

# The Murals of Moose Jaw: Commodification or Articulation of the Past?

Randy William Widdis

By the late 1980s, the 35,000 citizens of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, were faced with the harsh reality that their community was in decline. A global decrease in prices for agricultural goods and the reduction of rural transportation, culminating with the closing of VIA rail passenger service in 1990, had taken their toll on the collective psyche of the city's residents. Many of Moose Jaw's businesses were dependent to a significant extent on the local farming community for support and they struggled as agriculture, the mainstay of the rural economy in the province, declined in importance—a trend evident in statistics showing Saskatchewan's changing labor force employed by industry (Table 1). Table 2 further demonstrates the community's economic and population stagnation during the 1970s and 1980s. While total population changed very little between 1975 and 1991, the dependency ratio remained quite high, reflecting a decreasing youth component and an increasing percentage of the elderly. Economic stagnation, as revealed in declining construction starts and values, stimulated out-migration among the young. This limited development of employment opportunities and an aging population placed greater pressure on the city to support services and facilities. A sense of desperation was in the air as elected officials and private citizens attempted to devise tactics aimed at diversifying and revitalizing the local economy.

It was during this low ebb that leaders began to consider alternative development strategies, including schemes geared towards the stimulation of tourism. One such plan centered on the idea of developing a series of historical murals in the downtown area. This strategy was based on a similar project undertaken in Chemainus, British Columbia, developed after a sawmill closure in the late 1970s forced the small Vancouver Island community to either diversify or perish. The success of the Chemainus murals, the major force in attracting 300,000 visitors and \$26 million in business in 1991,<sup>1</sup> appealed to Moose Jawians; in the summer of 1989, a

---

Randy William Widdis is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. *Historical Geography*, Volume 28 (2000): 234-52.

Murals Committee of the Mayor's Task Force on downtown revitalization  
 Table 1. Saskatchewan Labor Force Employed by Industry 1984-93  
 was created.

This paper analyses the impact of the murals project on the City of Moose Jaw, opening with a specific example, plays in the development of the local economy particularly within a rural and relatively peripheral setting. After a review of the history and guiding policy of the project, I briefly discuss the economic impacts of the murals on the city, focus primarily on the symbolic meaning of the images revealed in the diorama mosaic presented to both visitors and residents alike, addressing the question of whether the murals represent an articulation or commodification of the past.

Industry	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Agriculture	89	85	88	91	78	77	83
Non-Agriculture	347	361	364	362	373	369	367
Other Primary Industries	71	73	74	71	73	73	72
Manufacturing	24	27	24	23	25	24	26
Construction	22	23	23	25	25	25	26
Transport, Communications, and Utilities	31	30	30	31	32	32	32
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	19	22	20	21	23	23	21
Service	128	133	138	140	141	144	148
Public Administration	34	33	32	32	31	33	30

Heritage Tourism, Conservation, and Development

Although too large to be viewed by the agency Statistics Canada as a rural place, Moose Jaw, by its location (Figure 1) and its agricultural service function, may arguably be considered a rural-based community. And in this context, it is useful to consider what the literature says about heritage-based tourism in such an environment, especially given the expectation that the growing tourism sector will fill the void created by declining rural-based economic sectors.

The complexity of this subject is revealed in the different definitions offered. It is difficult to define rural tourism because rural areas themselves are in a complex process of change so that the once apparent, although problematic, distinction between rural and urban is now blurred. Heritage is also hard to define because what appears at first glance to be a simple concept, upon further consideration, takes on layers of complexity. At its most basic, heritage may be viewed as knowledge of and emotional bonding with particular histories and geographies. And in this context, "the imaginative use of symbols and myths have become the stuff of history, tradition, and heritage."<sup>2</sup> Heritage tourism includes many facets of tourism ranging from examination of physical artifacts of the past and natural landscapes to the experience of local cultural traditions. It also merges with arts tourism in the form of creative interpretations of past landscapes as reflected in paintings, sculpture, theater, and other inventive expressions.<sup>3</sup>

Year	AGE GROUPS						
	Total Population #	0-18 #	%	20-64 #	%	>65 #	Dependency Ratio <sup>(1)</sup>
1975	34,168	11,775	34.5	17,730	51.9	4,663	18.6
1981	34,324	10,467	30.5	18,822	54.8	5,035	14.7
1985	35,525	9,918	27.9	20,003	56.3	5,604	15.8
1988	35,522	9,953	28.0	19,665	55.4	5,904	16.6
1990	34,770	9,817	28.2	18,874	54.3	6,097	17.5
1991	33,665	9,464	28.1	18,022	53.5	6,169	18.3

(1) D.R. = 0-19 and >65 x 100 / 20-64

There exists, however, significant argument over heritage and heritage tourism, the latter often justified in the name of conservation even though seen as an economic strategy. In particular, the debate centers around the question of whether such efforts represent a realistic articulation of a romantic commodification of the past. Some individuals and government agencies view heritage and heritage conservation in very concrete, functional terms. For example, the province of British Columbia

