

## **PART ONE**

# **CLASS STILL MATTERS**

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**M**oore” is the ninth most common surname in the United States, and its etymology is simple: it is derived from “moor,” meaning “a fen” or “a bog,” and it implies that the ancestors of the person carrying the name were poor and powerless, confined to the marginal land that the rich folk didn’t want. To the extent that the United States is an Anglo-Saxon country, the prevalence of this name says a lot about the roots of its people and about the role of class (along with its American concomitant, the denial of class) in its sociology. An American, regardless of origin, is more likely to identify with the working man than with the aristocrat, yet—paradoxically—to insist, against all the evidence, that the accident of birth played no role in his personal fate.

Michael Moore is an anomaly in this latter regard. His identity seems to be drawn from folk memories of the New Deal 1930s, a much more radical time when working people were developing a self-conscious culture. Moore knows that class is important, if not determinative, in life prospects. He presents himself as just an ordinary working stiff who could have ended up as a factory worker, who dropped out of college and doesn’t have any fancy degrees, yet

who's managed to figure it all out. He's the descendant of Irish immigrants, the son of an auto worker and a clerk, who grew up near Flint, Michigan.



Michael Moore, with humor and a certain antistyle, exists to make it clear that class does matter. There's some history here, some background, and even if Moore himself is now a multimillionaire who never actually worked on a production line—well, class is more than a matter of income, more even than a matter of occupation. It's a matter of background, consciousness, and identity.

Moore's parents, Frank and Veronica, and his older sisters, Anne and Veronica, were not deeply involved in politics, but the family was devout in the religion of the Irish-descended American working class. Frank and Veronica went to Mass every day and raised their children in the faith, and they were one of the founding families of a new neighborhood Catholic church. They came from a socially progressive, blue-collar Catholic tradition that found inspiration in the social justice encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI, and this gave them an awareness of class and the importance of union solidarity. They were almost certainly aware of, and influenced by, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin's Catholic Worker movement. The family took up collections for César Chávez and the United Farm Workers and for Daniel and Philip Berrigan and their religiously inspired, nonviolent, anti-Vietnam War protests.

Michael himself attended a training seminary while he was in high school, and for a brief period he seriously considered entering the priesthood. Years later, he proposed a segment for his *TV Nation* television show in which a correspondent goes to confessionals in twenty different Catholic churches and ranks the punishments meted out, calling the results "A Consumer's Guide to the Confessional." But even then he was still enough of a Catholic to have doubts about this very funny and sharp idea. Moore and his wife, Kathleen Glynn, would later write, "When the segment was finished, Mike was confident he would burn in eternal Hell if this segment ever ran, so he spiked it."<sup>1</sup>

Although Moore didn't join the priesthood, he had a sense of mission from a very young age and was an enthusiastic agitator long before Flint's decline. Although he has wrapped himself in Flint's

labor history, he didn't actually grow up there; he was raised in Davison, a bedroom community just to the east of Flint proper, an open and sunny place that bills itself as the "City of Flags" and the hometown of Ken Morrow, a member of the 1980 U.S. Olympic champion hockey team. There is no public mention of a much more famous native son. As a matter of fact, Moore is in the unusual position of being a worldwide celebrity who is apparently banned from his hometown high school's Hall of Fame. His candidacy has been vetoed by Davison school board members who believe it would cost the district private donations.

Moore's critics have made much of the fact that Davison is white, comfortable, and clean, with many more white-collar workers (middle managers at General Motors) than gritty, working-class Flint. All of this is true, yet the criticism is still a little off. Davison was an adjunct of Flint, and it was no playground of the leisure class. Its modest suburban charms were well within the reach of the line workers at GM's plants in Flint, among them Moore's father, who made spark plugs for thirty years. Davison—nearly mall-less and mostly undeveloped in Moore's youth—has come up considerably since that time, while Flint has gone down precipitously. If Davison has a higher average income than Flint, dramatically lower unemployment, and is almost entirely white, at least part of this is due to the aftershocks of GM's withdrawal from Flint, starting in the late 1970s, which separated those who could afford to leave Flint from those who could not. Moore's father had his place in Davison long before this happened. Moore himself had left Davison long before this happened.

