

HEAR, HERE: VOICES OF DOWNTOWN LA CROSSE

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WEBSITE: <http://www.hearherelacrosse.org/>

*We're looking at the west wall of the Pump House where a mural was unveiled in June of 2014. . . . it represents basically the people of La Crosse, you can see someone rowing in the water, you can see images from Oktoberfest, a medical doctor. . . . There's someone on there that is still a young person, there's people that have passed on. . . . right in the center . . . that's actually in Ho-Chunk tradition one of my grandsons, Levi Blackdeer. . . . I was just awestruck that [John Pugh, the artist] had taken that particular image because [that] was from when my grandfather was granted the Medal of Honor for being a code talker during WWII. So I remember that exact moment in time when that picture was taken . . . there's even a picture of three Hmong elders who are actually elders that I recognize.*

*My name is Tracy Littlejohn, I am a member of the Ho-Chunk nation, and I was born and raised here in La Crosse."*

Tracy Littlejohn's comments about an important place for her in downtown La Crosse, Wisconsin, is one of 38 stories captured so far for *Hear, Here*—a public history project. *Hear, Here* began in 2014-2015 in UWL public history and photography classes. Project Director Ariel Beaujot—with nine student and three community researchers—set out to widen the public view of downtown La Crosse. "Every person and every place has their stories. And a community is made up of multiple stories. With this project, we bring to the fore voices that are often overlooked when the history of downtown is told—intimate, neighborhood-level voices that tell the everyday stories that make up our city." The project debuted on April 12, 2015 and is ongoing.

My emphasis is on the *Hear, Here* website ([www.hearherelacrosse.org/](http://www.hearherelacrosse.org/)) as I have not been in La Crosse to experience the other major project component: the orange *Hear, Here* markers on the streets of

downtown. Still the website and signage system have overlapping content and shared purpose, so there are occasional references to markers.

The entire *Hear, Here* project has received considerable recognition, in particular, a 2016 Leadership in History Award from the American Association of State and Local History. While the markers have received the most attention, the website is the component that can be and has been shared most widely. As of November 30, 2016, there were 38 stories on the website and 37 on markers (with a goal of 60 stories by 2020). By December 6, 2016, there had been 8,532 distinct users for the website with 48 percent from the U.S. and the remainder from 111 countries. There have been 4,077 calls accessing a story. Forty percent came from beyond the 608 regional area code. Users represent 47 states.

The *Hear, Here* homepage is based on a street map. Users can use an actual street map or an abstracted version that may work better if you are neither in La Crosse nor familiar with it. Each point on the map leads to the storyteller's name, a sentence about content, access for the audio and a number to use to hear the story by phone. A further link leads to a transcript. Kathleen Hawkes' photography students have provided images to support each story. A narrative on the home page explains project intent.

Other than editing for length and occasional re-ordering, stories come from the primary source without elaboration. Thus far 28 stories come from *Hear, Here* interviews and 10 from an on-going Oral History Program conducted by other UWL historians. Interviews can be 1-2 hours long. But, listeners may be on their feet. There can be street noise and uncomfortable weather. Although some early postings were 6-7 minutes long, most users disconnected after about two minutes. Current standards are more realistic. Stories are complete (not a series of unrelated bullet points) and about two minutes in length.

Other webpages give background and credits, archive media coverage, and explain how to participate in the project. About 15 new stories have been accepted. Producers are working on a new project for the La Crosse north side. Three communities are interested in licensing.

I reviewed the website on several different systems. I easily learned how the interactive components worked. Transcripts were easy to access. When accessed with Google Chrome and FireFox, I was consistently able to use the audio, although this was not always the case with Explorer. I appreciated hearing speakers in their own voices. (Some audio for markers has been re-recorded for clarity.) Descriptions of photographs should be accessible by rolling over the images but that feature did not work for me. Full interviews and other project- specific materials are now in Special Collections at UWL's Murphy Library. They will soon be available to the public. Materials from the Oral History Program are also in the Special Collections and already available.