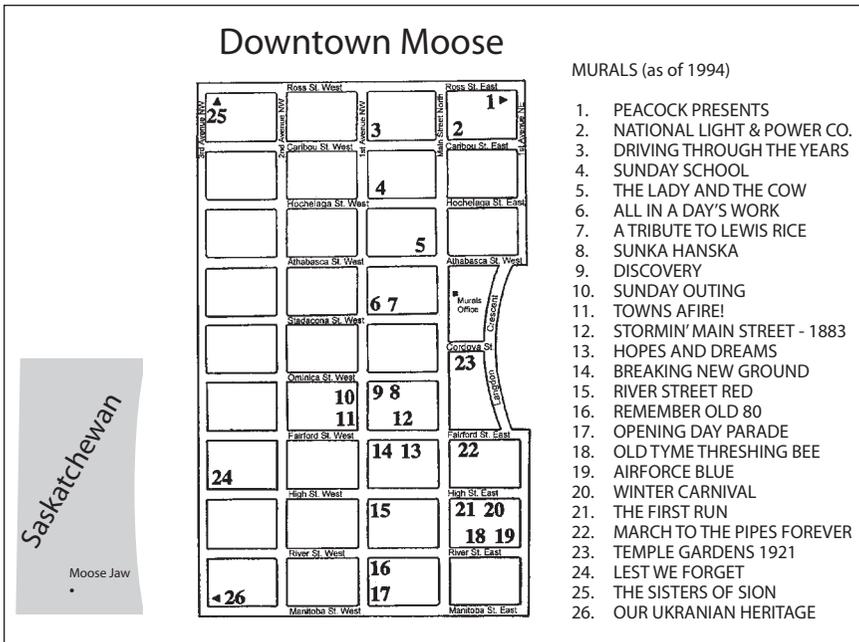
Year	Sectors				Total
	Residential	Commerce	Industry	Institutions	
1984	\$ 314,903,588	\$ 54,236,418	\$ 206,758,199	\$ 14,255,3475	\$ 402,215,822,680
1985	\$ 306,814,941	\$ 47,708,204	\$ 359,974	\$ 14,615,0381	\$ 374,217,435,000
1986	\$ 229,6815,600	\$ 55,233,446	\$ 91,952,252	\$ 12,6285,315	\$ 305,5334,361
1987	\$ 296,107,747,358	\$ 53,231,0252	\$ 151,012,663	\$ 143,335,928	\$ 378,17,406,201
1989	\$ 160,6803,415	\$ 51,2378,649	\$ 600,856	\$ 12,5921,935	\$ 23415,904,855
1990	\$ 147,6267,961	\$ 48,2432,400	\$ 778,000	\$ 13,4653,911	\$ 227,14,132,272

sees community heritage resources as “the tangible embodiments of intangible historical, cultural, aesthetic and social values” and heritage conservation as “the management of continuity within a context of change.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Ashworth sees heritage not as the concrete articulation of place and time but rather as a commodification process that he describes as “... the way in which history, i.e. the record of the past, becomes heritage, i.e., a contemporary commodity purposefully created to satisfy contemporary consumption. Heritage conservation is creation and not preservation of what already exists.”<sup>5</sup> Heritage, Ashworth insists, is implicitly tied in with the requirements of consumers and therefore is a product to be marketed. And so, he reasons, “... if heritage cannot logically exist without a consumer of that heritage, then it is a short step to argue that the answer to the question, ‘whose heritage?’, determines what is heritage ... authenticity ... is defined ... by the consumers ... [and so] if heritage is consumer defined, so is its authenticity.”<sup>6</sup> This raises questions about whose identity is being preserved and for whom is that preservation being made.

Many share Ashworth’s view of heritage as a “commodification” of history. For example, Richard Handler believes that cultural or heritage conservation, whether for its own sake or for the purpose of tourism development, is largely an illusion because we conserve only what we ourselves construct in agreement with our own client’s political agenda.<sup>7</sup> According to this perspective, governments and businesses shape tourist expectations through the marketing of selected cultural themes and the construction of historical props, displays, and events so that destination sites will embody marketed images. The result is the production of what Stephen Papsen calls a spurious culture, a product that displaces genuine culture and undermines local residents’ sense of sociocultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

Urry suggests that the recent proliferation of localized attractions devoted to rural and small town life of the past represents a post-modern discontent with everyday experience and a protest against modernity which makes tourists eager consumers of what he terms “staged authenticity.”<sup>9</sup> Greenwood views tourism in an even more critical light, arguing:

... [the commodification of culture] is the final logic of capitalism development of which tourism is an ideal example. The commoditization process does not stop with land, labour, and capital but ultimately includes the history, ethnic identity, and culture of the peoples of the world. Tourism simply packages the cultural realities of a people for sale along with their other resources. We know of no people anywhere who can live without the meaning culture provides; thus tourism is already reeling from the blows of industrialization, urbanization, and inflation. The loss of meaning through cultural commodification is a problem at least as serious as the unequal distribution of wealth that results from tourism development.<sup>10</sup>



Others, however, see heritage tourism motivated more by entrepreneurship than any explicit political agenda and some, including Howell, believe that the critical views of people such as Handler are:

