory of Deindustrialization in Canada," *Urban History Review* 35:2 (2002); Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-84* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007).

³ For a more detailed examination of the labour movement in Canada, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1880-1991* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992) and Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1996) .

historical process, with local, provincial, national and international implications. When autoworkers in Oshawa struck in 1937, winning one of the first victories for industrial unionism in Canada, they were part of a larger movement.⁴ Public history production in the city, like many other cities and towns, is highly localized in scope, celebrating local heroes and notables. But by what process do these people come to be commemorated? What forces have shaped public history production? How does this in turn shape collective memory?

Tributes to its captains of industry dominate public space and preoccupy local history production in Oshawa. One name in particular continues to claim public space in Oshawa, situated as the primary foundation in the city's creation myth. The late Colonel Robert Samuel McLaughlin, a founder and former president of General Motors of Canada, is frequently extolled as the 'father of Oshawa;' his presence continues to linger over the city long after his bodily remains have been laid to rest. Colonel Sam is often remembered as a benevolent philanthropist, as a man who is owed a great debt of gratitude, and as a man who single-handedly, it often seems, built the city of Oshawa. Within this project of memory creation, the actual historical record has been distorted. The myth of Colonel Sam was very much a postwar production, located in the broader context of a reassertion of capitalist authority in the post-World-War II period. The symbols of this myth inscribed the principles of individualism, property, and private charity at precisely the same time as broad-based support for unionism and collective action was emerging in the mid-twentieth century.

This public script of benevolence, goodwill and class harmony was created at the same time that managerial authority and corporate power were being strongly reasserted within and outside of the city's production plants. From the shop floors to the city streets, "counter-theatres of resistance" challenged capitalist hegemony. E.P. Thompson, building on the work of Antonio Gramsci, has theorized how the ruling class creates "theatres" of public power that showcase authority and exact deference; protest and insubordination are a key form of resistance to these public displays of power. James Scott highlights how a

⁴ Irving Abella, "Oshawa 1937," *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949*, Irving Abella, ed. (Toronto: Lorimer, 1975); Sam Gindin, *The Canadian Auto Workers: Birth and Transformation of a Union* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1995); and Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labour* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

“public transcript” openly describes relations between the dominant and oppressed, while critiques of power often form “hidden transcripts” which take place offstage and outside of the knowledge of power holders.⁵ At times in Oshawa, these hidden critiques of power have emerged onto a public stage as a result of collective acts of resistance. These moments form key plot lines in many stories popularly shared through the city, but they remain largely hidden from official history commemoration. Yet, these instances of resistance and collective action remind us of what can be achieved when people act together to improve lived circumstances. In our current era of escalating corporate power amidst eroding working and living conditions, this message continues to be a critical one.

Oral histories of working people in Oshawa offer a counter-narrative to the official history of the city as it can be read through its monuments, memorials and newspapers. Collective memory can be shaped through a complex array of forces. Individual memory and collective memory are closely connected; individual memory cannot exist outside a social group, while collective memory both encompasses and remains distinct from individual memory.⁶ Sites of public memory can in turn deeply affect collective memory. Writing on public memory in the United States, John Bodnar distinguishes between what he calls “official” and “vernacular” memory. He describes official memory as efforts by the state, including cultural elites, to mythologize itself and maintain the loyalty of its

⁵ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcripts of Subordinate Groups* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) and E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991). See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vols. 1, 2 and 3, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, “Individual Memory and Collective Memory,” and “Historical Memory and Collective Memory,” in *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 22-49, 50-87. See also Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

citizens, while vernacular memory reflects the need of ordinary people to pursue their social and political concerns in their local communities.⁷

A diverse body of stories emerge from oral histories; people can belong to multiple and different communities simultaneously based on ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, race, religion, workplace, region and municipality, to name a few.⁸ This complicates the use of terms like “collective memory.” However, some common plots punctuate personal histories. In Oshawa, many people emphasize events that place working people at the front and centre of historical change. In these stories, the gains of working people were not simply handed to them by kind wealthy benefactors; rather, gains in living and working conditions were the result of direct action, a willingness to stand up and fight for them. The reoccurrence of certain events across many historical narratives suggest that these are an important component of collective memory in Oshawa even if they are not commemorated in the city’s official public historical script.

The personal and political in oral history

This paper explores working-class memory in Oshawa while critically engaging with the way public memory in the city has been officially produced. This story has been deeply shaped by the people I encounter on a daily basis, and the ways they formally and informally share their history; at the same time, the narrative presented here is largely my own. In capturing popular stories, and reshaping them from a fluid oral tradition into a static textual record, I necessarily reshape these stories to fit into a larger narrative of my own construction. As such, it is just as important to reveal details about myself as it is to recount the histories that have been shared with me. As a resident of Oshawa, I am very much immersed in its working-class culture. Ironically, I have also become further distanced from this culture as I try to understand it more clearly through the avenue of post-secondary education. A deeply middle-class bias underpins educational

⁷ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁸ On the importance of unpacking the term “community,” see John C. Walsh and Steven High, “Rethinking the Concept of Community,” *Social History/Histoire Sociale* 32:64 (1999), 255-73.

institutions that is often at odds with working-class culture; bridging this cultural gap is a challenging, but a useful and important exercise.

People regularly share their memories. However, only a small percentage of those I have asked have agreed to a formal recorded interview. Many protest that they have little of import to offer, while also sharing their memories informally, and at times, at great length. Frequently I am directed to spokespersons, typically working class activists and elected officials; these are also often older women.⁹ This may be because I am a woman, but a few key women also seem to be popularly recognized around the local union hall as key guardians of its history: Bev McCloskey, Viola Pilkey, Jackie Finn, all of whom have a long history of community activism and are repeatedly recommended as trusted sources of information. While these women have played a great role in shaping my thinking and welcoming me into the local activist community, so too have informal methods of sharing history orally also shaped my thought process and narrative.¹⁰ Moreover, people fully expect that the information they share with me informally will shape my thinking about Oshawa's past. In this respect, oral history sources are radically different from written sources; as living, breathing "documents," they demand a reciprocal and highly interactive relationship. As insider and outsider to this community, I have experienced both the challenges and benefits that accompany these expectations.

My personal identity and position has been an important part of the interview process. I first approached the academic project of recording the history of Oshawa's working-class culture through the medium of the Retirees' Chapter of CAW Local 222 in Oshawa, an organization which represents 13,000 retirees' in the city and surrounding region. I was immediately and warmly welcomed into

⁹ Oral history has been key in recovering the history of women and gender. See, for example, Joan Sangster, "Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history," *Women's History Review* 3:1 (1994), 5-28 and Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Thompson, eds., *Gender and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Stacey Zembrycki's compelling analysis of the Ukrainian community provides perspective to the challenges of navigating many communities of identity, including gender, religion, age and class, to name a few; as she illustrates, relationships with elder women within a community can play a pivotal role. "Sharing Authority with Baba," *The Journal of Canadian Studies* 43:1 (2009), 219-238.

this organization; at the same time, people were as interested in learning more about me as I was in learning more about them. Understandably, most people want to know more about me before sharing their own personal information. I am often asked if I am any relation to Sam McLaughlin. I am not, although some remain dubious, in some cases pointing out the privileges that come with having this surname in Oshawa – as one woman told me over the phone after we had completed an interview, if her last name was McLaughlin, she probably would have been able to get a fancy university education, too.

