

**Oral History at Petite Riviere
Elementary School, Nova Scotia**
Alfred and Jessie Haché

"This project made me feel like a star."

"It didn't seem like school work at all."

"I really liked going to Mrs. McLeod's house to interview her."

"This is the best way to learn about history."

"I feel that Inga is still a little girl and she is right here in the classroom and is my friend."

"The best part of the project was the presentation in the community hall."

"It is much easier to write the next chapter of our Dr. Cameron story now that we have been to the house where he used to live."

These are some of the reactions of our students to the oral history projects that have been carried out at Petite Riviere Elementary School for the past three years.

The knowledge gained by the collecting, organizing and preservation of information became the major part of their curriculum. The writing of books based on sound research with original documents has made the process of education meaningful, purposeful and effective for them. (works cited). Researching and recording oral history in their own community has made the students aware of the value of their past in a personal way. This has given our young students the vision and purpose to go beyond the usual work required for their education.

Oral history works well as an educational tool for the authors because they focus on the experience and skills gained through the process rather than on the end product. The gathering and organizing of the material is a valuable educational experience in itself, and the fact that it prepares and stimulates the students to write stories and history books demonstrates that it is an exceptionally effective educational process.

Oral history projects develop the academic skills of our students in an educational environment that is:

- (1) meaningful, because the project is about their community;
- (2) purposeful and concrete, because a valued product makes for a clear objective that gives our students choice and direction for their contributions;

- (3) challenging, because it builds on the work of past students (the books placed in the library are the standards set for the next year's class);
- (4) motivational, because each student can make his/her contribution through his/her personal strength;
- (5) successful, because the process is real and stimulating for the students and the culmination of the project with their presentation to the community gives them the opportunity to share their work and reflect upon it in a relaxed atmosphere approximating an old fashioned social.

Each year the students wish to thank the people of the community. This is done by organizing a social in the community hall of the community that was researched.

At the social the students choose to read some of their own adventures written for the story book along with readings from the collaboratively written story book. With a slide presentation they describe the work that was done and they formally acknowledge the contributors to the project by presenting them with the history book and story book. The children then perform songs, a play or dances of the past. This is always followed by a sing-song led by Mrs. Margaret Crouse at the piano and Mr. Bruce Oakes at the accordion. One has to be present to appreciate the profound impact, joy and educational value of such a successful performance. The children with parent helpers then serve tea and refreshments and the evening concludes with the lovely sound of people young and old in conversations recalling fond memories.

The Inga Vogler Project

For four years before the initiation of the first project, the diary of Inga Vogler, a resident of Vogler's Cove seventy-five years ago, was read to the Grade Four classes as an example of what life in our community was like then. Each year the students were asked to check with their parents and older members of the community to see if any one remembered Inga or others mentioned in the diary.

It was two students from a Grade Three/Four split class of twenty-seven who launched the project in the fall of 1989 when they returned with information that the father of one of the boys had known Inga's father and that he had often been at the Vogler General Store as a young boy. We also learned that Inga's niece was still living in Inga's house in Vogler's Cove.

This information instantly became a tantalizing mystery to be pursued.

Each student was transformed into a detective. The class buzzed with questions and suggestions about how to proceed.

We first contacted Inga's niece, Mrs. Ann Green, and to our amazement she told us that Inga was living with her son in Rhode Island. We got Inga's address and phone number.

The first suggestion from the students was to write to Inga and return her diary. We phoned and her son informed us that Inga was in very poor health recovering from surgery for a brain tumor. Mr. Jim Estey, Inga's son, felt that her diary and the communication with the children might be a very good way to raise Inga's spirits. He granted permission to the class to make a photocopy of the diary to be used in the project. He told the children to feel free to write to Inga and promised that he would see to it that their questions would be answered.

The reaction of the class was that they wanted to write a story about Inga, with Inga as the heroine. We wrote a letter requesting permission to write the story and the reply from Inga through her son was positive, although she couldn't imagine anyone wanting to write a story about her.

The children began to write their story about Inga Vogler and as they needed clarification they would write to Inga and receive prompt replies to their questions. For example:

"Who were the boys smoking behind your doll house?"

"Where did you get your cat, Ittie?"

"Who had the first car in Vogler's Cove?"

Soon we found that we had collected so much information (a diary, letters from Inga, and information from interviews with older members of the community), that as the next logical step the class decided to write a history book.

The children in groups of two or individually chose a topic about Vogler's Cove that they wanted to research.

The writing of a history book about Vogler's Cove became a natural part of the curriculum. This school work would definitely not be thrown out at the end of the year. Rather it was to become two valued books added to our library. These books, *Vogler's Cove in the Early 1900's* and *I'm O.K. Mamma*, were to be requested by the community and visitors to the area. These books were also destined to become part of the National Library of Canada's Canadiana Collection and the Provincial Archives Collection.

