Film looks for lessons from factory town’s past

Longtime MCLA professor Maynard Seider explores North Adams’ post-industrial evolution in documentary

BY JOHN TOWNES

Professor Maynard Seider had a front-row seat as North Adams experienced the loss of its manufacturing base and subsequently struggled to rebuild its economic foundation.

As a sociology professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts for 32 years, with a particular interest in the subject of labor and industry, Seider studied this process closely.

His academic activities included teaching a course on the social history of North Adams in which his students conducted detailed research on the community and its ongoing transition. He was also co-author of a play, “The Sprague Years,” in 1995, that chronicled the rise and fall of the city’s largest employer through the middle of the 20th century.

Now, two years after retiring, Seider has completed an overview of these changes – and the larger national trends they reflect – as the writer and director of a documentary film called “Farewell to Factory Towns?” which premiered in April.

Seider’s film looks back at the city’s past and examines its current situation and prospects through interviews with local residents, labor activists, artists, historians, John Sprague (the last CEO of Sprague Electric) and many others with varying perspectives. He also had access to Sprague Electric’s corporate archives.

Seider said he has two goals for the film: to serve as a record of local history and as a microcosm of what has happened to communities across the United States as a result of de-industrialization of the national economy and other social and economic trends.

“When I came to North Adams, I fell in love with the city,” said Seider, who is now a professor emeritus at MCLA. “With this film I want to leave the community with a record of its heritage and what has been done here. I hope it will be useful as a historical archive for students and others in the future.”

In addition, he sees the issues it raises as relevant beyond North Adams.

“On a broader level, I hope it can reach other audiences outside of North Adams,” he said. “What happened here is similar to the experience of many other communities. I would like to see the film help to spark questions and discussion about these issues.”

While the film directly addresses the city’s difficult issues, Seider said he also intended it to be a positive counterpoint to some of the negative ways North Adams has sometimes been portrayed.

He said he was partially prompted to do the film as a response to “Downside Up,” a documentary made several years ago by Nancy Kelly about the city’s problems and the potential of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) – which arose amidst the former Sprague industrial complex – to turn the city around.

“Personally, I thought that film was too critical about the industrial past of North Adams,” he said. “It also portrayed the population as passive victims. I did not think that was an accurate depiction, and I wanted to present what I believe is a truer picture.”

Seider explained that, in his view, the city’s industrial heritage and the way the city has responded to its problems should be seen as a source of pride.

“North Adams has a great history as a manufacturing city, and the community has not been not passive at all,” he said. “There is a lot of positive spirit in North Adams. When Sprague was leaving the city, for example, there were efforts by local people to buy the operation to keep it running. And after Sprague left, the people here have been working hard to deal with these problems and revitalize North Adams.”

Seider began working on the documentary about five years ago.

The film was co-produced by Seider and AmherstMedia.org. He received a small research grant from the college, but the film is largely a volunteer project by himself and others. “I was fortunate to meet people who were willing to help,” he said.

The documentary was edited by Zeke
Meginsky, a 2009 MCLA graduate, and it is narrated by Court Dorsey. It was filmed by Meginsky, MCLA television studio manager Peter Gentile and Dr. Michael Birch, an English/communications professor at the college.

Seider also received assistance from local-access cable television stations. Music was provided by the Wintergreen Trio, a Berkshire-based group, and it features Milltown Waltz, a song composed for the film by band member Alice Spatz.

The film had its premier at MCLA on April 17, and has had several other showings. It is scheduled to be presented on June 3 at 3 p.m. at Western Gateway Heritage State Park, Building 4 in North Adams. In addition, it has been played in rotation on cable-access channel Northern Berkshire Community Television and is also slated to be shown on Pittsfield Community Television.

Seider said he is also hoping to make it available on video disc, and he may place it on the Internet for streaming. Information, schedules and a streaming video trailer for the film are available at farewelltofactorytowns.com.

“Can art save North Adams?”

North Adams originally developed through the growth of its textile industry. Then from the 1940s to the 1980s, its economy was dominated by Sprague Electric Company, the world’s largest producer of capacitors. But North Adams experienced severe economic decline and an extensive loss of jobs in the 1980s, as Sprague closed its operations in the city.

A major focus of revitalization plans in the latter ’80s and ’90s was on the redevelopment of the former Sprague complex into MASS MoCA, which was envisioned as a major cultural institution. The museum finally opened in 1999 after more than a decade of planning.

