

MASS MEDIA, PUBLIC HISTORY

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Creating Critical Sport History for Popular Audiences: A Comparative Analysis of Two Sport-Related Museum Exhibits in Hamilton, Ontario

A recent *Journal of American History* survey indicates that many academic historians sense that they have “lost touch” with their larger community; that their work rarely transcends academic forms of communication such as the book, the scholarly article, and perhaps the editorial written in a popular magazine or newspaper. Yet in the 1990s the “public historical sphere” has shown a proliferation of institutions and people that produce and circulate meanings about the past—museums, heritage centres and sites, documentaries and television channels devoted to history, as well as an ever-growing number of web sites. Creating a public exhibit about sport history for the public sphere is a challenge which academic sport historians must face if they are to translate their research into an accessible yet nevertheless still critical form for popular consumption. This is especially true since sport “Halls of Fame” are often uncritical in nature, glossing over issues of age, gender, social class and ethnicity all too easily.

This paper looks at some of the problems posed—and suggests some solutions to those problems—in the creation of public history through a comparative examination of two museum exhibits on working-class sport in Hamilton, Ontario: the Ontario Workers’ Arts and Heritage Center’s temporary exhibit, “The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour” (10 July–October 31, 1997, curated by the authors), and the permanent display on Canadian football housed in the Canadian Football Hall of Fame.

Issues addressed here include: the relationships between academic research and public history, and the institutional obstacles which prevent academicians from bringing their research into the public sphere; the sponsoring agents for public history and the ways in which sponsors influence what is being said and the ways in which material is presented; and the intended audiences who often respond to photographs and material culture objects uncritically. This paper argues that entering into the domain of public history is difficult yet rewarding for the sport historian and for sport history overall.