The Lowell Folklife Project

by Doug DeNatale

Lowell, Massachusetts, was the nation's first planned industrial city. Established in the 1820s as a textile manufacturing center, Lowell was viewed as an experiment in merging industrial production with humanistic values. The mills provided supervised boarding houses for female workers and promoted various cultural activities.

The period of the boarding house system was actually very short, and by the 1840s Irish immigrants were replacing Yankee farm women in the mills. Because the Irish lived in their own settlement, known as "The Acre," the mill companies no longer had total control over their workers' lives. In the remaining decades of the century, Lowell experienced a classic pattern of waves of immigration, as the Irish were followed by French Canadians, Greeks, Portuguese, Poles and a host of other nationalities.

By the 1920s Lowell was a city of 100,000. But with the twenties came the Great Depression and the failure of the city's textile industry. Immigration ceased, the factories decayed and the population slowly declined in an economic collapse so great that it lingered until the 1970s.

Within the last ten years Lowell experienced dramatic new economic and social development. The city has benefited directly from the region's transformation into a high technology center and is the corporate home to Wang Laboratories. A parallel redevelopment was born of the city's past, when the city was selected as the site of State Heritage and National Historical Parks to present the history of the nation's industrial development. An ongoing historic preservation effort has largely restored Lowell's downtown area to its 19th-century appearance.

With new job opportunities the city is once again attractive to further immigration. Its older communities have been joined by new groups of Portuguese, Puerto Rican and Cambodian immigrants, but, not surprisingly, the cross-currents of these developments have brought both benefits and new conflicts. The population influx has severely strained the city's aging housing stock, while rapidly rising property values have brought increased housing costs. The cultural impact of such new groups as the Cambodians – now more than ten percent of the city population – has placed new demands on schools and city services. This background of dynamic change and cultural ferment has been the setting for the Lowell Folklife Project, a year-long effort by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress to document Lowell's contemporary expressive culture.* The project was initiated by the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, a federal agency charged "to tell the human story of the Industrial Revolution in a 19th century setting by encouraging cultural expression."

As an organizing principle the project focused on the issue of social space – how people find a place for themselves in the city and how their forms of expression, in turn, create the changing landscape of the city. From this standpoint, ethnic identity is one of the dimensions through which group expression is formed. While this approach broadened the range of expression under consideration, it provided a coherent frame for our investigation.

Lowell is a compact city, where the effects of cultural expression on the urban landscape are readily visible. It furnishes many eloquent examples of the various processes through which group and individual identity produce a sense of place. One such process is the creation of individual spaces in yards and neighborhoods. These can be highly idiosyncratic or testaments to community identity; intensely private or extremely public. Even the most visible space of Lowell – the site of the city hall – can serve as a private landscape, as has happened with the city hall clocktower. The man who has wound the clock for the past thirty years has declared the space, "The Wally Burns Clock Tower." As Burns explains, "I figured that everybody else had something named after them around here, so I should too." The memory garden constructed by Manuel Figueira on a piece of waste land next to his home represents another mode of individual expression. During the 1960s his neighborhood blossomed, as a new wave of Portuguese immigrants acquired and rehabilitated the decaying homes of the area. But it was also threatened by a proposed highway. As Figueira recounted, the neighborhood was saved through a referendum:

> It was thanks to the registered voters all over the city. See, there was a lot of people . . . had just come from across, they had their homes, paid their taxes, but they couldn't vote. . . . That's why I say it took the people, the good people all over the city to help us.

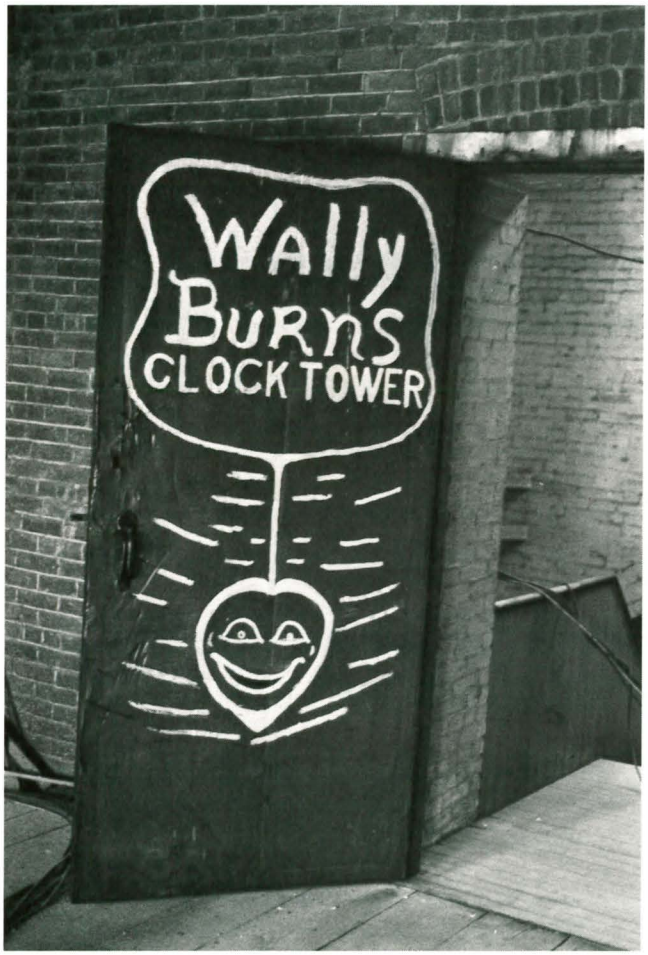
In response, Figueira planted his rose garden as a personal memorial.

