

THE FRONTIER COLLEGE HISTORY PROJECT

I hope I may take the liberty of telling you two rather crude stories which may help to illustrate two basic problems which I have encountered in this project and which reflect in turn basic problems in oral history: the bias in the perception of the interviewer and the bias in the perception of the interviewee.

Two Bay Street advertising types were conducting a survey of the prospects of the Liberal Party in the West (of Canada, that is), and, on an initial foray, entered a pub in Vancouver to ask the views of the imbibers therein. Upon asking their question, they were given by the interviewee the famous and universal one finger sign - may I be allowed to use a visual aid at an oral history conference? - which led the interviewers to conclude: "Well, just as we thought. They're still no. 1; they're still no. 1!!!"

The other story concerns a practical joker who had to take along a urine sample for a medical examination. Instead of his vial containing urine, it contained unclarified apple juice. Upon seeing the quizzical expression on the face of the laboratory nurse, our joker said, "Oh yes, it does look a bit cloudy. Here, let me run it through again", and he downed the sample in a single gulp.

Well, with all the lessons of "No. 1" history and "rerun" history firmly implanted in my mind, I set out in 1974 on my Frontier College history project. During 1975 these two lessons have made their impact felt at every turn.

This project was stimulated by the 75th anniversary reunion of Frontier College in 1974, when, for the first time in the college's history, people associated with all phases of its work were brought together in what represented effectively the personification of its history and task. The records of the college had already been deposited in the Public Archives of Canada, where they now constitute one of the most complete and rich sources on Canada's social development in this century. Through these files run many historical threads: labour policy and conditions, immigration, economic development, cultural and social attitudes, federal-provincial relations and the constitution, educational policy and philosophy, and the growth of adult education in particular. This collection comprises all surviving correspondence of the college, annual reports, articles, clippings, an immense photographic representation of the twentieth-century Canadian frontier, and all the records and registers of Frontier College's instructors. My object has been to supplement this already rich source for a history of the college with the oral record of the individuals who worked in the camps themselves, and who experienced what it meant to be a labourer-teacher. Here, I believe, is the greatest value of oral history, the essential and sometimes unequalled supplement to the written sources. I believe also that this has been confirmed by my experience with this project.

Part of my plan was simply a rescue operation, designed solely to preserve the record of the "labourer-teacher", who represents the most peculiar feature of the college, and those who have shaped the policy of the college. More importantly, my object was to "flesh" out the story of the labourer-teacher, to give more life and vitality to the story of an organization which is an educational and constitutional freak. It was possible to be more ambitious

than that, by setting out to tackle the neglect of the "frontier condition" in Canadian history - and this is not simply a case of telling the story of the "navy" in labour history - but my object was far less ambitious. It was enough, in my view, to investigate what represents a microcosm of this "frontier condition" by focussing on an aspect of social history into which many other historical threads could be woven. An investigation of the development of Frontier College and her labourer-teachers would not only reveal much about a pioneering adult education institution, her leaders, and the living and working conditions of Canada's frontier camps since the turn of the century, but also all the aspects reflected in the records mentioned earlier. The oral recollections of the labourer-teachers give insights into the life of the camps - their smell, the taste of the food, the outlook of the working men, the changes in attitude of the labourer-teacher, the personality of Frontier College's leaders, etc., that are simply not to be found in annual reports and letters. Here, the strengths that I suggest exist in oral history have in my judgement been proven. Of course, the weaknesses have also been revealed.

The oral phase of this study is but the first step of an extensive programme of research that must bring together the documentary record and the oral record that ranges from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Arctic to the Great Lakes, and over the past 75 years. Fortunately, the history of the College falls into several convenient phases:

1. The era of Alfred Fitzpatrick, the founder, and author of A Handbook for New Canadians, and University in Overalls:
a) 1899-1922 - foundations, early principles, the dominion charter; b) 1922-1931 - the degree-granting phase;
2. The era of Edmund Bradwin, principal from 1931-1954 and author of The Bunkhouse Man: a) 1931-1939 - the relief camps phase; b) 1939-1954 - the war and its technological and economic impact;
3. Since 1954 - community education programme, native education.

Conducting interviews and research on this chronological format, the major thrust has so far been towards the period up to 1939. Probably, the period since 1939 will be the object primarily of a preservation operation, but in any event the history will probably cover 1899-1954. However, no final decision has been made. The scope of the history will, like the questions we ask, be greatly influenced by the nature of our evidence.