Invariably, I am asked if my father worked for General Motors. Neither my father nor my mother worked in the automobile industry. What does my father do? He was a taxi driver, and my stepfather served in the non-commissioned officer class of the military before retiring to Air Canada, albeit in the non-union, middle management class. Few ask, but my mother worked in the service industry for most of her life alongside the largely invisible labour she completed in the home. These working-class credentials can be a source of shame and embarrassment in academic circles, but can provide some “street cred” in Oshawa’s working-class community. I am also often asked if I am from Oshawa. I have lived in the city for nearly half of my life, but I was born and raised in the Maritimes. For the many who have migrated to Oshawa from Canada’s East Coast, this added shared community can be a further relationship builder. Even those unwilling to participate in formal interviews frequently express great interest in my background and hearing about my work.

Above all, I have learned that actions, rather than words have been most important in building knowledge and trust. Simply telling people about myself is often not enough; I have also had to prove myself through my actions. One of the interviews I arranged when I began research for my PhD dissertation was with the political action committee of the Local 222’s retirees’ chapter. Comprised of long-time, well-known local working-class activists, I thought an interview with this group would be a good starting point in learning more about working-class activism and politics in the area. After speaking with each member of the committee, and carefully explaining the academic interview process, I was surprised to arrive for the interview to find myself at a scheduled political action meeting. There was a much larger group of people there than I had expected. Although I was given some time on the agenda to speak, I left the meeting that day without a single recorded interview, and a long list of action items in hand. I have since been pulled directly into the orbit of political activism in Oshawa.

Professional scholarship is produced by human beings, and so subject to all the flaws, biases, personalities, beliefs and fallibilities of human potential. Whether our politics shape our education and ideas, or whether these shape our politics, they all remain closely intertwined in a single body, impossible to separate. Producers of scholarly work do not often reveal their political leanings; even if there is a dialectical relationship between their viewpoints and politics, this is usually not explicitly stated. Oral history demands greater personal transparency, making it difficult to erect artificial walls between professional, personal and political work. Many oral historians and scholars of popular culture and the working class have worked to bridge the divide between scholarship, activism and politics. Some have answered Antonio Gramsci's call for the "organic intellectual," who either originates from the working class or joins its political party, or what Gianni Bosio calls "upside down intellectuals" who not only study, but learn from the oral interview process, and allows themselves to be studied as well.¹¹

In a similar vein to the retirees' meeting, I accepted an invitation to attend my first local NDP meeting with the sole intention of meeting long-time activists from the area with the hope some would share their histories. I was taken aback to find myself nominated for the riding executive at the same meeting, where I was also signed up as a member. The skills I have acquired in my graduate work translate well into political organizing, election work was a good opportunity to forge connections in a like-minded working-class community, and most important, I was moved by the issues of job loss, poverty and plant closures that the campaigns addressed. I believed that I could and should maintain boundaries between my personal political work and my professional academic work. Yet, the difficulty of this became clearer as I gained experience in the public field of oral history, and the very public stage of politics.

For the oral historian, community involvement and personal identity play a more direct role in professional history production. As living "sources," people demand much greater reciprocity. Archival sources do not expect a researcher to earn their trust before revealing themselves; they do not limit or expand what they will share depending on the relationship of the researcher to their community.

¹¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 40-42.

While what we read and how we interpret it is deeply affected by our cultural lens, the information available to the oral historian is also deeply shaped by personal relationships, which in turn profoundly inform the nature and shape of knowledge production. By being a part of one political community, much more information from within that community is revealed, while the doors simultaneously close to other political communities. The same holds true for the many different communities that any one person can belong to, whether they are based on gender, 'race,' ethnicity, age, religion, class or political identity. In developing the closest personal relationships with those who identify with similar communities, I must also acknowledge how deeply the voices that come out of these communities shape my work.

The personal relationships that can develop further complicate notions of academic objectivity.¹² The idea that objectivity is possible has been increasingly destabilized in academic research; however, alongside this development, a growing preoccupation with the "conceived" over "lived" experience has also deeply influenced historical scholarship.¹³ This is at odds with many working-class narratives, where lived experience and direct action play a central role. As the widely respected local activist Beverly McCloskey told me when I first began this project, if I really want to learn about something, I have to do it. While she was using this as an opportunity to get me more politically involved, she was also aptly summing up a theme I would encounter again and again through my research process. For many, my experience working in a factory offers a much greater understanding than any number of books I have read on the topic.

Oral sources do not offer a perfect, unfiltered view of the past. People can embellish events, while memory is a highly fluid and organic process which can change over time. For example, those who lived in the capitalist world through

¹² Daniel James aptly highlights the many benefits that can come from a close relationship with an interview participant in his work on the life history of a working-class woman and labour activist; in particular, his conclusion beautifully articulates the intensely personal relationships that can develop from the oral interview process. Daniel James, *Dona Maria's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹³ On the importance of making space for the dialectical relationship between "the perceived, the conceived, and the lived," see Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 33-46.

the Cold War era may have been highly influenced by a pervasive discourse that placed the world into two camps, capitalism vs. communism, democracy vs. dictatorship, good vs. evil.¹⁴ This in turn can greatly affect how they remember their own radical left politics in the period before what remained a largely ideological war in North America began. Memory can change over time in a way that written sources do not.¹⁵ Memory is also filtered through the present – most elderly people I speak to in Oshawa punctuate their life stories with observations on the current manufacturing crisis, at times passing along lessons from their lived experiences. Under the shadow of this current crisis, many may recollect the postwar years of industrial growth in a much more positive light in comparison, creating a “golden age” in memory, if not in practice.¹⁶

Official Memory Production in Oshawa

Official history production in Oshawa has been very much shaped by money, privilege and power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the many monuments to the name of R.S. McLaughlin that dot the cityscape. Heather Robertson’s *Driving Force: The McLaughlin Family and the Age of the Car* explores the creation of the myth that Sam McLaughlin constructed, wherein the significant roles others played in this story were written out of the narrative that Sam constructed which placed himself as the central driving force in bringing the

¹⁴ Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) and Reg Whitaker and Steve Hewitt, *Canada and the Cold War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2003).

