



## 5 A Social History of a Changing Environment: The Don River Valley, 1910–1931

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Not far from the spot where, at present, the Don-street bridge crosses the river, on the west side and to the north, lived for a long time a hermit-squatter, named Joseph Tyler ... His abode on the Don was an excavation in the side of the steep hill, a little way above the level of the river bank ... To the south of his cave he cultivated a large garden, and raised among other things, the white sweet edible Indian corn, a novelty here at the time; and very excellent tobacco.

Scadding 1873: 228–9

Henry Scadding's 1873 description of Joseph Tyler's cave is the first detailed record in what would become a long history of homelessness in Toronto's Lower Don River valley. According to Scadding's account, Tyler was an industrious and inventive recluse, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War who manufactured and sold 'pitch and tar' to merchants in town, and ferried the Helliwell brewery's beer in his 'magnificent canoe' when the roads were too muddy to use. He was a puzzling figure – Scadding notes the 'mystery attendant on his choice of life of complete solitude [and] his careful reserve.' His choice of location was equally mysterious: the Lower Don River in Tyler's time (the 1820s and 1830s) was separated from the town of York by the woods of the government reserve, making Tyler a man distinctly on the margins. Whether Tyler chose to live on the Lower Don or was pushed there by circumstance is difficult to determine. Certainly his livelihood of pitch production and pine knot carving would have been facilitated by a location close to the forest, and the river provided easy transportation into town. The uncertainty surrounding Joseph Tyler is emblematic of

the history of people on the margins – indeed, the fact that he is named and some details of his life recorded is more than we have for most of the people who found themselves living in the valley, for various reasons, over the last two hundred years.

A connection exists, I suggest, between dominant perceptions of the river valley as a marginal space at the edge of the city and its function as a repository for marginalized people. Toronto is not the only city to witness a connection between ravines or ‘low lands’ and marginal housing: Kellogg’s 1909 *Pittsburgh Survey* reported on ‘squatters’ and ‘disreputable families’ living in the polluted area of ‘Skunk Hollow,’ and Minneapolis’s ‘Bohemian Flats’ shared a similar reputation among nineteenth-century reformers (Kellogg 1914).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, land value and perceptions of risk were at work.<sup>2</sup> Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier’s study of squatters and working-class families in nineteenth-century Hamilton is illustrative in demonstrating the geographic connections between industry, polluted and poorly drained lands, and working-class neighbourhoods (Cruikshank and Bouchier 2004; Bouchier and Cruikshank 2003). Despite substantial work in Canadian historiography on marginalized groups and, in the environmental history literature, on degraded spaces, few studies have examined the links between those places and people relegated to the margins of urban environments. While most studies in the environmental-inequality literature describe the unequal distribution of environmental hazards in racialized or working-class neighbourhoods (see, for example, Platt 2005; Hurley 1995; Bullard 1990), few investigate the congregation of marginalized populations in already degraded spaces or in urban/rural borderlands.<sup>3</sup> Even fewer explore the link between homeless people and degraded environments.<sup>4</sup> How such spaces were constructed as marginal, and the attractions they held for homeless travellers, have yet to receive detailed treatment.

Pointing to this connection between marginality of place and of human populations conjures a number of theoretical pitfalls, not the least of which being charges of environmental determinism. Urban geographers have long attempted to shed the legacy of early-twentieth-century scholars such as Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess, who applied ideas from the nascent field of ecology to argue that competition for scarce natural resources such as land or water led to the stratification of social groups in different ‘niches’ through the urban environment. Inasmuch as environment affected behaviour, they concluded, poorer environments produced populations more prone to crime and deviance

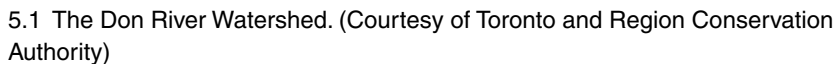
(Park 1952; Park et al. 1925). I am not suggesting that environmental factors alone determined the actions of those who sought refuge in the valley. The factors that pulled and pushed people to the valley, and that fuelled corresponding perceptions of marginality, were certainly more varied and more complex. Instead, I seek to draw attention to what emerges from the sources as an indisputably observable phenomenon: the congregation of people widely perceived as ‘social undesirables’ within what was widely perceived as an undesirable or problematic landscape. In making this connection, I seek to stress that environment *did* play a role in these people’s everyday lives: while it was certainly not the only factor drawing them to the valley, the presence of relatively unoccupied land close to the city centre must have presented some degree of attraction to those without regular work or shelter. Other factors, such as the active discouragement of vagrancy in most parts of the city, and the relative absence of policing authority in ravine spaces, likely also played a role in attracting homeless people.

In an attempt to understand better the forces at work in relegating certain populations and places to the margins, I turn to Canadian labour historian Ian McKay’s provocative call to re-evaluate the central role of liberalism in shaping Canadian history. As McKay suggests, the extension of a liberal project of rule across early-nineteenth-century Canada created a socio-political landscape of centres and peripheries, insiders and outsiders (2000). ‘Centres’ in this analogy represent those places and populations in which liberal ideals were effectively taken up, such as the rational street grids of urban centres, the single-family dwelling, the hegemony of the urban (male) middle class; ‘peripheries,’ by extension, were those places and populations within which aliberal practices persisted, or actively resisted, the rise of a new order: the Canadian north, aboriginal communities, labour unions. As McKay explains, the ‘individuals’ at the ‘conceptual nucleus’ of liberalism should be considered not as ‘actual living beings’ but rather as ‘the entity each one of them might, if purified and rationalized, aspire to become’ (625). In this way liberalism categorized certain individuals as deficient – among them, ‘women, workers, ethnic minorities, and Amerindians’ all ‘[marked] out as “Other”’ by the liberal model (626).

What is compelling about McKay’s reconnaissance or ‘re-knowing’ of liberalism is its potential to link the processes that marginalized certain populations with similar imperatives at work in classifying difficult or unpredictable environments as marginal or ‘waste’ spaces. His articulation of liberalism as it was expressed in nineteenth-century Canada em-

phasizes the simplification of complex systems, the desire to eradicate unpredictability, and the attempt to extend a rational, managerial ethos across territory and populations. Applied to the land, the liberal vision of individuals 'as separate from, and acting upon, the natural world' correspondingly cast environment as property to improve, rationalize, make productive (2000: 631–2). Environments that resisted improvement, that proved somehow difficult to occupy, to make industrious, or to gain value from – mountain-sides and river valleys, deserts and wetlands – were dismissed by this logic as marginal, deviant, uncooperative, wild. That 'peripheral' populations should exist within peripheral environments should not, perhaps, be so surprising. Examples are all around us: the impoverished rural communities of the central Appalachia; the isolated First Nations reserve battling contaminated water and few opportunities; the fishing community pursuing diverse strategies of subsistence on the Atlantic coast. As cultural geographer Rob Shields has observed, social divisions have spatial expression. Places on the margin, in his assessment, become places left behind by the rush of modernity – liminal spaces that invert or actively subvert dominant values of civilization and rationality (Shields 1991). The Don River valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I argue in the discussion that follows, was one of those places.