So far, financing has not been a major problem. With \$3,000.00 from Simon Fraser University to start, I was able to secure another \$8,450.00 from the Canada Council for the first oral phase. Frontier College has added several thousands in services. Most of the funds have, of course, gone to pay for the salary and expenses of a research assistant, who has been doing most of the real work. The Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.) have been an important support, both with advice and equipment. All our tapes will go eventually to the P.A.C., but before that happens we shall probably require another \$50,000 and perhaps 5 years to complete the study.

The value of the sessions we have at these conferences lies in the discussion of the practical and philosophical problems encountered in employing the oral record in much the same way an historian might encounter them in

more conventional historical records. In short, the basic question is, will using the oral record enable us to do better history? Shall we, as a result of using it, be better historians? Well, yes and no. Let me take several of these practical problems and perhaps I may be able to explain what I mean.

The first matter I want to deal with is one that revolves primarily around the problem of the bias of the interviewer. In the first place, my assistant, Ms. Marjorie Zavitz Robinson, and I have been closely associated with Frontier College, in the former case as a member of its staff and in the latter case as a former labourer-teacher in 1960 and 1961 and now as a member of the board of governors. Naturally, there is an inbuilt desire to place upon the evidence the best possible interpretation. The only guard against this bias is that both of us have been trained as historians and are fully aware of the pitfalls of history into which the unwary can so easily fall. In the final analysis, only the reader will be able to determine the quality of our history.

The next is that of shaping the questions to be asked. If you don't ask the right questions, you might as well give up. Here, we have taken what I believe is a sound historical approach. After reading all the published writings by and about the college, we went systematically through the correspondence and selectively through the registers of the labourer-teachers. On this basis, we shaped a questionnaire which we hoped would serve the purposes both of covering the sweep of the college's history as well as delving into details of certain special interests which had emerged from the documents, such as the origins of the idea of the labourer-teacher, the struggle over the dominion charter with its degree-granting rights, the personality and ideas of Fitzpatrick and Bradwin, and so on. Actually, the questionnaire really consists of a list of "areas of discussion" rather than of direct questions. It therefore has covered three basic areas of the labourer-teachers' story: 1) his work as a labourer (camp working conditions, pay, food, hours, the work force, any special problems in the camp); 2) his work as a teacher (introduction to Frontier College, preparation, his programme in the camp, experience, attitudes, results); 3) the long-range impact of the experience on the individual and his assessment of the worth of the college.

Our experience with the interviews has led to continual but essentially minor refinement of the questionnaire and a constantly evolving understanding of the college's history. For example, there has been a constant debate in my mind over the extent to which Fitzpatrick was visionary or practical. From his writings, I feel that he was more practical than visionary, but most of those who knew him saw him as an utopian and even eccentric person with a will of iron. And so it must inevitably go on. The lesson is obvious, of course: there is great danger in letting one's own biases take command of the material. We must do battle with "No.1" history.

Next, I want to say something about that other problem, the bias of the subject. First you must be apprised of the extent of our project. Of over 4,500 former labourer-teachers, we were able to find addresses for about 3,000 and obtained responses to our enquiries from about 2,000. Some of course are dead, but who are those who did not reply and why did they not reply? We isolated about 300 in the period 1899-1939 for further research because they appeared to give a good cross-section of the history: by era (early days,

the relief camps); by type of job (rail gangs, mining, forestry, construction); by length of service (the short-term "failures" and the long-term "successes"); by region of the country; by language; by association with special projects (women field-workers, degree work, homesteading experiments); by special interests (knowledge of Fitzpatrick and Bradwin, knowledge of Norman Bethune, or because they subsequently became prominent in some way). Going back to the 212 boxes of registers at the P.A.C., we narrowed down our interviews to 80 for the period 1899-1939. 50 have been completed, 25 of which are from the period 1899-1922. The bulk have been in English, but some have been in French. They live in all parts of the country, but the bulk have been what may be classed as middle-class W.A.S.P.'s from Southern Ontario. This, of course, is an indication of a fundamental factor in any research: we are imprisoned by the limitations of our material.

