

Unit 3: Video 3 Transcript

Q: Why is Hamilton important?

A: One of the most interesting industrial towns that became a bustling industrial city was Hamilton, Ontario at the head of Lake Ontario. And its experience, I think, was both unique but also representative of a number of other towns. It had a very aggressive business class that pursued industries and worked together to found the ones they didn't have. They founded a bank. They founded some textile industries. They founded a blast furnace company in the 1890's which became the core of Steel Company of Canada, Stelco in later years. And they drew together a group of highly skilled workers in the late 19th century and created a very successful industrial community. They also became representative of a new trend by the turn of the 20th century that was moving industry in new directions and directions that I and some other historians have taken to calling a Second Industrial Revolution. The decision to start a blast furnace company that would become the mass production steel industry is one very good example of how in this period, whole new industries appeared that were not based on the old craft model at all, but were highly technologically advanced and sophisticated and brought together many more semi-skilled workers. Workers who had not had any particular training in an old craft, but had to be taught how to run the new machines and the equipment that would make steel or chemicals or auto or any number of pulp and paper-- any number of other such important industries-- important products. And so I looked at Hamilton as a way of trying to figure out what went on in that community in the process. And I discovered that the transformation of industry took place relatively quickly in the early 19th century. Sorry, early 20th century. Especially in the decade before World War I. The First World War accelerated that a lot because for the first time there was a product that was made in the millions that many places were turning out which was the shells that were needed in Europe for blasting the Germans. And by the 1920's there were plants that had been organized on a very large scale with advanced technology and whole new management systems that fit into what was being called, by that point, scientific management, a new approach to much more closely regulating

workers and designating their work more rigidly than had been done in the past. And so I was interested in a number of ways in how that experience ramified through other parts of workers' lives. And one of the things that becomes immediately obvious is that for a new industry like that you need a lot more workers, and you need new kinds of workers. So it's a period in which children largely disappear from industry. But large numbers - and women tend to move in larger numbers to take up some of that slack - but large numbers of new immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe come in in huge numbers that parallels what had already been happening in the United States 20 years earlier. And is certainly happening in Toronto and Montreal and other cities in central Canada. So that the steel plant is full of workers from Italy and Poland and Ukraine and-- all sorts of Eastern European and Southern European countries. And International Harvester, which is one of the biggest plants in Hamilton, brings in Poles from Chicago where it's already had an operation going. It hires large numbers of Armenians, becomes one of the main places for Armenians to get jobs and on and on. So that it's a much more multicultural city which, of course, is not easy for everyone to adjust to. And so the tensions that develop between different groups of workers are palatable, especially during World War I when it seems that these groups have started to get jobs that the white Anglo-Saxon workers thought they should never had access to, working in the shell plants making good money. So soldiers come home and they're furious and they organize big rallies to try and get these enemy aliens deported. Largely the enemy aliens wanted to go home because they realized how unpleasant it all was. And one of the things that becomes clear in looking at Hamilton and many other cities in this period, as in the United States, is that these workers were frequently what we call sojourners. They had no intention of staying. They were planning to work for a period of time to earn enough money to help their peasant families back home and then return home, and many of them did that more than once. They went back home, came back again, stayed for 10 years, never came back again. Or eventually decided this was a better place for them and their families and moved over. It was a period as other historians have noted in other cities of extremely uneven and unpredictable economic consequences for workers. Particularly because the cost of living really shot up in the first two decades of the 20th century,

particularly during the war. And the cost of living outshot wage increases, so the real wages were actually going down and workers were very, very upset about that and very conscious of the problems of that in their daily lives. And this is a point where you can imagine that the women in households were just as concerned every night when wages were being discussed 'cause they said, I can't buy the bacon at the corner store anymore because it's so bloody expensive.

That led me to ask some other questions of if income was somewhat insecure for these workers, as I concluded that it was, that it wasn't predictable and it was-- and you were going through boom-and-bust cycles where you might find serious unemployment, if traditional jobs were disappearing and all sorts of new ones were being created and great turbulence about it and uncertainty, how did people cope in their own homes? How did they-- what kind of associational life off the job did they have? And a couple of things become clear. One is that on the home front and, in fact, in surviving with what we have often called the family economy, in other words how members of the household organize themselves to be able to survive together so that-- the classic is the male breadwinner, father, goes out to earn wages. The wife stays home, does the domestic labour and whatever children come along help out in their various ways along that-- in and around those two, usually with the boys going eventually in their teens going off to work and the girls staying to help at home. What interested me was how long those practices that had developed way back in the 1850's/'60s/'70s as ways to cope with a new industrial society, how long those continued and that workers turned back to those very simple ways of surviving because they didn't have much choice. And right through to the point where the school system says, well, these kids should be in school longer. They shouldn't be out working. And the press is full of letters from parents saying, but I don't [?] want my kids working. Schooling doesn't fill empty stomachs, you know, we want them earning money to help us survive. And they lost that battle, of course, 'cause the kids were-- the age of school leaving was raised to 16 and suddenly you've got a whole new batch of high-school kids. And the blossoming of a certain kind of working class youth culture as a result of that. But at the same time there were groups of-- enough groups of workers and middleclass people with expendable incomes that a great blossoming of popular culture

emerged that was commercialized. It was made available by entrepreneurs, showmen who thought they had something to offer. The emergence of vaudeville houses. The emergence of movie theatres, amusement parks, places that were not frequently visited by workers, I don't think, except the young ones who were going through their courtship rituals. But for the most part it was an occasional visit that they might, at best, be able to afford. But it became something that was much more central to lives than had certainly been true half a century earlier, even a few decades, couple of decades earlier. And by the 1930's, of course, movies are just central to the lives of North Americans in general, but certainly working people in Hamilton are flocking to them in large numbers. And radio has arrived in the household which is the cheapest form of environment you can get on a regular basis. So there's a new engagement with a kind of mass culture that hasn't been there in the same way in the past. I think before that mass culture was probably religion. But now there's still religion but there's this whole new other stream that, in fact, many religious groups fight against. And in fact, what makes popular culture a subject of real interest in the early 20th century is that the old forces of sobriety and serious industrial-- serious personal discipline that had been most strongly represented in the temperance movement and to some extent in the sabbatarian movement that wanted to shut down Sundays to make sure that nobody did anything too outrageous on Sunday. Those groups are in open warfare with the new commercial interests. They don't want street cars running on Sunday. They don't want people tobogganing in parks on Sunday. The actually-- here in Toronto they actually shut down-- they posted policemen at the toboggan ramps to keep people from using them on Sundays in the middle of the winter. And yet faced with the choices, far more workers seemed to have decided they'd rather have the opportunity to go out and enjoy these pleasures. The great confrontation between these forces of popular culture, of course, was prohibition which arrives in World War I and which comes at different speeds and different points across the country. Because the provinces are the ones that have to decide to do this. But most of them decide by 1915, '16, and '17 that they're going to follow that route and the major male working-class institution in every neighbourhood, the saloon, is shut down. The private clubs for the rich are shut down. The liquor stores are shut down. And the local bootleggers get busy.