

The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour, An Exhibit at: The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC)

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Exhibit Reviews

The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour
An Exhibit at: The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC)

Michael Mercier, McMaster University

The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC), based in Hamilton, Ontario and housed in the city's old Customs House (built in 1860), was officially opened in November, 1996. The only museum of its kind in Canada, and one of only two in North America, OWAHC aims to preserve and display the heritage of Ontario's workers and their unions through the development of permanent, temporary and travelling exhibits. These exhibits reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of Ontario's workers and emphasize the role of women in labour history. OWAHC demonstrates to residents of Hamilton and Ontario the heritage of labourers and the labour movement in Ontario. Hamilton was chosen as the home of the centre because of its strong connections, both past and present, to organized labour.

OWAHC's activities and contributions to the community are varied. It develops and hosts exhibitions about work and working-class life; develops educational programmes for children and youth; supports community-based labour history projects; preserves archival documents, photographs and records of unions, workers and working-class life; publishes a bi-annual newsletter (*Worklines*); organizes self-guided walking tours of Hamilton's working-class communities; and maintains the only Canadian public resource centre focussing on labour and labour history.

"The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour," a recent OWAHC exhibit, is an excellent example of an inter-disciplinary approach to local history. Displayed from July to October, 1997, it was curated by Nancy Bouchier and Ken Cruickshank of McMaster University and provided a window into the various histories of Hamilton Harbour: urban, environmental, social, industrial/labour and economic. Through a detailed account of the uses of Burlington Bay (later Hamilton Harbour) from the early days of European settlement through to the present day, this exhibit introduced visitors to the historical themes and issues relating to an important element in Hamilton's development. The curators made use of a variety of sources ranging from archival photographs and records, to local government records, reports and newspaper clippings, and even interviews with local residents, about their memories of Hamilton Harbour. In so doing, this exhibit highlighted some of the trade-offs that cities must face between economic growth and environmental degradation while, at the same time, incorporating a class analysis of the impact of pollution on urban life.

The exhibit, housed in the main gallery of OWAHC's Customs House, was both visually and intellectually stimulating. Using mostly text and enlarged photographs mounted on the gallery walls, the curators effectively re-created the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bay. A few physical artifacts, such as an early twentieth-century power boat, were also included, resulting in an appealing exhibit. Furthermore, the curators' choice of an uncomplicated presentation allowed for the focus

to centre on the people and places of the Bay rather than on the design of the display itself.

"The People and the Bay" is typical of the value and quality of the material produced by OWAHC. It underlined the dual role that Burlington Bay played both for the people of Hamilton as a recreational facility and as a source for economic growth and viability, particularly through industrial production. In order to highlight this dynamic relationship the organizers identified five regions around Burlington Bay on the basis of their recreational and/or economic characteristics. The exhibit showed each area in terms of its dual economic/recreational functions and the efforts of conservationists, politicians and local community groups to clean them up.

These five areas were the Eastern Inlets, the Northenders' Waterfront, Wabasso Park, Brant Inlet, and the Beach Strip. Each successive generation of Hamiltonians has created its own visions and perceptions of the Bay and many of these were portrayed in the five regions and the related activities chosen by the curators for this exhibit. All of these visions, however, have been developed in the face of urban and industrial pollution. Through much of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the South Shore of Hamilton Harbour, the area now densely occupied by heavy industry, was characterized by a series of marshy inlets that were home to a wide variety of plants, animals, fish and birds. By 1912, the City of Hamilton and the newly formed Hamilton Harbour Commission had designated this area as an ideal location for a concentration of heavy industry because of its central location within Hamilton, and its close proximity to the protected harbour and its reliable water source. The hope was that by locating industry in one section of the waterfront, the rest of the area could be left for recreational and residential uses. Through the 1910s and 1920s the natural inlets of this area were filled in to provide more land for industry. The impact on the environment of the Bay was felt immediately. By the mid-1920s, much of the Hamilton side of the Bay was unusable by residents for fishing, boating, swimming or other recreational activities because of the polluted water. However, not all pollution was the result of industrial development and neglect: sewage and garbage, as well as the poor natural flushing action of the Bay, also contributed to the problem.

A working-class area known as Hamilton's North End fronted the Bay to the west of the industrial plants where many of the labourers worked. Residents used the Bay both for recreation and to supplement their meals. For many decades, families swam off old piers, abandoned wharves, and wrecks. However, public health officials soon declared these as unsafe and unhealthy for children and so campaigned for the development of safer and supervised beaches. In 1915, Lansdowne Park was built in an attempt to address these safety and health con-