The question which begs to be answered is why would 9 and 10 year-old children choose to take on such major projects? The answer is simple: their social activities had made them very familiar with the subject. They enjoyed doing original research with their teachers. This work is meaningful because the children know exactly what they need to do and the result of

their work is understood by all to be a contribution to their community.

The decision to write a history book came from the wealth of information gathered from:

- (1) interviews with older members of the community (Four students with specific questions from other class members went with their teacher to interview a member of the community. The interview was videotaped and became part of the report, to the class, by those four students. The class members got the answers to their questions the next day as they watched the replay of the taped interview. The accountability to their fellow students gave purpose and focus to the four students doing the interview);
- (2) research at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia (four students went with their teacher to the archives to research for specific information needed for the project);
- (3) the community (community members dropped into the school to bring artifacts and information that they felt were relevant to the project).

The writing of the history was different from the writing of the story book in that each student, or group of two students, chose a community topic that they wished to research. Like the story book, they wrote their history topic on a word processor.

How can writing become so rewarding? At the peak of excitement, during which the suggestion was made to write a story about Inga, a beginning sentence, developed by the class, was written on the board. Each of the twenty-seven students wrote their own adventure beginning with that sentence. As the teacher read these adventures the best parts were underlined. Each of the twenty-seven adventures was read to the class with special emphasis on the best parts.

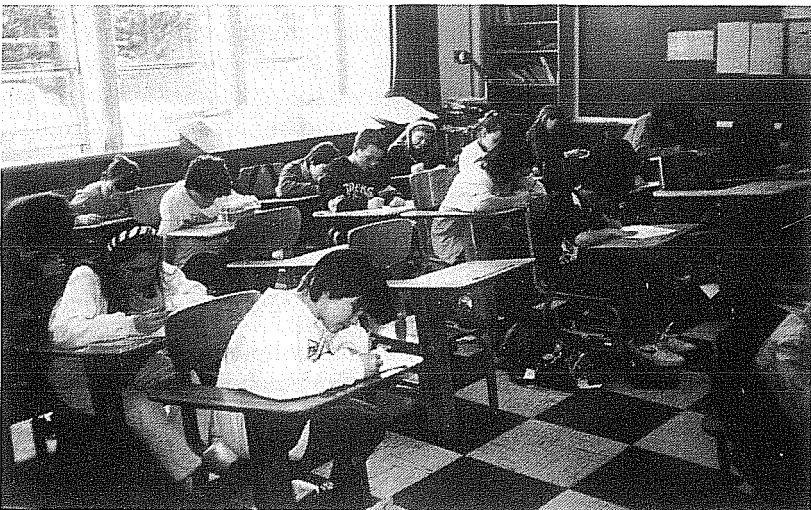
The class discussion that followed determined the plot, and together we started writing the story. I wrote the class contributions on the board while two students entered the story on the word processor and the remaining students wrote the story in their writing folders. As we developed the story collaboratively, the best lines that were underlined became part of the text. The writing process of the history book and the story book were both the same from this point on. Overhead transparencies and a class set of each chapter were made so that the class, along with their teacher, could edit the final copy.

Each student was given a copy of the chapter (1-2 pages) or topic to be edited. The class was given ten minutes to find all the changes they felt

needed to be made. Then the piece of work was projected from the transparency and the suggested changes that the author or authors agreed to make were placed on the transparency. Two students, usually the authors, entered the changes on the word processor. This edited copy was printed to go through the final editing that would be laid out with space for illustrations.

The next step to writing a story from original material (a diary, letters from Inga, and information from interviews with older members of the community) was natural and very exciting for the students. Their research, in the form of recorded audio and videotapes along with documents collected from the community and archives, provided enough material for future projects. Just like in the real world, each investigation led them deeper into the subject matter and their skills developed accordingly. They enjoyed this research because it required them to be creative, resourceful and productive within the context of a familiar topic. Because the objective was clear and the work was purposeful, the students were focused. The result was that they felt confident and each one made his/her own contribution. These contributions were obvious in the finished product. There is no more powerful incentive than this in the educational process. Effective use of this incentive turns the teaching moment into a tide that is productive and rewarding for everyone.

This kind of educational reinforcement is so effective that four years after the first project as I read the books to the present class I can usually remember the students' lines and even visualize each student making a contribution.



Grade Four students working at their own versions of the chapters of *Dear Only Knows*.

The acknowledgment of student work provides a potent learning experience. The appreciation of each student's work with the ensuing discussion amongst a group of students that have clear and precise ideas of what they want to say causes all of them to critically focus on language. Words are carefully chosen and various arrangements are explored to bring out the subtle meaning needed to express exactly what the author has in mind.

