

FIFTH ANNUAL CANADIAN ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The fifth annual Canadian Oral History Association Conference was held at Toronto's Skyline Hotel on October 13 and 14, 1978. It marked the first time the Association had met in Toronto and followed the unwritten policy of shifting conference locations, a policy geared with the intent of making it possible for those interested from local and regional areas to attend.

The theme for this year's Conference was Oral History and Education, a pragmatic choice considering the degree to which the method is now employed in our school system and the increasing emphasis on oral documentation in universities across the country. After registration on Friday morning, the delegates were greeted by Mrs. Jane McCracken, President of the Association.

After welcoming the delegates, Mrs. McCracken proceeded to outline the history of the Association, including the past four annual conferences. She continued with an explanation of the present Conference structure and its departure from the format of the previous gatherings, specifically its division into two parts with Friday's activities devoted to the presentation of papers while Saturday was scheduled for three workshops on different aspects of the oral history method and philosophy.

The President's remarks were followed by Session No. 1, based and titled on the Conference theme, Oral History and Education. The session was chaired by Dr. Ian Winchester of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education who introduced the first speaker, Dr. Carole Henderson Carpenter of York University. Dr. Carpenter's paper was entitled "The Old Man, A Family Tradition" and centered around the storytelling capacity of her paternal grandfather. She explained that her grandfather had died before she had had the chance to interview him but that she had undertaken the project through interviews with members of her family, including her father and brother. Dr. Carpenter continued by analyzing the different types of stories told by her grandfather and commenting on the valuable nature of such a family folklore project. She stated that such a project, like family oral history research, has problems because of its anecdotal nature but thought that the advantages of same, especially for the younger generation, outweighed this deficiency. She felt that the younger members of a family benefitted from this activity by obtaining a better sense of self awareness and an increased appreciation of history. Dr. Carpenter concluded her paper with the observation that the initiation of a family folklore or oral history project was not a difficult undertaking and expressed a hope that projects of this type could be implemented in both the primary and secondary school levels to a greater extent than at present.

Both the second and third speakers in Session No. 1 represented the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and both read papers related to their doctoral work involving the adaptation of specific immigrant groups to the twentieth century urban experience in Toronto. Speaker No. 2, Franc Sturino, presented a paper entitled "Oral History, Immigrants and Education" which dealt with the usage of oral history as both a research tool and as a source of information amongst a particular segment of the Southern Italian community in Toronto. Mr. Sturino explained that his doctoral work concentrated on that villager group to which he has blood ties and which involved a study of their socio-economic makeup in their place of origin, their reasons for

emigration, their establishment first in Chicago and subsequently in Toronto, following restrictionist legislation in the United States during the 1920's. He stated that oral history and tradition formed an integral part of this study which in itself could not depend solely on written sources since these were not conducive to the Italian peasant community. He did point out that his sense of objectivity was threatened by the process of interviewing relations from the group into which he was born but stated that such an approach had the advantage of familiarity with the dialect of his people which helped especially in checking evidence of questionable veracity. Mr. Sturino noted that among his findings to this point was a vision of the Italian community in Toronto as a polyglot and not that of a homogeneous culture or group. With relation to oral history in general, he pointed out that he harboured reservations over its usage as the sole tool or source by non-academics, a practice he referred to as the creation of instant history. He did feel, however, that oral history was a legitimate partner in the historical process and eminently suited to social history and ethnic studies. He stated that the implications for the usage of oral history in these latter areas with regard to education were large, especially in the development of text books for the school curriculum.

The third speaker, Lillian Petroff, read a paper entitled "Macedonians in Toronto, the Rise of a Community, 1903-1940. Ms. Petroff explained that many of these new immigrants faced the prospect of being socialized to Canadian life through the evangelical efforts of the Protestant churches of Toronto, especially the Baptists churches. The immigrants were encouraged to attend church services and church sponsored meetings where one of the primary goals was that of obtaining conversions. Ms. Petroff continued by stating that conversions were obtained and dutifully reported for the benefit of the archives of the various churches. She added, however, that these and other statistics in the church records were only of limited help in attempting to understand the immigrant experience. Background information was necessary and Ms. Petroff explained that through oral history interviews with a number of the Macedonian immigrants, she was able to obtain a different perspective of their relationship with the churches. She reported, for example that many went to church sponsored meetings not really to be converted but to learn or improve their English to increase their job possibilities. Ms. Petroff felt that this finding, amongst others, demonstrated the usefulness of oral history in fleshing out important background details.

