

# I Forge On: Walkability and Experiencing Early 20th Century Urban Life Through Spokane's Expert Smithy

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## INTRODUCTION

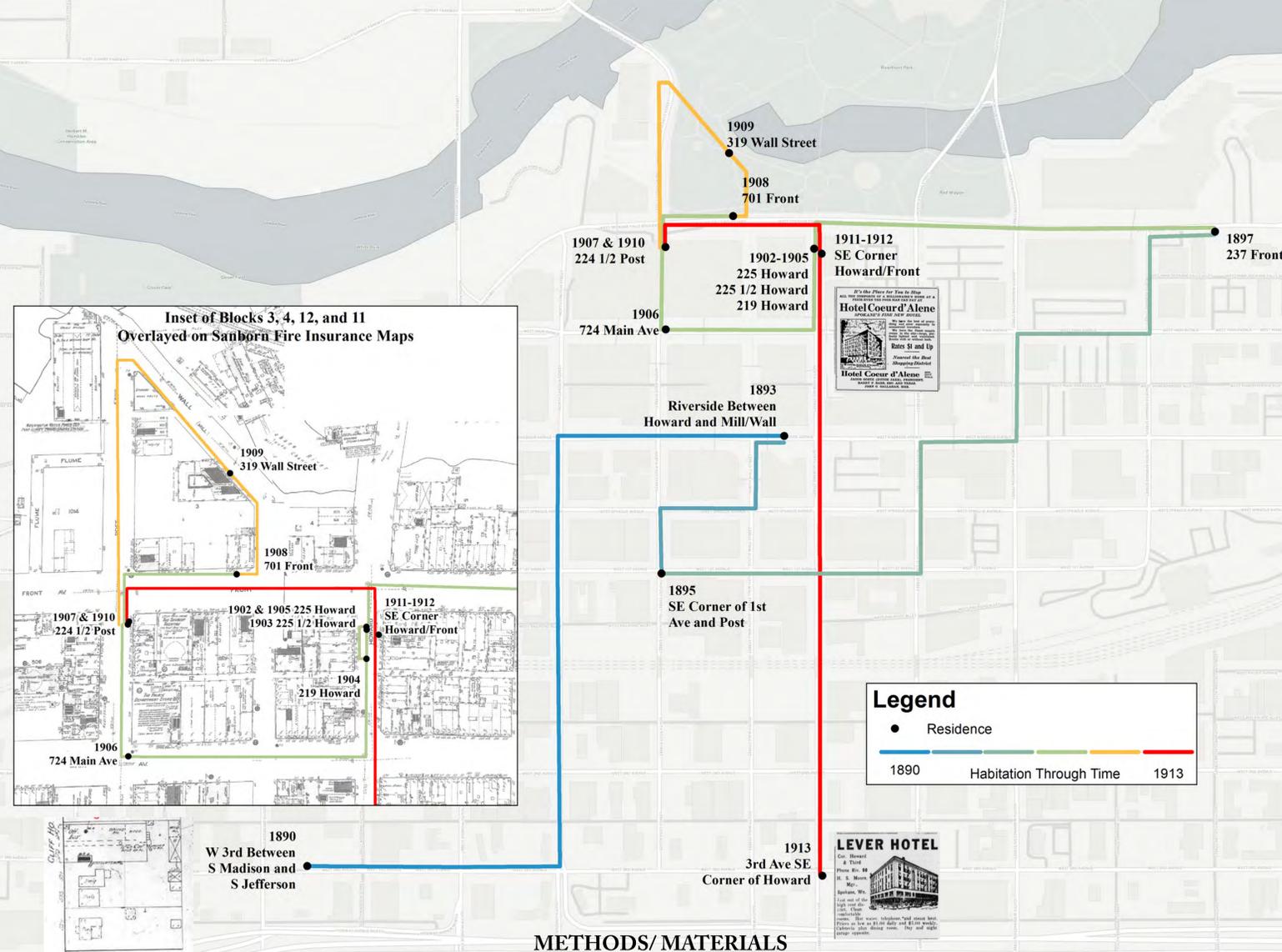
**What:** In 2016, archaeologists with Fort Walla Walla Museum Heritage Research Services and the Spokane Tribe of Indians Preservation Program identified a 26 meter (m) by 19 m area of black sooty loam with 50% slag located between 95 and 115 centimeters below surface. The high prevalence of slag in conjunction with its placement corresponding to that of a blacksmith shop—appearing on the 1890 and 1902 Sanborn Fire insurance maps—indicated the deposit to be a spoil pile related to blacksmithing activity.

**Who:** Historical records show the blacksmith shop to have been operated by German immigrant, Peter Sondgerath—proprietor of the Spokane Blacksmithing Co. from the early 1890s to 1912. As one of 19 smithies listed in the Spokane City Directories in 1890, Sondgerath rose to prominence in the coming decade when he was recognized as a “who’s who” in the 1900 Spokane Illustrated History of Spokane County having:

“...made all the brewery wagons in this city [Spokane] and constructs carriages, omnibuses and all kinds of vehicles...He has constructed the architectural iron work for the Idaho State Building, at the [1893] World’s Fair...the Spokane County Court house...[and] also the principle buildings of Spokane. Mr. Sondgerath is one of the most expert tradesmen in Spokane and has a large and growing business located at 722 W. Front Street.” (Edwards 1900:651).