*Hear, Here* has been well planned and implemented. To determine who was missing from the record, researchers spent the first summer analyzing the existing oral history collection. Racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, the homeless and others were identified as gaps. Producers then sought representatives of these groups to interview. Students received additional training on interview technique. Interviewees provide informed consent forms. They may review their story and withdraw it if concerned. They may also be anonymous. Newcomer "Jane Doe" made this choice because she was uncertain about public response to her remarks on drinking and violence.

A few additions—a short La Crosse bibliography, list of storytellers, names of interviewers, dates of interviews and time period for events in the stories—would make the website more usable. Most importantly, the project assumes mainstream history is well-known but that is surely not true for most out-of-area listeners and probably not for many local residents. A short overview of general La Crosse history would show how *Hear, Here* stories fit in a larger narrative and also bring something new.

Downtown is a place where people have lived, worked and had fun for a long time, despite some harsh realities. Reviewed collectively (easy on the website), strong themes emerge in the voices of people who have a direct stake. Notable for me were the effort to preserve and strengthen downtown, the variety of work there, its role as a place of entertainment and the serious issues of homelessness and harassment.

Some efforts to help downtown falter while others succeed. Business owner and preservation advocate Chris Kahlow told about a developer who wanted to remove some historic row houses. “[He] . . . had to apply to the Preservation Commission. I argued that historic preservation and remodeling, rehabbing, was good economic sense and it was good for the community. The developer argued that it was too costly, which is the usual argument . . . . The developer won, and of course I felt very sad . . . . So [on demolition day], I . . . bought a brand-new silver chain and a lock and chained myself to the building. . . . the press came, and the contractors called the police. . . . [The police] knew . . . . I just was trying to make a point . . . . They . . . asked if I would just [go] to the other side of the building so that the debris wouldn’t injure me. . . . I unchained myself, and they watched me . . . chain myself onto that side of the building. . . .”

Anne Snow, a La Crosse Children’s Museum founder and now Executive Director, had a better result. “I had lived in New Orleans where there was a really great children’s museum. . . . when we moved here it was winter and there wasn’t a lot to do with a three-year-old and a one-year-old. So I really started because I missed [the museum] we had liked. . . . Charles and Marjorie Collins owned the [former Leath Furniture] building and they were actively trying to sell it . . . . [We] asked if we could see the space . . . . to help ourselves envision the museum. . . . by the end of the tour they just handed us the key and said, ‘. . . we think this would be the perfect home, if you can use it, it’s yours.’ ”

Stories about working downtown also reveal a lot about community character. Jake Hoeschler’s uncle Frank had extensive downtown property. “His slogan was, “We’re bullish on La Crosse. . . . in his buildings he had German scenes . . . [and a] plaque on the side of the building in German about ‘going forward La Crosse’ . . . . But it was always in German.” In WWII, someone called the police station and said . . . “that ‘Bunder’ has a swastika on top of the building and on top of the American flag.” But Jake had keys for the buildings and was able to show the police that the figure was a bull, not a swastika.

Christina Hotchkiss has spent years working in downtown bars: “[One owner] would call me and yell at me. When you’re the manager, you might as well be his child. And he can boss you around like your dad.

He would call me at one in the morning on days that I didn't have to work, "Christina, get down here. Change the soda tank. Nobody knows how to do it." . . .

Downtown has always been a place for entertainment, some of it rough. William Koch described an early era of licensed prostitution and knife fights. Something of that echoes in Jane Doe's tale of a jury case in the 2010s. A fight had left one combatant with a jaw cracked in three places. ". . . his mouth was wired shut . . . The charges were disorderly conduct and assault. . . .When [the jury] first polled . . . the majority felt like it was just a bar brawl . . . I, of course, was like 'Well I'm new here, explain this to me. Because what I hear all of you saying is this isn't a big deal because he was drunk . . . . that violent behavior is okay as long as you're drunk.'" The jury was appalled at this interpretation. They found the defendant guilty of disorderly conduct but still weren't able to agree on the assault charge and it was dropped.