... oversimplified, flawed by elitist assumptions. By acknowledging local people and cultures only tangentially as passive victims of bureaucratic machinations, Handler ... fails to explore how the aspirations and social dynamics of host communities affect cultural representations. While he employs contemporary theory to expose examples of cultural objectification, Handler appears unwilling to embrace interpretive, reflexive practices and explore the possibility for native deconstruction as well as construction of cultural symbols, i.e. for using representations of history in deliberate, self-conscious ways to contest stereotypes or shape commentary on and resistance to present injustices .... Because Handler's analysis ... fails to acknowledge ordinary people as key actors in the politics of their own culture, it offers little guidance for the practice of cultural conservation under conditions where local participation is a central feature ....<sup>11</sup>

Howell further contends that staging one's cultural heritage presentation can be viewed as a quest for heightened self-awareness and a bid to communicate that definition of self to others, including tourists. Using this same line of thought, Hodder argues that staged presentations for tourism do not have to be depthless but "can strive to create connections

\$50,000 from souvenir sales. In an August 1, 1990, interview in the *Moose Jaw Times*, Cline emphasized that subjects for the murals would be selected through a process of mutual consultation between the board and artists and that local artists would be encouraged to participate. The major goal of the project, he stressed, was to create jobs through tourism and the belief was expressed at the beginning that the project could become self-perpetuating through active fundraising by the board and through sales of souvenir articles. Yet at the same time, Cline insisted that the artistic creations would focus only on local themes and events. In that sense, the board was dedicated to a project that would create an awareness of belonging among residents and serve to reinforce an identification with specific physical and social contexts.

Even before the initial mural was completed in August of 1990, regulations were put into effect: local historical themes and events were to be emphasized and when possible, and local artists would be hired even though the competition was open to muralists from other parts of Canada. Further, the board was to be subdivided into site and subject preference committees.

The combination of older buildings and suitable walls in the downtown area was viewed as the ideal setting for the project. Specific walls were chosen on the basis of their quality, size, and location, keeping in mind considerations of visibility and accessibility. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of selecting sites that favored walking tours, thus making it difficult for people to just drive on by.<sup>16</sup> Once the walls were selected, the board sought the permission of the owners of the respective buildings to allow their walls to be backdrops for the murals. All but a couple who were approached agreed readily, obviously aware that tourists and local residents who came to view the artistic interpretation on the side of their building might also choose to purchase something from their establishments. The walls were then purchased for one dollar and a formal contract between owners and the city ensured that the former would not alter the appearance of the wall. For its part, the city was then obligated to maintain each mural.

While many of the ideas for the murals came directly from the subject preference committee, others originated from private groups. After the theme and/or picture for each mural was selected, competitions were advertised both locally and nationally. Three line drawings were then selected from the submissions leaving the committee to choose the ultimate winner. Once the artist for a given mural was chosen, he or she would create the line drawing of the mural on a transparency, which was then projected onto the wall where the mural would appear. The artist then traced the line drawing onto the wall, and then carried on with the actual work of creating the mural, which typically took four to six weeks. Once each mural was completed, a dedication ceremony was held, and the artist signed the work. A mural typically cost between \$10,000 and

---

with the past which situates groups in relation to their heritage in order to form an alternative identity."<sup>12</sup>

While those responsible for initiating and designing the Moose Jaw murals project were likely unaware of the philosophical, moral, and political issues underlying this venture—their thinking based primarily on the potential for tourist dollars generated by such an undertaking—these same considerations nevertheless constitute a useful frame upon which to interpret this particular development strategy. As a cultural-historical geographer, I see the important question as being, "Does this particular project represent the processes and factors behind the evolution of Moose Jaw and its rural hinterland or is it simply another example of a tourism strategy that commodifies history to heighten consumption?"

### Genesis and History of the Project<sup>13</sup>

Although the idea of a murals project was shared by a number of Moose Javians, particularly those who had been to Chemainus, the idea was first proposed in the summer of 1989 when the Moose Jaw city council formed a task force on downtown revitalization and granted \$5,000 to a steering committee. These funds were used to bring Karl Schutz, organizer of the Chemainus Murals Project, to assess the feasibility of a similar endeavor in Moose Jaw.<sup>14</sup> Schutz had based his idea of enhancing the townscape and promoting the heritage of the small community north of Victoria on the medieval murals that he had seen on the walls of religious buildings in Romania. He was particularly struck by the fact that the monasteries were charging tourists to view them and convinced the residents of Chemainus that commissioning a series of murals to be painted on the sides of the principal buildings in the downtown area would prove to be a worthwhile investment because it would lure tourists into the community. In February of 1990, Schutz delivered a public address in Moose Jaw in which he similarly argued that a murals project would help revitalize the downtown, renew interest in the city's past, and attract travelers who would otherwise bypass the city on the Trans-Canada Highway. Impressed by the city's cache of historic buildings, an advantage Moose Jaw held over Chemainus, Schutz encouraged residents "to develop a theme, strive for high-quality realistic images, and leave abstract art for the art galleries."<sup>15</sup>

