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THE USE OF SELECTED QUANTIFIABLE
SOURCES IN CANADIAN URBAN HISTORY

Gilbert A. Stelter

Historians who attempt to study urban development in any systematic manner are faced with the necessity not only of learning new techniques, but of using previously neglected sources. Traditional literary sources are either inadequate or do not exist for dealing with questions involving social structure and mobility or the changing spatial distribution of groups within cities. This is especially true when one studies the development of working-class sections of a city whose residents were not particularly articulate in the middle class sense. The problem is further compounded if one deals with urban development in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries, for the manuscript census after 1871 simply is not open to researchers.

A wealth of material useful for social history is readily available, however, including tax assessment rolls, city directories, school and parish registers, deeds, and wills. The mass of data existing in these sources is almost overwhelming but a quantitative approach in which data is coded for analysis by a computer makes the data manageable.

Several studies of Canadian cities have made extensive use of these sources. In his Victorian Toronto, Peter Goheen sampled the

assessment rolls in each decade, using one name from each page of the rolls, which amounted to about one household in fifteen.¹ The "Hamilton Project", directed by Michael Katz at OISE in Toronto, is using the assessment rolls in a more comprehensive manner, examining every individual at four intervals in each decade. Katz is also using other sources, particularly the manuscript census.²

As an example of the use of some of these sources, I wish to outline briefly a current project of mine based essentially on assessment rolls. Together with some assistants, I am analyzing the development of two working class sections of Sudbury, Ontario--the Flour Mill section, which is predominantly French Canadian, and the Donovan section, which has a Slavic orientation. This project is part of a larger, long-term study of the nature of society in single enterprise, company towns in Canada. Last winter, we did a preliminary survey of the Flour Mill section (between the years 1911 and 1941) which has provided useful guidelines for the present project.

The amount of information available from assessment rolls varies from city to city and even from year to year in the same city. In the Sudbury rolls the information usually includes the name of the head of the household, the spouse's name, the street and street number, the lot

number, occupation (usually by general category such as carpenter, miner, teacher, lawyer), the age of the assessed person, citizenship status, number of children 5-16, number of children 5-21, number of residents of the household, religion (Catholic or Protestant), public or separate school supporter, owner or tenant, the value of land and of buildings. This information can be supplemented by city directories, although these are far less comprehensive and tend to miss a sizeable portion of the population, especially in the working-class sections.³ Information, however, is usually given on the specific location of work which can be correlated with the general occupational category in the assessment rolls.

We have decided to examine the available data by decade, dealing only with the census years, to enable us to compare the social characteristics of the particular sections with those of the city as a whole in the published census. Of the many questions that could be dealt with on the basis of the available data, we are presently concentrating on the following four:

1. Ethnicity. Our sources do not give birth place or indicate the language spoken, but we are attempting to determine ethnicity on the basis of the names. We have found it necessary to consult with local residents in this regard and have found many cases of persons with French

Canadian names who have lost their mother tongue, and also of persons with English-sounding names who are actually French Canadians. In the future, we intend to examine parish and school records which will give us more definite evidence of ethnicity. In our preliminary study we have found that the percentage of French Canadians in the Flour Mill section rose from 73% to 78%, whereas the French Canadian percentage of the city's population usually was between 33% and 35%. This intensity of residential clustering by ethnicity has several implications. In his Philadelphia study, Sam Warner suggests that clustering is significant for unionism, for ward political machines, and for the services of schools, churches, and other social institutions.⁴ In Sudbury, it has led to a ghetto-like protection against the prevailing English culture. This clustering appears to have made viable the French language churches, schools, and commercial establishments which have been at the core of French Canadian culture and have given the section its particular identity.

2. Occupational structure. Our classification of occupations has followed that in the published census for 1931 and 1941. A general trend which has become obvious in our preliminary work is a general decline of the level of occupations in the

Flour Mill. What began as a suburb around 1911, with an average mix of occupations (average for Sudbury, that is), slowly declined to a downtown, working-class section by 1941. Most professional and middle class occupations had disappeared. We expected to find a high proportion of miners in the Flour Mill but the proportion (25% of the labor force in 1941, for example) was similar to that in the city as a whole. On the other hand, in the Slavic-oriented Donovan, immediately adjacent geographically, 59% of the labor force was engaged in mining. The reasons for this difference are not yet fully understood but could involve either a French Canadian preference for occupations other than mining, or perhaps a company policy which tends to exclude them.

A related question is the group organization of work and the relationship of work place and residence. The trend in Sudbury, as in all urban centres, is toward larger units of work. The work group may become a source of discipline, loyalty, and culture in its own right, with particular implications for unionism in Sudbury. The residents of the Flour Mill, in contrast to those in the Donovan, preferred to work in small units within their own section and may not have been as influenced by unionism as were other ethnic groups elsewhere in the city.

Another related question is that of class, for occupation is one element of class distinction. Social mobility appears to have been low, but as Stephen Thernstrom found in a study of a working class population,⁵ some economic mobility was evident as a substantial number of workers ended up owning several houses.

3. Persistence. We have defined this as the proportion of the population remaining in a section after a given time, in this case a decade. The persistence rates for the Flour Mill appear to be high in comparison to other communities which have been studied⁶--17.7% for the decade 1921-31 and 24% for 1931-41. Ethnicity and home ownership were the best indicators of persistence; French Canadian home owners were most likely to stay. Those of other ethnic groups usually remained in the Flour Mill only a short time.

We have begun to study those who left the Flour Mill, particularly if they moved to another section of the city. French Canadians almost invariably went to another French Canadian section, their choice depending on whether they were moving up or down the social scale.

4. Housing and density. The data in the early Sudbury assessment rolls gives only the value of the home, not its size or type of construction. This type of information would be available only from an analysis of

deeds as Sam Warner did for his study of Boston.⁷ Several conclusions are possible, however. The density of the population increased dramatically, with an increase in the number of families in the same house. The percentage of tenancy increased as did the percentage of absentee owners. The value of homes did not increase at the same rate as for the city as a whole.

As to method, one conclusion we have definitely come to is that the quantitative approach and the use of some of the sources mentioned is certainly no short cut to historical research. A statistician and a programmer associated with the project have saved us a great deal of time in designing the program and in analyzing the results. Student assistants, whose primary responsibility is transferring the raw data into standard form on the data sheets, have found Edward Shorter's The Historian and the Computer an invaluable manual.⁸ Perhaps the only justification for the extra time involved is that we feel that our approach will give us more precise information than could be gained by impressionistic methods. Hopefully, our final statistics will provide an essential background for a further study of government and politics, reform, business organization, and other aspects of urban life in the communities we are studying.

¹Victorian Toronto, 1850 to 1900: Pattern and Process of Growth (Chicago, 1970).

²The "Hamilton Project": An Interim Report. 2 vols. (Toronto, 1969 and 1970).

³Peter Knights, "City Directories as Aids to Ante-Bellum Urban Studies: A Research Note", Historical Methods Newsletter, 2 (Sept., 1969), 1-10.

⁴The Private City, Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth (Philadelphia, 1968).

⁵Poverty and Progress, Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

⁶See articles by Griffen and Knights in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, Nineteenth Century Cities, Essays in the New Urban History (New Haven, 1969).

⁷Streetcar Suburbs, the Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900 (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

⁸The Historian and the Computer, A Practical Guide (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971).