

Drifting on the currents of time and place: Change on a city block over time.

The R.L. Polk Detroit City Directories offer a unique glimpse into a daily city life that has now vanished. These bound volumes list every occupant of every structure on every block in the city limits over a century and a half, usually surveying the rapidly changing city every year. Looking at these volumes allows Detroiters today to drift on the currents of time and place over important periods of change.

Finding your time and place.

To what place do you feel a connection? Is there an address or a block that is important to your family, or intriguing to you? Or is there a time period in Detroit that you most wonder about? The drifter is asked to select a specific location, appealing to experience or even at random, and then to search for its occupants in several periods, creating a snapshot of the findings. This snapshot may be in any form, for example a hand-drawn map of a place at the start and at the end of the drift, or a table of the Polk listings over time. It may simply be an impression left in your mind.

How does the physical landscape of your place change over time?

What do you imagine daily life is like?

Is change complete, or are there remnants of the old that cut across time?

What mysteries remain?

- ∞ *The Polk directories are located on the southeast wall of the Burton room at the Main Library, with browsing tables adjacent*
- ∞ *Note how the books increase in size in the 1870s, when the first wave of industrialization takes off in the city, then in the 1920s*
- ∞ *Family names commonly repeat within blocks in the 1920s*
- ∞ *1930s Detroit saw increasing vacancy due to the Depression*
- ∞ *Franchises began to displace family-owned businesses in commercial areas in the postwar 1940s and 1950s*
- ∞ *What do your findings evoke in you?*

Things to watch out for:

- ∞ U.S. postal addresses were renumbered in 1920, after a decade of expansion and infill, so street numbers change before and after. Listed cross streets can provide clues about specific locations.
- ∞ Streets may have been renamed as an area changed its character
- ∞ The earliest directory available in the Burton Collection is 1837, and the latest is 1973. By the 1950s, the east and west sides of the city are located in different alternate year volumes. The collection is missing various specific years.

The Burton Historical Collection, consisting of some 30,000 Detroit-specific materials, was donated to the Detroit Public Library in 1915 and has been expanded ever since. It is in the north wing of the Main Library, located at 5201 Woodward in Midtown.

The R. L. Polk and Company, a producer of business directories, was founded in Detroit in 1870. It advanced the city directory with reverse addresses and business listings.

Drifts submitted to the Kunsthalle, 5001 Grand River ave @ W. Warren, on Saturday July 20 will be displayed for the duration of the show.