In high school, Moore had already established a penchant for outspoken politics that predicted much that was to follow. Coming up at a time in which the Vietnam War was boiling through American political life, he was always an agitator. He started his first anti-establishment news sheets in grade school, while in high school he won a public-speaking contest with a speech condemning the local Elks lodge for barring black people from membership. He started a campaign to ban the Homecoming Queen contest, which he considered silly and sexist.

When the voting and office-holding age was lowered in 1972 from twenty-one to eighteen, Moore ran for the Davison school board and won, becoming the board's youngest member. From this position, he

set about lobbying the board to fire the principal and vice principal, whom he clearly despised. The two submitted their resignations soon after Moore's election to the school board, and he would later take credit for forcing them out. It's not at all clear why Moore was so intent on getting rid of these men. Moore writes of feeling oppressed by deadening routine—not a remarkable memory of high school. In his own words, he has only nice things to say of the principal whose removal he sought:

I had known this man, the principal, for many years. When I was eight years old, he used to let me and my friends skate and play hockey on this little pond beside his house. He was kind and generous, and always left the door to his house open in case any of us needed to change into our skates or if we got cold and just wanted to get warm. Years later, I was asked to play bass in a band that was forming, but I didn't own a bass. He let me borrow his son's.<sup>2</sup>

This passage has understandably been seized upon by right-wing critics of Moore; there's something shocking and unseemly about it, for Moore himself is writing that his antiauthoritarianism trumps any consideration of loyalty or human feeling or the character of his targets. The reader is left to assume that, to Moore, anyone in a position of authority—or who can be presented as being in a position of authority—is an enemy. Even politics at the school board level was for Moore a zero-sum game: teachers (except for the popular antiestablishment ones) were the enemy, students the victims of an oppressive system. Moore's instincts were to trust the students always to know what was in their own interests. He did not get along well with the other board members and did not hesitate to invoke the legal system, at one point threatening to sue the board for the right to tape-record board meetings, an issue that was, typically, couched in the highest language of public accountability. His confrontational style led to a recall effort, which failed.

The Davison school board was too small a stage for a talented social activist, and Moore soon expanded his work. He and his friend Jeff Gibbs started the Hotline Center, an emergency phone line that took calls and made referrals for unwanted pregnancies, drug overdoses, and suicide attempts, and they soon branched out into broader social

issues like police brutality. The hotline led to a community newspaper named, in best early-1970s style, *Free to Be*. The pompous sense of self-importance of Moore and his young staff was written in the wet cement of the sidewalk they installed outside the hotline's office in the Flint suburb of Burton: WE SHALL STAY FREE! followed by Article I of the First Amendment.

*Free to Be* was mimeographed and distributed free, and its title was hand drawn, but there was some real journalistic competence behind it. Moore had been a socially conscious writer and investigator throughout his school years, winning an Eagle Scout badge for a slide-show exposé of polluting industries in the Flint area, and *Free to Be* took on some fine-grained but serious issues, mostly having to do with the politics of the school board and student rights. As Moore gained confidence, *Free to Be* began to address larger matters, such as the case of Ray Fulgham, a black man who Moore decided had been railroaded on a burglary charge and whom he made into a cause célèbre of local progressives.

*Free to Be* soon evolved into Moore's next project, the *Flint Voice*, which first appeared in 1977, after Moore dropped out of the University of Michigan. While at U of M, he had been majoring, presciently, in political science and theater.

In that year, Moore had a stroke of luck when he went to a Harry Chapin concert in Detroit and managed to talk his way into the singer's dressing room, where he told Chapin about the hotline. Chapin, then a big star known for his 1974 hit "Cat's in the Cradle," agreed to do a benefit in Flint and ended up doing eleven benefits over the years for the hotline and the *Voice*. He netted half a million dollars for Moore, which meant that Moore could buy some professional equipment and, with a little discipline, put out a serious monthly paper.

The *Flint Voice* was a bit ragged, but it became more and more professional over the years that it was published, 1977 to 1982. In its pages, Moore produced some excellent investigative journalism, as well as sponsored that of other writers. The *Voice* really dug deep into local and state stories and looked at things that the conservative *Flint Journal* would never touch. Not bound to any particular news format, the *Voice* could publish in a wide range of styles and tones, and many of the articles were written by Moore himself. He was

relentless, and everywhere. He rooted out municipal and police corruption. He highlighted GM's demands for local and regional tax breaks with the implied threat of plant closings if it did not get them, a race to the bottom with other towns and counties that carried more than a hint of corporate blackmail. He found cover-ups of corporate chemical dumping. He ran pieces investigating illegal police surveillance and racial discrimination in municipal zoning. He caught Genesee County commissioners going on "working trips" to Hawaii while the county was \$4 million in debt and laying off hundreds of workers.

