

## The HERO Collection As Community History

*Burnley A. "Rocky" Jones*

This is a summary of the Black Historical and Educational Research Organization (HERO) project, which was funded by the Department of the Secretary of State in 1970. As stated in the report, the purpose of HERO was academic, cultural and monetary. The aims were to collect the oral history, folklore, myths and superstitions of the Black community by utilizing the energies of Black students. Dalhousie University administered all funds and, as project co-ordinator, I was in charge of all staff. Office space was provided by Dalhousie at a minimum fee, and all office materials were solicited from the Halifax business community by HERO workers.

The program was divided into three phases: (1) training, (2) field work and interviewing, and (3) supplementary research and the processing of information. The program helped to develop academic skills while at the same time allowing Black students the opportunity to learn about their history; it also hoped to educate the white community about Blacks. The students were salaried but spent most of their money on necessary expenses in the field. This problem was created by an inadequate budget and the fact that the people being interviewed lived in scattered locations throughout the province.

During the first phase, the HERO workers were exposed to resource persons who helped them develop skills necessary for interviewers. They also engaged in role playing and study groups on relevant subjects. After training, the field workers went into different communities and were able to interview 270 Black people over the age of 65. The 30 percent of eligible respondents who were not interviewed may have had valid information to contribute to this work, but for many reasons this was not obtained. Limited finances made the project less effective than it could have been, although the amount of work was commendable. Skills useful to students who intended to continue their studies and do research at the post-secondary school level were developed, and many of the project workers obtained knowledge about research that most university graduates do not possess.

The cultural part of the program, although equally as important as the academic, was much harder to assess. The senior members of the Black community were made aware that they had information that was valuable, and many were pleased that the young people were taking an interest in the history of their communities.

In many cases, respect was openly shown for the young people, who had much more formal education than their elders but were in the position of asking for help in a respectful manner. Most of the older people were understanding, helpful and informative. They were quick to explain the terminology that was used years ago, and the patience that they displayed was indescribable. There was one gentleman who had been interviewed three times and phoned many more just because he had so much information, and he always was willing to share his knowledge with us. Many more people, living below the poverty level, fed and sheltered the HERO workers and refused to accept any form of payment in return.

The young people were able to excite the older people about the possibilities of their lives being recorded in history books, and so the bond was strengthened between the young Blacks and the old. Other young Blacks, upon learning some of the facts that HERO was collecting, became interested in learning more about their history and were promised a report in the near future. The white community will be able to understand better the problems and accomplishments of the Black people living amongst them. This, we hope, will help to negate the stereotype of Black people as "hewers of wood and drawers of water."

The monetary aspect of the project was the least successful of any. The HERO workers were spending extra money while traveling across the province and the extra expenses made it impossible to save. For the most part, the workers had to pay for lodging in their home town while at the same time paying expenses on the road, and the out-of-town expenses were not reclaimable.

## Training Program—Phase One

The training program was set up by the co-ordinator and lasted for one week. All workers participated in this phase, which was designed as a crash course in research methods and local history. Dr. W.P. Oliver of the provincial adult education department was the resource person for interviewing techniques and community sensitivities. Dr. Helen Creighton was the resource person for superstitions and ghost stories, and staff of the provincial museum explained various aspects of collecting artifacts. The workers also spent time doing role playing and, in study sessions, familiarized themselves with the geography of Nova Scotia and the written history of the areas that they were to visit. The role playing was repeated until workers were able to go into the field in groups of two and begin interviewing. After two weeks, the workers were sent out alone and worked by themselves with a minimum of supervision for the duration of the summer.

## Field Work and Interviewing—Phase Two

The interviewing was initially done by two persons working together using a questionnaire devised by the co-ordinator and tested for validity and accuracy on a sample population. Workers were aware that the questionnaire was designed as a guide, but that the bulk of the information could only be obtained through the interviewer's common sense and genuine interest. With complete reliance on their own ingenuity, the workers produced astounding results. Most of the interviews displayed initiative, imagination, intelligence and sensitivity. The information collected is valuable to academics, writers and all Black people. Insights into the lives of Black people in Nova Scotia around the 1900s were gained and it was hoped that the Black HERO would be able to portray this life as the people lived it.