After the delivery of Schutz's favorable report, the steering committee was converted to a board chaired by local artist Dale Cline and \$10,000 in seed money was received from Downtown Moose Jaw's Business Improvement District. Then the board, which called itself Murals of Moose Jaw, applied for and received from the city's Capital Works Program \$210,000 to initiate the project. The board also hoped to raise a further \$250,000 from the public, \$135,000 from local businesses, and another

the spin-off effects resulting from such visits. As a result, any estimates of the economic impact of the project are conjectures at best. In Dale Cline's opinion, while the initial strategy of selling limited edition prints achieved only nominal success, bus tours have proven to be profitable. Bob Baker, present chairman of the mural board, calculates that between eighty and a hundred buses on average tour the murals in the tourist season of late May through mid-September with one or two buses arriving even in winter specifically to view the collection.<sup>17</sup> According to Cline, most of those not on bus tours coming to look at the murals are from a 160-kilometer radius of Moose Jaw.

For interest's sake, let us assume that in a typical year ninety buses averaging fifty people visit the city. For every one of these people, Cline estimates that ten more come to see the murals, a calculation based on the number of people coming into the Murals of Moose Jaw office asking for brochures and information. If Baker and Cline are correct, and given our assumption about the number of tour buses is reasonable, then close to 50,000 people annually visit the city specifically to observe the murals. If all the bus tourists and 25 percent of the local area tourists stay overnight and spend an average of \$75 per person, and day visitors spend an average of \$25 during their stay in the city, then according to our assumptions, people coming specifically to view the murals contribute over \$2 million a year to the local economy.<sup>18</sup> This figure represents a significant boost to a community that is struggling to survive in the midst of some very trying times, even though many of the service jobs the murals support are relatively low-paying.

### Commodification or Articulation of the Past?

Of course, any judgment of the central question of this paper will be subjective. What one person sees as a relatively accurate portrayal of community in the past may be seen by another as an idealized image that commodifies tradition and "airbrushes" history. My interpretation of the murals will be arranged according to selected themes, including: authenticity, symbolism, and place making and commodification.

### Authenticity

A significant degree of authenticity in the murals is ensured by the historical research undertaken by many of the artists, particularly those from the local area, and the mandate of the board to have the murals portray events, images, and themes that reflect the history of Moose Jaw and vicinity. All artists, local and from other parts of Canada and the United States, avail themselves of a large collection of historical materials

\$15,000 in total.

The first three murals were painted in 1990, ten were added the following year, six in 1992, two in 1993, five in 1994, one in 1995, and two in 1996. In that first summer, the three-year budget was projected to be about \$650,000, with most of the funds coming from corporate sponsorship, local fundraising, and souvenir and art sales. The city promised an annual contribution of \$50,000. Only \$100,000 was to go directly to the commissioned artists, with the rest to be consumed by site preparation, the artists' living expenses, paint and other materials, the rental of an office, advertising, maintenance, and the salary awarded to an executive director.

The original murals generated a lot of interest among local citizens with many favorable and few critical comments appearing in issues of the local newspaper. While some residents expressed doubt that the murals would attract many tourists, it appears that the city was generally enthusiastic about the project. In the following years, Murals of Moose Jaw pursued a number of different strategies to market the murals, including erecting signs promoting the product on the Trans-Canada Highway, selling sets of limited edition prints, advertising in government publications and brochures distributed throughout Canada and internationally, sponsoring workshops on mural painting at local schools, and supporting both bus and walking tours. Yet by 1992, continuing problems in agriculture and a struggling local economy eroded enthusiasm for the project and prompted the city to reduce their funding.

The executive director was laid off and the original allocation of \$50,000 from the city was reduced to \$25,000, with an additional \$25,000 provided in 1993 following the subsequent completion of three additional murals. Later that year, Murals of Moose Jaw withdrew their application for the community grant, acknowledging that the city had more pressing responsibilities in light of the struggling local economy. Since 1993, the murals have been completely or partially funded either by the board with assistance from local sources or by the various organizations that have provided suggestions for mural themes. With this reduced funding, Murals of Moose Jaw expect to continue on an average pace of two murals per year, theoretically until they fill the 140 walls identified in 1990 as being suitable for murals.

## Economic Impacts

For many Moose Javians, the economic potential represented by the murals project constituted the basis for their original support even though they recognized the fact that the paintings could be viewed without charge. Yet no one has attempted to keep track of the number of people visiting the city specifically to view the murals or to account for

transform this isolated frontier into a settled countryside consisting of prosperous wheat farms and thriving communities. In this context, the impact of transportation technology emerges as one of the most prevalent and important themes in the collection. For example, "Remember Old 80," (Figure 3) the first mural painted in 1990, reflects the fact that the railway was truly the lifeblood of Moose Jaw and other communities on the prairies and a crucial factor, if not the principal reason, for their growth.

Changes in transportation and communications technology over time are revealed in a series of murals including "The First Run" (1991), portraying the exact date (August 19, 1911) and time (5 p.m.) that a large crowd gathered to witness the first run of Moose Jaw's new streetcar system. Of note is the fact that the site of the painting, the north wall of the Fur Town building, is adjacent to the same spot where the original run took place. "Driving Through the Years" (1994) acknowledges the revolutionary impact that the automobile played in transforming Saskatchewan society while "Discovery" (1994), consisting of more than 750 clay tiles, depicts images of advancements in telecommunications as well as the emblems of SaskTel and its predecessor, Saskatchewan Government Telephones.

