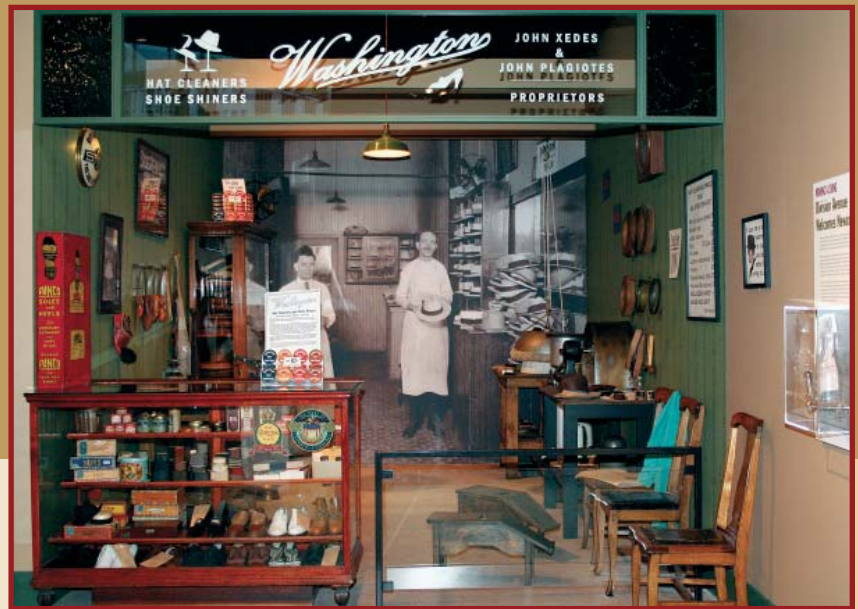


A Visitor's Viewpoint of *Newcomers: The People of This Place*

By Julie Christianson Stivers



One of the narratives at the beginning of *Newcomers: The People of This Place* explains that the newest permanent exhibit at the Public Museum traces the history of West Michigan through the lens of immigration and ethnicity, telling the stories of travelers who took a chance, took a journey and decided to establish roots in this place. From Native Americans, whose story is told extensively in the neighboring exhibit *Anishinabek: The People of This Place*, to 21st-century refugees from places like Somalia and Sudan, *Newcomers* delves into a rich material heritage to trace the development of the region's cultural diversity.

But *Newcomers* also reflects the Public Museum's own long history as a resource for understanding the ethnicity, cultural traditions and race relations of West Michigan. Another text in the new exhibit states that 10% of the current Grand Rapids population is foreign-born. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the Museum first began exploring ideas of ethnic identity, nearly two thirds of the city's people had been born in another country. In 1917, as the U.S. entered World War I, the Kent Scientific Institute (as the Museum was then named) was asked to organize an exhibit showcasing "people of Grand Rapids who were originally of the various allied nations." Gathering objects from local families, the Institute created an exposition that featured model rooms, music, artwork and special events.

A hundred years later, the Public Museum is still preserving the cultural heritage of West Michigan families. It has combined newly donated treasures with long-time collection favorites to create an exhibit that not only traces the history of people who came to West Michigan but also presents a colorful, vibrant portrait of the life they created here.

The new permanent display reflects contemporary thought about how to organize and portray ethnicity and cultural heritage. In the past, exhibits such as the old Heritage Hall in the Museum's former Jefferson Avenue location presented objects from the old country in isolated groups, treating ethnic heritage as static and unchanging. *Newcomers* allows visitors to explore ethnicity in both individual families and the whole community as constantly changing, as a dynamic force that shapes a region's identity.

The *Newcomers* exhibit uses thematic areas to explore how people from many different backgrounds can have similar experiences when they leave their homes for a new place. French voyageurs came to trade with the Native Americans. New England businessmen came to take advantage of available land. European immigrants came to work in factories. People from all over the world arrived to escape political unrest and economic failure. Their common experiences are interwoven in exhibit sections titled *Leaving Home*, *Coming to This Place*, *Settling In*, *Making a Living*, *Building a Family*, *Creating Community*, *Realizing Identity*, and, finally, *A New Place*, which emphasizes that Grand Rapids is "a city peopled by Newcomers, a place unfinished, ever evolving."

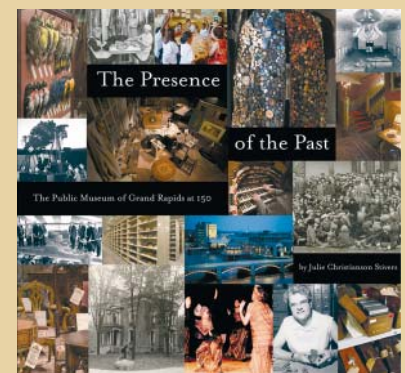
The idea of using multiple stories told simultaneously is part of a new approach to ethnicity and community that has been developing in humanities

Recreation of Washington Shoe and Hat Shop which was owned by Greek immigrants John Xedes and John Plagiotes.

