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Section 504-2
Short Assignment 1
Word Count: 1566
SI Mailbox Number: 101

Observing the Dexter Cider Mill ca. 1886

The subject of this paper is a one hundred and twenty year old cider mill located in Dexter, Michigan. I observed the operation and use of specialized equipment that compresses mashed up apples to extract their juice. I witnessed families and friends enjoying a final day of summer. I experienced an age old tradition practiced with simplicity and pride; that of making apple cider.

My observation involved three visits to the Dexter Cider Mill. During these visits some audio notes were taken as well as digital pictures. Admittedly a cider mill may seem an unlikely cultural institution; however my observations and research proved otherwise. In addition to visiting the cider mill from a purely observational standpoint, this paper seeks to explore the idea that a cider mill does indeed represent a cultural institution in ways consistent with those presented by David Carr in "The Promise of Cultural Institutions."¹

Though I observed this institution through the lenses of this assignment, I learned that the process of observation is dictated by the environment and circumstances of that which is being observed. My first impression was that this was an old place. It had been repeatedly painted, patched, added to and renovated as time and use demanded. Appearances aside, the unique "collection" of artifacts are accessed in a similar but distinctly different way than collections housed in a library or museum.

¹ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003): "In the Context of the Possible."

Absent were catalogues or indexes used to find something within the institution. Also missing were the atmospheric controls, sealed glass cases, and laser beam alarm systems protecting those things fundamental to an institution and its role in history, culture, and commerce. I learned that observing a cider mill as a cultural institution requires more than just casual observation or careful study of the complex meaning behind designed arrangements meant to inspire and educate.

What I learned about the process of observation is that the observer and the process are not two separate things. The process of observation requires careful attention to detail and a willingness to engage the experience for what it is. At times I was just another person fascinated by the antiquity of the mill, at other times I felt a connection to its history. The atmosphere was laden with familiarity and tradition. As the smell of fresh baked spiced donuts invaded my senses I watched the teenage helpers bring apples and warm donuts up through the floor from the kitchen using a dumb waiter operated by ropes and pulleys as it had been done for ages. Watching the creation of memories unfold as parents and children explored the mill I developed a deeper sense of appreciation and respect for the site and those managing it.

Approaching something familiar under the auspices of observing a cultural institution led to an elevated sense of awareness and brought significance to the occasion. I noted with greater detail the artifacts on display as well as their arrangement and placement. I also noted the frequency of certain artifacts and how items were organized in relation to their use. With an attentive ear, I listened to the dialogue of workers and visitors and watched their behavior carefully.

As part of exploring the idea that a cider mill is a cultural institution I will attempt to address a few questions from Carr's list of ten guiding questions behind entering and describing a cultural institution.

Carr suggests considering the types of thinking and learning that might happen there and whether there are any themes or unifying ideas evident in the setting. He also suggests that one ask themselves in what ways and under what conditions or circumstances the institution would be considered a lifelong resource. He also suggests that means and conditions that make a cider mill a lifelong social resource be explored to illustrate the cultural significance of such an institution.² Carr's suggestion to note the dynamics behind any connections to other associations reveals an interesting aspect that the author might not have been considered otherwise, the formation of the Michigan Cider Makers' Guild.

“The Guild is patterned after the craft guilds of the Middle Ages. It restricts membership to those who meet its stringent quality standards, and it has a vigorous program to keep its members up to date on improvements in cider-making practices. Michigan's leading cider mills have joined the Guild.”³

Taking into consideration what type of thinking and reflective learning might take place at a cider mill I watched from afar the interaction of families with the setting. Children and parents inspired by what they see are motivated to inquire and learn more about cider mills, their history and the impressive process itself. The operator educates visitors on the history and practice involved in pressing apples, the mechanics and equipment used, and the tradition of cider mills in Michigan. He inspires reflection on a time when apple cider was a special seasonal treat that required the combined effort and coordination of entire families.

² Carr, Chapter 3, "In the Context of the Possible," 40, 41.

³ 2006 Michigan Cider Makers Guild, <http://ciderguild.org/about2.php>.

Carr suggests that "only the library and the museum, among institutions for learning, allow multiple generations to reflect side by side."⁴ Witnessing parents renew and explore their curious nature with their children certainly suggests a type of reflection among generations. It could be argued that an institution supporting social memory as a fixed component of regional history represents a unique institute for learning. It has to be more than the cider and donuts. There is something essential in the setting that speaks to generational stability, to our sense of longevity and social awareness, to that which relates us to other generations. Maybe it isn't just the libraries and museums that allow for generations to reflect side by side.

People remember visiting a cider mill their entire lives. With some children, it can be a very engaging and memorable event. Maybe the memories themselves and subsequent reflection on the experience of visiting an institution like a historical operating cider mill are among the most important aspects relative to thinking and learning inspired by a cider mill.

The unifying idea or theme evident in the setting of the cider mill were apples, specific items related to apples, tools related to pressing apples for cider and for processing apples for consumption. On display in the main room were a series of antique apple peeling devices. Also present was a collection of cooking utensils designed specifically for preparing various apple dishes.

Less organized, but equally representative of a theme consistent with the cider mill was the presence of multiple cash registers, scales, and various types of liquid storage containers used throughout the years to support the operation of the cider mill. Weighing and selling apples, donuts and cider requires such equipment. A unifying theme is one of processing and commerce. To this day that theme persists but is now supported by the historical and cultural significance of the location.

⁴ Carr, Appendix B, "How to Observe," 43.

A cider mill can be seen as a sustainable lifelong resource. As long as there are apples and people that enjoy apple cider, there will be mills for making cider.⁵ Whether this resource is utilized depends on various factors that can affect longevity. However it is the antiquated machinery, the physical location and the traditions in which the public is invited to witness the process of making cider that supports the cider mill as being a lifelong resource. The operation and utility of the small family-owned mill has already spanned multiple generations. Provided economic and government hardships don't adversely impact the operation of the mill, it stands to reason that it will endure for generations longer.

Only recently have the historically independent cider mills across Michigan and the United States started to work together. The purpose of this collaboration is to protect the practice and heritage of making cider from control by government policy. By organizing and articulating the process and requirements they work toward solidifying their culture and values.

In order to view a cider mill as a cultural institution it was necessary to explore the idea that there is a distinct culture behind cider mills and milling in general. There are indeed behaviors and beliefs held by cider mill artisans relating to their craft that have been respected for generations. While time has certainly played a role in the shaping of this culture, the influence of government and organizational challenges cannot be readily dismissed.

My appreciation of cider mills has grown after this careful observation. During the process of watching visitors and their reactions, I witnessed history and tradition and found myself ever more curious about what it is that makes a cider mill such a significant part of our social system and culture.

⁵ Michigan is known for having a climate supportive of fruit due in part to the presence of the Great Lakes. An illustrative article can be found in the May/June 2006 Michigan History magazine titled, "The Secret Ingredient".

After observing the cider mill I shared details on my assignment with a couple Dexter folks; a bank teller and a business proprietor. Though I'm pretty much a stranger to them, they both recounted in rich detail their experiences of visiting a cider mill as a child and how they took their kids to the same mill and how this experience represents a unique bond between them that they remember for their entire lives. It made me consider that the memories themselves and subsequent reflection on the experience of visiting an institution like a historical operating cider mill are among the more important, albeit nostalgic qualities that makes a cider mill a cultural institution.