Subjects that the *Voice* revisited several times were corruption in local government and illegal use of municipal employees in political campaigns. In late 1979, Moore ran stories alleging that the office of Flint mayor Jim Rutherford was coercing federally funded city employees to campaign for him on publicly paid time; that Rutherford had irregularly approved liquor licenses; that he had improperly billed the city for services in 1973, when he was the police chief; and that he and Flint Township police chief Herbert Adams were part owners of a bar (Michigan law prohibited law-enforcement officers from owning bars). In response to the *Voice* stories, City Ombudsman Joe Dupcza began an investigation into Rutherford's administration, and Moore somehow got hold of and published his report before the official release date.

Six months later, after Dupcza tried to have Flint police chief Max Durbin fired, Flint police obtained a warrant to search the offices of the printing contractor for the *Voice*. The *Voice* later wrote that the police were looking for evidence that Dupcza was the source of the leaked report;<sup>3</sup> if he had shown it to the press before its public release, Dupcza, who had caused both Rutherford and Durbin grief, could himself be fired. Moore made brilliant use of the raid, announcing plans to file a huge lawsuit against the city. He attracted the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press, and he got national exposure for his paper and his issues. He also provocatively reran all the negative articles about Rutherford.

Rutherford is an interesting guy, a career policeman who joined the force in 1948, got a college degree, and rose through the civil service to become deputy mayor and chief of police. When Flint changed its city charter from the city manager to the strong mayoral



system in 1975, he retired from the police force to run for mayor. He barely won in 1975 but did better in 1979. When I asked him about the *Flint Voice* raid, he seemed honestly unable to remember it. He did recall, however, that Moore had a problem with authority: "He was pretty much critical of most politicians. I can't think of any he would say were worth anything, and maybe he was right. . . . What he focuses on is what's wrong and what's going to be wrong. In my elections, Moore was trying to find out anything and everything that I had done wrong. This was his usual use of confrontation."

It's also what good muckrakers do, and Moore was a good muckraker. "Moore is very smart," said Albert Price, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan at Flint who worked with Moore on several projects, including a local TV show called *Roadkill Politics*. "He was always very focused on class issues, and he's tried to bring political discourse around to social class and the distribution of wealth in our society. He reported on stuff that was serious, and he did it at a serious level. The *Flint Voice* was a far more legitimate source of information than the conservative, establishment *Flint Journal*. Moore simply provided much, much more information."

He was playful, too. The informality of the paper meant that he could run satirical social criticism like the diary of "Brian," an individual telling his story from sperm to adult, at first full of optimism, hope, love, and humanity, but increasingly distorted through mind-numbing schooling and soul-crushing factory work into a redneck racist slob who hated the world.<sup>4</sup> This story reveals quite a bit about Moore's view of human nature: that we are born good, trusting, and communitarian, and that it is only exposure to a warped, capitalist value system that trains us to be suspicious, greedy, and hateful. This is, of course, classic left-wing romanticism, the counterpart of which is the right-wing romanticism of the sacred, selfish individual. It is a shame that politics, philosophy, and economics have all greatly suffered from the persistence in Western intellectual life of both kinds of romantic theories of human nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Hayek, Karl Marx, and Ayn Rand can share the blame equally.

Moore's complete commitment to his causes made him some enemies at GM and in the city administration, but it won over many working-class people. Fran Cleaves, an auto worker, die-hard unionist, and activist, ran into him frequently at picket lines and community

meetings, and they became close friends. Cleaves was much older, and unlike some in the black community, she trusted and welcomed this like-minded white boy. Cleaves grew up in Detroit but moved to Flint in 1964, when Moore was eleven, to work for GM. She laughed when I asked if she worked on the line or in an office. On the line. She was first assigned to “the hole”—Chevrolet Manufacturing Plant Number Six—where she put in her time hanging doors. Later she moved to oil pans and rocker arms, then the motor line in Plant Number Four, one of the plants that took part in the historic sit-down strike of 1937.