The interviewing was not accomplished without problems. HERO workers interviewed a combined total of 270 Black people over the age of 65 and, according to information obtained from the residents of every community, this represents about 70 percent of the persons in this age group. Most of the 30 percent not interviewed were sick, and the rest were either not available or not willing to give out information. There was a general feeling of hostility about being interviewed due to the fact that most of the information given out from the Black community was previously exploited by whites and used in a derogatory fashion. The numerous examples of misused information made us realize that this project should continue and publish the story of Black people in Nova Scotia as Blacks see it. Cassette tape recorders used for the interviews were subject to breakdown, and repairs and maintenance often caused delays.

Due to limited finances for the purchase of tapes and stenographic services, it was sometimes impossible to have the tapes from the field transcribed onto the master tape file, thereby permitting the original tapes to be promptly returned to the field for reuse. This problem could have resulted in a delay in the field workers' return to interviewing but, because time was of the essence, field workers doubled as office staff to speed up the process. Had more funds been available, they could have been diverted into the purchase of more tapes and additional secretarial assistance. We acknowledge with thanks the assistance of a machine donated by CJCH for our summer project. However, because of the speed (3-3/4) additional tapes had to be utilized. These were some of the handicaps we had to face.

## Research and Processing—Phase Three

The third phase of the project was the most demanding and perhaps the most crucial. At this stage the information that had been collected had to be roughly processed. This required many hours in the provincial archives, searching primary sources for verification of our collected data. The field workers first condensed all of the typed interviews and graded them according to content. They were re-read and all information about ghost stories, superstitions, medicines and cures were extracted. These subjects were isolated, because they were easily identified. Other project workers searched the interviews for material on education, important Black people, relevant historical landmarks, the Second Construction Battalion, and examples of co-operation and hostilities between the communities.

As material was found in the interviews, the workers were expected to search wherever possible for verification. This meant that the Department of Veteran Affairs, the Baptist Church, school boards, etc., were contacted and asked for co-operation; the response was favourable. The tapes were hard to hear at times, because the respondent's words were inaudible.

At this point in the project, because of the aforementioned frustrations, the workers became bored and a high percentage of absenteeism became noticeable. This was understandable, considering the fact that interviews had to be read more than once, since the most minute detail could have such significance and influence on our findings. References were scattered around the province, and transportation for follow-up became a problem. We realized that we could not make general statements about the summer's work since the data was not all processed. To generalize at that stage would have been highly irresponsible.

Some editing was done by myself, but contemporary vocabulary could not do justice to the mood that was created by oldtimers when they reminisced about their youth, so every effort was made to preserve their exact words. The process of transferring the spoken word to the written word cannot convey inflections, intonations and sometimes the meaning that accompanies a word or a phrase. The only legitimate interpretation is the one supplied by the informant.

There were many Black people interviewed who had never felt important, nor had they been shown the usual courtesies meted out to persons of their age in other communities. They were delighted and pleasantly surprised by the respect shown them as persons with valuable information to contribute.

As an example of community spirit, one Hammonds Plains gentleman mused, "The community at

that time was like one large family. What one person had, we all had, and if someone had trouble, the community would get together and help him . . . men would turn out and help people to build a house. One time seventy-five men turned out and built a house for a woman in one day. If a person lost a horse or a cow, the people would go around and collect enough money to buy another one for him."

This is the "Black unity" for which the young people of today are desperately searching. The Black community was a community in the real sense of the word, and the liberation of our people is directly related to our ability to emulate the kind of Black humanistic philosophy practised by our ancestors. "I am my brother's keeper" is what they seemed to say throughout those interviews.

## Conclusion

The final stage of the project was originally intended to include the publication of a report that would be a valuable resource for the Black community's history and culture. All of the tapes of interviews were eventually transcribed, but as our realization grew of the sensitive nature of some of the information, we found that we had a problem. No signed release forms had been obtained, and some of the interviewees could have been identified from the information. It was decided that we had to respect their confidentiality, and the result was that all of the material was deposited in the Dalhousie University archives with the stipulation that no one could have access to it until 1990, when very few of the interviewees would still be surviving. As that date draws near, perhaps some of us who enthusiastically worked on the Black HERO project will be able to focus attention on the need for that final report.