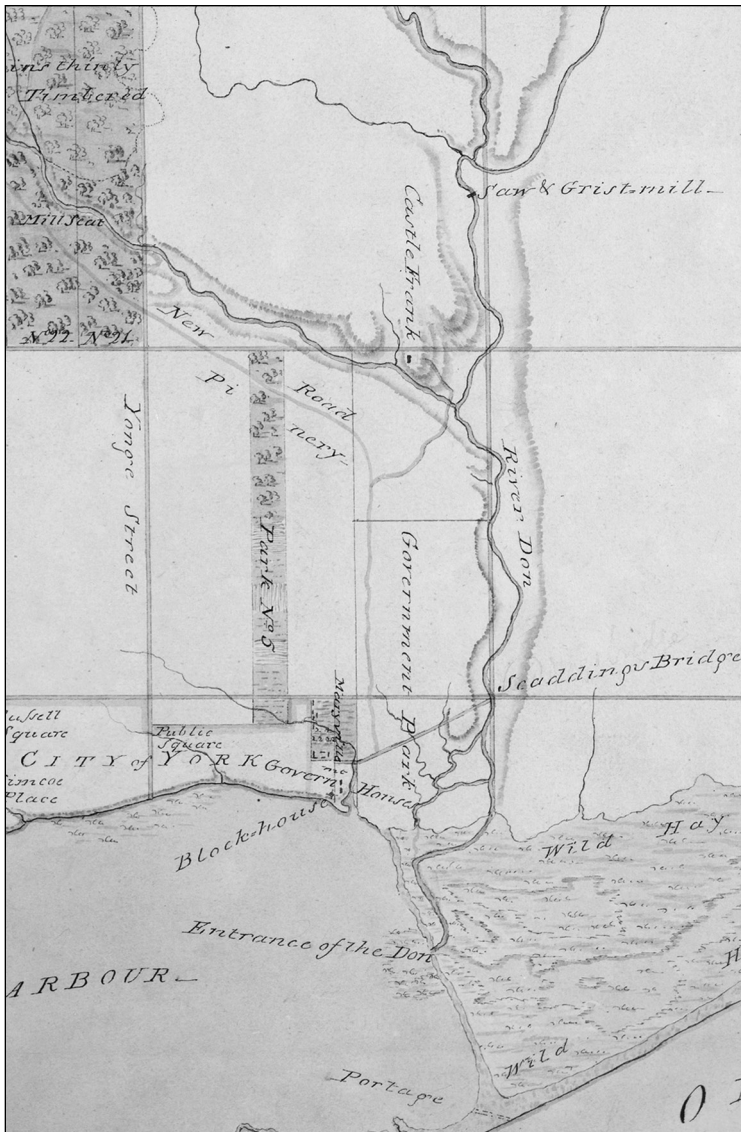
This chapter draws upon newspaper articles, local histories, historical photographs, and municipal reports to sketch a history of the interactions between people and place in the Don River valley. I have chosen to focus not on the working-class communities that grew up alongside the industrialized areas of the lower valley (south of the forks), but on people who experienced even less security – those who turned to the valley itself for refuge. Throughout the chapter, I return to a central dialectic of perception and experience – the tension between the ways the valley and its inhabitants were perceived by the more privileged residents of the centre and what was happening, as best we can discern from the limited sources that exist, 'on the ground.' Place itself becomes a source in piecing together the experiences of people pushed to the edges of society. The kinds of things people sought in that place, and the opportunities it presented – expected and otherwise – give some sense of the motivations of marginalized groups in choosing the valley over other options for relief housing. I will begin by sketching a brief overview of the factors that relegated an environment once central to the development of the town of York to one that was peripheral and stigmatized by the latter decades of the nineteenth century. From there,



I will turn to the experiences of two groups of people who sought refuge in the valley in the early twentieth century.

### **A Marginal Environment**

For John Graves Simcoe, Upper Canada's first lieutenant governor, the sheltered curve of the east end of Toronto Bay and its tributary streams presented a landscape of possibility. Arriving in the area in the summer of 1793, Simcoe noted the harbour's natural defensibility and its potential to supply the future town of York and its environs with lumber. 'At the Bottom of the Harbour,' he reported to acting colonial administrator Alured Clarke in May 1793, 'there is a Situation admirably adapted for a Naval Arsenal and Dock Yard, and there flows into the Harbour a River [the Don] the Banks of which are covered with excellent Timber' (in Firth 1962: 4). Satisfied with his assessment of the area's potential, he had his surveyor Alexander Aitkin lay out a plot for the future town of York immediately west of the mouth of the Don, at the base of today's Parliament Street. He established a four-hundred-acre reserve for 'government buildings' west of the river (stretching from the lakeshore north to today's Carlton Street and west to Parliament), and by 1799, the first parliament buildings had been erected near the intersection of today's Parliament and Front Streets (Adam et al. 1885: 211; see figure 5.2). Before returning to England in 1796, Simcoe awarded generous farm lots in the vicinity to military officers and favoured officials within his inner circle. For many grantees, holdings along the Don complemented already valuable properties closer to town. They could dabble with farming along the flats of the river with little pressure to create viable operations. Some, like Simcoe's secretary John Scadding, farmed their holdings with relative success (Robertson 1894: 194–5). Others chose instead to erect lavish suburban mansions on their lands overlooking the valley (Ontario Department of Planning and Development 1950, part 1: 34). This was particularly true west of the river along Yonge and Davenport Streets, where country estates such as Rosedale prevailed until mid-century and beyond. The area around the Lower Don, then, enjoyed a fleeting desirability in the first years of settlement. By the early 1800s, however, development had begun to move north and west from Simcoe's original town plot. Although prominent inhabitants of York continued to speculate in lands abutting the river valley in the 1810s, by 1820 the area had become saddled with an increasingly undesirable reputation (Ganton 1974: 14).