¹⁵ Alessandro Portelli’s works on oral history remain foundational to the field; see, for example, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli; The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) and *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ The postwar period was fraught with challenges; despite higher employment levels, automobile production was fairly volatile, marked by seasonal employment and layoffs. From the late 1940s onwards, automation within the plants and line speed-ups sparked a series of work actions. However, silence shrouds much of the more negative aspects of this past, particularly in areas where workers’ struggles resulted in few gains. For a much more detailed global analysis of “the golden age” within the context of the twentieth century, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

automobile industry to Oshawa.¹⁷ It is important to note that the official history of Sam McLaughlin, and Oshawa through association, was originally based on an oral interview with McLaughlin, wherein he provided his own interpretation of his role in bringing the auto industry to the city.¹⁸ However, this oral history has gained increasing legitimacy through its continual reproduction in written text.

Colonel Sam was the son of Robert McLaughlin, founder of the McLaughlin Carriage Company. By the turn of the twentieth century, the carriage company was among the largest in the country.¹⁹ The McLaughlin's negotiated a deal with Billy Durant of General Motors, which led to the creation of the McLaughlin Motor Company in 1907. In 1918, Sam McLaughlin sold the Canadian production facility to General Motors, remaining a major shareholder, President of General Motors of Canada and Chairman of the Board. He also sat on the board of General Motors.

R.S. McLaughlin is widely commemorated in Oshawa as its founding father, a generous philanthropist who cared above all about the welfare of workers in his community. The historical record is somewhat more complicated. It was not until the late 1940s and 1950s that Colonel Sam developed an especially vigorous spirit for giving. Although there were undoubtedly many factors that may have led to this, two are particularly compelling. The first was changes to tax laws, which made charitable donations tax deductible, and so a more profitable endeavour. The second involves changes that were taking place on the ground in Oshawa. In 1937, GM workers in the city went on strike, forming Local 222 of the United Automobile Workers (UAW). Key to this victory was the wide-based community support that strikers received. Over the next few years, a unionization wave swept the city, as workers in the city's major industries organized, along with hotel workers, city workers and working class housewives. Labour representatives began being elected to city council, and by the mid-1940s social

¹⁷ Heather Robertson, *Driving Force: The McLaughlin Family and the Age of the Car* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995).

¹⁸ R.S. McLaughlin as told to Eric Hutton, "My Eighty Years on Wheels," *Maclean's* (15 October 1954).

¹⁹ *A Great Canadian Industry and its Founder: Being a Brief History of the McLaughlin Carriage Company* (no publisher, no date).

democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) candidates were being elected to represent the riding.²⁰

Prior to the Great Depression, General Motors had developed an intricate corporate welfare system as a means of quelling labour strife. Gift-giving had long been realized as a politically advantageous act, a useful means of maintaining a paternalist order in cities, towns and workplaces.²¹ Often, the only thing the poor have to give in return is thanks, praise and loyalty. Gift-giving as a one-way process can create a deep sense of indebtedness among the recipients of these gifts. Following the lead of many other large producers, the Company offered an intricate welfare programme through its Industrial Relations Department, centred in Detroit, to propagate the “family spirit” of General Motors. The company envisioned itself as “a sort of practical Utopia that answers Sir Thomas More’s dream of a state furnishing common tables with group insurance serving 99 percent of the plant’s over 4,500 permanent employees.”²² It also funded sports teams, built a convention hall, sponsored orchestras and choirs, picnics, group games, contests, dances, social gatherings, literary and dramatic societies, and offered correspondence courses for educational purposes.²³ In conjunction with paying the highest wages in the city, the company was able to stifle discontent temporarily. However, this corporate welfare scheme largely collapsed during the Depression. By the 1940s, unionism had become a significant part of working-class culture in Oshawa.²⁴

In light of these political changes on the ground, Sam McLaughlin may have felt a need to redeem his public image as he embarked on a spirited campaign of giving in the postwar period. One thing is certain; he was clearly preoccupied with claiming these gifts as his own by physically attaching his name

²⁰ The success of labour in the local political arena has never been complete, as support has swayed between Conservative and CCF or NDP candidates. Organized labour also regularly ran successful candidates for municipal politics; however the labour slate rarely made up a majority of councilors.

²¹ On paternalism in Canada, see Joan Sangster, “The Softball Solution: Women Workers and Male Managers in a Peterborough Clock Factory,” *Labour/Le Travail* 32 (Fall 1993), 167-99.

²² General Motors press release (30 June 1927), Guy House, Oshawa Archives, 0003, 0011, 0001.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “After the Strike - Labour Relations in Oshawa, 1937-39,” *Relations industrielles/ Industrial Relations*, 48:4 (1993), 691-710.

to each one.²⁵ This insistence on etching his name on a public script of Oshawa is revealing, and has in some cases served broader ideological purposes, very much shaping how residents view and remember the history of their city.

Many of the gifts the McLaughlin's gave the city had deep roots in middle-class agencies of moral regulation of the poor. In 1946, the McLaughlin's donated a vacant house they had built for one of their daughters to be used as a YWCA, where the behaviour of single young women was monitored, and classes were held teaching immigrant women so-called 'Canadian ways.' It was named Adelaide House, in honour of Colonel Sam's wife.²⁶ In 1947, Sam purchased a public park in Oshawa that he donated to the Boy Scouts movement.²⁷ In its early years, the Scout movement was often supported by industrialists and middle-class reformers seeking to instil military and industrial discipline in young boys.²⁸ Named Camp Samac (SAM-MAC), it contained an Olympic swimming pool, log cabins, and council hall; it also featured a 16-foot pole dedicated to the Cubs, a 26-foot pole dedicated to the Scouts, and a 40-foot totem pole known as the 'Big

²⁵ Illustrating that imperialism cannot be fully understood without a theory of gender power, Anne McClintock explores the desire to name "virgin lands" as an expression of "a desire for a single origin alongside a desire to control the issue of that origin." Building on analysis from Luce Irigaray, she links this act of naming to long-standing family and sexual politics, wherein the father, with no visible proof of the paternity of his child, substitutes his name for the missing guarantee of fatherhood. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 28-29.

²⁶ Mary Quayle Innis, *Unfold the Years: A History of The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1949), 193; "YWCA," Guy House, Oshawa Archives, 0007, 0004, 0012; and "The Young Women's Christian Association," *Daily Times-Gazette* (8 March 1949), 23.

²⁷ *Progress Special Edition* (17 September 1983), Guy House, Oshawa Archives, 003, 0011, 0001.

²⁸ On the early Boy Scout movement, see David Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) and Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

Chief,' with carvings depicting the life and times of Sam McLaughlin.²⁹ A house was donated to the Girl Guides soon after.³⁰

In 1950, citizens in Oshawa had the opportunity to vote on the construction of new civic institutions. While a new city hall was endorsed by popular vote, a majority expressed satisfaction with their current library, rejecting the construction of a new one.³¹ Soon after, Sam McLaughlin announced that he would be footing the bill to pay for a new library in the city, to be named the McLaughlin Public Library. The original library, located in the heart of downtown Oshawa, was used for union and welfare work before it was demolished in 1956.³² This reflects one of the major problems with private acts of charity, for while they can be publicly subsidized through tax credits, the decision-making process can be a highly undemocratic one.

