

"Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850–1925." Chippewa Valley Museum, P.O. Box 1204, Eau Claire, WI 54702-1204.

Permanent exhibition, opened December 5, 1992. Tu–Su 1–5 (summer 10–5); adults \$2.50, children \$1. 2,438 sq. ft. Tim Pfaff, curator of public programs; Susan McLeod, director; Jeanne Nyre, designer; Julie A. Johnson, curator of collections; Diane Schmidt, senior curator.

Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850–1925. By Tim Pfaff. (Eau Claire: Chippewa Valley Museum Press, 1994. 128 pp. Paper, \$12.95, ISBN 0-9636191-1-X.)

One photograph appears in two different exhibitions at the Chippewa Valley Museum. The difference in its treatment suggests both how far this emerging regional museum has come and the challenges it still faces. The photograph shows a team of horses dragging the church building out of Porter's Mills, Wisconsin, in 1901. In the museum's "Rural Heritage" exhibition (opened 1982), the photo is displayed merely as a historical curiosity. It accompanies a display of the church's original altar, one of several period installations in the exhibition (barbershop, general store, doctor's office, etc.) that quaintly evoke small-town life around the turn of the century. In "Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850–1925" (opened December 1992), the same photograph of the horse-drawn church is used to very different effect. The exhibition shows that the church was being moved because the region's logging industry had collapsed and the town was dying. The "Settlement and Survival" exhibition uses the photo as a poignant example of what it asserts was the pivotal moment in the Chippewa Valley's history—the shift from a logging- to a manufacturing-based economy. In short, "Settlement" integrates the photograph into a coherent historical argument, a significant departure for the museum. Unfortunately, while the exhibition offers a substantial reassessment of the region's history, it does not do enough to ensure that visitors actually understand and appreciate the argument its creators intended. Despite the staff's best intentions, visitors may still see the exhibition's images and objects as isolated curiosities instead of as evidence for a thoroughgoing interpretation.

Justifiably, the staff of the Chippewa Valley Museum (CVM) views "Settlement" as a turning point for the institution. The exhibition was funded in part by a \$31,000 planning grant and a \$150,000 implementation grant, both from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Both CVM's director, Susan McLeod, and the curator, Tim Pfaff, stress that "Settlement" marked a shift to exhibitions with greater interpretive coherence. Before, McLeod recalls, CVM had made displays that were attractive but had a disjointed "case by case" organization. Pfaff describes the older exhibitions as a series of disconnected "roomettes." With "Settlement," McLeod reflects, the exhibition team moved to answer the question "What happened there [in the Chippewa Valley]?" in a more "narrative / thematic" way and on a "much larger scale" than before.

Indeed, "Settlement" does take in a broad historical sweep, charting the rise, fall, and resurgence of towns in the Chippewa Valley between the mid-nineteenth



Horses drag the Porter's Mills, Wisconsin, church out of town, 1901. When the logging economy died, some of the towns that had supported it disappeared.

Courtesy Chippewa Valley Museum.

century and the 1920s. The exhibition traces this history in three sections. In the first two, the active agent is the logging industry. "Towns Built by Lumber" outlines the development of the logging economy after an 1837 treaty between the United States government and the Chippewa Indians opened the Wisconsin Territory to sustained logging. This section shows how the Chippewa Valley's seemingly inexhaustible forests of pine, coupled with the natural waterway of the Chippewa River (which flows into the Mississippi), made for an economic boom in the area. Logging companies employed thousands of sawyers, sawfilers, carpenters, and clerks. In turn, ancillary opportunities emerged for cooks to feed the loggers, boardinghouse operators to house new arrivals, tailors to clothe the workers, and taverns to entertain them. Lumber towns such as Eau Claire, Chippewa Falls, and Menomonie sprang up almost overnight around midcentury.

"Crisis in the Cutover," the second section of "Settlement," details how quickly the Chippewa Valley's new economy broke down. By the mid-1880s, the valley's "inexhaustible" pine forests were substantially depleted, and profits had dwindled. The eastern lumbermen who had precipitated the logging boom moved farther west, leaving valley residents to clear stump-ridden land and ponder how to make a living without king pine. The answer, according to the exhibition's final section, "Finding a Future," lay in broadening the area's manufacturing base. In the 1890s and early 1900s, community leaders and boosters sought to diversify the area's economy by capitalizing on its assets—cheap waterpower, skilled labor, and well-developed railroad access. Using publicity campaigns and recruitment drives, and at times offering cash bonuses and tax credits, civic leaders drew to the valley manufacturers of tires, refrigerators, and pressure cookers. Improved roads and the spread of the automobile also brought tourists from St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Chicago,



A large panel in the center of “Settlement and Survival” vividly conveys the demise of the Chippewa Valley logging economy in the 1880s.
Courtesy Benjamin Filene.

who enjoyed fishing and boating in the region. By the mid-1920s, the towns of the Chippewa Valley had thriving industrial economies and bustling downtown streets, even though the lumbering industry had almost completely disappeared.

When sketched in this way, the exhibition’s argument has an appealingly clean organization and narrative direction—from boom to bust to rebirth. This argument is an important corrective to more anecdotal depictions of the region’s logging history that romanticize life in the logging camps. Instead of telling tall tales about colorful loggers, “Settlement” shows that the logging economy precipitated an economic crisis for the people of the area.

“Settlement,” then, has an argument that should be heard. Unfortunately, the message has become somewhat garbled in translation from conceptual outline to exhibition walls. To all but the most determined and knowledgeable visitor, I fear, “Settlement” tells a more fragmented and more purely descriptive story than its creators intended.