5.2 Detail from William Chewett, Map of York, 1802 (Toronto Public Library, MS1889.1.6). Note government reserve (labelled 'Government Park') in centre of map west of Don River and 'Government House' (parliament buildings) on lakeshore northwest of the river mouth.

A number of factors worked against the desirability of the lower valley lands in this period. From the earliest days of European settlement, certain problems were especially pronounced in the east end. Most prominent among these was the fever or ague that tormented settler populations each summer. Characterized by alternating symptoms of severe fever and shaking chills, the 'ague' or 'lake fever' was an almost inevitable, if rarely fatal, aspect of life in Upper Canada in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Now understood as a strain of malaria (from the eighteenth-century Italian *mal'aria*), a disease spread by the bite of the *Anopheles* mosquito, at the time the ague was thought to result from inhaling 'bad air.' In a letter to a former employer in Quebec City in September 1801, Toronto printer John Bennett wrote: 'I am just recovering from a severe fit of fever and ague which confined me to bed for ten days past – no body can escape it who pretends to live here ... There is a marsh about [half] a mile from where I live from which a thick fog arises every morning – people attribute [the fever] in great measure to that and to the low and uncultivated state of the Country' (in Firth 1962: 242). Gases produced by decomposing organic matter took on the ominous label of 'miasmas' – disease-producing vapours – and the places where such organic matter accumulated, such as swamps and wetlands, became places to fear, avoid, and, best yet, destroy through drainage and fill.

Before the discovery of the malaria parasite in 1880 and subsequent discoveries of mosquitoes as vectors of transmission, place itself bore the mantle of disease risk. Certain environments were considered more 'unhealthy' than others. In 1803, for example, Sir Isaac Brock reported in a letter to military secretary James Green that the soldiers quartered in the Block House at the mouth of the Don were 'falling ill of the Ague and Fever in great numbers,' while the garrison at the west end of town 'continues in perfect health.' The evidence confirmed his suspicions about the environment around the Lower River, '[shewing] plainly that the character given of the situation of the Block House is too well founded' (in Firth 1962: 72). A quarter-century later, petitioners to the Upper Canadian legislature in 1830 stressed the 'inconvenience and unhealthiness' of the site of the recently burned Parliament House, located at the foot of Parliament Street just west of the Don marshes, in their call to reconstruct the Parliament buildings near the lieutenant governor's residence in New Town (west of the original town plot). 'No person having a regard to health would select [the site near the Marsh] for a residence,' they argued; 'the untenanted State of houses adjoin-



ing the said Marsh, confirm them in this opinion' (in Firth 1966: 30–1). Ague was not the only disease associated with the marsh; as Jackson shows in this volume, fears of cholera were used to justify extensive improvement plans for the Ashbridge's Bay marsh in the 1890s.

Conevery Bolton Valencius has provided useful context for this notion of 'unhealthy' landscapes in her 2002 monograph *The Health of the Country*. For nineteenth-century Americans, Valencius reminds us, the environment did not stop 'at the seeming boundary of the skin,' but instead, 'the surrounding world seeped into [one's] every pore, creating states of health that were as much environmental as they were personal' (12). She continues:

Factors of surroundings – the sodden vegetation of local bottomland, the rot and 'scum' atop a nearby stream, the winds that blew over swamp-land as over soldiers' fortifications – affected the health of environments as they would the health of people within a locale. Place and person were swayed by the same kinds of forces; sloughs and forests underwent the same processes as did lagging recruits and ambitious farmers. (107)

Just as elevated sites with fresh, circulating air were considered salubrious, so low, marshy areas where air and water alike were thought to stagnate were considered insalubrious and malevolent (89–90). Miasmas 'entered the body as breath or fluid, and they operated within it just as they did within terrain. They carried the environment's imbalance, disturbance, or putrefaction into the depths of the body, expressing within the individual the sickly tendencies of the locale' (110–14; see also Melosi 2001, 2000; Tarr 1996). For Brock's soldiers and the petitioners to the Upper Canadian parliament, then, the marshlands around the mouth of the Don were inherently unhealthy. Ironically, despite mistaken theories about the origin of disease, fears of miasma were not entirely misplaced. Brock's observations about the disproportionate frequency of ague among soldiers at the eastern blockhouse corroborate other anecdotal sources in suggesting that malaria cases were more numerous in areas adjacent to the marsh.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the slow-moving waters of the Don marshes would have provided an excellent breeding ground for mosquitoes, and efforts made to avoid these 'unhealthy places' and to shut out the dangerous 'night air' often had the effect of shutting out mosquitoes as well. (For further discussion on miasma, see Jackson, this volume.)

As the 1830 petition on the location of the parliament buildings sug-

gests, perceptions of unhealthiness also had significant implications for the development of the area. In an 1833 letter to Viscount Goderich, secretary of state for the colonies, Lieutenant Governor John Colborne explained that the westward expansion of the city was the only reasonable option: 'The Eastern part of the Town is affected by the effluvia of the marshes of the Don, and the rapid increase in the population requires that the Town should be extended towards the Westward, the most salubrious and convenient site' (in Firth 1966: 342–3). Toronto did, indeed, 'lean west' in the years that followed, further marginalizing the site of the original town plot near the mouth of the Don. Parliament moved to new and more fashionable quarters in the west end of town (at Front and John Streets) in 1832, escalating with its relocation the desirability of west-end real estate (and the corresponding undesirability of the east end; F.H. Armstrong 1988). When the city incorporated in 1834, the lower river came to represent an official margin, its curving course forming the eastern border of the city between Bloor and Queen Streets. The largely undeveloped area between Parliament Street and the Lower Don fell within the 'City Liberties,' an ambiguous status that meant residents enjoyed neither full city rights and services nor paid full city taxes. Like other suburban areas around the city, development here was slower and more sporadic than in the more desirable and (marginally) better serviced areas of the new centre, and tended to concentrate along central access routes (Ganton 1974: 35).<sup>6</sup> From 1834 until the abolishment of the Liberties in 1859, then, the Lower Don occupied a borderland space within the everyday experience of the city's residents and in the official sphere of city maps and jurisdictional boundaries.

