

DOMESTIC WORK: ORAL HISTORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

by Barbara Riley

L'histoire documentaire recherche dans les objets fabriqués les données essentielles de l'histoire. De même que pour l'histoire orale, ce n'est que tout récemment qu'elle a été utilisée pour mieux explorer le passé. Dans le présent article, l'auteur montre comment ces deux techniques peuvent illustrer l'effet de changements technologiques sur le rôle et le travail des femmes en Colombie Britannique pendant la période 1900-1930. L'auteur a choisi d'interviewer 63 personnes utilisant deux types de poêles à sciure de bois pendant cette même période. Il en est résulté une riche cueillette, bien documentée, illustrant l'utilisation de ces poêles et leur importance dans le travail ménager.

L'auteur explique comment l'histoire orale peut aider la recherche muséologique dans quatre domaines particulièrement importants. Elle peut en effet aider un acheteur à déterminer l'importance d'un objet dont il envisage l'achat. Elle peut aussi aider à cataloguer un objet en fournissant des détails originaux sur son contexte historique. Elle permet à l'organisateur d'une exposition de préciser la place et l'importance d'un objet dans une culture donnée. Enfin, en insistant sur l'explication, par un informateur, de la fonction et l'importance d'un objet, l'histoire orale est appelée à jouer un rôle éducatif de premier plan. Cette technique révèle souvent des faits jusqu'ici inconnus concernant l'emploi d'objets, qui sont par là même à l'abri de manipulations dommageables de la part d'un public non averti.

L'auteur conclut en montrant l'importance des techniques de l'histoire orale pour assurer la pertinence de l'histoire documentaire en tant que démarche légitime de la recherche historique.

My current research on women's domestic history in British Columbia during the period 1900-1930 is a collaboration among the National Museum of Man, British Columbia Provincial Museum, and British Columbia Provincial Archives. The objective is to study the impact of technological change on women's role and work in the home. Having stated just this much, it must be obvious why oral history can contribute to the project. First, the period under study, 1900-1930, is recent enough to guarantee that people who can witness to those years are still alive. Secondly, the history of Canadian women, as a subject of research interest, belongs to the so-called "new social history" which brings non-elite populations into the realm of scholarly inquiry. Researching the lives of large groups of ordinary people - as subjects such as women's history, labour history, and family history do - has introduced new kinds of evidence and new methodologies, both necessary to an understanding of those who left no traditional documentation of their lives. Oral testimony is an accepted and significant kind of evidence for analyzing their experience. Finally, the general usefulness of oral evidence for women's history increases sharply when research focuses on domestic work. Here, in the daily routines, the automatic movements and gestures, and the unconscious thought processes, historical experience is most universal yet least consciously acknowledged, hence rarely recorded by any means. Again, oral history can help to reveal the acts and inter-relationships which make

up this experience. In researching women's domestic work in British Columbia, the initial survey of historical evidence included documentary materials, visual sources, oral testimony, and artifacts. Before briefly considering the results of this survey, a few words about artifacts, material history, and curators.

Artifacts are the material evidence of the past; material history is the field of study which uses artifacts as primary historical data. (In Canada the terms "material history" and "material culture" are often used synonymously. I prefer material history because history is the scholarly discipline in question and also because the word "culture" can be ambiguous in meaning.) Both artifacts and material history are the particular concern of museums and historic sites. In fact they are the raison d'être of the heritage institutions charged with collecting, preserving, and interpreting the artifacts which are the products of human culture.

The work of curators and historical researchers employed in museums and historic sites reflects the purpose of their institutions. As a curator I am expected to acquire artifacts so they can be preserved for the education and enjoyment of present and future Canadians; I am expected to catalogue them properly so they can be used in interpretive programmes and also as historical data by other researchers; and I am expected to interpret artifacts and their historical context to the public. Research is essential in order to carry out this threefold objective in a responsible manner; in turn, the requirement to collect, catalogue, and interpret artifacts moulds the form and direction of the research undertaken. Thus, like any other research project, the study of women's domestic history seeks to expand knowledge and raise new questions: how did British Columbia women perform their domestic work? What did the tasks consist of? What help did they have? How did work change over time as families acquired so-called labour-saving devices? In what ways did women contribute to the financial support of their households? In addition, the study must also respond to the requirement to collect artifacts, properly documented: what objects were generally in use in B.C. kitchens during the years 1900-1930 - physical description, names of manufacturers and models, the accessories? How were they used and by whom? When were they replaced, with what, and why? What changes occurred in domestic work as a result? Finally, the research results and the artifacts collected must be interpreted to a broad public. Answers to the above questions will assist in developing accurate interpretive programmes.

