At Homer, Alaska, Cook Inlet meets the Gulf of Alaska. According to its Chamber of Commerce, the town of four thousand people occupies a spectacular site on Kachemak Bay in sight of the Kenai Mountains. Once a coal-mining town, Homer now relies for its livelihood mainly on commercial fisheries—salmon and halibut in abundance—and tourists. With moose, bear, puffins, eagles, porpoises, and killer whales close at hand, it seems like the antithesis of my own New York City, and well worth the visit.

Residents of Homer might be surprised to learn that their weekly routines owe something to the violent victories of a dissolute demagogue in London during the 1760s. But they do. The online *Homer News* posted an intriguing story in April 2003:

Monday has become the day for war supporters and peace activists to stage simultaneous demonstrations on the corner of Pioneer Avenue and Lake Street, prompting a barrage of honks and hollers—and the occasional profanity—from passing motorists. Saturday, meanwhile, has become the day that Anchor Point stakes its claim as the hub of patriotic rallying.

Deanna Chesser said there were no peace activists present as roughly 90 people gathered to show their support for military action in Iraq and the efforts of the men and women in the U.S. military. “And we don’t have any Women in Black,” said Chesser, referring to Homer’s contingent of the glob-
al network that advocates peace and justice. The organizers of the Anchor Point rally are planning a repeat performance for noon on Saturday, with the addition of music and speakers. Chesser, whose son Davin recently was deployed to Kuwait, said she expects an even bigger turnout.

While those showing their support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq have Anchor Point all to themselves on Saturdays, they have only begun joining the peace activists on the corner at Pioneer and Lake for the past several weeks. For weeks prior to that, passers-by out around noon on a Monday would see a subdued silent vigil taking place on the corner, which is also the site of Homer’s Veteran’s Memorial. The presence of protestors in front of the memorial stirred up resentment among some residents, prompting a call to begin a counter rally at the same time. “We want to take the corner back,” said one flag-waving demonstrator. “Why don’t you pray for our troops instead of for the Iraqis?” yelled a passing motorist, responding to the Women in Black assertion that their vigil is in observance of those lost in war.

But Sharon Whytal said she believed the choice to stand near the Veteran’s Memorial symbolizes a concern for all those who are lost in military conflict. “It’s true that many of us are there because we’re grieving for the loss of veterans,” Whytal said, adding that having both groups share the site also provides a powerful symbol—freedom in action.

While there had been reports of some unpleasant exchanges between the two groups, there was little sign of it on Monday as close to 100 people stood on the corner, split evenly. The group waving flags stood out front on the sidewalk, lined up at the curb waving flags and cheering as passing motorists honked and waved. Standing 15 yards behind them, a line of Women in Black joined by a number of men, also dressed in black, remained silent for the duration of their vigil. “I don’t feel offended that there are two groups there expressing their minds,” Whytal said, referring to a sign bearing a slogan popular at many protests around the country: “This is what democracy looks like.”

Anchor Point, site of the solo pro-war celebrations, lies sixteen miles west of Homer on the Sterling Highway, which leads up Kachemak Bay to Anchorage. Having only an elementary school at home, Anchor Point’s adolescents bus down the Sterling Highway to Homer for their high school educations. Thus the two towns often interact.

The same day that the Homer News reported Homer’s dual displays of antiwar and prowar sentiment, it also ran a dispatch from Anchor Point describing the yellow ribbons tied to trees throughout the smaller town, and inviting people out for a
As the Petőfi-Szótor states, for Petőfi, one of the most important poets of 19th-century Hungary, “tömég” could mean ‘the amorph mass of a large amount of material,’ ‘the large quantity of something,’ and most frequently, ‘the multitude of people gathered together’: a crowd. This is not really surprising, considering Petőfi’s active role in the revolution and the freedom fights of 1848-1849.

Csőd
The TESz informs us that “csőd” originally had the meaning of crowd. There is one example for this usage from 1841. Nonetheless, the word had other meanings right from the beginning, which took over rather quickly. The less frequent “csődül” has retained its connotations to crowd, however, possibly due to the fact that it has not been lexicalized separately from the word “csődül,” since it is formed according to the rules of Hungarian grammar.

According to the HHC, the regular nominal derivatives of “csődül” came to use around 1838-1840. József Osztróvszky used the expression “csődület” (participation, financial assistance) in the context of insurance companies. The eminent Hungarian poet Mihály Vörösmarty made use of the expression “csődülés” (coming together, running together of people) several times in his short story, “A füredi szívhalász,” in 1840. Mihály Horváth, in his book of industrial and trade history written in 1840, analysed the policies of tradesmen who wanted to prevent the oversupply of goods by prohibiting the “csődület” (proliferation) of merchants. In 1844, Ignác Nagy wrote of “csődületi zár” (the suspension of bankruptcy, insolvency) in his article “Adó és betegség” (urban disease), describing the maleficient effects of the putrid scent of the dirt and water in the city of Pest.