Other factors commingled to cement the area's status as a marginal space. Relatively poor soils, with the exception of the river flats south of Pottery Road, reduced the potential for successful farming initiatives. In an 1811 survey of the former government reserve between Parliament Street and the river, Deputy-Surveyor Samuel Wilmot reported that 'the land consisted of poor thin soil with the timber principally destroyed, but that with good management it might answer for pasture.' The only valuable timber, he continued, 'was close to the lakeshore' (Wilmot 1811). The steep ravine lands of the valley between Bloor and Gerrard streets further limited agricultural potential and complicated access to valley holdings. Unpredictable riparian conditions brought more headaches for landowners. Seasonal floods washed out bridges and roads and occasionally threatened livestock and outbuildings, and

unexpected droughts reduced water flow, threatening mill and agricultural operations alike. For property owners east of the river, the limited number of bridge crossings over the Don, and the poor quality of those that did exist, made access to their holdings especially challenging.<sup>7</sup> These factors added further disincentives to an area already blighted by perceptions of unhealthiness and distance from the growing commercial and residential core of York. And yet, as much as these considerations played a role in reducing the desirability of lands in and around the lower valley, particularly for middle- and upper-class buyers, they always existed in tension with pressure in various periods to expand the city eastward, and with the incentives that came with undesirability: cheaper land prices; lower taxes for property owners; and, as the century progressed, proximity to industrial employers. As access improved and population pressures increased throughout the century, development increased in the area despite associations of risk.

Limited subdivision of the lands surrounding the lower valley took place in the 1830s and 1840s. As Isobel Ganton found in her detailed study of changing land ownership in the Lower Don Lands, evident in this period is a notable shift from the wealthy, prominent citizens who owned farm lots around the Lower River in the early nineteenth century to an increasing concentration of middle-class and working-class landowners (Ganton 1974). Proximity to a growing number of industrial employers in the 1860s and 1870s attracted more working-class residents to neighbourhoods on both sides of the lower river. Clustered around 'rail yards, noisome factories and packinghouses,' the neighbourhoods around the Lower Don were among several impoverished working-class districts in the city that, J.M.S. Careless wrote in his history of nineteenth-century Toronto, emerged 'between high-value centrally located property and the outlying districts, which became wealthier enclaves for those who could afford the price of streetcar fare to work' (1984: 138).<sup>8</sup> An urban borderland had been created. Segregated from the rest of the city by its poverty, its reputedly unhealthy environment, and its concentration of noxious industries, the area around the lower river had become, by 1880, a marginal space within which to isolate the processes of production and waste disposal so vital to the process of city building. Toronto writer and publisher Graeme Mercer Adam's description of the area immediately west of the lower river in 1885 sums up the depth of the area's fall. 'The extreme end of [the] eastern section [of King Street],' he wrote, 'is a dreary wilderness, into which no man ever seems to venture except the aborigines, and in

which all the refuse of the city seems to accumulate ... The unsavoury reputation it bears from a sanitary point of view is probably at the bottom of its want of prosperity' (Adam et al. 1885, part 4: 287).

### **Valley Home: Refuge and Subsistence in an Urban Borderland, 1910–1931**

In the first half of the twentieth century, political and economic circumstances around the world resulted in heightened levels of homelessness in cities across Canada. In ways similar to those of the past, but vastly more visible, the Don became a receiving area for those who either could not or chose not to seek out other means of shelter. While the valley remained an area of preference, it was not Tyler's refuge west of the Don bridge that twentieth-century transients chose; instead, they chose areas still capable of providing refuge: the partially wooded flats of the river north of Bloor Street, and secluded copses along the upper branches of the river north of the forks. Indeed, after industrialization and the major engineering projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed the river south of Gerrard, what remained of the 'rural' in the valley shifted further north.

In the discussion that follows, themes of transience meet with our established themes of centre and periphery, perception and experience. While largely unexplored as a phenomenon in its own right in Canadian historiography, transience was central to Canadian experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moving between city and country in pursuit of seasonal labour, moving west in search of access to land and better possibilities, and moving between provinces with disparate employment opportunities are iconic Canadian experiences. And yet, for nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century observers alike, transience was viewed as both an anomaly and a dangerous development. Late-nineteenth-century reformers puzzled over the conundrum of the 'pauperization of the poor' and the need to separate the 'worthy poor' – those willing to work – from those of the 'professional' class, who aimed to take advantage of charitable services. 'Vagrants' almost invariably fell into this latter category; perceived as a sign of declining morality, they were repeatedly singled out as targets for hard labour or restricted assistance.<sup>9</sup> In McKay's terms, an entrenched liberal vision cast vagrants as 'deficient' individuals for their failure to embrace liberal norms of regular waged work and sedentary living. As cities like Toronto struggled with a huge influx of unemployed men in the

early 1930s, 'the transient' was again singled out as less deserving of city support than the resident unemployed – a practice that eventually spurred intervention from provincial and federal levels of government in generating make-work projects for unemployed men in remote areas of the country.

Like most marginalized populations, people who sought refuge in the Don valley in different periods are largely absent from the historical record. Census enumerators walked through the neighbourhoods bordering the valley, but didn't enter the wooded areas of the valley to record people living there. City reports on housing and homelessness document city-wide housing crises, particularly in the 1930s and during the post-war boom in the 1940s, but rarely reach the level of specificity needed to trace people living rough in the valley. Policemen did not regularly venture into the valley, except in pursuit of particular suspects. Indeed, it is precisely this absence of scrutiny that may have attracted people to the valley in the first place. As Bouchier and Cruikshank note in their study of working-class residents and squatters in Hamilton's Burlington Bay, 'one of [the community's] attractions was that it was nicely secluded from the gaze of the Harbour Commission and city police authorities that workers on street corners and in busy city taverns often felt' (2003: 22). Despite this relative silence in the official record, public interest in the unfortunate and the alien ensured that some coverage appeared in the newspapers of the day. Two groups of 'undesirables' received significant coverage in Toronto newspapers: Roma immigrants who camped in the valley in the 1910s and 1920s; and the unemployed men who formed a 'hobo jungle' on the flats of the river in 1930 and 1931. Drawing upon a limited record of historical photographs and newspaper articles, I will sketch the movement of people through place, and explore the ways that place – including topography and local resources – provided for and attracted populations with few alternatives.

