

Trumpeter (1997)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Our Shared Home: An comuse Initiative

Cheryl Lousley

McMaster University

CHERYL LOUSLEY: As a student at McMaster University and a resident of the Hamilton Harbour watershed, I have participated in the *comuse* Initiative since the spring of 1995. That involvement has meant baking banana bread and cookies for our informal monthly meetings to ensuring walks are organized and announced in the community newspaper, to writing definitions and goals of the initiative for the group to peruse, to interviewing community elders about their memories of their neighborhood. The rewards have been many. This rural soul came to know and appreciate the local culture and special wild places that exist within or on the fringes of the city.

I am currently working on a Masters of Arts at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), learning a new city neighborhood in the big move to Toronto. My other recent projects include working with secondary school students in Hamilton-Wentworth as coordinator of the Young Citizens for a Sustainable Future program and preparation for a summer volunteer experience in Botswana with Canadian Crossroads International.

I would like to thank Bob Henderson for his guidance and friendship in my work with *comuse* and writing this article. Also, I wish to acknowledge the spiritual nourishment I have received from walks along the gentle edge of my creek at home, those quiet places in Cootes Paradise, and watching the stars from up on the Escarpment.

A warm August evening gathered seventy people to West Hamilton's Victoria Park, former site of the 1860's Crystal Palace fairgrounds, for a walk through the Strathcona/Hess Village neighborhood. A geography student and an amateur historian guided the group by Ontario cottages, old factory sites, and red brick row houses, up to the large detached residences (some still with carriage houses) originally lived in by the factory owners atop the Burlington Heights. Of course, many others on the walk had stories to tell as well: A local resident mentioned that a church we were passing houses a stained glass window by Group of Seven artist Frank Carmichael. While caught by surprise, the minister of the Korean congregation that now worships in the church was delighted in having the group, in tens and twelves, enter and view the window. And on we went - a jovial swarm of seventy - through the neighborhood until bringing the walk to a close at a pub in trendy Hess Village, new friends made, old stories remembered, a neighborhood explored, another *comuse* success.

Like many other industrial centres, the communities that inhabit the Hamilton Harbour watershed are in the process of change, forced to clean up a century's worth of progress. But there is something missing in this environmental reparation. Besides all the negatives of directing change, there is a need to celebrate this place and the people who share this home, to learn from it and come

to know it, to understand our role in our home-place, and to understand ourselves. I believe that this is the driving spirit behind a newly-formed community group that has taken the name "Our Shared Home: An comuse Initiative."

This initiative is directed by a small group of historians, teachers, and naturalists brought together by outdoor recreation coordinator Wayne Terryberry in 1994. The group was interested in celebrating the local, whether it be local history, cultural activities, or natural areas, and to do this actively *by getting out and touching the community!* Formally, the comuse group aims to encourage and support active enjoyment of local cultural and natural treasures, to facilitate the gathering and sharing of local knowledge, and to nurture a shared attitude of respect, appreciation, and responsibility for our home-place.

Although unfamiliar to most, the comuse concept - a museum without walls - was proposed as a model for the group to follow. An comuse is all about pride of place: "It is for and about people at home" (Quig p.27). An idea born in France and found as "open air museums" in Scandinavia, an comuse is more easily grasped intuitively than by definition. The literature on comuses is scarce and primarily consists of examples. But from Brittany, France to Haute-Beauce, Quebec, to Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, there are a few distinct threads common to all: active participation, the uniqueness of place, the value of local knowledge, and change through continuity with the past.

comuses are museums in that they encompass an element of interpretation in the broad sense of "helping people to understand the significance of what they see" (Dalibard p.3). The differences between traditional museums and comuses are significant, both in content and method. The content of an comuse is the home/habitat of the people who live in the comuse territory - the communities of the Hamilton Harbour watershed in this case. By calling an comuse a museum without walls, the "gallery" becomes the site of our daily lives: the ever-changing, multidimensional, and richly diverse human and natural community of our watershed. Children and elders play a special role in the celebration and mapping of a community, providing a continuity between changes that have occurred, and changes we want to make for the future. Our method of "displaying" the contents of this museum - our shared home - involves sharing stories, making maps, and actively exploring. And so comuses can be "a mirror by which the local population views itself in order to discover its own image" (Jamieson p.16).

To visit an comuse, we just need to open our eyes and ears and to take a walk with some neighbors. As Sharon Butala so aptly expresses in *Perfection of the Morning*:

The world is more wonderful than any of us have dared to guess, as all great poets have been telling us since the invention of poetry. To discover these truths, we don't need to scale Mount Everest or white water raft the Colorado or take up skydiving. We need only go for walks. (Butala p.65)

For more information contact: Wayne Terryberry, Department of Recreation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 4K1, (905) 525-9140 ex. 23879.

References

Butala, Sharon. 1994. *Perfection of the Morning*. Toronto: Harper Collins.

Dalibard, Jacques. October/November 1984. Executive Director's Report: "What Is An Ecomuseum?" *Canadian Heritage* : 2-4.

Jamieson, Walter. 1989. An Ecomuseum for the Crowsnest Pass: Using Cultural Resources as a Tool for Community & Local Economic Development. *Plan Canada* 29.5 :14-23.

Quig, James. 1987/1988. Pride of Place. *Canadian Heritage* :27-29.

Citation Format

Lousley, Cheryl (1997) Our Shared Home: An comuse Initiative *Trumpeter*: 14, 2.
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.14.2.16>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details