Last listed smithing in 1912 (R.L. Polk 1912), Sondgerath’s shop closed in advance of the Union Pacific Passenger Depot and elevated track construction.

**Intent of this Research:** Few archaeological studies have been done on turn of the 20th century Western U.S. blacksmithing sites. What is known is largely from investigations into early 19th century blacksmith shops which indicated living quarters were part of the structural layout (Light and Unglik 1987:6-9). In the case of this shop, historical records show Sondgerath roomed off-site in various furnished rooms throughout his 22-year career, with the exception of one instance in which he lived at his shop for the year 1908. Through a walkability analysis of the establishments Sondgerath resided in relation to his workshop this poster explores the Industrial Archaeology themes of worker housing and identity (Fracchia 2014); as it was in early 20th century Spokane.



## METHODS/ MATERIALS

Our research into Peter Sondgerath’s domestic arrangements began by collecting his addresses from city directories between the years 1890 and 1913. This involved referencing physical copies at Whitman College’s Penrose Library and digitized versions available on Ancestry.com. These addresses were then located on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for corresponding years, or years closest available (i.e. 1890, 1891, 1902, and 1910). While decennial federal census records were consulted, Sondgerath did not appear to be present in either the 1900 or 1910.

Utilizing CartoDB, a GIS software, we located the places of residence Sondgerath occupied onto a current map of Spokane. Images of various hotels and boarding houses were obtained through online records of newspapers in the Pacific Northwest. Finally, as a means to surmise larger trends occurring in Spokane during the early 20th century and infer class or socio-economic status of the establishments Sondgerath lived in, we compiled a list of renter occupations from city directories.

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## RESULTS

Overall research into Sondgerath’s living conditions were sparse. At his first lodging, Cliff House, Sondgerath was one of two blacksmiths living alongside several other hand laborers including a stone cutter, plumbers, plasterers and a machinist, a few clerks, bookkeepers, and at least one capitalist (aka entrepreneur) were also in residence. From what can be inferred of these occupations, Cliff House tenants appear to reflect middle class income earners.

In just five short years, Sondgerath was rooming in one of the four most prominent accommodations in Spokane—the Pacific Hotel (Edwards 1900:115). When relocating to the Pioneer Block within the first few years of the 20th century, Sondgerath found himself amongst mostly those occupying jobs in food service (waiters, cooks, and bartenders). Perhaps adding a sense of culture or at the very least character, were several Coeur d’Alene theater employees including its stage manager and one of its actors. It is worth noting Sondgerath, himself, was interested in the arts at this time; serving as treasurer and a bass singer in Spokane’s Harmonie Society (*The Evening Statesmen* 1903). This interest and a seeming rise in both wealth and social standing may have led to taking up accommodations adjacent to the Shubert Theater (1907; returning in 1910) and the exciting Hotel Coeur d’Alene (1911-1912); apart from it being around the corner from his workshop. Sondgerath’s residency at such places like Hotel Coeur d’Alene and Hotel Lever (last place of residence (1913)), where advertisements offered rooms for \$1 a night, highlight his upper middle socioeconomic status when considering average daily wages for blacksmiths in the West made roughly \$3.08 (based on a \$.40 hourly rate for a 54 hour work week in San Francisco; U.S. Department of Labor 1934). Being cited as wealthy when it was reported he had been “arrested for creating a disturbance at the Hotel Spokane,”—another posh place to be—in all likelihood Sondgerath made more than the average wage for blacksmiths (*Colfax Gazette* 1905).

## CONCLUSIONS

In creating a map of Sondgerath’s residences over time, we discovered that every location was within walkable distance to his workshop; living as far as 0.7 miles in 1890 and less than 0.1 miles from his shop in 1909. After 1890, Sondgerath moved increasingly closer to his work space until 1902, when he remained within a two block radius for a decade. In his last year as a Spokane resident (1913), Sondgerath returned to the neighborhood of his first lodgings—approximately nine blocks south of his workshop. It is only in 1908 that he resided at his shop; occupying a variety of boarding houses and single room occupancy (SRO) hotels in all other years.

Our analysis of historical records and the walkability of a prominent blacksmith’s workspace from his living space highlights the interaction of labor and identity; where in which this smithy preferred to live primarily away from working conditions in reasonable comfort. Living “off-site” affords separation from work and opportunities to socialize with others that were not clients and employees/co-workers. Furthermore, migrating from Germany and opting for readily available living spaces in hotels and boarding houses, Sondgerath’s experience reflects the intermingling, ethnically diverse worker housing that was occurring in early 20th century Spokane while drawing attention to the homogeneity of economic classes on a number of blocks. In what was a simple layer of slag, this research has made it possible to reconnect to a local figure and remember his place and important contributions to the growth and development of early modern Spokane.



Above: Slag fragment recovered from blacksmith activity area.



Right: Portion of blacksmith activity area in a trench unit.

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