

Towards an Expanded Definition of Oral Testimony: The Coal Miner on Nineteenth-Century Vancouver Island.

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I come to you today as somewhat of a heretic. I wish to propose that the definition of *oral testimony* be expanded. To speak of oral testimony is to use the words "sound" and "recording," but in order to employ the characteristics of oral testimony which are invaluable to a person like myself writing popular history, it is necessary to go beyond these two limiting words.

It is no accident that when the introduction of tape recorders to the mass market in the 1960s produced a boom in the gathering of oral history, the boom was most pronounced on the Prairies. The history of colonization was less than one hundred years old there, and many of the people who had lived it were still alive. In other areas of the country where European settlement had begun much earlier, the gathering of recent history from living sources did not initially seem so relevant or exciting.

British Columbia history falls somewhere between the Prairies and eastern Canada in age and venerability. In the mid-1840s, the Hudson's Bay Company moved its coastal base of operations from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River in present-day Oregon to Fort Victoria on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Company officers were already aware that there were coal deposits on the Island and by 1848 were making plans to exploit it. When Europeans came to the Island to mine coal, there was nothing between them and the Canadian colonies but thousands of miles of prairie and mountains. British Columbian history then, began well before what the present-day pioneer can remember.

When I wrote the book *Boss Whistle*, its time frame was selected for me because it was based on the oral testimony of surviving coal miners. The miners told their story well, but living memory did not go back much further than 1900 and there was still over fifty years of history yet to tell, history which included the beginnings of the militant labour movement, the rise of the Dunsmuirs, and the evolution from pre-industrial methods of mining to very sophisticated ones. There were hundreds of stories there, and I needed them if I was to write a companion history to *Boss Whistle* which would interest a general audience.

To begin the research for the second book, which is called *Three Dollar Dreams*, my plan was to sit down with some of the miners I had interviewed for the first book and just ask them what happened to their parents and grandparents. Simple. Not simple. No one could remember anything about what their fathers did. No one could remember being sat on their grandfather's knee and told stories about the past. Perhaps miners and other working men are unusual in this regard. They knew what had happened to them and they knew the good stories about their own time but that was all. Perhaps their fathers had not brought their work home with them. It is a fact that miners sheltered their families and especially their wives from the worst that went on in the mines. The women did not need any fresh information to add to their anxieties.

It would turn out that I was able to draw a certain amount of information out of the miners by mentioning antiquated mining terms to them, or by reading to them about some incident that had happened just before they were born, but these sessions around someone's kitchen table only took me back to 1895 or 1890 at the earliest.

To go back further and still retain the flavour of first-person recollections, I had to look to other sources of first-hand, off-the-cuff, unrehearsed information. So I chose to regard letters, diaries, and testimony at trials, royal commissions, and inquests as oral history. All these sources can contain wonderful colloquial renderings of events just recently passed. The teller might be too close to the event to see it in perspective, but the sound and smell and emotion are fresh and vibrant.

It is rare to find letters written by working-class people. The habit of corresponding regularly and keeping the replies must have been a middle-class and upper-class pursuit. Even the literate miner did not have the leisure time or inclination to write letters, and many were illiterate, leaving the occasional important missive to be dictated to someone who could write. The rarity of working-class letters, therefore, makes the finding of one very exciting.

In 1883 in the Nanaimo area, mining was booming.

New mines opened every month and attracted large numbers of immigrants. Samuel Lowe was one of these. He came to the new community of East Wellington with his wife and two small daughters from somewhere in the United States. The East Wellington colliery was just starting up and hired Sam on as a shaft sinker. Four weeks later, he was killed on the job.

His widow wrote the following to her sister, Mrs. Agnes Childers, just a few days after the accident. A descendant directed my attention to the Provincial Archives of British Columbia to which W.S. Childers of Silver Spring, Indiana, had donated the letter in 1973. There was no punctuation, no "t's" were crossed, "i's" and "s's" were awkwardly formed, and capitalization was random, but the short letter told volumes.

Vancouver's Island, B.C.
Nanaimo, Jan. 19, 1883.

Dear Sister

I Scarclly know how to tell you of the sad death of my poor Husband but I cannot tell you I will send the paper and that will do as well. So do write me soon as I feel the want of some relation in time of trouble God help me to bare it on a count of my Fatherless children Dear Sister I hope you will never have to go through what I have since last Tuesday it is so hard with strangers.

from Elizabeth Lowe

The fact that I have also been able to determine what happened to one of the daughters adds considerably to the excitement of this find, but the short letter in itself tells so much about the kind of people who came to mine the coal, their level of literacy and the tragic situation of the widow in a coal-mining town.

Additional information was obtained about Sam Lowe, and the conditions he worked under, through the inquest conducted the same day he died, in the office of the mine, with the body of the deceased on a table in the carpenter's shop next door. The men who worked with Sam told their stories to the coroner. They were all sitting in this very room. It could have happened to any of them. Sam said, "I can't sit worth a cent." He got up and walked out and did not come back. When they went to look for him they found him at the bottom of the shaft.

Besides speculation on how Sam died, we find out how the shaft was constructed, that Sam was a man of high spirits and could not sit still; that it was customary to leave the door of the shaft open with no protection for the unwary because it always blew open anyway with the concussion of the blasting shots; that men sometimes drank on the job but Sam had not been drinking; that the shaft was serviced by a basket; and

all this information expressed in the vernacular. It is very inspirational to the writer and I hope to the reader as well.

Not all inquests were conducted so close to the event or to the deceased. Many took place several days or weeks after and were formal and awe-inspiring, especially to the workers who were brought in one by one to testify under oath. That the proceedings were also called inquisitions probably did nothing to lessen the apprehension of the witnesses. Fear may put a man on his best behaviour but it can also loosen his tongue. An oath may or may not guarantee truthfulness but often did, and when the events were described by one witness after another, a clear picture began to emerge.