The project, done by the Grade Fours, involves the collaboration of the students and teacher of Grade Five. Each year for the past three years as the Grade Four students undertake a project like those mentioned above, they consult with older students about drawings and illustrations. They are instructed by students who have already developed special talents in illustrative art and expertise with computer programs. This collaborative project is the result of a husband and wife team teaching effort. The authors and the students of Grade Four and Five share the workload and move freely as our expertise or talents are needed.

Flexibility and natural exchange between teachers and students are very efficient ways of developing the skills needed for this kind of project. The products of the project (story book, history book, play and community presentation) are the result of the successful involvement of students in activities necessary for a sound education. Their work is valued by members of the community, who buy the story book and history books. It is valued by the school, which makes the books a part of the school library. The books have been accepted by the Provincial Archives and the National Library. They are used as curricular material within our school. The research is a serious attempt to preserve our heritage with videotapes of elderly citizens whose first-hand knowledge of the past needs to be recorded before it is lost.

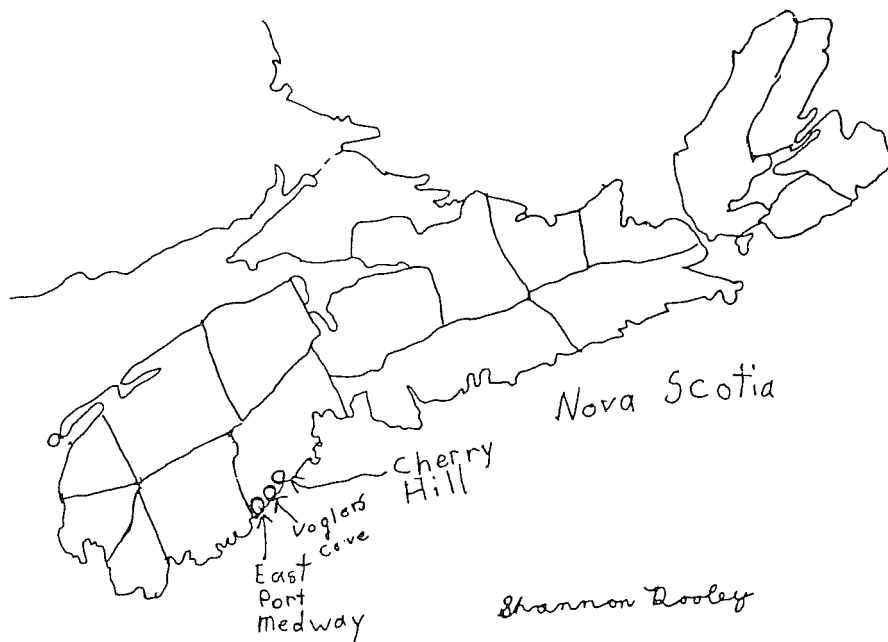
Our students participate in the education process of a real-life experience that produces a valuable product as it develops academic skills. The work of previous students becomes the curriculum material needed to familiarize new Grade Four students with the task that lies ahead. This activity not only prepares them for their own project, but it sets the standards to be achieved and surpassed in succeeding years. The authors are always amazed by the focused attention of students reading other students' work and discovering interesting facts about their community.

"Oh, look, this is the house across from my house."

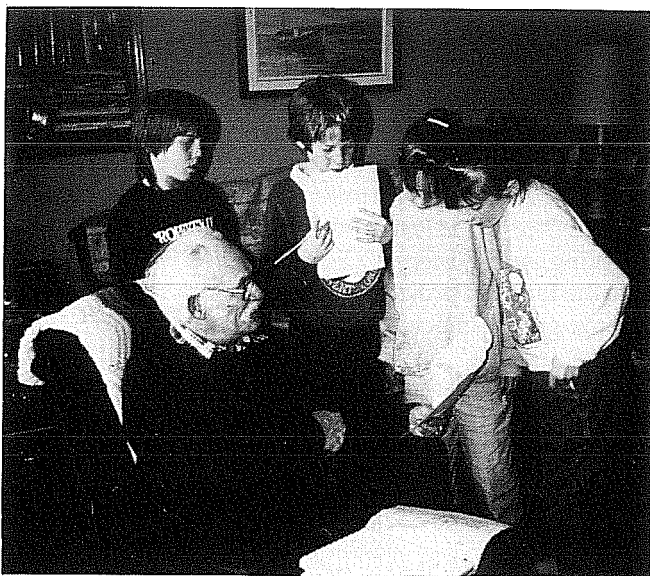
"Oh, look, that's my grandfather mentioned on this page."

"Look how much a Chevrolet cost in 1926, \$630.00."

"Isn't this interesting, the words painted around the wall of our church were there when Inga was a little girl."