Session No. 2 of "Oral History and Education" in the morning saw the emphasis change from that of university studies as presented in the first session to the use of oral history in the school system and on radio. Jane McCracken acted as the Chairperson for the session and introduced the first speaker, Mr. Fred McFadden from the Scarborough Board of Education. Mr. McFadden explained that his involvement in the oral history process included having students interview elderly citizens on various subjects, especially those relating to local and ethnic history. He spoke of one particular social studies program involving multicultural studies where students at the grade five level asked very basic questions on the socio-economic lifestyle of people who had immigrated to Canada from different parts of the world. These questions related to such subjects as style of dress, use of machinery in primary industries and construction materials for houses. A tape excerpt was then played from one of these interviews. Mr. McFadden later presented two additional samples of related work both of which used slides for enhancement, one originating from two grade seven students and the other a group of high school students.

The second speaker of the session was Ms. Barbara Diggins, a freelance broadcaster for Radio Station CJOR/60 in Vancouver. Her paper was entitled "Oral History Takes on Another Dimension" and dealt with the usage of edited portions of tapes

originally done by archivists, historians etc. in the production of radio programs. Ms. Diggins explained that she attempts to make these programs as entertaining as possible befitting the commercial nature of her radio station but also as informative as possible. She then played excerpts from several programs and later commented on the success these broadcasts enjoyed, an indication perhaps of wider public acceptance for such material which, for the most part, has previously been restricted to school broadcasts. In her opinion, the implications for education in this particular segment of the historical record were large and she expressed the hope that the number of radio programs based on oral history would continue to grow.

The third and final speaker of the session was Dr. James Morrison from Parks Canada in Halifax. Dr. Morrison explained that he had been approached by the Ontario Department of Education to act as an interviewer for a planned educational television program based on the geography of Newfoundland to be presented to Ontario students at the grade 9 and 10 levels. Given this general direction, Dr. Morrison continued by stating that he felt the geography lesson could best be assisted by focusing on a family situation wherein the learning experience could be imparted through their eyes. That, in effect, was what happened. The Goodyear family of Stephenville was chosen after a preliminary investigation and the resulting thirty minute program was entitled "Through the Eyes of a Family". Dr. Morrison explained that different types of interviewing tactics were employed with members of the family, including the biographical and topical formats. His questions covered a timespan from the early years of this century to the present and concentrated on the lifestyle of the family and the internal/external conditions which affected that lifestyle. Only the answers of the various interviewees were recorded on videotape for the program which Dr. Morrison screened for the delegates at the conclusion of his remarks.

The first session after lunch was chaired by Mrs. Jane McCracken and entitled "The Ethics of Interviewing". The session represented a new direction in that it was the first formal consideration of the interviewee's role in the interview situation to be presented at a COHA conference. The first speaker, Dr. Mary Northway, a retired psychologist and sociometrist, related her experiences as an interviewee, a position she's been in eleven times since 1971. Dr. Northway reported that her most enjoyable interviews have been with interviewers whom she didn't know because of the greater spontaneity which resulted from this situation. Her least enjoyable experience was with a team of two inexperienced student interviewers who had been sent out to interview her on the psychology of camping. Dr. Northway stated that because of their inexperience, she instead ended up interviewing the two of them. Most of the other eleven interviews conducted with her have been biographical in nature regarding her work history. She related that on at least two occasions during these sessions, the interviewer(s) attempted to influence her answers which she felt was a very negative tactic. She also expressed an opinion that emotional upsets and the length of the interview session affect the quality of the process to a degree. Dr. Northway continued by stating that she had spent a year at Cambridge in graduate school studying remembering theory and that this knowledge, combined with her career work, permitted the realization that an external event is usually modified at the time by the viewer who imposes his or her own meaning on its occurrence. In addition, the recollection of an experience is remodified by the individual according to that person's present situation. Dr. Northway concluded her remarks by advising interviewers not to press for the correct date or actual situation, but to draw from the interviewee his or her impressions of the past. Her opinion as a psychologist was that historians could check for accuracy with regard to statistical information, place or time.