A basic goal of this strategy was to stimulate the economy with the museum and tourism, and to attract other creative artists and related businesses.

One of the themes of Seider’s film is the question of whether MASS MoCA has made a significant difference or not.

“One of the key questions of the documentary is ‘Can art save North Adams?’ And, if not, what else needs to be done?” said Seider.

The film presents varying views on that in its interviews, Seider himself believes the results have been mixed.

“In many ways MoCA has been helpful,” he said. “It’s successful as a museum, it has put North Adams on the map and brings in thousands of visitors to the city annually. It has attracted artists to move to the city, and led to some related economic development, including the redevelopment of other mills for new uses. The museum also sponsors free events and services to the local community.”

However, he continued, the strategy has fallen short in other ways.

“The poverty rate in North Adams is still very rough,” he said. “The only jobs available to many people are low-wage, part-time service jobs. Before MoCA opened, it was projected that it would lead to the creation of at least 600 jobs in the city. But only 65 people work at the museum, and studies have indicated that the total jobs created indirectly by MoCA are less than half of the original predictions. It has not had some other anticipated effects either. Downtown North Adams still looks semi-deserted.”

In light of that, Seider believes the community still needs to look for additional solutions for its economy. “While MASS MoCA has been helpful, it’s clear that North Adams can’t rely on that alone to create enough good jobs to meet the needs of the majority of the people who live here,” he said.

Long-standing interest in labor

Seider has well-defined opinions about the larger loss of manufacturing, the pressures placed on the working class, the increasing disparity of incomes and social and economic dislocation in the United States.

Seider, who is originally from Connecticut and now lives in Amherst, said he has always been interested in the issues of industry and
labor. “My parents were in unions and I grew up in that environment,” he said. “It’s something that stayed with me in my own career.”

Seider received his B.A. from the University of Connecticut and a master’s degree and doctorate from the University of Wisconsin. After completing college, he worked in a factory for a year and he later published his experiences and observations in a book called *A Year in the Life of a Factory*.

While a professor at MCLA, he was personally active in labor issues at the college as the president of the Faculty Association. In 2003 the New England Sociological Association named him as the New England Sociologist of the Year.

Although job losses, the erosion of incomes for the working and middle class, and concentrations of wealth and power at the top have received increased attention since the economic crisis of 2008, Seider contended that they are the outcome of longer-term trends that began in the 1970s.

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Seider believes that such an initiative would have a similar effect today. “There are many people who need work, and there is much work that needs to be done,” he said. “Since the private sector is not creating a sufficient number of good jobs, it makes sense for the government to get more involved and put people to work.”

He acknowledged, however, that this is a hard sell in today’s climate of political polarization about the role of government and the emphasis on budget cuts and reduced public services.

“It’s not a partisan issue anymore,” he said. “It’s not just the Republicans who oppose government involvement. The Democrats are not willing to stand up for these ideas anymore either. So both parties are pushing for things like cutting back on public jobs and services. The recent stimulus was too small to make a difference, and much of that went to tax breaks rather than funding programs.”

While he believes that public pressure might help to bring about New Deal policies, Seider also sees other avenues for social change and broadly based economic renewal as particularly important.

“The political structure is stymied, so we also have to look to grass-roots social movements to achieve positive change,” he said. “The protests against Gov. (Scott) Walker’s stance against unions in Wisconsin and the Occupy movement have at least focused more attention on these issues.”

He said that constructive, community-based activities at the local level are vital.

“He also believes there is still potential for some restoration of an industrial economy. “There is always the possibility for some manufacturing to come back, such as the making of solar panels and other technologies,” he said.

In Seider’s view, there should also be more pressure to place an appropriate value on jobs that exist in the service sector.

“We should look at jobs like retailing as being similar to factory work, in terms of enabling people to earn a decent living,” he said. “Jobs at Walmart don’t have to be low-paid and part-time.”

Seider expressed cautious optimism about the prospects for restoring a more broadly based economy and increased employment and wage levels.

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**“There are other models of what people can do by working together to improve conditions,” he said. “The film points to the ways that is happening in North Adams, which has a very strong tradition of volunteering. It looks at how people are organizing to support the community in a variety of ways. Organizations like the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition are doing great work, for example.”**

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