The researcher is also dependent upon the diligence of the recording secretary, the best of whom attempted to copy down every word that was spoken and resisted improving the syntax and robbing the statements of their colloquial charm. Such a man was the secretary for the most dramatic inquest I read: the investigation of the causes of an explosion in Nanaimo's No. 1 mine which killed 148 miners on the evening shift, May 3, 1887. The myths that have grown out of this tragedy are part of Nanaimo lore and have become wildly inaccurate and contain almost nothing of what really happened. In particular, the Chinese have come to be blamed for causing the explosion. No one, it seemed, had gone back to find out what the miners who had worked the day shift had said at the inquest.

No single witness was able to tell the whole story, but gradually the reader can piece together a picture of what happened to that mine and the men in it on that day. Each man knew what he did and what he was supposed to have done—not always the same thing. The techniques practised versus the available technology come through in the simple language of the miners and oversmen. When all is pieced together, the reader knows that knowledge then readily available would have prevented the explosion, and that the Chinese, forty-eight of whom died, had no part in causing the accident.

It is almost entirely through inquests that I was able to learn about the presence of a substantial number of Italian miners on Vancouver Island, one or two decades before the major influx occurred in eastern Canada. Italians were often brought into mining communities as strikebreakers on the Island and in other locations in North America, and this led to a hatred of this group which persisted into the twentieth century. For some, the association was so strong that all strikebreakers are referred to as "Italians" no matter what their nationality. The use of words like "wop" by miners, even when testifying at inquests and royal commissions, gives the reader some sense of the strength of their contempt.

My expanded definition of oral testimony gave me the only direct contact with the Chinese miners of the nineteenth century. It is not coincidental that the Chinese were blamed for the 1887 explosion. Their presence in the mines and indeed in British Columbia was a hot issue at the time, and there were two royal commissions convened to look into the problem.

Chinese miners were among those giving testimony to the commissioners in the coal towns. Despite their stilted English, they usually contradicted the stereotypical testimony of the white miners. However, some inquests into Chinese deaths tended to confirm some of these very stereotypes. The description, for instance, of the medical care given an injured Oriental miner by his housemates reinforces the white man's contention that the Chinese lived in overcrowded, disease-infested houses, practising some form of primitive sorcery. Death from "want of skillful attendance," as the coroner's verdict expressed it, could have been avoided had the company doctor's directives been followed.

Miners' diaries come in two types. The first usually came my way via a friend of the family, who knew that old Louis kept a diary "all his life," but these diaries were always disappointing. They were not personal records of the diarists' feelings or the events of their lives. It was as if these men did not consider their own lives worth recording and had chosen instead to note the remarkable events that happened to other people. The information contained in them could have been found in the newspaper, and in considerably more legible form.

The second type of diary, however, is a treasure. I felt sure I would not find a single one of these. I was sure that the typical miner, if he could read and write at all, would be a man of action, not of words. Fortunately I was wrong. I was able to find several diaries, including one which tells the story of the first strike on Vancouver Island in 1851 from the striker's perspective. The fact that the diarist's brother told a contradictory version thirty years later only added to the interest.

Andrew Muir was a literate man who was part of the first group of miners to come to Vancouver Island. On the voyage out he was cheerful and philosophical, and waxed lyrical when describing the unexpected landfalls and the vagaries of ocean travel. But Andrew became indignant and combative when the Hudson's Bay Company failed to live up to its contract with the miners. When he was arrested and put in irons in the company bastion for leading a mutiny, we read a fiery Andrew Muir full of indignation.

We were treated in the most shocking manner possible called everything we could be called and threatened to be shot like dogs and dare not open

our Mouth so we remained silent the time they were putting on the Irons. . . . I durst not so much as speak to my own Mother. Such proceedings as these carried on in a British colony Governed by English laws, is a disgrace talk of slavery being abolished here it reigns in full force. They will have slaves who will crawl at their feet even when they look at them such are the officers of the Hudson's Bay Company not content with starving a man they must also trample upon him.

Often people keep diaries only during times of adventure or during unusual events. I was able to compare the diaries of four separate adventurers as they rounded Cape Horn at various times before 1869, when it became possible to cross North America by train through the United States. Train journeys broken by stagecoach rides through Indian territory make good reading too. One of the passengers in the 1870's was Barbara Campbell Hoy, a thirty-five-year-old widow from Sydney, Cape Breton, travelling to meet a miner who had loved her as a young girl before he left Cape Breton to find adventure.

Barbara had grown tired of waiting for Joshua Martell to come home and had married someone else. She had a child and then her husband died. When Joshua, by now an oversman in No. 1 mine at Nanaimo, heard from her brother that she was again single, he sent her a letter written in beautiful script, asking her to join him. Perhaps he did not have the courage to express himself directly for he chose to write a poem instead. His granddaughter allowed me to copy it. The poem ends:

Some loves are moments to me for I write
In a correspondence with one to unite.
If I say she proved false and couldn't be true,
Would you think for a moment I meant it for
you?
If the cap does not fit you, just toss it away
And say I'll have nothing to do with this sorry lad.
But if you should think you were fitted quite well
Just drop a short note to Joshua Martell.

These glimpses of the lives of ordinary people are what makes history interesting to the general public, and that is the audience we must reach if we are to convince our fellow countrymen that our past is vibrant and interesting. Oral testimony gives us these glimpses. Rather than be limited to the past one hundred years by the tape-recorded sounds of living memory, let us expand the definition of oral testimony and use it to write history as far back as these sources allow us to go, about ordinary Canadians for ordinary Canadians.

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