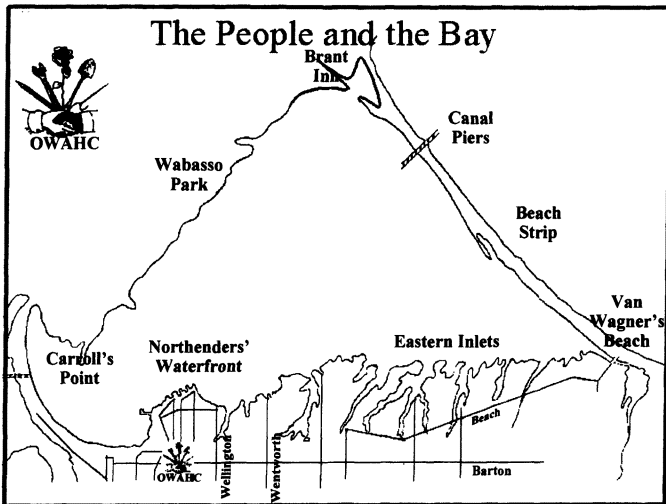


Figure 1: Map of Hamilton Harbour. Source: Courtesy of OWAHC.

cerns, but was subsequently closed due to the unsanitary condition of the water. An excerpt from an article in the *Hamilton Spectator* on April 13, 1926 summed up the problem; "Dr. Roberts, Medical Officer of Health, told the Board of Control that Lansdowne Park Beach 'is not fit for animals to bathe in.' Controller Jutten objected to singling it out as water is just as foul elsewhere." Regardless of these concerns, this was the only area of the Bay that most working-class families could afford to use for recreational purposes and so they had little choice but to swim there.

The North Shore of Burlington Bay, also known as Wabasso Park (later La Salle Park) was a popular area for swimmers from Hamilton as early as the 1860s. As pollution problems, resulting from garbage, sewage and industrial wastes made the South Shore of the Bay undesirable for bathing, Wabasso Park's popularity rose among those who could afford the trip across the Bay. In the 1920s, Hamilton City Council invested in recreational facilities at Wabasso Park and provided a ferry service. This did not solve Hamilton's swimming problems because many working-class families still could not afford to travel across to Wabasso Park and so had to make do with the closer and more polluted shores. In any case, by the mid-1940s the public health authorities also closed Wabasso Park to swimming because of the polluted waters, just as the South Shore beaches had been closed twenty years earlier.

The most exclusive area of the Bay, identified as Brant Inlet (present-day Burlington), was the area least touched by the pollution of the Harbour. Located in this area were exclusive hotels, resorts and musical 'clubs' which during the big band era played host to such popular stars as Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald. Expensive excursion steamer trips from Hamilton

and Toronto often included an evening of dinner and music at Brant Inlet. However, this area was visited almost exclusively by the wealthy. Others made use of the area by enjoying the atmosphere and music from outside the clubs and restaurants.

The eastern edge of Burlington Bay is separated from the cleaner waters of Lake Ontario by a narrow strip of land known as the Beach Strip. With the arrival of the railway in the 1870s, hotels, resorts and cottages, owned by the wealthiest Hamilton residents, were built on the Lake Ontario side of this strip. Before the Bay became too polluted, people using this area for recreation had the choice of the cooler waters of the lake or the warmer waters of the Bay. By the turn of the century, Hamiltonians of more modest means were able to venture to the Beach Strip by street railway. Many of Hamilton's working class could rarely afford such a trip unless sponsored by a company, church or labour union on the occasion of a summer picnic. By the 1920s, when the Harbour was at its most polluted, urban reformers were concerned that working-class children were swimming in the dirty Harbour water. In response, City Council provided free streetcar rides to the Beach. This allowed a cross-section of Hamilton's social classes to make use of this formerly exclusive area.

Woven through the portrayal of the five distinct regions of the Bay are several themes. The impact of industrial and urban pollution on the Bay and the inequalities in access to the cleanest areas were the main ones. The curators also explored the efforts to "clean up" the Bay from both environmental and moral perspectives in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the homes, boat houses and wharves along the South Shore were taken down because the elite perceived them to be structurally unsound, eyesores, and hang-outs for gamblers and others involved in 'immoral' activities. Similarly, issues regarding 'proper' attire, particularly for women, were of particular concern to reformers throughout the twentieth century and added an interesting dimension to the exhibit's focus on the area's "environment."

During the era when the water of the Bay was clean, boating and fishing were activities that led to considerable conflict between the social classes. Boating, in particular, was an exclusive activity of the wealthy. Labourers, certain immigrant groups, and women were barred from amateur boating competitions and from joining elite sporting clubs. Fishing, too, became a contentious issue in this period. Throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, labourers were faced with months of unemployment during the winter. In the years when the water was not polluted, they often survived by spearing fish through the ice on the Bay. The elite called for a ban of this activity because it was seen as "unsportsmanlike", ignoring the reality that many labourers were not fishing for sport but rather for food. Not surprisingly, by the 1920s, as the water became more and more polluted, the labourers often aligned themselves with the conservationists in order to protect the fish in the Bay.