Most late 20<sup>th</sup> century stories didn't end in violence however adventurous for someone. Barb Kooiman went into a "seedy" club in the 1970s and was immediately offered a job as a stripper. \$15.00 an hour. Her minimum wage job paid \$3.25. She thought about it. Jane Schley went downtown during one Oktoberfest. ". . . I was in The Popcorn, and it was literally wall-to-wall people. . . . before you know it, I am getting squished out into the street. . . . this cop says, "HEY! Back in the bar! No public consumption!" Which during Oktoberfest is pretty funny. . . . I said, "Officer, would you like to help me get back in there?" and he goes, "[Are you] being smart with me? I could haul you in you know." . . . that was my one and only brush with the law in La Crosse . . . .

Homelessness is a rare theme for a project like this. Toni Asher grew up in La Crosse and now directs the regional arts center. "This part of La Crosse was mostly industrial. . . . So it was very different than the arts district it is today. . . . in the early 2000s . . . shortly after I'd open, I'd have people start coming in and it would be the homeless people that slept under the grain elevators at night, and they would wait until I'd open up so they could come in and use our bathroom to wash up. . . . yes, there's people who sleep outside in the cold weather year round. They hang their clothes on a rusty nail under a bridge,

they're sleeping on a dirty old sleeping bag and that's all they have, and they're part of our community too.”

John McCue was on his way to work with a band. He describes himself at that time as “. . . a hobo. . . . A hobo is not a bum . . . he or she is looking for work. . . . I hadn't eaten for a couple days and I walked past this place called the Tosa Club. . . . a lot of those clubs have lunch and then they wouldn't be too busy until supper. . . .so the only guy in there was the bartender. [I said] I'm broke, I got a job here you know, I can come and pay you back if you'll front me . . . a hamburger and French fries. He says 'Okay, no problem'. . . . After I got paid . . . first thing I did was go down and . . . put the money on the table . . . He said, 'I never thought I'd see you again.' Basically, I like this area . . . and it could very well have been the kindness of that, of that one guy.”

As intended, *Hear, Here* includes stories from underrepresented minorities: Black, American Indian, LBGTQ, foreign nationals and religious minorities. (But not yet, for example, the 4.6 percent of the population that is Asian—mostly Hmong.) Sometimes minorities cannot count on even-handed treatment from all neighbors. Maureen Freedland told about challenging a Ten Commandments monument in a public park. “My parents came here as Holocaust survivors, they came here for religious freedom. . . . That's why it's so important to me . . . . I'm a member of the La Crosse County Board. . . . this Ten Commandments Litigation was brought up as a factor against me in my first campaign. . but I won . . . I feel like my position and my willingness to fight for the Constitution was recognized as important and that's part of why I did win that election.”

Reaction to certain stories from Black residents prompted the biggest challenge for the project to date. Shaundel Spivey was graduate student on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in 2012. “my story starts with me coming out of this abandoned building . . . that used to be known as the Cognac Club. . . . We . . . saw two men fighting: a Black man and a White man and then eventually a group of White men and a group of Black men started fighting . . . then I remember fast-forwarding to, like, seeing the cops come and clear out the

place and everybody was running and the cops really only arrested the Black guys, and one of those dudes was my brother. . . .”

The marker for Spivey’s story was vandalized, then stolen twice. One store owner feared the stories would cause other Black residents to react violently. (They did not.) Others expressed concern that any mention of race put the city in a negative light. One of the strengths of *Hear, Here* has been response to this negative criticism. Ariel Beaujot and her students looked for the roots of these fearful reactions. Mostly forgotten by residents was La Crosse’s history as a “sundown town” that had strongly discouraged Black migration into the city. UWL and the city’s Human Rights Commission brought sociologist James Loewen to La Crosse for discussions about sundown towns that were widely attended. The mayor made a formal apology. The city council pledged to address equity more vigorously in the future. The media webpage includes the research and coverage engendered by the controversy and response.

Susan McLeod, retired Director  
Chippewa Valley Museum  
Eau Claire, Wisconsin