Location of Vogler's Cove.



Captain Douglas Bell from Petite Riviere helping out with the history of Petite Riviere.

The students truly appreciate the work that has been done. They understand from experience the value of that work and they naturally want to continue it.

Oral history is successful as an educational tool because it takes the process of education to its origins. The basic need to know, investigate, understand, and record information about ourselves has not changed. Education of younger students through oral history is a natural way to develop interest and to link children to their past. The investigation of the past through the related experiences of elderly people within the community is a powerful education. Both the students and the interviewees are stimulated. The awakening of memories in the elderly from the questions of the students and the enthusiasm generated by their response becomes a meaningful adventure that connects the past and the present.

It is an ideal situation when the teacher is learning fresh material with the students and experiencing the same contagious excitement that the students are feeling. The teacher's contribution as an educator is maximized in such a setting. It is the achievement of teaching within the teaching moment. It is also the delicate science of keeping the momentum in the learning process.

The project begins from a need or desire of the group to explore and continue to discover interesting information. The activity feeds on itself as it develops into an adventure that begs to be recorded. The students' commitment is matched by contributions from the community. Excitement initiated from the classroom is amplified and redirected to the classroom by interviews, people dropping into the school to share information, letters arriving with answers to questions, and the proud excitement of students rushing in from their bus to share their information.

Over the past three years our students' school work has produced *Vogler's Cove in the Early 1900's*, *History of West Dublin*, *Crescent Beach and LaHave Islands*, *A Brief History of Petite Riviere and Green Bay*, *I'm O.K. Mamma*, *Dear Only Knows*, *The Hattie Play*, and *A Dedicated Doctor*. The students are currently working on *A History of Crousetown* and *Tales of Crousetown*.

These are the kinds of projects and schoolwork that make teachers and students want to get to school in the morning.

Excerpts from *Vogler's Cove in the Early 1900's* by Grade 4, Petite Riviere Elementary School (1990), pp. 7-11

Interesting Things About Inga Vogler and Her Family

Inga Vogler was born in 1906 on January 7. Her mother's name was Una Dean Annis Vogler and her father's name [sic] was James Solomon Vogler.

Una Vogler, Inga's mother went to normal school in Truro for a year to train as a teacher and taught in Cherry Hill for several years before she was married. She was one of the first women to drive a car in Vogler's Cove. She drove the family car most of the time because James didn't like driving. She lived to be 96 years old.

James Vogler, Inga's father, took a business course in Halifax before he opened his general store in Vogler's Cove. James's parents gave him the name Solomon from the Bible because they hoped he would grow up to be a wise man.

Inga went to West Vogler's Cove School and Liverpool High School. She graduated from Acadia University when she was 19 years old. The strange thing about that is that people usually start college at 19! She must have been very smart. She met Roy Estey at Acadia and later married him when she was 28 years old.

When Inga married Roy at St. Alban's Anglican church, they had two ministers because she was Anglican and Roy was Baptist.

In those days weddings were a community event and everyone in the community went. Joe Bolivar arrived for Inga's wedding very early. The church door was locked and he pounded on the door because he thought they locked him out.

After Inga graduated from Acadia she taught school in Riverport and was asked to teach in Petite Riviere but she moved to the United States to teach French and Math. Later Inga and Roy settled in New York where she lived most of her adult life. Inga and Roy had two children, James who now lives in Rhode Island and Jacqueline who lives in Florida.

Inga had one brother, James Kelly Vogler. Kelly was born on June 9, 1907. When he was little he used to catch flatfish for Inga's cat, Ittie. He was in the Air Force at the beginning of World War II. First he spent some time at St. Thomas, Ontario. And then he went to an Air Force office in England. After the war Kelly worked in the Royal Bank in Quebec City. He lived in Quebec City where his daughter, Anne, was born. Then he came to Nova Scotia to work at Acadia Construction for some time.

Kelly Vogler's only daughter, Anne Cooke, lives in the Vogler house today in Vogler's Cove.

Inga's parents' house burned down when she was less than ten years old and Mr. George Kennedy from Port Medway built their new house. George Kennedy's son, Aubrey, who was 16 years old had to row the lumber from Port Medway for the Vogler's new house.

Inga was very interesting. For example, she was one of the few girls in Vogler's Cove who could swim. The reason for that is that it was though improper for girls to swim. They thought it was unladylike but Inga didn't care; she swam and her father even stood on the wharf and held a lantern so she could swim at night.

Inga travelled to many places in the world. When she was in China, she took a summer course at the University of Beijing [sic]. She was the oldest student (82 years old).

In 1989 Inga had an operation and is now recovering with her son in Rhode Island.

Editor's Note: Readers of this journal who may like copies of these works (\$5.00 each) can write:

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