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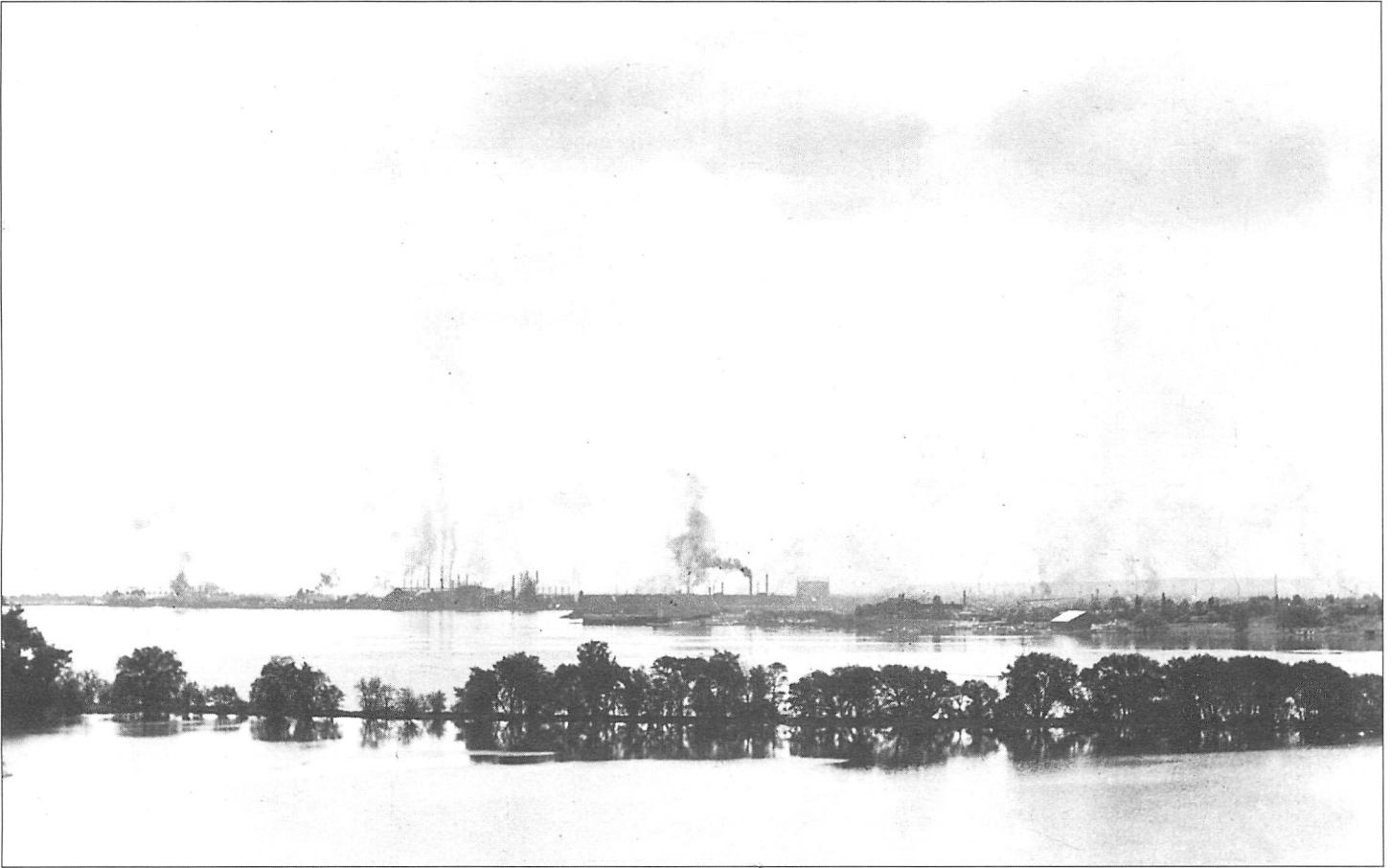


Figure 2: Hamilton Harbour, 1946. Looking southeast across the barbour from near Carroll's Point towards the industrial north end of Hamilton. Source: Photograph courtesy of J. Morris and the Hamilton Public Library Special Collections.

This exhibit emphasized some of the most prevalent issues that cities, and particularly industrial cities like Hamilton, faced in the early decades of this century. Needing to stimulate their economy, Hamilton developed an industrial base at the expense of the environmental conditions of the waterfront. Making acceptable trade-offs between economic growth and environmental degradation has been one of the most difficult challenges facing twentieth-century cities. Similarly, inequalities between the social classes, so carefully portrayed in this exhibit, are characteristic of the mandate and purpose of OWAHC, but have been unfortunately downplayed in much

recent published urban history. Exemplifying these two themes, "The People and the Bay" successfully dealt with issues of local and more general significance.

A short summary of the exhibit, including many of the photographs and anecdotes is available from OWAHC. For more information about OWAHC, write to: Ontario Workers Arts & Heritage Centre, P.O. Box 83034, Jamesville Station, Hamilton, Ontario, L8L 8E8. Visit them at: 51 Stuart Street, Hamilton, Ontario, (905) 522-3003 or on the internet at: <http://www.web.net/~owahc> and owahc@web.net