Pioneer agriculture is represented in a series of murals including "Breaking New Ground" (1990), depicting the enormous effort made by homesteaders and their animals in their attempt to "prove the land," and the aforementioned "The Lady and the Cow" and "Hopes and Dreams." "Old Tyme Threshing Outfit" (1992), portrays a typical threshing operation taking place more than eighty years ago. The land was seeded by a four-horse team, which would also draw the binder that cut the grain and tied it into sheaves.

Different perspectives of community development are illustrated in several of the murals. One of the earliest, "Opening Day Parade" (1990), shows the 1910 parade held on the opening day of baseball season. The parade, featuring most of the towns' automobiles, started in front of the chateau-style railway station, and was accompanied by a brass band, the fire department, the Moose Jaw Robin Hoods and their opponents, and town officials. "All In A Day's Work" (1991) shows some of the earliest Moose Jaw retailers who managed to persist in the community during a period of great business and population turnover. "A Tribute to Lewis Rice" (1991) is dedicated to the life of a man who created a legacy of historical photographs of Moose Jaw and vicinity, some of which have been used as the foundations for certain murals.

One of the more intricate murals, "Sunday Outing" (1991) painted by Regina artist Wee Len, who studied oriental brush painting in Vietnam, is a delicate interpretation of Moose Jaw's river valley in the days when life moved at a more leisurely pace. It was the custom after church in the summer for young men and women of the Aquatic Club to enjoy a Sunday afternoon canoeing down the Moose Jaw River. Lee's colorful background tapestry adds to our appreciation of this bucolic scene.

The only mural depicting the aboriginal presence in Moose Jaw is



collected by Dale Cline and others and made available for their use. Cline himself has conducted considerable research in the preparation of his murals. For example, in "Stormin' Main Street" (1991), he embarks on a personal journey of his family's past. The mural depicts two youngsters racing their horses down Main Street in the summer of 1883, a practice frowned upon by town officials. The painting is meant to capture a sense of the rapid pace of settlement in the year that Cline's family first came to Moose Jaw. Old photographs, newspapers, and interviews allowed him to include in the mural businesses that actually existed at that time.

"The Lady and the Cow" (1991) was based on a 1904 photograph showing Elizabeth Elliott and her prized Jersey cow in front of the sod barn at Aylesbury, built by her husband Thomas in 1903 (Figure 2). "Hopes and Dreams" (1991), a 150-pound, fifteen- by seven-foot relief sculpture illustrates the 1882 trek by pioneers from the end of the track at Brandon, Manitoba, to Moose Jaw, a trip that took two weeks. The source of the sculpture was a historical photograph showing a team of oxen pulling a cart with settlers and their belongings to their homesteads. "Town's Afire" (1991), gives a dramatic portrayal of the danger of fire at the turn of the century. The artist, Gus Froese of Moose Jaw, spent months going through newspapers and photographs in the town's archives before deciding on the design.

## Symbolism

The murals depict in symbolic terms the efforts made by pioneers to



order. The mural is in the shape of an open book, reflecting the sisters' work in education.

"Our Ukrainian Heritage" (1992) (Figure 5), located on the front wall of the South Hill liquor board store, pays tribute to the contributions of the Ukrainian community to Moose Jaw and commemorates the centennial in 1992 of Ukrainian settlement in Canada. The South Hill location was chosen because of the sizeable Ukrainian population living there. Traditional colors of yellow and blue form the background to silhouette onion-domed churches. The mural, by superimposing the Ukrainian trident on a maple leaf, represents the intertwined cultures. Flowing from the trident-maple leaf are bands of the yellow and blue collars of the Ukraine to various elements of the mural including a young girl with flowers, another young girl with a kolach (the bread of welcome), and a pysanka (easter egg). Two dancers dominate the center and to their left is a musician playing a bandura next to an Easter basket ready for blessing at church on Easter morning. The basket is laden with butter, cheese, ham, sausage, pysanka eggs, babka (bread), and salt. A young boy with a sheaf of wheat represents the fulfillment of their dreams in Canada. Also included is a reproduction of a poster of the kind that promised 160 acres of free land that lured Ukrainians to come to western Canada. The old Ukrainian national hall is also part of the mural.