Cleaves has paid a very high personal price for being on the wrong side of the American socioeconomic divide. Her son Herbert was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in a rough neighborhood in Flint shortly before the release of Moore’s first film, *Roger & Me*. If you watch the credits roll at the end of the film, there’s a dedication to him that warms the heart of his mother.

Cleaves saw Moore as a dedicated and effective activist long before he had any hope of money or fame. She told me:

He was at everything. You couldn’t hardly be involved in any social issues here and not meet him. He was always respected as a speaker; wherever he was speaking would be packed, and it would be packed with people who had everyday struggles, survival issues, especially people who worked in the plants and the hospitals, homeless people. There was a movement from Tent City; Michael was very involved with that. I can remember picketing one of the banks—just Michael, myself, and two or three other people, who picketed Citizens’ Bank here to support the people who were trying to organize a union. I remember it well because Michael was covered in snow. He could always be counted on to come up with the right position that would help you teach and educate people. He seemed to have a thick skin and a sense of humor, never retreating from his position but being able to not take it personally.

There was one case in particular, a kid named Billy Taylor who was killed by the police, and they tried to cover it up. They said that he was in the middle of a theft—which he was—but Michael was able to show that the boy’s hands were up when he was killed by the police. There was a case in

which even a black policewoman was shot down and left to die. There was all kinds of evidence, even on the police recorder, where they were making jokes about leaving her dead. Michael exposed all of that in his paper. He got in trouble with some of the leaders of the black community, who would identify him as this kid from Davison who needed to go back where he came from, but Michael had enough support from people in the black community who knew him. . . . He wouldn't debate that kind of stuff; he just kept on doing the work he was doing.

Moore does seem to have been both careful and sincere in his racial politics throughout his career, to the extent—as some black associates of his have noted—of being unable or unwilling to call out black people on antisocial behavior. Sometimes his attitudes have earned him ridicule from the right, as when he has intentionally downplayed the effects of black street crime so as to focus on white corporate crime (indeed, one whole chapter in his book *Stupid White Men* is about the evil that specifically white people do). He has nurtured the essentialist view of race in America to the point that he is able to blame the nation's problem with guns in large part on what he sees as a racially hysterical news media.

Once, during a question-and-answer session with a sympathetic crowd in California, I saw a black man stand up to thank him personally for his films and for saying in an interview that he would never dream of undertaking any project without having black people involved at every level. Moore's sincerity, however, may be only rhetorical; as Peter Schweizer discovered when he looked into the matter, Moore's practice falls far short of his ideals in this regard.<sup>5</sup>

The questioner asked Moore how he had come by this attitude, which he considered rare in white people. Moore sat thoughtfully for a moment (although I would have bet that he had encountered this question before and knew exactly what he was going to say) before answering:

I was thirteen years old. It was Holy Thursday. We were coming out of Mass; it was kind of cold. Someone turned a radio on in his car in the parking lot. He called out, "They just shot

Martin Luther King!” And—a cheer arose from those people coming out of the church. It was one of those moments in which things suddenly become very clear: “Okay, fuck this. I don’t want to live in this kind of world. These people have to change. . . .” And that’s sort of been my motivation in what I say and do when it comes to race in America.

Sam Riddle is a friend of Moore’s and a professional associate with whom he has retained a close bond over the years. Listed on the masthead as a “founding member” of the *Flint Voice*, Riddle has been an important figure in Flint, Michigan state, and national politics since the early 1970s. A high school dropout who did a stint in the army before getting a college and legal degree, Riddle now operates in the same territory that Moore does, although from a slightly different perspective: the intersection of politics and image, news and entertainment.

Riddle has political clients all over the country. He has represented politicians in Detroit, Flint, Colorado, and many other places; he has worked with Al Sharpton and the Word television network, the largest media operation for black ministers in the country; he’s worked with Ralph Nader, Jesse Jackson, the eccentric Michigan politician Geoffrey Fieger, and several of the people who have been featured in Michael Moore’s films. If there’s a racial aspect to be worked, he will work it—not in the cynical spirit of shakedown but because of the plain fact that justice in America is still racial and that, if you expect to get justice where race is involved, you can’t ignore race.

Riddle has known Moore since his early political days on the Davison school board. In his last year of law school, Riddle was working for Genesee County district attorney Robert F. Leonard when the recall movement against Moore was under-way. Leonard—an unusual district attorney for that time and place—was concerned that the recall movement was using illegal intimidation tactics against Moore and sent Riddle to investigate. Moore and Riddle have been friends ever since, and they learned to organize together in Flint.