The list of properties and donations that R.S. McLaughlin gave is substantive, and as a result, his name remains deeply etched on civic institutions throughout the city. Yet have these acts of gift-giving, public performance, and naming been a determining force in shaping collective memory in the city? If the wide adoration of Sam McLaughlin in Oshawa is any indication, then yes, these acts are powerful shapers of collective memory. To suggest that Sam McLaughlin is remembered fondly in Oshawa would be an understatement. Very much in keeping with Steven High's analysis of Canada's *Industrial Sunset*, American capitalists are often the villains of working-class melodramas that have been enacted in homes, streets and workplaces across the city. However, local identity is even more central here, masking or overriding consciousness of class interests. Sam is so widely revered not only because he is Canadian, but because he lived most of his life in Oshawa, and made such a deep impression on the local space where people live out their daily lives. It is within this local space that people encounter his name linked to so many civic institutions. It is in Oshawa that he gave so many gifts, and so it is perhaps fitting that people in Oshawa express deep gratitude and indebtedness to his generosity.

²⁹ "Boys' Dream of a Camp Donated to Scouts at Oshawa With Bonfire Ceremony," *Globe and Mail* (15 September 1947), 15.

³⁰ YWCA, Guy House, Oshawa Archives, 0007, 0004, 0012.

³¹ "Contract Awarded for Civic Buildings," *Toronto Star* (10 January 1950), 7.

³² "Santa's Workshop Produces Toys for Strikers' Children," *Toronto Star* (9 December 1955), 5 and "Oshawa Old Library Sold for \$75,000," *Toronto Star* (7 February 1956), 9.

Few that I have spoken to have expressed criticism of Sam McLaughlin for the public record; whether this informs “hidden” texts outside our public purview remains difficult to ascertain. As a personification of General Motors in Canada, this deep reverence rests uneasily alongside the equally deep reverence repeatedly expressed in working-class narratives for acts of collective resistance against this capitalist order. These contradictory narratives can co-exist. As E.P. Thompson writes, seemingly opposing identities can exist within the same person, one deferential, the other rebellious. These can be derived from:

two aspects of the same reality: on the one hand, the necessary conformity with the *status quo* if one is to survive, the need to get by in the world as it is in fact ordered, and to play the game according to the rules imposed by employers, overseers of the poor, etc.; on the other hand the ‘common sense’ derived from shared experience with fellow workers and with neighbours of exploitation, hardship and repression, which continually exposes the text of the paternalistic theatre to ironic criticism and (less frequently) to revolt.³³

In this vein, the fact that people celebrate both R.S. McLaughlin and the acts of resistance against the corporation that made him such a celebrated figure can perhaps be more easily appreciated.

There are always exceptions to every general rule. A few of my interviewees took a much more critical view. Experience and generation appear to play an important role here, in that those who have vocally and publicly criticized Sam McLaughlin are older, with direct experience rooted in working at GM or managing a working-class family budget before there was a union. Some will point out that R.S. McLaughlin’s millions were the reward of other people’s labour, and that his power to give was a highly undemocratic process rooted in the labour they gave to General Motors. Long-time union activist Roy Flemming, who began working at GM in 1934, had this to say: “*Well, you gotta realize that he was at the time [one of] the richest...in Canada, so he still controlled his own destiny....then he had places here and here, so he didn’t, what you’d say, have to mingle with the poor people.... Well he didn’t.*” Roy recognizes the many

³³ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 11.

contributions which were made: “*Oh, he did a lot, yes, yes. But God knew how much money he had...and it was all made in Oshawa, you know.*”³⁴

Myron Mech, another long-time GM employee who was a teenager in Oshawa during the Depression, makes a similar point: “*You see, R.S. McLaughlin owned this town, let’s put it that way. Anything, disregarding whether it’s the Council or whatever, it’s what R.S. says.*” He notes that before the union, the town was run by businessmen who “*were only interested in that part. To hell with the other part.*” As to Sam’s contribution to his workers, he felt he:

*never got any compensation or help from the company or nothing. I remember during Christmastime. R.S. McLaughlin as I said ran this city, when there was no union. On Christmas, a few days before Christmas, he would have truckloads of turkeys brought in from the west...to all employees with English pudding.... They used to throw it on the porch, and the pudding.... He was using us.*³⁵

Likening the gesture to images seen on television of bags of food being dropped in Africa, he suggests that R.S. was among the wealthiest men in the world. “*That guy, it was, anything that he left behind or had named after, there had to be some stipulation....I’ve got a ring from R.S. McLaughlin....And a diamond for every five years. Big deal.*”³⁶ Jeanette Nugent remembers hearing about the turkeys, too. “*My mother told me once that, one year for Christmas R.S. gave all the workers in the factory a turkey, and some of the men threw the turkeys back on his lawn, and he never did it again.*”³⁷ Overall, criticisms of Sam McLaughlin are exceptions to the rule. Most point to the many buildings and memory sites that carry his name as evidence that he “*did a lot for Oshawa.*”³⁸

³⁴ Roy Fleming, interview with author (20 April 2007).

³⁵ Myron Mech, interview with author (23 April 2007).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jeannette Nugent, interview with author (17 April 2007).

³⁸ A CAW Local 222 flyer distributed to workers at GM criticizing a 2012 announcement by the company of further job cuts began by asking what R.S. McLaughlin would think of this treatment of Oshawa’s workforce.

Memories of Resistance

Resistance is a recurring theme in oral histories from working-class Oshawa. This can encompass a wide range of diverse issues. From individual to collective acts of resistance, people frequently privilege stories of challenges to authority in many different spaces, from workplaces to city streets to homes, to the corridors of government and the law. Similar stories arise again and again, based on the same events, illustrating how these have shaped collective memory. These events form the plot of stories that have been repeated over and over, passed from generation to generation, so that even those who did not experience these events still share stories about them. Experience continues to play a critical role, indicating important generational differences. People who lived through the 1937 strike at General Motors, for example, position it much more vividly and centrally in their narratives. Remembering what it was like to work at GM before they unionized, they counter this with the many ways that unionism directly improved their lives. These stories have continued to be passed down to younger generations, but this event does not as vividly inform the narratives of those who did not directly experience the Depression or pre-union employment at General Motors.

I faced my first acts of unplanned resistance to my pre-designed interview strategy during my very first round of interviews. I had the opportunity to interview surviving founding members of UAW Local 222, most of who were rank-and-file members. At the time I was focusing specifically on the 1930s and 1940s, but I left most of these interviews having learnt almost as much about the 1955 strike as the 1937 one. How people recount and remember various Oshawa strikes tells us much about the formation and articulation of working-class memory.