By 1993, the murals began to represent more recent developments in Moose Jaw's history. "National Light and Power" (1993) tells the story of the National Light and Power Company that operated from the early 1930s until 1960, when SaskPower took over responsibility for providing power to the city. The painting depicts the building when it was built

"Sunka Hanska" (1991), painted by Ochpawace artist Dennis Morrison (Figure 4). Sunka Hanska was a young warrior who was part of Sitting Bull's band that participated in the Battle of Little Big Horn. He came to Moose Jaw in 1885, remaining until his death in 1917. The mural is rich in symbolism: the headdress shows leadership, seashells depict listening, four strands of the chokers reveal the four races of man, the braids characterize cleanliness and purity, the moon represents honesty, the buffalo symbolizes Sunka Hanska's ability to call the animals, the thunderbird shows spring and rain, the teepee portrays native values, water represents the spirit, and the pipe symbolizes healing. East, west, north,



and south are depicted respectively by yellow, red, white, and blue. The rocks at the bottom right are for our ancestors while the lone tree is for each and every observer.<sup>19</sup>

"Winter Carnival" (1992), displaying a variety of activities including sledding, hockey, and snowball fights, shows how important recreation was during the winter months. "The Sisters of Sion" (1992) was produced to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the religious



the Soo Line from Chicago to Moose Jaw and stayed in the small prairie town until things cooled off back home. Yet there is no concrete proof that Capone ever set foot in Moose Jaw. Despite the lack of proof, he and other American gangsters have been linked to the tunnels in the recently opened Tunnels of Little Chicago tourist attraction, a blatantly exploitative venture inviting visitors to experience, in the words of its operators, “the history behind the legendary tunnels of Al Capone and his cohorts beneath the streets of Moose Jaw.”

In 1991, some Moose Javians were not so keen to exploit the Chicago connection or any other doubtful links to controversial figures such as Sitting Bull and Louis Riel.<sup>20</sup> In a 1991 article appearing in the Times-Herald supplement *Epic*, Moose Jaw bookstore owner Fred Taylor stated, “The idea of reinventing our past detracts from the real history we claim to be so proud of. To import an American lawbreaker as a hero is taking things a bit too far.” Yet a reinvention of the past is exactly what has been done with the Tunnels of Little Chicago, the tourist attraction that most clearly manufactures and commodifies history.

### Conclusion: Placemaking and Commodification

There has been in Canada and other countries a kind of “muralmania” in the last decade. The motivation for this boom in mural projects

in 1930, along with a brief history taken from two pages of the Moose Jaw Times-Herald. "March to the Pipes Forever" (1993) is a tribute to the Heather Highland Dancers and the Springs O'Heather All Girls Pipe Band, which was formed in 1953. "Peacock Presents" (1994), consisting of five fibreglass sculptures, was commissioned by the student governing assembly of Peacock Collegiate to depict all aspects of the school—academics, art, drama, choral, and sports. In "Temple Gardens 1921" (1994), three artists joined forces to piece together over 9,000 ceramic tiles to depict the well-known dance hall as it appeared in a 1921 photograph. Temple Gardens, torn down in 1978, was one of the premier venues in western Canada, drawing performers such as Fats Domino, Tommy Dorsey, and Bobby Gimby.

Besides the impact of transportation and telecommunications, agriculture, and the development of community, other themes are portrayed in this outdoor gallery. "Sunday School" (1991) is dedicated to the memory of two Englishwomen—Eva Hasell and Winifred Ticehurst—who, in the spring of 1920, embarked on a mission to bring Sunday schools to the isolated farms and villages of southern Saskatchewan. "Lest We Forget" (1992), completed by local artist Dale Cline on the Legion wall on High Street, is a pageant of war and peace. Cline used sepia tones for this mural that remembers the history of Canadian combat and peacekeeping duties. "Airforce Blue" (1994) portrays the history of the air base in Moose Jaw, noting in particular the city's association with the famous Snowbirds aerial unit.

The mural that has produced the most controversy is "River Street Red" (1991) (Figure 6). For the first forty years of Moose Jaw's history, River Street was the business center of the town with fine hotels and professions located along the road. But as the community grew along Main Street, River Street declined and became known for its gambling and red-light district. The hotels pictured in the mural became symbols of the gambling and shady characters that had followed the boom years of the neighborhood. Respectable families avoided this part of town, and in the 1920s, most of the police force was dismissed in connection with criminal activities in the area. A series of underground passages beneath River Street, believed to be developed by the Chinese community in Moose Jaw for the movement of illegal immigrants, were employed by bootleggers and gamblers to move contraband during the prohibition of the 1920s. Chinese laundrymen used the tunnels to run gambling chits from one hotel to another. The mural is painted in the art deco style of the 1920s and 1930s with a backdrop of hotel windows creating a transparent effect.

Originally there was a suggestion that Al Capone should be the subject of the River Street mural because of the rumor that he used Moose Jaw as a hideout when the pressure in Chicago became too great. A few people claim that American gangsters, including Capone, traveled



do not simulate characteristics and replicate artifacts or conditions that represent other places. Even though many of the murals are painted in the aesthetic, picturesque style, the themes evoke a sense of Moose Jaw's past. Equally important is the fact that place is articulated through local geographical motifs as derived from historical sources such as photographs and oral histories.

The murals do represent to a significant degree local residents' relationship to their own history. They situate the history of the community and the surrounding area within its own geographical context, thus serving as a means whereby citizens can establish links with the place in which they live. The fact that many of the murals are painted on the walls of historically preserved buildings means that the geographical context in which history has been represented still exists to a significant degree.