Riddle points out that Moore did it the hard way, at the grassroots level, where he earned his beliefs about class and politics, all the while with his eye on a larger stage. He told me:

In 1983, he and I decided we were going to change the mayor of Flint. At that time, the mayor was the former police chief, Jim Rutherford, who had authorized those raids on the *Voice* offices—real Gestapo tactics. November 1983, there's an underdog black candidate, Jim Sharp, a former marine who doesn't have a prayer against this right-wing Jim Rutherford. I said we had to do something to get out the black vote. The *Voice* sponsored a get-out-the-vote rally in Whiting Auditorium in Flint, the same place we would later do Ralph Nader, where we outdrew Bill Clinton. So I fly down to Washington and negotiate a deal where, the day Jesse Jackson announced he was running for president—just before the Flint election—his first stop as a major black presidential candidate would be Flint, Michigan. Then, to ensure Jesse would be there, I get the jet that Lee Iacocca uses—if you got the money, you can charter anything. We go down and pick up Jesse the day he's scheduled to announce. Except that, when me and Michael get there, Jesse's with Marion Barry at a press conference and Jesse's about to back out; the party doesn't want him to announce. He's trying to make up his mind about whether or not he's going to run.

I went in and told him—and Michael's all embarrassed about the language I was using—“Look, you motherfuckers, you can do what you want, but I've got two, three thousand people waiting up in Flint, waiting for you to come there. That's your first stop. That's the deal we negotiated.” Jesse glares at me, but he makes his announcement and he gets on the jet. And we get to Whiting Auditorium and they're just rocking. They've been there for three hours, but they're still there! The rally is a humongous success. It motivates the voters to get out. There's a big upset victory, Jim Sharp wins and Rutherford, who raided the offices of the *Flint Voice*, is out.

Jesse leaves Flint. He takes the jet and doesn't bring it back! He went down to Georgia and Alabama. Michael's thing is that Jesse is this great black leader. My thing is that he can help us get out the vote, and then get his ass out of town. Sharp won and Michael and I got our picture on the

front page, side by side, and Michael said, “This is the kind of thing Sam and I do.” With me and him, it’s always been action. We *do* shit.

The celebrity weirdness, the secret weaknesses of powerful people, the power of the common people—it’s a very American story. It’s worth noting, too, that twenty years later Riddle and Rutherford are good friends and speak of each other with respect.

Speaking of a recent scandal involving Al Sharpton’s personal life, Riddle offers an insight into the culture of American politics that is as profound as any I’ve heard:

Our personal lives are what do us in. They’re also the foundation for our accomplishments in this nation, depending on the value systems that are implanted in us by our parents. Michael Moore knows how to play golf! He was an Eagle Scout! His family were all very kind. His mother was a great woman. She and his father gave him a value system that is, I think, an inner strength. Some call it stubbornness, some call it bullheadedness, but thank God for his parents or we don’t know what he would be, because in many ways Michael could put the “Mac” in *Machiavellian*. He’s a strange character, a very complex person. He’s driven to get things done, by any means necessary, and I don’t hold that against him.

Michael knows the streets. He helped John Conyers out a lot when Conyers ran for mayor of Detroit. He’s worked with a number of black candidates. The difference between Michael and most other Hollywood politicals is that Michael has more field experience of hard-core grassroots politics than the rest of Hollywood combined. He was raised on black issues. He’s been around. He knows what it is to work from the ground up. Michael has always had his fingers in the pot of politics, from high school to now.

The *Flint Voice* was committed to working-class cultural expression in every dimension, and it had a full slate of literary and cultural reviews. It let the “shop rats” speak. Michael Moore, by his own

admission, called in sick on his first and only day on the line at GM, but he encouraged and developed some real talent at the *Voice*.

Moore's big find was Ben Hamper, who was everything that Moore was not, everything he aspired to be as a son of the working class. Hamper was fully conscious of the irony of giving up one's soul just because the blue-collar wages and benefits couldn't be beat. He wrote with a gritty poetry of the nihilistic—no, the *surrealistic*—emptiness of a life lived in the plant, of the frustrations of the workers who, in Hamper's time, were never asked to do anything creative.

