

Newsletter article – Making a Living

Mark your calendars today for the Saturday, September 8 opening of our newest permanent exhibit *Challenges, Choices & Change: Working for a Living*. A ribbon cutting will be held at 1 p.m. followed at 2 p.m. by a presentation by exhibit co-curator Mike Matejka. Refreshments and special activities will follow.

For nearly 200 years, the people of McLean County have daily earned their bread “by the sweat of their brow” (and the engagement of their brains). Where did they work? What were their tasks? Did they gain the job they wanted? If not, what restricted them? How did they win a voice at work? How did work change with new technology? These questions and more are answered in *Working for a Living*—featuring jobs in physical labor, trades, manufacturing, merchandising, entertainment, and both public and civil service.

Changing technology transformed work and opened new opportunities. Early European settlers were dependent upon horse and wagon travel, with limited access to larger marketplaces. In the 1850s, arriving railroads accelerated economic growth. Small towns grew along the tracks and skilled workers arrived to run trains and maintain locomotives and cars at the Chicago & Alton Railroad Shops. Goods were shipped and arrived quicker, along with new emigrants to McLean County. This faster moving world accelerated with new communication techniques, the telegram and the telephone. When the 20th century dawned, the automotive age began. As roads were paved communities were transformed. Small town merchants now had to compete with the urban center. New businesses sprang up to service the auto and its driver, helping create McLean County’s largest employer, State Farm Insurance. As work changed, so did workplace relationships. Occupations once limited by race and gender slowly opened for greater access. Workers organized to have a voice. Entrepreneurs saw opportunity and reached for success. Post World War II jobs were transformed as computers and electronic communication reshaped human labor and air travel brought McLean County closer to the international marketplace. Local workers embraced and adapted to these changes as well as the new challenges each created. They chose a variety of careers, sometimes taking risks, but always hopeful to prosper.

Matejka and exhibit co-curator and designer Susan Hartzold dug deep into the Museum’s resources to identify hundreds of artifacts and images and to uncover the individual stories of over eighty men and women from all walks of life who worked in McLean County. “Work takes up so much of our waking lives; researching and exploring the stories of typical workers earning their living and practicing their unique skills made this such an enjoyable and eye-opening project to work on,” noted Matejka. “Providing a deeper understanding of the choices workers had in the kind of work they were able to get and how those choices changed over time were key goals of the exhibit,” Hartzold added, “It was also important to make clear what limitations gender, ethnicity, economic status, and education had on those choices. Torii Moré, the Museum’s curator of digital Humanities, had a huge impact on achieving those goals through the creation of interactive videos and touch screen activities.”

Working for a Living is the fourth of five new permanent exhibit galleries created using funds from the Museum’s recently completed Capital Campaign. The final exhibit, which will replace the Politics gallery, is scheduled to open fall 2019.