Yet while the presentation of the images symbolizes the enduring image of community in the face of change and a powerful geography and serves as an important historical frame of identity for local residents, they are selective. Moose Jaw as a place meant different things to different people at different times and the murals are only partly successful in representing this diversity. What is not included in the murals is as significant as what is included. The symbols and images portray a romantic vision of the settlement experience and fail to capture a sense of the struggles taking place at various times between humans and their environment. The devastating effect of the drought during the 1930s is ignored completely. There is little sense of the conflicts occurring in the community among various groups. Some of the less pleasant chapters

raises interesting questions regarding heritage, authenticity, identity, and commodification. The murals project in Moose Jaw may be viewed, just as the venture in Chemainus was by Barnes and Hayter, as both an “entrepreneurial response ... to the sometimes devastating effects of capital restructuring on local communities,” i.e., a strategy devised by a peripheral agricultural center in response to the new global realities of a restructured agriculture, and as an “attempt to recuperate local identity and distinctiveness” in the face of these broad disruptive forces.<sup>21</sup> As well, both projects may be seen as examples of how individuals and communities turn to place and locality in order to find or re-establish their identity in the context of what Harvey sees as a “space-time compression,” i.e., the disintegration of spatial barriers resulting from technological developments in transportation and communication.<sup>22</sup>

The success of the murals in generating tourist dollars will depend on the ability of Moose Jaw to establish an infrastructure of marketing, planning, and financing. In this context, facilities catering to tourism generated by this and other attractions such as the Tunnels of Little Chicago, and the recently completed Temple Gardens Mineral Spa, should be developed. Financial and market support for these ventures must come from the provincial government as the community by itself does not have the capital to lay this foundation.

Viewing the mural landscapes as ideology—“as a symbol of the values, the governing ideas [and] the underlying philosophies”<sup>23</sup> of Moose Jaw and vicinity—suggests that the architects of the project are engaged in the process of placemaking. Yet even though the murals serve as a medium in which to assert place-bound identity, the fact that they are marketed as a product in order to attract tourist dollars means that the potential exists for presenting a partially illusory past, commodifying the romantic images held by the general public regarding small town and rural life.

In the murals, local identity is rendered in mythologized landscapes that serve to transform “landscape from an external phenomenon to be engaged visually, to a psychic terrain of internalized symbolic meaning.”<sup>24</sup> It is in this transformation where the debate about heritage tourism is grounded. Taken together, the murals convey an overall image of the past that is dynamic, showing the transfer from frontier to developed community. Yet these interpretations of Moose Jaw’s heritage, however supported by historical research, still reflect the present and a society’s nostalgic view of the past.

While seen primarily as an economic strategy, the murals of Moose Jaw represent an ideological framing of history, geography, and cultural tradition. To say that there has been no manipulation of time and place in the murals would be naïve. However, with the exception of “River Street Red” and the “Little Chicago” theme more directly exploited in the recent tunnels development, the iconic signs represented in the murals

history in the ... landscape [and] ... for the artist ... it means being willing to engage historical and political material."<sup>26</sup> The underlying philosophy is inherently political as well as cultural because its purpose is to develop place as well as produce a product that is viable in consumer terms. This kind of sustainable heritage is compatible with what Schneekloth and Shibley term "placemaking," an art and practice whose tasks—"opening the dialogic space, confirming and interrogating contexts, and framing action—are inherently political and moral acts."<sup>27</sup>

What needs to be done is to balance the utopian, bucolic ideal of Moose Jaw's past with portrayals of forces and events that disrupted rural and small town ways of life and brought about changes in the community. This will require a commitment among the directors of the project to support murals that inform local residents and tourists alike of those chapters of Moose Jaw's history that challenged and thereby transformed the community. Decisions about what images to create in the murals should involve all groups and interests within the community and more accurately reflect all aspects of Moose Jaw's dynamic history.

That this philosophy will be adopted is doubtful given the recent development of the Tunnels of Little Chicago attraction which clearly distorts local history in order to lure tourist dollars. It appears that commodification has triumphed over articulation in Moose Jaw's development of heritage. The juxtaposition of these two projects existing side-by-side in the historic downtown core, the one flawed and yet worthwhile and the other exploitative and false, represents the kinds of extremes that characterize heritage tourism today and, as such, serves as a valuable case study for those interested in the impacts of such development.<sup>28</sup>

### Acknowledgement

The author thanks Dale Cline for his assistance. The useful counsel of two anonymous reviewers is also appreciated.

### Notes

1. Eric Eggerston, "Murals Make History," *Epic* (March 1991): 10.
2. Brian S. Osborne, "Constructing Landscapes of Power: The George Etienne Cartier Monument, Montreal," *Journal of Historical Geography* 24:4 (1998): 432.
3. Heather Zeppel and C. Michael Hall, "Arts and Heritage Tourism," in Betty Weiler and C. Michael Hall, eds., *Special Interest Tourism* (London: Belhaven Press, 1992): 48.
4. Province of British Columbia, Heritage Planning Branch, *Heritage Planning: A Guide for Local Government* (Victoria: 1992): 7.
5. Gregory J. Ashworth, "Heritage and Tourism: An Argument, Two Problems and Three Solutions," in Conny Fleischer-van Roojen, eds., *Spatial Implications of Tourism* (Groningen: Geo Pers, 1992): 96.
6. *Ibid.*, 98.
7. Richard Handler, "On Sociocultural Discontinuity: Nationalism and Cultural Objectification in

in the community's history, such as the notable presence of the Ku Klux Klan, have strategically been ignored.