### *Roma Travellers, 1910s and 1920s*

In their illustrated history of immigration to Toronto in the early twentieth century, Robert Harney and Harold Troper made reference to groups of Roma<sup>10</sup> migrants who carved a space for themselves at the edge of society: 'Moving about in family groups or small "tribes," their wagons or old cars appeared in and around Toronto at certain times of year. The river valleys along the Humber and Don were their favourite



5.3 Roma woman carrying water at camp on Humber River, 12 October 1918. (John Boyd, Sr, City of Toronto Archives, series 393, item 15386)

campsites and those who did not come into the centre of the city to do business spent their time fishing and making sweet grass and reed baskets' (1974: 38). As these observations suggest, Toronto's river valleys provided not only refuge from authorities (examples from other North American cities show that Roma families often faced imprisonment or ejection when confronted by local police),<sup>11</sup> but also a source of sustenance and livelihood. Toronto photographer John Boyd Senior documented the presence of Roma families on the banks of the Humber River in 1918. His images show women gathering water from the river and cooking meals on fires fuelled by driftwood from the river banks. While these images were captured in Toronto's other major river valley, it is clear from the documentary record that Roma families also camped along the Don. The images are rich with detail, and provide an excellent companion to the scant textual records available on Roma travelers in the Toronto area in the early twentieth century.



5.4 Roma woman peeling potatoes at camp on Humber River, 12 October 1918. (John Boyd, Sr, City of Toronto Archives, series 393, item 15391-1)

An article in the *Toronto Daily Star* on 5 November 1910 described a Roma campsite near the west branch of the Don (at the end of Soudan Avenue, near the intersection of today's Eglinton and Bayview Avenues), noting in patronizing terms its distance from mainstream Canadian experience:

Tucked away in the bushes around the last bend of a long road to the north of the city, miles from a railroad, and a good walk from any other human habitation, are four little white tents, the dwelling place of the remnants of a gypsy tribe. They have prepared for the winter only by building leaf shelters over the doorways of the tents and there they will stay through storm and sunshine until the wanderlust seizes their gypsy fancies.

At the time, this area of the valley remained rural and largely wooded, with large farms occupying the neighbouring table lands. Not the polluted environment of the lower valley, the area nevertheless occupied a margin in its rurality and its position just outside the city limits. Difficult to harness for productive uses, the valley lands at this time were also largely unoccupied – another draw for travellers seeking sanctuary. Living at the camp ‘as one large family,’ the reporter noted, ‘are four men, three women, three children, two bears, and a baboon.’ As best he could observe, the group made a modest income by taking up collections after ‘the bear and monkey [gave] exhibitions on the streets’ and from fortunes that ‘the women of the party tell ... to the unwary.’ It seems the reporter was left to draw his own conclusions about the possible relationship between the women and men in the camp, and the purpose of their stay in the area. ‘They are not the sociable summer camping party,’ he reported with disappointment, ‘that their tents might imply’; nor are they ‘over fond of stray callers.’

Despite the relative isolation of the camp, local residents – apparently concerned that ‘these gypsies might have too many of the story book gypsy characteristics’ – attempted ‘to show [the Roma] that there were other parts more favorable to their race.’ The article doesn’t elaborate on the means with which the group was made to feel unwelcome. According to the reporter, the families responded by ‘promptly [purchasing]’ the property. Having ‘shown themselves to be law abiding citizens, and people of wealth,’ harassment by neighbours and authorities purportedly ceased. The reporter, however, couldn’t resist the speculation that the group would nevertheless ‘be off for other parts when the spring-time comes around’; with them, he concluded, will go ‘the covered



wagon and the collapsible stoves, the old hay horse, and the scratching hens that they have taken unto themselves' (*Toronto Daily Star* 1910c). Here is interesting evidence of the 'Other' as a 'doubtful [prospect] for liberal individualism' (McKay 2000: 626). While the purchase of land granted this particular group of Roma some limited respect as 'probationary individuals,' their ethnicity cemented their status as outsiders to the dominant liberal ethos. No further mention of the group appears in the local papers until 4 February 1911, when the *Globe* reported that a 'band of gypsies who have been encamped around Eglinton for some time' was taken in by Dominion Immigration Officers 'preparatory to being deported to the United States.' Apparently the group consisted of 'a number of men, women, and children, four wagons, several horses, and four brown bears.' While it is difficult to be certain if this was the same group described by the *Daily Star* in November, the location 'near Eglinton' suggests so. Area residents had apparently complained of the group's 'persistent begging,' adding to Children's Aid Society reports that children had been observed 'running out in the snow barefooted.'<sup>12</sup>

Ten years later a group of eight 'Serbian gypsy' families occupied a site further upriver, on the west branch of the Don near the intersection of Yonge Street and York Mills Road (*Toronto Daily Star* 1920b). Unlike the 1910 camp, this camp was easily visible from the road. An article in the *Globe* on 1 June 1920 noted that the camp was situated 'not more than one hundred yards from Yonge Street ... so that passing motorists may easily be beguiled to visit their encampment and have their fortunes told' (*Globe* 1920a). The camp's roadside location in the valley provided the dual advantages, the article suggests, of access to the river for cooking, bathing, and drinking water, and access to a source of revenue through roadside sales. Men in the camp apparently worked in the city as chauffeurs and coppersmiths, and supplemented their income with roadside sales of used cars and car parts. As the reporter milled about trying to get an interview with one of the women of the camp, he observed children, apparently 'too numerous to count,' swimming in the Don. They swim with their clothes on, he noted, '[jumping] into the water and then [waiting] for the sun to dry them.' It wasn't long before the camp raised the ire of local residents. Complaints throughout the summer of 1920 about 'the condition of things at the gypsy camp at York Mills bridge' were directed to the county police and health authorities (*Toronto Daily Star* 1920a). The situation was last mentioned in the *Daily Star* on 21 August, when the columnist speculated that 'the gypsies are preparing to move to their winter quarters' (1920c).



5.5 Approximate locations of two Roma camps along west branch of Upper Don River, 1910–20. (Map by Jordan Hale)

While the evidence here is sketchy and laced with the prejudices of its presenters, it nevertheless supports the hypothesis forwarded by Harney and Troper that Toronto's river valleys provided – temporarily, at least – refuge and means for subsistence for immigrant families travelling with limited resources. As Boyd's images remind us, the river valleys provided access to water for drinking, cooking, and bathing, to driftwood for cooking fires, to fish, and to grasses for basket making. They also provided a degree of refuge from 'stray callers' and powerful authorities. Some historiographical context on Roma experience in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America is useful here. As Marlene Sway has shown, Roma family groups in the United States and Canada used nomadism, multiple occupations, and the exploitation of readily available natural resources as strategies of economic adaptation. Descending in large part from Roma populations who came to

North America during the large immigration of eastern Europeans in the 1880s and 1890s, many Roma groups pursued a nomadic lifestyle due not 'to wanderlust as much as to pressure exerted upon them by ... host societies' (Sway 1988: 39, 44). Following occupations that were typically 'seasonal, temporary, marginal, and even precarious,' they moved from place to place and engaged in a number of occupations simultaneously (110). Car repairs and used-car sales, occasional farm labour, scrap-metal recovery, fortune telling, and other forms of entertainment were among the typical overlapping and gendered occupations (Sway 1988; Sutherland 1975).