Oshawa has been the scene of many strikes, rallies and protests, with a reputation as a militant union and blue-collar town; this tradition was born in the hard times of the 1930s. In a city where the local economy was heavily centred around the automobile industry, the Great Depression hit hard. Stories from working-class survivors of this period emphasize its daily difficulties while nostalgically remembering this formative time, a trend in keeping with oral

history studies across many communities.³⁹ The 1937 strike that led to the founding of Oshawa's largest union local – and what would become one of the largest locals in North America – lasted two short weeks. In the grander scheme of poverty and hardship that delineated working-class life in the 1930s, this short event in a much larger period of upheaval may not be as memorable. Furthermore, many of those surviving this era were very young at the time; most that I spoke to were children and teenagers during this period. Yet those old enough to work at GM before and after the 1937 strike position it as a key moment in their life history.

For many veterans of the 1937 strike, the ability to resist the dictates of foreman on the floor was one of the greatest gains of unionism.⁴⁰ As Myron Mech describes: “*well, work in General Motors, if you put in six months out of the year you were doing pretty good...if you were liked by your supervisor or foreman, they called you back in November. And if they didn't like you...it's terrible.*” George Nugent started at GM in 1937 in the boys' group. When asked if GM was a good place to work, he had this to say: “*Not before the strike apparently. I heard lots of complaints about favouritism by the foremen. You know, they'd favour some people if they'd do a favour for the foreman, and they'd call them into work and leave the other men out. Because there was no protection you see...they'd call their favourite in and leave you at home.*”⁴¹

Like many autoworkers in Oshawa, Gordon Jackson had deep roots in the industry: “*And my father and uncles worked there too. When they had the first strike, it was quite a do, they brought in the army and everything, they were going to do it, but the union got established, and things improved from that time on. But*

³⁹ Denyse Baillaregeon, *Making Do: Women, Family and Home in Montreal During the Great Depression*, trans. Yvonne Klein (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999); Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Stacey Zembrzycki, “‘There Were Always Men in Our House’: Gender and the Childhood Memories of Working-Class Ukrainians in Depression-Era Canada,” *Labour/Le Travail* 60 (Fall 2007), 77-105; and Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁴⁰ Supervisory relations are a significant theme in the history of the 1937 strike in Oshawa that combines staged photographs with workers' oral histories by Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Oshawa: A History of Local 222 United Autoworkers of America*, (Canadian Labour Congress, 1982-83).

⁴¹ George Nugent, interview with author (17 April 2007).

a lot of struggle."⁴² Alongside issues surrounding supervisors and foreman, the "Sons of Mitches" is another major theme in narratives of the 1937 strike. Workers did not just confront one of the largest corporations in the world, but they also came up against the apparatus of the state. Liberal Ontario premier Mitchell Hepburn's efforts to break the strike and stop the spread of unionism in the province led to the establishment of a "special police force." Comprised largely of volunteers from Queen's Park and University of Toronto students, this militia was brought to Oshawa to police the peaceful strike.⁴³

Gordon and his wife Agnes recount a recurring strain in unionized workers narratives in Oshawa:

Gordon Jackson: *Well I think that it was the focal point of the labour movement to better the workers in the whole, in Canada you might as well say rather than just Oshawa. But it started from here and spread. I think it's improved the workers' lot in a big way. It didn't come free and it didn't come at no cost.*

Agnes Jackson: *The union was needed, wasn't it?*

Gordon Jackson: *It worked out as far as I'm concerned. It must do some good because it's been here for a long time and it's still going.*⁴⁴

The strike and foundation of the union is not only remembered as an important victory for Oshawa, but for all workers. Despite the opposition of company, government and the law, workers overcame these challenges to win a better life for themselves and working people more generally. The union did not win official legal recognition during this strike; however, members of the local in Oshawa continue to resist even this small loss by commemorating the official anniversary of their UAW/CAW local for over 75 years since this 1937 strike.

Interestingly, another large strike at GM in 1949 does not as deeply inform narratives of workers who lived through this event. One reason for this may be that this wildcat strike did not end in victory. In the wake of the Rand Formula's integration into unionized workers' collective agreements in the postwar period, unions slowly became integrated into a legal and parliamentary framework. The

⁴² Gordon Jackson, interview with author, (18 April 2007).

⁴³ Abella, "Oshawa 1937," 112.

⁴⁴ Gordon and Agnes Jackson, interview with author, (18 April 2007).

Rand Formula has been criticized for “bureaucratizing” the union movement.⁴⁵ While it provided unions much-needed security by deducting union dues from workers’ paycheques, it also protected management rights, made unions responsible for policing their own membership, and made striking during periods covered by a collective agreement illegal. Unionized workers at GM had their first experience with the effects of this when 5,300 workers walked off the job in a wildcat strike at 11 a.m. on 26 October 1949.⁴⁶

Complaints over the Rand Formula were rife in the period leading up to the wildcat strike, with reported cases of supervisors using it to threaten employees and secure their compliance.⁴⁷ Despite attempts by the bargaining committee to secure a better deal, they were only able to win the Rand Formula in 1947.⁴⁸ Production at General Motors of Canada was increasingly significantly; the company produced 51,772 vehicles in 1946 and 85,360 in 1947, a number which nearly doubled by 1950.⁴⁹ During this time, there were concerns surfacing that contract negotiations were becoming too long and drawn out, and that the old era of price cuts and speed-ups was resurfacing, as General Motors was still running on its efficiency system.⁵⁰ While slight gains were made in reducing efficiency rates, discontent continued to escalate until workers walked off the job in a wildcat strike. The strike was provoked by four arbitrary dismissals the week before. GM was attempting to increase production from forty to forty-seven cars a day while breaking previous profit records, a familiar story to the workers whose employment extended back to 1937. Three stewards, Dick McEvers, Bill Talbert and Basil Mothersill, refused requests to work faster, and were immediately fired as a result. The fourth dismissal occurred on the same day when committeeman Lloyd Peel was overheard telling a group of men about the arbitrary dismissals; according to people on the scene, the superintendent’s voice boomed across the

⁴⁵ Donald M. Wells, “Origins of Canada’s Wagner Model of Industrial Relations: The United Auto Workers in Canada and the Suppression of ‘Rank and File’ Unionism, 1936-1953,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 20: 2 (Spring 1995), 193-225.

⁴⁶ “GM Strike Stills Oshawa Heartbeat,” *Globe and Mail* (27 October 1949), 10; “24-Hour Pickets Patrol As 5,300 On Strike At G.M.,” *Toronto Star* (27 October 1949), 1.

⁴⁷ *The Oshaworker* (6 October 1948), 1.

⁴⁸ *The Oshaworker* (3 December 1947), 2. At least one steward refused to run for re-election in protest over the Rand agreement. *The Oshaworker* (6 April 1949).

⁴⁹ General Motors, *GM in Canada*, 10.