On my first quick pass through the exhibition—imitating the ten-minute walk-through that many visitors would give to an exhibition this size—I had little idea of what it was trying to say. The exhibition is visually appealing, with built-in walls that establish a gently winding traffic flow through the gallery. Striking photos and artifacts of varying sizes are shown effectively at varying depths. Despite finding many interesting things to look at, though, I had little sense of the exhibition’s main argument after my first overview. Even after a second, hour-long pass through,

I did not fully grasp the exhibition's central message. Only after conversations with CVM staff members, a third word-by-word study of the exhibition with their explanations in mind, and a review at home of the exhibition text (as it appears in the catalog that accompanies the exhibition) did I truly understand the point.

To help other visitors more easily appreciate the argument of "Settlement," the CVM staff could make some changes to its labels, design, and organization. These elements currently do not directly enough reinforce one another and guide visitors to the exhibition's central themes. Most immediately, "Settlement" needs a main introductory label. At no point are the three key sections of the exhibition identified or summarized in advance. As visitors walk through, therefore, they have no mental road map that they can use to situate themselves in the exhibition's argument. This omission is particularly problematic in an exhibition organized around a "before and after" thesis—the contrast between the old logging economy and the new manufacturing economy. Visitors entering "Towns Built by Lumber," the first section, have no way of knowing that this section is not simply describing the old days but is laying the groundwork for an interpretive point. The exhibition needs to prepare visitors better for the kind of reading of the past it proposes to do.

Many visitors, of course, do not read exhibition labels anyway. The absence of an introductory label would matter less if not for inconsistencies in the exhibition's design and organization. In particular, there are disjunctions between the exhibition labels and the artifacts and images that accompany them: what you see does not always connect to what you are supposed to think.

In some areas within "Settlement," the visual and the conceptual elements complement each other very well. The section "Crisis in the Cutover" features probably the most effective visual evidence in the exhibition. A photo taking up one full wall shows a desolate field of stumps and broken trees. A smaller photo overlaid on top of it shows men standing in front of a huge tangled mass of roots that they unearthed with a stump puller. Nearby hangs the photo of the Porter's Mills church being pulled out of town. Clearly, the visuals show, something has gone awry in lumberland.

The point behind other visual elements in "Settlement" is less clear. A label discussing strikes ("Sawdust War") is accompanied, without explanation, by a photo of a lumber company's drying yard and a scale stick used to measure cut lumber. A subsection describing the importance of immigrants (particularly Germans and Norwegians) to the valley's labor force is rather randomly illustrated by a display of objects that immigrants brought with them from their homelands (a black beaded cape, two wooden trunks, a top hat).

Inconsistency in the exhibition's organization heightens concerns about visitors' ability to grasp its argument. Both the first and third sections are divided into two subsections, the second of which focus on Eau Claire. "Eau Claire, 'Sawdust City'" shows an array of artifacts from daily life between 1850 and 1890, including a telephone, an amputation kit, and a fire-hose cart. "Eau Claire, a City Redefined" dis-

plays several objects from 1890–1925 (a bowling ball, a hatbox, a typewriter) and re-creates a modern kitchen from the 1920s. These two subsections, almost purely descriptive, break the flow of the exhibition's argument. The exhibition needs to give more guidance about how to connect these parts to the exhibition as a whole. Should these subsections be seen as case studies? centerpieces? sidebars? Adding to the confusion for out-of-town visitors is the fact that "Settlement" never explicitly defines the geographic reach of the term "Chippewa Valley," so Eau Claire's position relative to the overall discussion is uncertain. (When I asked, the CVM staff defined the valley as the 2,400-square-mile watershed of the Chippewa River.)

A variety of factors, then, becloud the exhibition's main story. Judging from my visit on a busy summer Saturday, visitors' responses seem to be to make up stories of their own. Several different groups of visitors, instead of focusing on the exhibition's intended theme, went through the exhibition playing an impromptu game of Guess the Object. "What's this?" "An old stethoscope." "What's this?" "An old sewer pipe made from wood!" The only difficulties these visitors faced was in finding identification labels, which often are not placed immediately adjacent to the objects in question. Many families likewise enjoyed the exhibition as a site for cross-generational communication. Looking at a gas-powered washing machine, an older woman laughingly recalled to her companion that her mother had not trusted automatic models and would sit and watch the machine suspiciously through its whole cycle. A young father pointed out to his son a photo of grizzled carpenters holding their tools: "These are some of the people back then," he explained. "They didn't have the power tools we have today."

Visitors, it seems, treat "Settlement" in much the same way they do the "Rural Heritage" exhibition in the adjacent gallery—as a site for seeing old things, reminiscing, and passing on family lore. This is not a bad way to approach an exhibition, but it is not what the creators of "Settlement" intended. Perhaps visitors would engage more directly with the exhibition's argument if the changes it highlights were presented more directly and in more human terms. The best suggestion along these lines comes out of CVM's educational programming. A recent activity for children assigned each child a specific historical job related to the logging industry. Midway through the exhibition, they lost their jobs and had to find new ones in the manufacturing sector. This sort of inspired exercise both clarifies and personalizes the exhibition's historical argument. "Settlement" would benefit greatly from incorporating similar techniques into the exhibition itself.

As it stands, "Settlement and Survival" could be very useful to people already broadly familiar with the story it tells. It presents information that will interest historians of the upper Midwest, and it could serve as a good resource for secondary school and college teachers preparing lesson plans on the area's history. To more casual visitors, "Settlement" poses a difficult challenge. It both offers and asks of them more than has any previous exhibition at the Chippewa Valley Museum. It

wants them not only to examine the past but also to evaluate and interpret it. To help visitors fully engage in this approach to the past, the museum now needs to turn its attention to signaling more clearly these new opportunities and expectations to the public.

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