It is in this context that one could argue that the murals have created a sentimental and therefore partially contrived landscape. Local landscape images are linked with the romantic aesthetic to be exploited for consumption. This creation of an idealized image of the past can be viewed in post-modern terms in that the images of community and development portrayed in the murals stand in stark contrast to the economic stagnation of present-day Moose Jaw. Ironically, this portrayal of an idyllic past is part of an economic strategy that is meant to change the reality of current recession.

Yet, on the other hand, critics of such projects fail to see that murals, like all art, are subjective interpretations. They are not exploited places like nineteenth century mills transformed into expensive restaurants catering to wealthy urbanites. And while they are post-modern creations that tell us more about the present than the past, they nonetheless serve as interpretations of the past.

The debate, it seems to me, is based on the degree and nature of local participation in the planning, design, and implementation processes and the sensitivity displayed towards the portrayal and interpretation of the local character of place. This raises the question as to whether heritage tourism and allegiant conservation/preservation of place are congruous. What will it take to ensure such compatibility?

Those who view the two as complementary offer guidelines that are circumscribed by sustainable principles. In Crouch's view:

... a sustainable approach to tourism envisages the people of an area being empowered by owning their own culture as part of any tourism development. Rural tourism may thus seek to replace or supplement abstracted heritage with a different set of values and experiences ... but the central task is that of constructing cultural identities in true participation with the community, identities which are often very different from those sought by a mainstream commercial approach .... [These identities] involve different kinds of presentation activities, practices and forms of engagement that are often unashamedly social and cultural.<sup>25</sup>

Such an approach emphasizes projects and programs that include local people and values indigenous cultural knowledge, a perspective that in fact mirrors the change in philosophy underlying rural planning. Both specialists and local residents alike need to advance alternative concepts that recognize diversity and are sensitive to place in order to counter the stereotypical images developed by a tourism dictated by market considerations. This means that "artists, historians, citizens, and planners who come to this kind of work need both historical and spatial imagination to learn to work together to identify and interpret people's

- Quebec," *Current Anthropology* 25 (1984): 55-71; "On Having A Culture: Nationalism and the Preservation of Quebec's Patrimoine," in G.W. Stocking, ed., *Objects and Others* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985): 192-217; "Heritage and Hegemony: Recent Works on Historical Preservation and Interpretation," *Anthropological Quarterly* 60 (1987): 137-41; Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
8. Stephen Papson, "Spuriousness and Tourism: Politics of Two Canadian Provincial Governments," *Annals of Tourism Research* 8 (1981): 220-35.
  9. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990): 13-4.
  10. D.J. Greenwood, "Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commodification," in V.C. Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): 180.
  11. Benita Howell, "Weighing the Risks and Rewards of Involvement in Cultural Conservation and Heritage Tourism," *Human Organization* 53:2 (1994): 153.
  12. Ian Hodder, *Theory and Practice in Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992): 278.
  13. Much of the information for this section comes from an interview conducted with murals artist and former chairman of Murals of Moose Jaw, Dale Cline.
  14. Schutz was also hired as a consultant in 1990 by the small town of Boissevain, Manitoba, which has similarly developed a murals project. See John C. Lehr and Julie Kentner Hidalgo, "The Art of Survival: Murals and Tourism in Boissevain, Manitoba," *The Yorkton Papers: Research by Prairie Geographers* (Department of Geography, Brandon University, 1997): 53-64.
  15. Eggerston, "Murals Make History," 10.
  16. *Moose Jaw Times-Herald*, 10 December 1990.
  17. *Regina Sun*, 23 November 1997.
  18. In 1993, tourism generated an estimated \$34 million to the city's economy.
  19. *Moose Jaw Times-Herald* and *Moose Jaw Shopper*, 29 March 1994.
  20. Louis Riel, the Metis leader of the Northwest Rebellion, has been portrayed as both a martyr and a fanatic in the historical literature and the debate over his place in the history of western Canada continues to this very day. *Sitting Bull* and the Sioux received sanctuary in Saskatchewan after the Battle of the Little Big Horn but were forced to return to the United States because of their inability to feed themselves in their new home.
  21. Trevor Barnes and Roger Hayter, "The Little Town That Did: Flexible Accumulation and Community Response in Chemainus, British Columbia," *Journal of Regional Studies* 26:7 (1992): 648.
  22. David Harvey, "Between Time and Space: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80 (1990): 427.
  23. Donald Meinig, "The Beholding Eye," in Donald Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 42.
  24. Urry, "The Tourist Gaze," 13-4.
  25. David Crouch, "Home, Escape and Identity: Rural Cultures and Sustainable Tourism," in Bill Bramwell and Bernard Lane, eds., *Rural Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development* (Cleveland, U.K.: Channel Publications, 1994): 97-8.
  26. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995): 76.
  27. Linda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995): 18.
  28. The irony of these two different projects is that while the murals more accurately reflect the history of Moose Jaw and vicinity, the more exploitative "Tunnels of Little Chicago" may turn out to generate more money for the community.