⁵⁰ *The Oshaworker* (5 January 1949; 19 January 1949; 20 July 1949).

floor: “You’re fired too. Take it from now.”⁵¹ A week before the strike a request to meet with Charles Daley, Minister of Labour for Ontario, was ignored.⁵²

The strike lasted twenty-four days. The International union leadership refused to support the job action as the strike was declared illegal, but the local leadership remained united with the membership. The company eventually agreed to revoke the dismissals and instead levied suspensions on the four men. Two stewards were suspended for one month, one for three months, and committeeman Lloyd Peel received a six-month suspension. The local assumed the responsibility of paying the men’s wages until they were permitted to return to work, and negotiated penalty exemptions for new hires that were still working under probation.⁵³ The vote to return to work received 79 per cent of membership support, but given the heavy penalties that were being levied daily and the lack of international support, their hands were tied.⁵⁴

Although this event does not widely inform collective memory in Oshawa, it does play a foundational role in some individual memories. For some young workers, this would be their first encounter with the union, and a smaller few would begin a lifelong career of union, social and political activism on its picket lines. For Bev McCloskey, who would become one of Oshawa’s most widely known and respected activists, this strike is key to her life history. Indeed, when contributing to a two-page biography required to nominate her for an award acknowledging her many list of accomplishments advocating on behalf of women, workers and seniors, Bev insisted this 1949 strike be given a central place in her life story:

Beverly Gibson began working at General Motors in 1949 when she was 20 years old. A 24-day-long wildcat strike that year was her first experience with the union, where she learnt to play Euchre while picketing at Gate 8 of the North Plant; she has remained a steadfast union and social activist ever since. She’s continuously held a number of elected positions through her years of employment at GM: committeeperson, alternate committeeperson, acting district committeeperson, along with her work on many standing committees. She served on the Executive Board of Local 222 for 17 years as Recording Secretary, the only executive position a predominantly male membership would allow a woman to hold at the

⁵¹ “GM Strike Stills Oshawa Heartbeat,” *Globe and Mail* (27 October 1949), 10.

⁵² “Union Is Ignoring Contract G.M. Claims In Telegrams,” *Toronto Star* (28 October 1949), 3.

⁵³ *The Oshaworker* (21 December 1949), 2.

⁵⁴ “Record Vote Ends Strike At Oshawa,” *Globe and Mail* (21 November 1949), 1.

time. Bev calls it the “best job going,” and keenly points out that it was a position that could also carry much power.⁵⁵

While the 1949 wildcat strike is centrally positioned in Bev’s life, this remains very much an individual memory even though it was an experience shared with thousands of other workers. Yet like so many other working-class narratives in Oshawa, agency is also central to her story. Once again, the agency that working people can exert through a collective effort against employer, state and the law remains central to memory. Further to this, Bev’s experience as a woman, and her ability to exercise power even as she has been disempowered on the basis of her sex, is pivotal to her narrative. Even though Bev was confined to the deeply feminized role of secretary during her long service on her local’s executive, it was important for her empowerment to receive equal acknowledgment. Bev recognizes the importance of language as a source of power through her responsibility not only writing down motions, but making sure all motions passed by the membership were “properly” phrased; few bothered to read these motions as they were officially passed.⁵⁶

GM workers in Oshawa would have to wait until 1955 before they were in a legal strike position again with any local autonomy. Automobile production increased exponentially in this period, sparking major growth in the epicentre of GM’s Canadian operations. Between 1949 and 1951, the city’s population grew from just over 28,000 to more than 41,000, increasing to over 60,000 in the 1960s.⁵⁷ Employment at GM grew by similar leaps and bounds, from an average of 4000 workers in the 1940s, to 14,000 by the mid-1950s; of the 14,000 people on GM’s payroll, over 10,000 were unionized workers. Many of the workers from

⁵⁵ Beverly McCloskey Nomination Package, 23rd Annual Agnes Macphail Award (ONDP Women’s Committee, March 2012), 3. Among Bev McCloskey’s many accomplishments includes her role in starting the first UAW Women’s Committee in Canada, and playing a central role in outlawing sexual discrimination in Ontario workplaces; the activism of this committee led to the inclusion of “sex” in the Ontario Human Rights Code. See Pamela Sugiman, *Labour’s Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Autoworkers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 137-170.

⁵⁶ Beverly McCloskey, telephone conversation with author (6 March 2012).

⁵⁷ Part of this population growth can be attributed to the annexation of East Whitby along with other small neighbouring communities in the postwar period. Population statistics are available in the *Census of Canada*.

the auto parts factories were also organized in UAW Local 222, so that the local had between 15,000 and 20,000 members during the height of automobile production in the city, placing it among the largest union locals in North America. The Oshawa and District Labour Council, an umbrella organization that brought together unionized workers in the area, grew from a membership of 5,000 when it was founded in 1942, to approximately 27,000 members by the 1960s.⁵⁸ Given the sheer dominance of autowork to the local economy, when GM shut down, everyone felt the ripple effects.

Perhaps this is why one of the most recurring themes in people's recollections of Oshawa's past is the 1955 strike at GM. Lasting 148 days, nearly six long months, many position it as a major turning point in their lives. The strike involved 17,000 GM workers in Toronto, St. Catherines, London, Windsor and Oshawa. Earlier efforts to co-ordinate national bargaining had been rocky. The UAW negotiated a 5-year contract in 1950; many workers were unhappy with this settlement, forcing the contract to be reopened in 1953. Local 222 was the only group from the Canadian Region of the UAW to reject the ensuing deal, refusing the negotiated pay increase.⁵⁹ When co-ordinated bargaining was tried again in 1955, a separate bargaining team was established for Local 222 to address the concerns specific to the massive General Motors complex in Oshawa, where well over half of GM's Canadian workforce was employed. They were seeking an improved seniority system, a company-funded health care and welfare plan, greater job security, a union shop, and an apprenticeship program. Another key demand was the guaranteed annual wage since layoffs were an annual event at GM as it shut down to accommodate yearly model changes.⁶⁰ A supplement to their unemployment insurance during these shut-downs was also important for workers and their families so as to guarantee a steadier annual income.

⁵⁸ Minutes of the Oshawa and District Labour Council, currently named the Durham Region Labour Council, from its founding in 1942 until the present, are held at the Steelworkers' Hall in Oshawa. See also 65th Anniversary Committee, *Durham Region Labour Council: 1942-2007 – 65 Years of Labour Activism* (Durham Region Labour Council, 2007).

⁵⁹ Walter Reuther Library (WRL), UAW Toronto Sub-Regional Office, Box 70, "General Motors Sub-Council, 1953-56."

⁶⁰ WRL, UAW Toronto Sub-Regional Office, Box 26, "General Motors, Strike, 1955-56."