(* The professional folklorists of the project's field team were Michael Bell, Barbara Fertig, Mario Montaño, Martha Norkunas, Tom Rankin, David Taylor and Eleanor Wachs. Funding for the project was provided by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, the Massachusetts Council for the Arts and Humanities and the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission.)

> I have something representing the South End and the people that helped us to save my home and the school and the homes of the people of the South End – the roses. . . . I'm proud of it, they can't call this a slum no more. And I'm so proud I lived to be able to do it – and I was eighty-years-old when I started.

Another kind of urban reconstruction occurs when a group of newcomers try to recover an environment they have lost. As Lowell's new Cambodian community grew rapidly, so did the concern that a crucial link was missing for the refugees. Narong Hull related:

> The people survive, but they still feel like they need one more thing, like a man need to have two hand to work together . . . beside working, getting money buy food, house for living, they need a spirit . . . to support their own mind. . . . especially old people who cannot adapt American life, and they still think about their own way of living, they feel alone to go outside, they feel afraid to go outside. . . . So, I need to help them for us to establish a Buddhist community, bring them together, chanting a Buddhist song, and cook Cambodian food, dress Cambodian dress. And they feel very comfortable, they feel, 'This is the way I want it'.



Wally Burns, who has wound the clock at Lowell's City Hall for more than thirty years, immortalized his work with this decorative painting on the door to the clocktower. Photo by Doug DeNatale

Within three short years the Cambodian community raised enough money to acquire a former Knights of Columbus hall in a residential area. While this answered their spiritual needs, it raised anxieties among the neighborhood's residents, bewildered by the Buddhist religion. As Theresa Theobald of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association recounts, the Cambodian community responded by holding a neighborhood celebration:

> They invited people in the neighborhood, some of the religious leaders from churches that were close by. And many people came, and many people made speeches, and said, 'We welcome you.' . . . You know, when something different moves into a neighborhood, there's always questions. And this was a great idea, because they could see now what it was all about. And if you know that something's different, but you know how it's different, you're not as frightened of it, and you don't complain as much.

At times a group might make an outright claim to an area through expressive means. In the Puerto Rican community of Lowell, Catholic parishioners, angered by the negative stereotypes of crime and drug abuse attached to their community, have chosen to punctuate the religious year with a number of processions declaring their faith. Father James Fee explained:

> We walked through those parts of town that are the most poor, and where you find the problems of poor housing, drugs, prostitutes, and, in general, the problem of poverty. Most of our parishioners live in this area, so it was a big opportunity to give people evidence of our faith and to confront people without any faith.

Expressive forms can also link groups in separate communities. A number of the groups that have participated in the project have formed a constellation of ties with other cities, ties sustained through shared events. A

Buddist monks at Lowell's Traratanaram Temple lead chanting during the Veneration of Ancestors ceremony. Photo by John Lueders-Booth

striking example is found in the Carnaval celebration of the Portuguese community. Traveling troupes of musicians and dancers from cities such as Lowell, Lawrence and New Bedford make a three-day circuit of all the Portuguese social clubs, religious societies and church halls in the region. There they perform short dramas that humorously portray some aspect of the group's relationship with their home communities.

The Lowell Folklife Project has been fortunate in documenting a dynamic period in the city's evolution. With the recorded testimony of individuals belonging to the city's older communities, a composite image of the

Adolescents chosen from the congregation of Lowell's Oblate Hispanic Mission lead a Good Friday procession through the streets of "The Acre" neighborhood. Photo by John Lueders-Booth

city's cultural landscape over time has begun to emerge. A follow-up project on cultural mapping is building on the project's research to make a further assessment of the effects of cultural processes on neighborhood identity. The findings from the current research have been placed in the Library of Congress and in Lowell's Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center and will be published by the American Folklife Center.

Doug DeNatale is the Project Coordinator of the Lowell Folklife Project. He received his doctorate in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985 and has conducted research, produced folklife exhibits and given presentations in Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Hampshire and New York State.

Suggested reading

Dublin, Thomas. *Women At Work: The Transformation of Work and Commmunity in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

Eno, Arthur L., ed. *Cotton Was King: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts.* Lowell: Lowell Historical Society, 1976.

Higgins, James and Joan Ross. *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell.* Lowell: Mill Town Graphics, 1986.

Mitchell, Brian C. *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-61.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Yi Fu Tuan. *Topophilia.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974.