The sampling of various kinds of evidence in British Columbia soon revealed that answers to these questions were not readily available in the historical record. Women left few written or published accounts of their daily round; they seldom recorded what they thought about the domestic role, nor did they note and explain the reasons for changes in domestic routines and responsibilities. In terms of visual sources, illustrations are abundant; but I wanted to learn what women actually used in their homes, not what advertisers, cookbooks, Eaton's catalogues, women's columnists or editors thought women were using or should be using. This meant examining photographs of private individuals and their homes; not surprisingly one finds parlours and dining-rooms rather than kitchens and pantries.

Existing oral material was not useful. The recollections of a number of the province's old-timers are on tape, but the details of domestic work do not figure significantly in these accounts. Sampling museum collections confirmed what curators already know - that most historical collections are currently of limited use because the basic documentation is so inadequate. There is no information indicating when and where certain artifacts have been used, by whom,

and under what circumstances; there is nothing to suggest the particular historical significance of an artifact or group of artifacts; there is no apparent reason why certain artifacts have been acquired and are being preserved. In other words, historical collections did not assist in drawing conclusions about what British Columbia women had used in their kitchens in the past, how they had carried out their tasks, and why. Lastly, an experiment combining oral and material evidence focused on sawdust-burning stoves, widely used on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland in the 1920s and 1930s. Following a public appeal for information, 63 persons were interviewed and 2 stoves examined and photographed. This approach provided the most reliable and detailed information on the knowledge, practices, and physical labour required in certain aspects of domestic work.

The survey of sources indicated the most useful directions to take, one being to seek information about the real work of the home directly from British Columbia women. In the summer of 1983 interviews were conducted with 36 women located by the "snowball" method. All had been born between 1900 and 1916; most had an Anglo-Saxon, middle-class background, and had been raised in an urban locale, usually Victoria or Vancouver. The objective was to investigate domestic work in their mothers' homes. The rest of this presentation uses the interviews to illustrate how oral history can assist curatorial research in four areas: acquisition, exhibition, education, and the use of artifacts as historical evidence.

Acquisition

The acquisition policies and priorities of museums and historic sites reflect their individual mandates. The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature collects artifacts and specimens relevant to the human and natural history of the province; the Western Canada Aviation Museum acquires objects associated with the aviation heritage of that part of Canada; Lower Fort Garry is interested in the objects which illustrate the fur trade and life at the fort in the years 1850-1860; Dalnavert, the former home of Hugh John Macdonald, collects objects which assist in restoring the house to the appropriate time, place, and social and economic circumstances of the original family. (It is important to understand that museums and historic sites do not have the same collecting imperatives as antique dealers or private collectors. Their acquisitions are not based upon the hottest market item of the moment, or on objects considered highly collectible for whatever idiosyncratic reasons).

The History Division of the National Museum of Man focuses on the collection of artifacts which are representative of the social and economic life of Canadians in the past, all levels of society in all regions of the country. The division is oriented not towards political history or the history of elites but rather towards the study of large groups of people, in line with the new social history mentioned above. It is not a division of decorative arts and thus aesthetic or stylistic considerations are not the basis of its acquisitions policy; nor is it a division of technology and so the technical evolution of objects is not a primary factor. Rather, it attempts to collect artifacts broadly representative of the historical experience of Canadians.

The problem of collecting representative artifacts lies in determining what is representative. Printed sources such as magazines and catalogues illustrate an abundance of items available for the British Columbia kitchen of the pre-First World War era. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company's Fall and Winter catalogue of 1910-1911 illustrates a "kitchen cabinet", basically a work table with two pull-out cutting boards, two drawers, and two bins for storing flour or other dry ingredients sold in bulk. But did most British Columbia kitchens have such a work table? Our interviewees indicated that in their mothers' homes food

was stored in built-in cupboards in the pantry, a separate room off the kitchen. This kind of specific evidence is particularly useful for deciding upon the acquisition of objects from dealers, most of whom have no interest in the historical provenance of their items and some of whom are only too willing to concoct a story to enhance the value of an object.

Acquisition and cataloguing go hand in hand. Oral testimony can add to the cataloguing data by supplying details not otherwise available. Sawdust-burning stoves, mentioned above in the survey of historical sources, have been acquired by some museums, but are not accompanied by any documentation about their construction or use. Oral information combined with physical examination provided detailed descriptions of how a regular wood-and-coal stove was modified to burn sawdust by the addition of a hopper and a change in the firebox. Interviewees also described the stoves' advantages and disadvantages for cooking and heating, the home delivery of sawdust, its storage, and the different kinds used for fuel, the responsibility of children for keeping the hopper filled, the reasons why these stoves were used and then replaced. In other words oral evidence provided a documented context for these historical objects.

