

North America's Building Trades Unions

MC3 Chapter 6 – Dig Where You Stand

“Dig Where You Stand”—the concept of the non-specialists researching and uncovering historical information about their place of work—is an old idea but it was not until the late 1970s that it was repackaged and presented in a useable form to amateur historians. The place of origin was Sweden and the moving force behind it was Sven Lindquist, a labor activist and writer whose book *Gräv Där Du Star: Hur Man Utforskar ett Jobb* (Dig Where You Stand: How to Research a Job) published in 1978 started a worldwide interest in the project. His theory was: “The experts might each be experts in his or her own field but when they are talking about your job you are the expert. That gives you a measure of self-confidence and a basis for amateurs and professional researchers to meet on equal footing.” Among the points he stressed were: “History is dangerous.” The results are still with us and knowledge of the past confers power on those who are aware of it.

Until workers understand where they stand (their workplace, their history) and how to use the resources/tools available to dig with (local library, county museum/archives, local/state labor history society, digital tools on the Internet), they will be forever in the background of the “official” version of events. According to Lindquist, each and every worker in every country has the power and potential to create a new image for labor and work, one “that puts workers and their work in the foreground.”ⁱ

Suggested Assignments - “Where You Stand” (do one of the following)

- 1) Interview two Building Trades members about how they became union members and why. Compare and contrast their answers with what you have heard about unions and draw some conclusions from this brief sampling about the union’s ability to attract members. You do not need to name the individuals but you must indicate the date(s) of the interviews, where they were conducted, and place in quotation marks any statements made directly by the participants.
- 2) Interview a retired family member or acquaintance about their job and the way it changed over the years. Compare and contrast the changes with your own work experience. You do not need to name the individuals but you must indicate the date(s) of the interview, where conducted, and place in quotation marks any statements made directly by the participant.
- 3) If you have school aged children who are taking an American history or Social Studies course, or you are taking a similar course yourself, write a two page paper reviewing the labor contents (or lack thereof) in the textbook and any supplementary reading.

Dig Where You Stand - Digging Tools (do one of the following)

- 1) Visit your public library and interview a reference librarian about what information it has (if any material) on local workers, workplaces, and unions. Ask if they have a hardcopy or digital files about work and workers. Write up a two page report of your visit listing the key items available and/or detailing the type of material lacking in the library's collection.

- 2) Visit your local county history society and interview a reference person about its hard copy or digital collections that relate to work and workers in your immediate area. Write up a two page report of your visit listing the key items available and offering suggestions as to what type of material might be available to the institution but is not being collected there.

- 3) Conduct a thorough Internet search for digital resources that relate to work and workers in your immediate area. Write up a two page report of the results of your search listing the key items available and offering suggestions as to what type of material should be available online but has not been collected there.

- 4) Visit a Building Trades local union office and interview the person in charge of the records. Find out what records are kept for historical or legal reasons and what non-current records are destroyed because they are no longer needed and have no historical value. Write up a two (or more) page report of what you found out.

ⁱ Sven Lindquist, "Dig Where You Stand," *Meddelande Från Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv Och Bibliotek* (Stockholm: Vol. 16, September 1980), pp. 42-47.