The second speaker of the session was Dr. Abbyann Lynch of St. Michaels College, University of Toronto. Her paper was entitled "Problems of Ethics in the Interview

Situation: How to Recognize and Cope With Them". Dr. Lynch stated that oral history presented more situations of a problematical nature than either written or material evidence simply because the source of information for the former process is a living being and not a document or an agricultural implement. In her opinion the personal rights of the interviewee were of greater importance than the process rights of oral research and she questioned the interviewer's right to intervene when it was realized that the interviewee was not providing accurate information. Dr. Lynch stated that the interviewer has a moral obligation to prevent the misuse of the interviewee's personal recollections once these have been recorded and that the long and short range benefits resulting from that information must be balanced against the risk to the interviewee. She concluded her paper with the observation that those who make use of the oral history method must always consider the dilemma of reducing the disadvantage to the respondent at the risk of reducing the effectiveness of the discipline. She felt that the oral historians responsibility could never be less than ethical and that the initial consideration outweighed the second in importance.

The final session of the afternoon and of the day was entitled "Involvement In Oral History" and featured three presentations from speakers with different work backgrounds and their usage of oral history within their fields of interest. Dr. James Morrison chaired the session whose first speaker was Cormela K. Patrias from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. Ms. Patrias gave a brief history of the Society, together with its goals before commenting on past social history papers related to immigrant groups and the manner in which these are often skewed because of the absence of a balanced cross section or representation of the different types of people within a particular group. She stated, for instance, that past studies have often relied on group spokesmen who are usually quite articulate but don't represent the opinion of the laborer or housewife when giving recollections of past events. In addition, these spokesmen often fail to mention unpleasant occurrences or themes in relating their group's history and that other sources, such as the government records, which are available, are likewise often incomplete concerning this type of information. Ms. Patrias then went on to relate the organizational characteristics of the Society's oral history program including the fact that several researchers contribute the taped interviews and that they are encouraged to conduct their interviews in English even if their native tongue is that of the particular community they're researching. In addition, the resulting tapes are transcribed only for publication purposes while those not intended for this purpose are summarized. The reason for this, in addition to the cost factor involved, is that the pronunciation and sentence structure are considered valuable by linguists, qualities which cannot be transformed into print.

Anton Wagner, representing the Association for Canadian Theatre History, was the second speaker of the session and his paper was entitled "Oral History and Canadian Theatre History Research". After giving a brief resume of theatre history in Canada, Mr. Wagner continued by stating that a great wealth of raw data both in archival and oral form exists in the country but to this point in time, very little of it has been used either as an educational force or through the medium of publications. He explained that the Association was formed in 1976 and that its goals were similar to those of the COHA with regard to the former's intent of promoting the advancement of theatre history in Canada. Mr. Wagner felt that oral history interviews would play a significant role in this advancement but cautioned against their usage to replace other forms of research. He concluded by stating that although oral history could not stand on its own, it was nevertheless a primary research tool, a humanizing factor and therefore indispensable.

The third speaker, Valerie Schatzker, represented the Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine. She explained that the Institute had established five chairs

for the study of history of medicine in Ontario, three of which were employing oral history as a means of documentation through interviews with professors and researchers at those locations. Mrs. Schatzker stated that at the University of Toronto where she is participating, members of the faculties of History and Medicine sit on a board governing that institution's particular oral history project related to the history of medicine. She explained that the interviews conducted are usually biographical in nature and, within that framework, cover such topics as the establishment of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, the granting of medical degrees in Canada and the socialization of medicine.

The fourth and final presentation of the afternoon came in the form not of a speaker but, appropriately enough, a tape recorded message from a speaker who was unable to attend. The tape was made by Mr. John Twomey, Acting Vice-President for the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television. Mr. Twomey was unable to attend because his Association was meeting on the same dates in Montreal due to a late change in their plans. On the tape Mr. Twomey explained that there were two reasons for the formation of the Association, one of which related to the lack of an historical framework for most of the personnel who have been involved in the radio and television industry and secondly due to the interest on behalf of the professionals involved in this industry in the documentation of the history of broadcasting. He added that no comprehensive history of broadcasting in Canada has yet been attempted in contrast to the United States and Great Britain. Mr. Twomey concluded by stating that the dissemination of information was an important priority for the Association and stressed the need for close co-operation between his organization and the C.O.H.A.