Once going through the long and often exhausting process of making the contact, we have then had to overcome the problem first of convincing the former instructors, because their memory was so poor, that they had anything of value at all to say. (The earliest served in 1906-07, remember.) After overcoming the age barrier and establishing a sound rapport (the oldest is 94, and several are in their 80's and 90's), we had the problem of actually stimulating their memories, often by going back over the same ground several times. Some subjects have a tendency to answer their questions and to ignore ours. The usual result is that what appears to be useful material was obtained. Insights have been gained which otherwise would not have been possible. The camps and their inhabitants have come alive. In cases of limited perception, the interview can add the needed dimension of understanding. For example, in 1919, there was in the press something of a "red" scare which painted the camps as hotbeds of discontent. Indeed, Fitzpatrick wrote in 1919 "The Instructor and the Red", in which he presented the labourer-teacher as the answer to the "bolshhevik menace" in the camps. Several instructors have indicated that, while there were strikes and I.W.W. organizers in the camps, it was not until reading the papers that the campmen themselves began to worry about what harm might be done to them by people outside the camps! We have been able to gain better insight into the nature of the person who made an effective labourer-teacher. Likewise, we are broadening our understanding of the impact of the experience on him. For example, James Ralph Mutchmor, later Moderator of the United Church of Canada, who served for five years as a railway navvy, likened his experience to the insights gained by Neimoller in prison. Few others offer such analogies, but every person interviewed has testified to the indelible imprint which the experience has had on his entire subsequent life.

There are, however, very large inbuilt biases which have emerged from the very nature of the people being interviewed. Generally speaking, we are hearing from those who want to help the college. Although many felt that they "failed" as labourer-teachers, they remain convinced that it was a "noble idea" and reflect favourably on their experiences. They have rose-tinted glasses. Many of course, like Escott Reid, are acutely conscious of this bias, but just as many are totally unaware of it. We have not been able to reach those who have negative views. Where are the grey-tinted glasses which might afford us a more balanced view? For example, Benjamin Spock, a labourer-teacher on a rail gang in the early 1920's, wants nothing to do with the College, or so his lack of response appears. For him, it was probably a bad experience. One ex-

planation might be that he was the only English-speaking person on a gang on which even the foreman spoke Ukrainian! We wish he would tell us about his experiences and his reactions. Did his "failure" prevent him from talking to us? We are not hearing from the early employers. Why did T.G. Shaughnessy of the C.P.R. use Frontier College instructors in his camps? We have not found any of the early union men who worked with the college. Most importantly, we cannot find any of the labourers. Most of them in Fitzpatrick's day were Slavs, so they probably could not tell us how the labourer-teacher appeared to them even if they wanted to. Who were the people who wanted the "B.A., Frontier College"? To some extent, these gaps can be resolved through the labourer-teachers' own field reports and registers, but even the most comprehensive report is seen through the labourer-teacher's and not the labourer's eyes. We shall probably learn little or nothing about what they thought.

These and other problems are of course just as frequently encountered in the written document, but they are much more immediate when in oral form. They are potentially more dangerous, because they tend to be more easily overlooked. To doubt an oral record is to doubt flesh and blood, not an inanimate piece of paper despite the humanity in it. One former labourer-teacher's recollections are in places the same, virtually word for word, as his memoirs. What is he remembering, his memoirs or the events? Others are reluctant to talk in the presence of a machine. In one case we had to hide the machine under a chair in order to persuade the person to talk. Others would reach over and turn off the machine when they would start to tell particularly "juicy" bits. Would they have been any more or less ready to write these down if guaranteed closure until after their own death? Perhaps we are even hearing things that would never be written down. Inconsistencies are emerging in several places. Bradwin says that the food was generally good in the camps. Mutchmor says that the National Transcontinental was built on beans. There are of course many such problems, and it would serve no purpose to go into them all.

In the long run, I cannot really say how much value will emerge from my oral history project. However, I have become convinced that the oral record has most value when it is used in conjunction with the other forms of record, the more complete the better. Clearly, on its own it can be a very unreliable record, and one should use it with caution. There is I fear in oral history circles, a disposition to credit the oral record with qualities of providing insight and understanding that have been denied the conventional record. I would in conclusion, therefore, appeal to oral historians to apply the same skepticism and the same tests of analysis and investigation to determine the authenticity and accuracy of the oral record as we would expect them to apply to the written record. Remember! no "No. 1" and "Rerun" history please!

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