Hamper is a fourth-generation shop rat; his great-grandfather made motorized buggies in Flint, and his bloodline carries a faint trace of the days before the Industrial Revolution, some genetic memory of the skilled artisans who were fed into the manufactories. His Catholic parents produced eight children, of whom he was the first. His father drank when he wasn't on the line; his mother worked as a medical secretary. Hamper knocked up his girlfriend and married her, and he saw his marriage starting to fall apart before he was even a year out of high school. He sought stability in GM's hefty paychecks and benefits, the fate he'd feared all his life but also, with three generations behind him, secretly considered inevitable. Why fight it?

Hamper's twelve years on the line were punctuated by four spells of layoffs to accommodate the vicissitudes of the market, a common feature of Flint life and of the auto industry in general. It was during a period of low-market idleness that Hamper fired off his first piece for the *Voice*, a record review. Hamper says of Moore:

We hit it off well, both being natural smart-asses who didn't care at all for being told what to do. I'd heard of him before we met. He was always popping up in the local paper or on TV creating some nuisance with authority. I was aware that he'd been the youngest elected official in Michigan when he was on the school board in Davison. None of this really mattered to me. I didn't take a keen interest in him until I began reading his newspaper, the *Flint Voice*. Most of the writing in there was pretty bad, ranting hippie shit, but Mike's stuff was usually good. I realized that this was a place where I could get published. The standards appeared quite low, at least on a literary level.

The standard of Hamper's work was higher. Moore was impressed and asked him for more.

At first, Hamper wrote bar and music reviews and was defensive about documenting the life that unfolded before him on the line. He was persuaded to write about his other job after a bad bar review led to a lawsuit; in a memorable and very characteristic turn of phrase, Hamper had written of a brawler heaven called the Good Times Lounge, "What this place lacks in ambience it makes up in ambulance."<sup>6</sup> The owners took offense at this and at the headline under which it ran: FLINT'S MOST DANGEROUS BAR.

After the legal action fell through, Moore finally persuaded Hamper to write about the line and the characters he hung out with there. Hamper recalls:

Once we began talking about the factory, we pretty much stuck to that. The yarns were plentiful, and Mike had a real curiosity about the way things went down inside a GM plant. He was like a voyeur. . . . The factory stuff was in his blood, his lineage. I always felt there was a small part of Mike that really wanted to give it all up and become a shop rat, surrender to the birthright, like I had. Then again, I don't think he'd have lasted long. The factory was hell on people who thought too much or tried to make some sense of it all.

Hamper began writing a regular column for the *Voice* called "Revenge of the Rivethead."

Hamper was inspired and angry, and he wrote beautifully. In one of his most famous columns, he describes his seven-year-old self visiting his GM-lifer father at the plant on "family day" and discovering that his father didn't actually "make cars"—entire cars—for a living, but only attached windshields:

Car, windshield. Drudgery piled atop drudgery. Cigarette to cigarette. Decades rolling through the rafters, bones turning to dust, stubborn clocks gagging down flesh, another windshield, another cigarette, wars blinking on and off, thunderstorms muttering the alphabet, crows on power lines asleep or dead, that mechanical octopus squirming against nothing,



nothing, NOTHINGNESS. I wanted to shout at my father, “Do something else!” Do something else or come home with us or flee to the nearest watering hole. DO SOMETHING ELSE! Car, windshield. Car, windshield. Christ, no.<sup>7</sup>

In *Rivethhead*, a collection of Hamper’s best writing that originally appeared in the *Flint Voice*, *Mother Jones*, and the *Detroit Free Press*, Michael Moore emerges as more than a hobbyist provocateur. Hamper shows him as a man of tremendous energy who loved his work and had a lot of fun with it, and who was interested in people, really interested in what made them tick, although often reductionist in his Manichaeian conclusions about the inherent characters of industrial workers versus those of industrial managers. (Hamper himself had no such delusions. He knew a bullying, soul-corroded burnout when he saw one, regardless of social background.) Hamper describes Moore coming with him to cover the “Toughman Contest,” a legal, anything-goes fight put on by the bar crawlers of Flint for twisted entertainment. After the combatants mauled each other, Moore sent Hamper to talk to the fighters and get their stories. Hamper was appalled by this degrading spectacle, and for all the right reasons. Moore, however, was excited for all the right reasons: these were people with real stories; they had something to say for themselves. They might surprise you.