Since 1995, Julie Christianson Stivers has chronicled the Museum and its doings through the pages of *Discoveries*, turning her "flying pencil" towards subjects both weighty and frivolous in her pursuit of the right mix of stories to captivate and inform. With this issue of the newsletter, Julie is "passing the editorial baton" to Museum staff.

As the author of the book *The Presence of the Past*, commemorating the Museum's first 150 years, Julie enjoys a perspective on the Museum unlike anyone else and uses that vast store of knowledge for the benefit of the Museum and our members.

Copies of the book *The Presence of the Past* are available in the Museum shop.





A Tasty Stew, an impressionistic arrangement of ethnic foods, preparation tools and menus.

scholarship over the past few decades. The National Endowment for the Humanities, which helped to fund the Public Museum's project, has been referring other museums to *Newcomers* as a model for how community museums can discuss race and ethnicity.

The process that led to the exhibit's success has been long and involved. It started in 2001 with documenting the Museum's extensive collections related to world cultures. Funded in part by NEH and the Institute of Museum & Library Services, experts in the material culture of many ethnic groups were brought to the Museum to examine the collections and analyze a wide variety of artifacts.

Grants from NEH and local foundations including The Frey Foundation and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation helped fund the next step of the process. A community advisory group was formed comprising representatives from ethnic groups within the entire West Michigan region. They were joined by members from fields of academic study including history, anthropology, sociology and material culture, and others representing organizations striving for social change, such as the Woodruff Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Aquinas College, and the planners of diversity curriculum for area schools.

The Museum also sent out a community-wide call for artifacts and stories. *Newcomers* features many long-held Museum treasures, such as account books from early trader Antoine Campau and portraits of city father John Ball and his wife Mary, alongside newly donated objects. A huge, lavish *baldacchino*, or street shrine, forms the centerpiece of the section titled *Creating a Community*. The fourteen-foot, two-ton ornamental canopy was made in Grand Rapids in 1922, commissioned by immigrants from Sicily and carried annually through the streets of the city's Little Italy by Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church parishioners. It was donated to the Public Museum and has been painstakingly conserved for the *Newcomers* exhibit.

In an interesting contrast, another area of the *Creating a Community* section features a replica of a Polish Aid Society Hall, depicting the fraternal halls established by Polish immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th century. At one time there were more than a dozen on the city's West Side, and the example in the exhibit invites visitors to share the camaraderie and good cheer that many newcomers must have found in them.

Every section of *Newcomers* is packed with stories. In *Making a Living*, family businesses reflect the entrepreneurial spirit of newly arrived immigrants. An Armenian cabinet maker who came to Grand Rapids in 1914 to escape Turkish massacres operated a popcorn business that was so successful that for many generations the word "popcorn" was virtually synonymous in the city with "Armenian". The Washington Hat Cleaners and Shoe Repair, a replica of a shop owned by Greek immigrants, will delight *Streets of Old Grand Rapids* fans.

The exhibit includes many personal stories, but also moves easily from the specific to the general, from the historical to the contemporary. There is a display that explores how neighborhoods have been shaped by waves of different settlement, tracing one address off Grandville Avenue from 1910 to 2005. There are also several environments containing objects to touch and explore, such as a train station waiting room, or a young Mexican-American girl's bedroom. Computer screens throughout the exhibit offer interactive opportunities to delve deeper into connections between people and place. Gallery guides contain information on the 48 nationalities and ethnic groups represented within. Large overhead video displays and subtle audio cues create an ambience that helps to tie different areas together.

Newcomers highlights more than 600 artifacts and the personal stories of more than 70 different families. Almost anyone can find something that relates to their own family connections, if only a favorite childhood memory from the collage that makes up *A Tasty Stew*, an impressionistic arrangement of ethnic foods, preparation tools and menus. The computer interactive screen that accompanies the section is a wonderful example of how the Museum has used the massive amount of information collected in years of research for the project.

Newcomers is an exhibit that is both rich and deep. Weaving together threads of different nationalities and different time periods, stories of people who came here from elsewhere and stories from their descendants, scholarly research and personal interpretations, it creates a tapestry that, like the city peopled by newcomers, is unfinished and evolving. It is a place to ponder the past and the present, and to discover connections that help make sense of a past that binds us together as we live in the present. ■