The use of the natural environment as a means of subsistence and livelihood also has a long tradition in Roma historiography. Sway records the use of fallen branches and scrap wood to produce bowls, spoons, and children's toys, and the collection of holly and heather for seasonal sale in nineteenth-century Europe (1988: 101). Mayall notes the use of grasses and wood from camp locations to manufacture brooms, doormats, baskets, clothes pegs, skewers, and walking sticks in the same period in rural England (1988: 58). As Harney and Troper suggest and Sway confirms, many of these craft occupations were extended to North American environments. The location of Roma camps along the Don in the first decades of the twentieth century may have been due in part, these sources suggest, to access to natural resources. Strategic placement along travel corridors for fortune telling and used-car sales/repair occupations was likely also a significant factor, as the 1920 camp at Yonge and York Mills Road suggests, as was distance from the *gaje*, or non-Roma, population, as both taboo influences on Roma cultural norms and potential sources of threat (Sway 1988; Sutherland 1975).

### *The 'Hobo Jungle' of 1930 and 1931*

Transience in the valley took on much greater visibility during the 1930s, when unemployed men established a large hobo jungle in the flats of the lower valley, north of Bloor Street. Some time in the fall of 1930 a group of transients found refuge in a brick factory in the valley, and rumours began to circulate about the Don valley 'kiln-dwellers.' Some investigative journalism by the left-leaning *Toronto Daily Star* located the camp in early December – the reporter apparently having 'tramped one night almost the full length of the Don valley searching for [the men]' before being tipped off weeks later by a young homeless man who had spent time at the site. 'Last night,' he reported, 'during

bitter winds and near-zero [Fahrenheit] weather, forty-two homeless, jobless, and penniless wandering men slept on “hot-flops” in the Don valley yards of the Toronto Brick [Company].’ The reporter explained: bricks baked in a series of huge chambers, or kilns, often took up to a week to cool. ‘While they are cooling, [the men] climb right inside the kilns, stretch themselves out on the hard, warm bricks and seek the solace of sleep.’ How did they come to find shelter in a working brick factory? The reporter was careful to point out that these ‘decent and respectable’ men were not trespassers:

These men are not bums. They are not tramps. Nor are they hoboes ... They are residents of the Don valley yards of the Toronto Brick Co. as the invited guests of Frank E. Waterman, general manager of that company, who has not only issued instructions to his staff that the men are to be allowed the privileges of his brick yard, but he has on several occasions stoutly resented the intrusion of policemen and plainclothesmen. (*Toronto Daily Star* 1930: 2)

This emphasis on the men’s essential respectability stands in marked contrast to perceptions of the Roma. While concerns about Communist sympathies and anxieties about the presence of ‘professional tramps’ in the jungle betrayed underlying suspicions about the character of men who had ‘let themselves fall’ into such circumstances, overall these men received a warmer reception than those identified by their ethnicity and economic practices as hopelessly and permanently depraved.

Based on the documentary evidence that survives, the residents of the Don valley jungle seemed to share an ambiguous relationship with those in the city above them. Frequent references are made in the *Daily Star* coverage of the camp to criticisms and condemnation of the city’s charitable institutions. Inhabitants of the camp apparently ‘couldn’t understand why every restaurant in Toronto didn’t let them eat the waste food ... They whole-heartedly doubted that the new Central Bureau of Registration for homeless men would make any difference to their plight’ (*Toronto Daily Star* 1930). While institutional responses to Depression-era homelessness and unemployment fell back on earlier approaches – sorting the ‘resident’ from the ‘alien’ homeless and focusing support on married rather than single men, the public response to the men in the valley tended to be more generous. As the *Globe* reported in the last days of the camp, ‘[the men’s] self-imposed rigor and independence, their vigorous cry for work and not charity, have appealed to

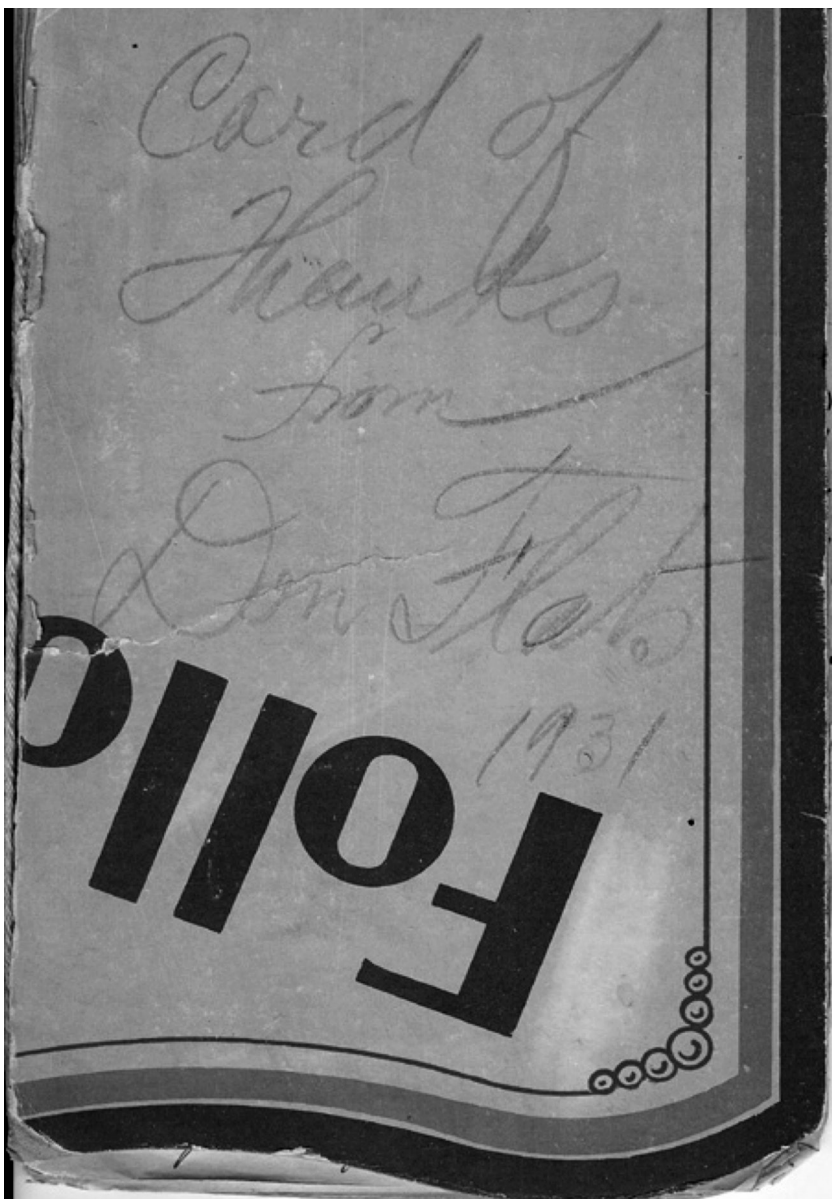
the public imagination. They made good as citizens out of luck' (1931c: 4). Reverend Peter Bryce made numerous visits to the 'jungle' to report on the men's well-being, and church and women's organizations across the city organized donations of food and clothing. In a remarkable document that reinforced – in their own words – representations of the valley residents as 'ordinary citizens down on their luck,' the 'cave and shack dwellers' of the valley scripted a letter of thanks on a scrap of cardboard and posted it at the edge of the valley.