The days sessions having concluded, the delegates adjourned until the early evening in preparation for a wine and cheese reception and later, the annual banquet, both of which were held in Ballroom C of the Skyline Hotel. Towards the end of the banquet, the local events organizer, Mr. Harold Moulds of the Ontario Medical Association, introduced the guest speaker, Dr. John Scott of the Toronto General Hospital. Dr. Scott gave a most interesting talk about pioneer life in Simcoe County, Ontario, and a restoration project he's been involved with regarding the Sir William Ostler estate. His presentation was accompanied by slides of the area and the estate. Dr. Scott was actually an eleventh hour replacement for the scheduled guest speaker, Professor W.E. Swinton of the History of Medicine Museum, Academy of Medicine, Toronto, who had to cancel due to illness. It was, however, agreed by all that Dr. Scott was a more than adequate substitute for Professor Swinton and he was thanked accordingly.

On Saturday the format of the Conference changed to a workshop structure. Three workshops were held emphasizing different aspects of the oral history method and its administration. The first was entitled "The Interview Process" and was conducted by Gary Hughes from the New Brunswick Museum and Jean-Paul Moreau, Sound Archives, Public Archives of Canada. It was attended for the most part by novice interviewers who wished to know more about the basics of interviewing, a situation that had been foreseen by the Executive when planning the Conference based on the experience of previous gatherings where the requests for same eventually prompted the move. The workshop covered such necessary considerations as the need for preliminary research in the archival and material fields, the types of interviews that could be conducted, the importance of the preinterview situation, equipment considerations, the interview itself and the various forms of documentation, including the release form and its ramifications that are required to complete the process. Each subsection of this process inspired questions from the delegates in attendance, particularly those dealing with the pre-interview and interview situations as well as ethical questions surrounding the release form agreement.

The second workshop of the morning under the heading "Transcribing and Editing" was conducted by Mr. Arthur Crighton, Senior Producer, CBC and Barry Penhale, a CBC freelancer. Mr. Penhale began the discussion by stating that he had been retained by the Ontario Educational Communications Association to produce a series of school broadcasts which, in effect, ran for a five year period from 1972-77. The broadcasts dealt with interesting aspects of Ontario's history and generally involved interviews with people who would not normally be approached for such information - a local resident of Cobalt, Ont. talking about the early days of that community; an Ojibway Indian speaking about his introduction to the large urban atmosphere of Toronto. Each program produced and sold to the O.E.C.A. lasted 27 minutes and most featured Mr. Penhale as the interviewer. Mr. Crighton then played a short excerpt from one of these programs which, although only two minutes in length, contained 38 separate edits. Mr. Crighton explained that the editing process is not always so thorough and its emphasis was, for example, lessened during the interview with the Ojibway Indian, a somewhat emotional encounter in which tight editing would have made the interview almost droll or comical. In other situations, the interviewer's questions were edited out. Mr. Crighton pointed out, however, that the original interviews were always kept and eventually placed in the C.B.C. national archives. He also explained that release forms were a standard procedure and that the freelance interviewer, in this case Mr. Penhale, always asked the interviewee if the tape could alter be edited for broadcast purposes with the self-imposed proviso that the respondent's words would not be taken out of context. In closing, Mr. Crighton explained that if the interviewee is unpaid, the interviewer is careful to avoid questions of a sensitive nature but that this is not always the case if the interviewee is paid.

The third workshop was held after lunch and was entitled "Storage and Use". The discussion leaders for this workshop were Mrs. Jane McCracken, Alberta Culture and Denis Gagnon, Sound Archives, Public Archives of Canada. M. Gagnon spoke on the topic of storage and began with a brief history of the Sound Archives before describing the recording and storage policies followed there. Among the topics raised by M. Gagnon was the problem of print-through and the proposed measures to counteract its effects, proper humidity and temperature levels for storage, types of archival storage, tape and cassette quality and the necessary processes of cleaning and demagnifying the recording heads on recorders. Mrs. McCracken followed the discussion and questions on this topic with a talk on the usage of tapes, including their accessibility through proper indexing and documentation, the decision making process regarding the acceptance or rejection of tape recordings offered for donation, the different types of researchers and their research orientations and the practical uses to which tape recordings could be put such as edu-kits for schools, radio broadcasts and museum displays.

After the final workshop, the Association held its annual meeting and the Conference was brought officially to a close. It was felt that the gathering had been a successful affair, especially in view of its stricter adherence to the Conference theme, a development that had not always enjoyed as much success in previous conferences.

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