A deal was reached on 14 February 1956. Workers won the guaranteed annual wage, stronger pensions, the union shop, an apprenticeship program, and COLA, which accounted for cost of living increases between contracts.⁶¹ Seniority issues in Oshawa were addressed, and the incentive pay system, which increased pay on the basis of how fast a worker could produce, was eliminated. This was a contentious issue in Oshawa, viewed as being unfair to older workers. GM agreed to pay half of a health plan; however, given that Premier Frost and Prime Minister St. Laurent had begun talks on a Canadian health plan, it was speculated that workers were more willing to concede this issue.⁶²

The 1955 strike is remembered as a victory; however, it is not the facts, figures and contractual language that most recount. Positioned as a major turning point in their life histories, people who lived through the strike speak of the difficulties that factory workers and their families faced in making ends meet before 1955, and the deep relief that greater financial stability brought in the years after. Many families clearly faced great hardship while foregoing wages for these six months, and some nearly lost their homes. However, these stories of hardship tend to be minor punctuations in a larger story of how people came together, helping each other to overcome these difficulties. The old library was used as a gathering place where striking workers and their families could go for assistance, creating a buzzing welfare centre downtown.⁶³ Some women emphasize their efforts in collecting home heating materials and other essentials from local business owners, whom they credit with being a critical source of support during this time. Others put their sewing skills to work making or repairing children's clothes and winter coats. During the holiday season, the library was converted to a toyshop where volunteers made toys to ensure that children would still get a gift. Children, it would seem, were largely sheltered from the sacrifices required for a six-month-long strike. Yet it is still raised as an important moment in the city's history, even by those who were very young or not yet born when it took place.

⁶¹ CAW Local 222 Collection, Alf Brisbebois, L. Peel, L. Ryan, "Strike Bulletin: Victory Edition," 110 (14 February 1956).

⁶² "Men Already Working On Assembly Lines At G.M." *Toronto Star* (14 February 1956), 7.

⁶³ "Wonder How Many of 9707 Workers To Return To Jobs," *Toronto Star* (14 February 1956), 7. Of 9707 employed workers, 7000 reported regularly for picket duty; older workers were given relief from picket duty services, while a small minority relocated to other jobs.

This suggests that the strike has become a key event in local collective memory, as stories have been passed from one generation to another.

Indeed, the 1955 strike is so important that responses to questions about different times and events are often brought back to this pivotal moment. When interviewing a small group of women activists from Family Auxiliary 27 of CAW Local 222, I asked them about the difficulties they faced in the 1930s and 1940s. At this point I was not even researching the 1950s, yet their responses quickly moved to the strike which was uppermost in their minds. This is what they had to say:

Betty Rutherford: *Well we didn't have plastic. I mean that card. ... And you bought the necessities. I used to write out a list every payday what I had to do, the light bill, or even go up and pay the union dues. I mean, at that time you walked up all those stairs up above the A&P, and it was just a necessity, you went up there just like you went to the bank to put your house payment in, or whatever... anyhow it was just the two of them in the office and they looked after all the union affairs, like the bookkeeping, and also the Credit Union. Because that's where you joined up for the first Credit Union.*

Betty Love: *I remember, do you remember the old - old, old library on Centre Street, that was just... anyway, what they did during that big strike, they got people to bring clothes and... [was that in 1955?]... I think so, I can't remember now, but I know Mom being President [of the union auxiliary], she was in the organization to do that, and I would go down and help and one time I saw this coat and I said, "you know Mom, if I took that coat and turned it inside out, I can make Randy a coat out of that. And she said, "you think you can make a coat?" And I says, "yeah, if I can use your sewing machine," and she had one of these foot machines. I did! I took that coat home and he had a winter coat that winter. And a lot of people did that!*

Anne Black and Betty Rutherford: *Oh, yeah.*

Betty Love: *Like you use the inside of the coat, because the outside would be a little worn or whatever, but the inside was brand new. And you just put a little, buy a cheap piece of material and put the lining in.*

Interestingly, the discussion of the strike and clothes elicited other memories that stitched together discussion of the economic hardship associated with the strike with reflections on the current family economy:

Betty Rutherford: *That's how all my clothes were made when I was a kid on the farm. My mother made all my clothes.*

Betty Love: *So many things you could do, that if you really needed to do it, you'd find a way.*

Anne Black: *Or they'd give vouchers when the long, big strike, I think it was...*

Betty Rutherford: *That was '55.*

Anne Black: *Yeah, and I know you'd have to go to a certain store, and for meat at least, that's the main thing for me, and when I think of everything, gee. And same when my little boy Mickey was in the hospital, in and out. Every four days I had no money because the strike was long. The...drugstore would bring special from Toronto, special milk and different medication and boy when that boy brought it with the bicycle I thought, I wish a had a quarter to give him a tip, you know. When I think, it was really hard, mortgage, you know, but anyway, we managed. We went through everything. Too bad our kids, the younger ones, but it's going to come to that, I would say. Reading in the paper, it's...*

Betty Rutherford: *We were brought up different though.*

Anne Black: *That's right.*

Betty Love: *We were brought up thrifty. That's what I always said.*

Betty Rutherford: *The kids of today, they, it's not their fault, I mean, because they've been handed everything.*

Betty Love: *Well we never had it so we give it to them.*

Betty Rutherford: *Yeah, that's right.*⁶⁴

Although the strike is associated with hardship in these working-class memories, it can also be linked to forms of nostalgia, at least for families that survived and persevered through these hard times.

Another interview also revealed how the strike became a central part of memory, even for those who did not directly participate. Jackie Finn was a child during the 1955 strike; she lived well north of Oshawa on a farm, and her father worked at the tannery rather than GM. She would go on to marry a GM worker when she came of age. But the 1955 strike is still central to her narrative. When I asked if her father ever complained about his job at home, or talked about how hard it was, she had this to say:

It wasn't easy, but he, I guess he felt, well, in order to feed the family, he didn't have any choice. But my father wasn't a complainer. My father was very generous and I remember in 1955 with a lot of our relatives all worked in General Motors, and they were out six months, I believe. See, that didn't really twig me because we didn't, dad didn't work there. But I do know the history of it, by reading the history, but we didn't actually live that part, and us, we were still on the farm then, and my father had raised pigs and things, so he was bringing a lot of pork into the relatives, plus potatoes and vegetables and everything, so Dad was very generous that way that he made sure that he brought the stuff in and helped out the relatives that were on strike at GM. I remember that but to tell you that I knew that there were people on strike at that time, no, I wouldn't have realized that's what it was all about. It was just that Dad was helping them out. But today now, as I got older, then I realized, and when I heard about the six month strike at General Motors, and all that then yes, then I

⁶⁴ Anne Black, Betty Love and Betty Rutherford, interview with author (14 May 2007).

*pieced it all together. When you're a little kid like that, and he's taking stuff in, and I would be with him maybe and come into Oshawa – I was visiting and having fun seeing some cousins and things, so I really didn't know that, say, my uncles were on strike at GM.*⁶⁵

Even though Jackie was not directly connected to this event, it still deeply informs her memory. Strikes are portrayed by interviewees as a clear solution to economic difficulties and dissatisfaction with the job, and again, direct collective action is central to overcoming oppression. Strikes more generally are remembered fondly as positive events, not only by the many in the city who have childhood memories of joining their father on the picket line. Strikes also serve to empower the historical working-class actors in these stories. Strikes at the tannery or other smaller workplaces in Oshawa were not as big an event as when General Motors was shut down. They were not experienced through such a large collective, and so do not inform individual or collective memory as deeply. Yet strikes do not have to be large to inspire collective memory.