The card, dated 4 August 1931 and signed by eight men, reads as follows:

To whom it may concern: this is to say that we dwellers of the Don Flats (otherwise known as the 'cave and shack dwellers') do hereby wish to thank all those who have tried to help us out in any way and particularly those kind enough to send any supplies in way of food left over from picnics etc. which might have otherwise gone to waste and we'll be glad to accept in future any kindness that this notice might happen to bring to us. Hoping that things will soon be better we remain thankfully yours.<sup>13</sup>

Public fears about the number of men congregated in the valley also expressed themselves in the local newspapers. Around the same time as the thank-you card was produced, concerns about Communist agitation centred around the Don valley camp led to warnings in the conservative newspapers that 'all drifters should be cleared out of the cities before winter' to stem the possibility of revolution (*Globe* 1931b: 1). The accusations met with vehement indignation from the *Daily Star* and, reputedly, from inhabitants of the valley camp.

Asked why they chose the valley brick works rather than the House of Industry (a shelter for the poor) or one of the city's night missions, one of the men responded, 'We've still got a little pride left' (*Globe* 1931b), adding that they found begging on the streets demeaning. This sentiment was repeated frequently in the *Star's* coverage of the Don valley camp, and in accounts of hobo jungles in other parts of the country (McCallum 2006; Wade 1997). It was expressed especially clearly in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Star* from an anonymous jungle resident in July 1931. Identifying himself as a First World War veteran who found himself homeless in the same city he had enlisted from years before, he wrote that he was 'of a husky build and suited to manual labor.' 'Before I will accept charity or line up in a bread line,' he continued, 'I offer my services for room or board.' He signed the letter only with his



5.6 Card of thanks, 4 August 1931. (Courtesy of East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto)

location: 'Don Valley' (*Toronto Daily Star* 1931b). Another letter to the editor from a resident of the hobo jungle suggested, interestingly, that work could be created for the unemployed men of the valley by creating a project to straighten the river north of Bloor Street and to remove unnecessary weeds and trees from the valley (MacArthur 1931). The project never materialized.

If pride was one reason these men chose the valley, the shrinking availability of other forms of relief was another. A follow-up article in the *Daily Star* on 19 June 1931 counted three hundred men in the valley 'following [the] recent closing of all city missions and shelters, with the exception of the House of Industry.' The brick works population had expanded to one hundred men; an additional two hundred slept 'on the banks of the muggy Don river with the sky as a blanket and the earth as a mattress' (*Toronto Daily Star* 1931a: 1).<sup>14</sup> Later that summer the jungle expanded again, with approximately four hundred men camped along the flats of the Don River. As Reverend Peter Bryce observed in a tour of the valley in August 1931, some men slept in box cars and dugouts; others fashioned 'most ingenious huts' – 'bivouacs of rushes ... bound together by striplings sewn through with thatch' (Bryce 1931: 1).

The river valley provided natural amenities, such as water for drinking, cooking, and bathing, reeds and saplings for hut construction, and driftwood for campfires; it also yielded resources from the history of human settlement in the area. A local dump in the valley north of the Bloor Street Viaduct (the site of today's Chester Springs Marsh) provided a bounty of discarded objects that men used to furnish their makeshift homes: a picture frame, an old trunk, a radio antenna (but no radio), and a semi-functioning kerosene lamp were some of the objects mentioned in Bryce's 1931 report. The most obvious attraction of the Don valley site, however, beyond its proximity to the city centre, were the rail lines that ran through the valley. As former East York mayor True Davidson recalled in her 1976 memoir, 'The jungle became known amongst the fraternity of those riding the rods, and almost every freight that came down the Don brought more inhabitants to the area' (Davidson 1976: 82). As the Depression worsened and ever-increasing numbers of unemployed men from across the country congregated in the valley, mayors from Toronto and East York vowed to crack down on outsiders seeking relief within their city limits. Toronto police vowed to 'watch every freight train' to 'stop transients from forcing themselves on the municipality' (*Globe* 1931b). The coming winter's relief services would be provided to local residents only, and not transients from other areas, the



5.7 Makeshift dwellings in Don Valley, 1930-1. (Courtesy of East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto)



mayors warned. The gap had widened for the men of the hobo camp. No longer the ‘respectable men’ temporarily ‘down on their luck,’ the inhabitants of the jungle were portrayed increasingly as an alien threat to the city’s stability. In McKay’s terms, they had become outsiders to the dominant liberal order, rather than temporary transgressors.

The jungle, it seemed, had to go. In late September 1931 the Province announced that 2500 unemployed men would be drafted from congested Southern Ontario centres for work on the Trans-Canada highway project in Northern Ontario (*Globe* 1931d). Further drafts followed, and by the beginning of October the ‘peculiar and varied habitations’ of the jungle had been demolished, their residents transferred to northern camps or removed to temporary shelters (*Globe* 1931d: 1). As the *Toronto Daily Star* reported, it seems the men of the Don valley jungle had fared remarkably well for their ordeal: of 213 men examined by medical doctors before joining the first road-building contingent, only three were rejected as unfit for hard labour. No diseases were reported, and no cases of malnutrition – in fact, the incredulous reporter noted, the men on the whole were more likely to be overweight than underweight (Sinclair 1931).