Moore was serious, but he was also playful. When General Motors started to send a giant cartoon mascot called Howie Makem, the Quality Cat, around to talk to workers on the line, Moore thought it absolutely hysterical. He tried hard to get Hamper to interview the cat. Hamper refused this humiliating concession to the infantile weirdness of GM’s corporate imagination.

By 1986, Hamper’s work for the *Flint Voice* and the *Detroit Free Press* was getting some attention, and he was featured in a *Wall Street Journal* article by Alex Kotlowitz on blue-collar writers, with a line drawing of his face on the front page. Television shows were calling him. But Hamper was the real thing: he struggled every day against the deadening absurdity of his line job, but it gave his life meaning. He couldn’t escape the feeling that he was a line worker who wrote, not a writer who worked the line:

I was amused by the attention because I realized it was just as much a novelty as anything else: “Look at the shop rat. He can actually spin sentences together!” For me, it was more something to do, something to occupy the time. Moore was the big catalyst. He was the first to suggest that I start to document these stories about the shop. Until then I was just floundering around, searching for an inspiration or niche. There were times when I entertained the idea of being a full-time writer, but I pretty much realized that it was the factory that provided the spark, the adversary, that I needed.

Hamper stayed on with GM until 1988, when his job was moved to Pontiac and the accumulating stress of a dozen years on the line got to him. He started to have incapacitating panic attacks.

If Moore got Hamper some national attention, Hamper also helped Moore. There were truths in Hamper’s work that lived on long after everyone had stopped caring about the union campaigns and corrupt local politics that filled the *Voice*’s reporting. Because his work was so good, and because it got noticed, Hamper brought national attention to the *Voice* and its editor, who soon found himself in contention for the editorship of a magazine with a national circulation.

The *Flint Voice* looks like it was a lot of fun to do, and it must have been run by true believers since it couldn’t have made much money and was seriously dependent on Harry Chapin and his benefit concerts. This well tragically ran dry when Chapin was killed in a car crash in 1981, and contributions from Stewart Mott—an heir to the Charles Stewart Mott fortune who was incongruously sympathetic to left-wing causes, and was a friend of Moore—didn’t quite take up the slack. As a free alternative monthly paper, the *Voice* struggled, although it did acquire some advertising and respect.

The *Flint Voice*’s successor, the *Michigan Voice*, was published between 1982 and 1985 and did eventually sell for money. It was glossier and more commercial, ran nationally syndicated columnists, and sold all over the state, although it remained true to its counter-culture roots. Its first issue proclaimed that it would not accept advertising that was “racist or sexist in nature, or from the Armed Forces.”

Reading the *Michigan Voice*, one gets the feeling that Michael

Moore was already a little bored. He'd been doing alternative journalism for years before the *Michigan Voice* even got started. He had a reputation and had branched out a bit, landing a gig as an occasional commentator on National Public Radio by 1985, but he was still doing more of the same and just getting by. Moore claims that until he was thirty-five—until a few years after he left the *Voice*—he'd never made more than \$15,000 a year. And his tactless, antiauthority impulsiveness could hurt him: according to NPR's news director at the time, Robert Siegel, he lost the NPR position when, in a segment on child abuse, he suggested that it was the fault of parents who taught their children to obey.<sup>8</sup>

Reading the *Voice* now, almost twenty years after it closed up shop, one can clearly see the outline of Michael Moore's future career. All the elements are there: the playfulness, the humor, the unorthodox approach to public policy reporting, the polemics, the sense that political action is worth doing only as a crusade, and also the assumption that issues are black and white, the good guys against the bad guys, workers against parasites. The naïveté is sometimes inspiring and sometimes irritating, but, although the language is often inflected with the boomer anger of the 1960s and 1970s, the style is not a hippie style; Flint is a blue-collar town and the *Voice* was very deeply a blue-collar publication. In its attitude if not always its language, it is almost an early-twentieth-century socialist style with its belief in the essential perfectibility of human relations, if only all of that corrupting nonsense of industrial, capitalist life—bosses, police, destruction of individual potential through existential drudgery—could be swept away.

But, again in line with the idealists of the early twentieth century, getting to this happy place required some uncompromising militancy. The *Voice* published a lot of innovative and probing journalism. In poring over many, many issues, I never found a retraction or correction. If Moore was ever wrong, he wasn't likely to admit to it, and perhaps never believed it. And that, too, predicted the style of his future career.