The politician and economic policy-maker nobleman István Széchenyi used “csőd” (bankruptcy, insolvency) in his article “Adó és két garas” (Tax and two farthings) in 1840. The expression “csődülési zár” (the suspension of payment of legal debts) was first used in 1841, the year “csőd” was also used as crowd. Sándor Petőfi, the most successful poet of the 1840s (and of whole Hungarian literature) is another example of the popularity of “csőd” both as a word and as urban practice in the period:

“Igy múlik éjünk s napunk,/Nincs híja period;”

“That’s how our days and nights pass by./We are not in want of anything./Until we go new rally along the Sterling Highway. Participants, it said, should bring American flags and pictures of family members serving in the Iraq war.ii Inside Homer, the corner of Pioneer and Lake, where the two bands of around fifty people each stood fifteen yards apart, features not only the town’s war memorial but also its police and fire departments. These activists stage their peaceful confrontations at one of Homer’s central locations.

No one who stayed alert to national and international news during the spring of 2003 should have any difficulty decoding April’s events in Homer and Anchor Point. Not just Americans, but people across the world, can easily recognize them as street demonstrations, a standard means of broadcasting support or opposition with regard to political issues. In this case, demonstration and counter-demonstration represented opposition to, and support for, American military intervention in Iraq. On the same days when citizens of Anchor Point and Homer took to the street, hundreds of street demonstrations were occurring elsewhere in the world. Some of them concerned the Iraq War, but most of them took up other locally urgent questions. In the early twenty-first century, the street demonstration looks like an all-purpose political tool—perhaps less effective in the short run than buying a legislator or mounting a military coup, but within democratic and semi-democratic regimes a significant alternative to elections, opinion polls, and letter-writing as a way of voicing public positions.

Although the news from Homer and Anchor Point does not tell us so, the twenty-first-century demonstration actually has two major variants. In the first variant, Homer style, participants gather in a symbolically potent public location where through speech and action they display their collective attachment to a well-defined cause. In the second, they proceed through public thoroughfares offering similar displays of attachment.iii Often, of course, the two combine, as activists march to a favored rallying place, or as multiple columns converge from different places on a single symbolically powerful destination.

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TESTIMONY

Reflections on Crowds — Then and Now

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Then in a youthful “purple haze.” Now trying to sort out memories from subsequent reflections, shared stories with friends and media accounts. The period from 1964 to 1969 was turbulent for me as a young San Franciscan, opposed to the war in Vietnam and the draft; an activist for civil rights and social equity. The psychedelic and drug scene was pervasive as we were organizing antiwar and civil rights demonstrations, some of which turned violent, happenings and “love-ins” in Golden Gate Park, concerts at the Fillmore and Avalon and lots of Haight-Ashbury street action. How to find and reconstruct memories? The strongest are of an abundance of desire to alter the world, stop wars, live in love and peace, radically change the way the American “establishment” controlled social and economic activities at home and abroad. Individuals and crowds are significant in these memories.

The single most powerful and probably most significant mass action I was involved with was the “occupation” of the Mall in Washington D.C. in the spring of 1968. My ex-wife and I were living in New York and with friends were planning to build one of the “resurrection schools,” a geodesic dome on the Mall to provide classroom space to teach inner-city, mostly African American children during the summer. We drove in our VW to Washington, arriving at dusk to a remarkable absence of any traffic, with fire engines and smoke all over the skyline. We had no radio in our car, no knowledge that Martin Luther King had been assassinated, that D.C. was in a state of emergency or that a curfew had been imposed. On the outskirts we stopped at a traffic light and a pickup pulled alongside and a man in plain clothes pointed a shotgun at us. He asked what we were doing driving about. After hearing our story he told us to go directly to our friend’s in southeast D.C. without stopping. We arrived safely and found our friends and others locked in their apartment. Throughout the night tanks and National Guard troops rolled down the street to the Capitol area. After a sleepless night of intense discussion, we ventured forth to the Mall to try to figure out what was going on—to figure out what to do—what was possible. After a day or two we were on the Mall along with thousands of others, camping, making music, building “resurrection schools” and conducting anti-war demonstrations. We protested the presence of troops and tanks by placing flowers in the barrel of rifles held by men my age or younger. For several days after the rioting quieted we built the school and returned to New York—drained—upset—confused—frightened.
Why were crowds essential? The sense of solidarity and belonging in such a clear and visceral way was the most important reason and the most enduring sensation. We were together—optimistic—and we gained strength through our numbers—strength for a shared cause. The rain, the muddy Mall, the troops, the tanks—the hardships brought us even closer together. We worked hard, believed passionately, cared to extremes and, as a result, were comrades.

Another memory is fear. Fear of losing control—of the crowd out of control, of armed, equally frightened young soldiers shooting us (as later happened at Kent State)—of riot—of serious injury—to my friends—to me.

With memory dim, what is the legacy for me filtered through subsequent years? I guess I learned that for social action to be successful it often requires mass action. While mass action is powerful, crowds and social actions can be subverted from their goals. Governments, tradition, and inertia are powerful forces resisting change—thus when change comes, it comes slowly. I also realize that what I perceive as social gains that have been “won” (or legislated) can be later lost if those who care are not constantly vigilant—remaining activists. (I think of Roe v. Wade in this context.)

Having had three male children I have also seen that because I am an activist does not mean they will be. Those of us from the pre–baby boom civil rights and anti-Vietnam days often turn our children and their friends off by frequently recounting the glorified experiences of the late 1960s. They see us as stuck in nostalgia. As they have had no similar major issues directly affecting their own lives until 9/11/01, my children and their generation nonetheless require their own space and time to effect change—with or without mass action.