These snapshots provided by newspaper accounts hint at the ways that both Roma families and Depression-era hoboes used the environment around them to enhance what must have been a fairly marginal existence. Both groups, it seems, chose the valley for access to certain amenities, such as water, firewood, and material scavenged from nearby landfill sites. Distance from authorities may also have been important, as the experience of Roma travellers in other parts of North America, and the jungle residents’ aversion to institutionalized shelter, suggests. The brick works manager’s ‘stout resentment’ of the intrusion of plainclothesmen also suggests a limited degree of protection afforded to homeless men under his roof. In its role as a semi-rural space on the edge of the city and, in its lower reaches, an industrial and heavily polluted space, the Don River valley became a place on the margins. Devalued by more fortunate inhabitants of the city, it became, as I have argued, a place for people pushed to the edges of society. Despite developments over the last forty years that have seen much of the valley ‘revalued’ as a recreational landscape, in some respects not much has changed: makeshift tents of the homeless can still be seen on the banks of the river in the lower valley, and as recently as the spring of 2008, the City used the valley as a receptacle for huge amounts of filthy, salt-laced snow from the city’s roads.

## Conclusion

In its focus on marginal people in a marginal place, this chapter contributes to a growing trend in recent Canadian historiography to draw attention to the structures of power at work in designating people and places within the framework of centres and peripheries – the liberal order framework that Ian McKay outlined so provocatively in his 2000 prospectus in the *Canadian Historical Review*. Drawing from the evidence provided by middle-class perceptions of the marginalized, it seeks to go a step further by shedding light on the lived experience of people ‘on the outside’ of the liberal project – in this case, those whose ‘poverty ... irregular habits, and ... problematic, intermittent relation to the formal market economy, particularly to money and waged work’ stood in sharp contrast to liberal values of order, property, and self-control (Sandwell 2003: 447). Assessed as marginal by powerful groups in the urban centre, places like the Don River valley, with its miasmatic lowlands and difficult-to-develop ravine banks, and populations like the Roma and the Depression-era hoboes, were among the casualties of the liberal project of city building in early-twentieth-century Toronto. Here were reputedly unproductive citizens pursuing unorthodox strategies of ‘getting by’ in a landscape similarly dismissed as unproductive and marginal. As I have attempted to show, the individuals who sought refuge in the wooded areas of the Don valley were resilient, flexible, and creative actors in their own lives. They sought out the valley for the things it offered, as much as for the things they were denied in other parts of the city, and, for limited periods of time at least, it provided the refuge they sought.

## NOTES

- 1 References to Skunk Hollow and the Bohemian Flats were obtained from a conversation initiated in H-Environment’s online discussion forum, 21 March 2008.
- 2 Andrew Hurley (1995), for example, shows how middle-class whites in Gary, Indiana, constructed a ‘hierarchy of place’ – creating homogeneous neighbourhoods priced out of reach of the poor, while at the same time shielding themselves from environmental hazards.
- 3 Valerie Kuletz’s *The Tainted Desert* (1998) is an exception in its focus on both the marginalization of place and the human populations dependent upon it.

- 4 Todd McCallum's work (2006, 2004) on Depression-era hoboes in Vancouver describes the establishment of a hobo jungle in a derelict area of Vancouver's waterfront, but doesn't explore the connection between marginal space and the marginalized populations that congregated there. Similarly, Jill Wade's excellent article (1997) on marginal housing in Vancouver describes squatters living on polluted foreshore lands along Burrard Inlet, False Creek, and the Fraser River, but doesn't explore how and why such places were constructed as marginal. Work on 'marginal places' in the cultural-geography literature also focuses primarily on the political, economic, and social factors involved in the marginalization of particular groups, with little attention to the nature of the environments in which people find themselves (Ruddick 1996; M.P. Smith 1995; P. Jackson 1993; Shields 1991).
- 5 An editorial in the 1853–4 issue of the *Upper Canada Journal of Medical, Surgical and Physical Science*, for example, in arguing against the siting of the new Toronto General Hospital in the east end of the city, notes 'plenty of locations in Toronto' where ague is considerably less prevalent than in the east end, where 'scarcely a house has been free from its visitation.
- 6 The City Liberties stretched east of the river in a thin band from Queen Street south to the lakeshore and east to the far end of Ashbridge's Bay. Lands north of Queen, east of the river, fell under the jurisdiction of York County until the 1880s, when the city began a new round of annexations. The abolishment of the Liberties in 1859 brought full city rights and responsibilities to the suburban area west of the Don and east of the river south of Queen.
- 7 No bridges existed north of Gerrard in the lower valley, for example, until the Prince Edward Viaduct was constructed in 1918.
- 8 Aggregate data from assessment rolls corroborate Careless's conclusions. Data compiled for the decades between 1870 and 1910 show that property values within the wards on either side of the river (St David's Ward, parts of St Lawrence's Ward, and, after 1884, St Matthew's Ward on the east side of the river) were consistently lower than wards with comparable populations in other parts of the city.
- 9 James Pitsula discusses these trends as they played out in the reception of 'tramps' in late-nineteenth-century Toronto. The Associated Charities' decision in 1881 to implement a 'labour test' whereby recipients of aid would have to break a quantity of stones or chop kindling before receiving food or shelter was used as a method, Pitsula concludes, of enforcing a middle-class work ethic 'on a deviating, floating population. It was also an insidious way of denying the reality of unemployment because the authors

of the labour test assumed that the character defects of the poor, not the unavailability of work, was the central issue' (Pitsula 1980: 132).

- 10 I have used the word 'Roma' throughout to refer to the diverse group of people who have self-identified in different places and times as the Rom, Romani, or Roma, as 'Travellers' and as 'Gypsies.' Despite contemporary use of the term 'Gypsy' in early-twentieth-century North America, I have avoided use of the term for its derogatory connotations.
- 11 Lyon (1998) documents the arrest and temporary jailing of male Roma travellers in Peterborough, Ontario, on charges of loitering and obstruction of a public highway. For other examples see Acton (1997) and Sway (1988).
- 12 Sporadic deportations seemed to continue throughout the 1910s. In his annual report to the Toronto Board of Health, for example, Medical Officer of Health Charles Hastings reports the deportation of a group of Roma he viewed as 'sleeping and living like animals' (Charles Hastings, Annual Report to the Toronto Board of Health, 1914, series 365, Department of Public Health Reports, City of Toronto Archives).
- 13 Card of Thanks, 4 August 1931, East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto.
- 14 Michiel Horn (1984, 12) provides some context for both the heavy burden experienced by Canadian municipalities in providing relief and the attempt to clamp down on assistance to transients in order to force them out of the city and into relief camps.