Another strike that has become almost mythic in Oshawa is the 1966 strike at the Oshawa Times, the city's major newspaper historically. Many did not directly experience the material hardships caused by this strike, and so it does not as deeply inform many life stories. Yet it is still often named as an important historical event. In many respects, this strike could not be more radically different from the '55 strike at GM. Involving 34 members of the Oshawa unit of the Toronto Newspaper Guild, the strike lasted 2 weeks. The main issues in this strike surrounded pay, job security, union security, and automation in the workplace.⁶⁶ However, when the employer won an injunction limiting pickets to 10 people, the strike at the Oshawa Times immediately became a highly contested site. Injunctions had become an increasingly common management tool to limit the power of striking workers, and judges were showing an increasing willingness to award them.⁶⁷ According to accounts of the time, this was one of the first major challenges to this. When the sheriff arrived to present the injunction to striking

⁶⁵ Jackie Finn, interview with author (22 March 2011).

⁶⁶ "Non-Stop Oshawa Talks Enter Second Full Day," *Toronto Star* (10 February 1966), 1.

⁶⁷ On the fight against injunctions and militancy in the 1960s, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

workers, he was greeted by a crowd of approximately 200 people. He was unable to finish reading it aloud as he was jeered and pelted with snowballs, while a woman from the crowd tried to rip the injunction from his hands, tearing off the cover and throwing it in the snow.⁶⁸ Each day thereafter, between 150 and 200 people swelled the picket lines at the Times, even though the legal limit had been set at 10 people. Local police were unable to enforce the injunction. Other workers at the Times refused to cross the picket lines even though their collective agreements required them to do so, effectively shutting the newspaper down for the duration of the strike.

These events garnered wide media coverage, launching a public debate over the use of injunctions in workplace disputes. It also became a foundational moment in a wider challenge that sprang up against limits on workers' right to strike. Granted, not everyone directly participated in this event; rather, a "militant minority" led the charge.⁶⁹ Did they carry the support of what might be called the silent majority? It is difficult to know. In the following elections, however, the majority of voters in Oshawa supported strong advocates of workers' rights at the polls amid a much larger global context of protest, resistance and revolt. Provincially, Oshawa had long been a CCF, and later, NDP stronghold. Progressive Conservative candidate Albert Walker had won the riding in 1963, but was defeated after his first term by NDP candidate Cliff Pilkey, president of the Oshawa and District Labour Council, who had played a leading and very public role in challenging the use of injunctions. On the federal scene, in 1968, a young political science professor at York University by the name of Ed Broadbent defeated long-time Conservative MP Michael Starr, the first Ukrainian-Canadian elected to Parliament, by 15 votes.⁷⁰

Of course, there are many other events beyond strikes that inform public memory. Important sites of memory are another recurring theme when people share their life histories. One such cultural institution in the city is the Oshawa Civic Auditorium. When its arena burnt to the ground in 1953, the city lost its

⁶⁸ "150 Oshawa Pickets Defy Court's Order," *Toronto Star* (3 February 1966), 1.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of how a "militant minority" of activists in British Columbia were successful in maintaining a left tradition through the Cold War era, see Ben Isitt, *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948-1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁷⁰ "Starr Kills Goodman's Order for Recount," *The Toronto Star* (23 July 1968), 1.

beloved hockey team, the Oshawa Generals. The Civic was built to replace it, and bring the Gens back to Oshawa. I've often been proudly told that the workers built the Civic through regular voluntary payroll deductions.⁷¹ Recently, the Civic has been replaced by the newly constructed, taxpayer-funded General Motors Centre. People could also remake space in the city to suit their own needs, interests and desires. Camp Samac was intended to be used primarily for the Boy Scouts movement; however, residents in the city continued to use it as a public park. For example, it became a favourite hangout for young couples looking for a private place to enact courtship rituals.⁷²

Another important theme that arises in oral histories is generational difference, and the ways in which understandings of the past can erode with the passage of time. I have frequently heard that the younger generations take many of the gains that were won by working people for granted, lacking an appreciation of how hard people fought for these. Many of the gains made in collective bargaining eventually passed into labour law. Indeed, organized labour could be a potent lobbying force in seeking to expand workers' rights more generally. Overtime pay, minimum wage laws, paid vacations, pensions, workers' compensation, health and safety legislation, public healthcare, affordable housing, maternity leave – many of these are hard-won gains of the twentieth century that organized labour has championed. What has been done can also be undone. Improvements to living and working standards that have been won can also be lost. History has been no linear march on a one-way path towards progress. Instead it has been marked by ebbs and flows, victories and losses; sometimes one step forward has been followed by two steps back.

Conclusion

Where are the public sites of commemoration in Oshawa to the strikes I have described, as well as the other important moments for working people in the city's long and storied history? Sadly, they are few and far between, largely hidden in

⁷¹ "Community Involvement," *CAW Local 222 50th Anniversary Book* (Oshawa: CAW Local 222, 1987).

⁷² Robert Holden, *Camp Samac History* (Oshawa District Council: Scouts Canada, 1996), 97-100.

the city's public script.⁷³ Each passing generation becomes further removed from this vibrant history. A powerful rhetoric has gained increasing legitimacy in recent decades. As corporations have relocated production facilities to areas with weak labour and environmental standards, far too many have joined in pointing the finger at so-called 'greedy' unions that somehow 'forced' this corporate exile. Meanwhile, corporate leaders who have chosen to maximize profits by paying the cheapest possible labour costs have somehow emerged on the "right" side of history. When did the ruling classes convince us that their interests were somehow our interests? The memory of history is clearly contested in class terms, though the ability to name, mark out, commemorate and thus 'document' history has been utilized primarily by those with the most power, as this local study shows.

I have discussed a very small piece of this much larger puzzle here, but I think some important lessons from the past can be drawn for our present and future. Private philanthropy, along with the privatization and corporate naming of public space, has continued unchecked in our times. This can carry deep political implications, often reflecting wealth, power and privilege, rather than a fair and balanced view of the historical record. Our past can and should better equip us to make more informed decisions about our present and future circumstances. Sites of commemoration can have a powerful effect on shaping public memory.

Additionally, we can learn a lot from our elders if we are willing to sit down and listen. Their stories can offer important counter-narratives to official public histories, sometimes offering alternate views of the past. These histories are equally legitimate. A rich collection of stories continues to inform collective memory as these are passed orally from generation to generation, but these can fade with the passage of time. These stories ought to be preserved so we can continue to benefit from the lessons they offer. Sam McLaughlin's name continues to loom large over the city of Oshawa, but the stories of working people offer important alternate versions of history. Space in our cities ought to be made for commemorating and remembering these stories of our past.

⁷³ For example, Ed Broadbent and longtime Local 222 President Abe Taylor both have "stars" on Oshawa's downtown sidewalks; however, these monuments to Oshawa's working-class history are usually paired alongside industrialists or members of its cultural elite.