Exhibition

An exhibition in a museum or a building at an historic site is the pre-eminent means by which these institutions interpret the past to the Canadian public. In fact, most Canadians learn about their history not from books but from visits to museums and historic sites. Historical accuracy is an imperative in such re-creations. The selection of artifacts should be based not on what looks good or what fits, but rather on what accurately represents the theme or topic being interpreted. In a period room, for example, accuracy is demanded in every detail. This attention to detail is evident in the restored kitchen at Dalnavert, the Macdonald House Museum here in Winnipeg, where research had to identify the kitchen and its relationship to the butler's pantry and the larder; the existence and placement of major objects such as stove, cupboards, work tables, wood box, two sinks, and ice-box; and of smaller items such as clock, cookbook, rolling pin, waffle iron, and kettle; the colour and treatment of walls, floors, and windows; and dozens of other details such as the type of bulb and cord used in electrical fixtures. A specific example from the British Columbia study is the ice-box. Although not a common feature, it was used in some homes in the early decades of the century. However, oral testimony placed it, not in the kitchen or even the pantry, as might be supposed, but on the back porch or in the basement, an important point in the reconstruction of a kitchen of that time and place.

Education

The artifact has many educational uses in addition to its appearance in exhibitions or restored buildings. Guides or costumed interpreters explain historical subjects by reference to artifacts. Classes for schoolchildren usually include "hands-on" learning where the students can handle and even operate objects which are reproductions or duplicates. Museums and historic sites often feature live demonstrations of past techniques and skills. All these programmes encourage visitors to ask questions about the artifacts and their context, and docents and demonstrators must be knowledgeable about the processes and themes they are explaining.

Actually using an artifact can lead to insights, not otherwise available, about its relationship to the original maker or user. Usually, however, the use of artifacts, by either researcher, docent, or visitor is not permitted. Museums are charged with the responsibility, on behalf of the community, to

preserve the collections in their care and to protect the artifacts from further deterioration; handling, wearing, or operating artifacts can degrade them or even cause their complete disintegration. Codes of ethics for curators and other staff are explicit about their responsibility to ensure the security and integrity of the objects in their collections. Oral evidence can help overcome this barrier by describing the interaction between object and human, an interaction often charged with subtleties not revealed by physical examination of the object.

One British Columbia interviewee described how her mother, even after the purchase of a motor-driven washing machine, still washed, by hand, on the scrub-board, those articles of clothing which the machine had not cleaned to her standards. In some households, then, washing machine and scrub-board complemented each other for a period of time. The subject of ironing provided a good example of the details which can be missed without knowledge of the physical use of an object. Most women used sad irons, made of cast iron and heated on the wood-and-coal stove. As one iron cooled, it was exchanged for another, hot off the stove top. Ironing seems to be an obvious task, relatively easy to explain. However, oral testimony brought out details that will bring greater accuracy to educational programmes. Most homes did not have ironing boards, but spread a roll of blankets on the kitchen table. The iron first had to be wiped off on a piece of cloth, otherwise it might leave a streak of soot on the clothes. In a few homes which had both sad irons and electric irons, the sad iron was considered the faster and more convenient - partly because the wood-and-coal stove was always "on", partly because early makes of electric irons were not reliable.

Artifacts as historical evidence

Material history is the field of inquiry which studies artifacts as primary historical data. Only in the past decade or so have curators and other researchers attempted to use artifacts in this way. Prior to that most museums regarded the artifact as an end in itself; once collected, identified, and exhibited, it had served its purpose. But historical researchers now recognize that the artifact, like any other historical evidence, including oral testimony, is really a means to an end - the end being to understand the past.

The historian attempting to analyze artifacts as evidence faces formidable challenges. As there is no formal training to teach such analysis, he or she must learn by doing; as there is no accepted methodology for studying artifacts, individual initiative must improvise or borrow one; the evidence itself - the collections in museums and historic sites - is inadequately catalogued, thereby severely limiting the use of the artifacts for historical analysis.

Artifacts are created, by human beings, deliberately. The maker makes the object and the user uses it according to learned cultural patterns, and the object embodies these cultural patterns. Oral history can assist the researcher in unlocking the cultural significance of artifacts.

The 36 British Columbia interviewees testified to the universality of wood-and-coal stoves during the early decades of the century; they identified manufacturers and models, and described the processes of fuelling, cleaning, and cooking. But occasionally interviewees revealed another layer of cultural reality. One woman, noting that her mother had never replaced the old wood-and-coal stove with a cleaner, more convenient one fuelled by gas or electricity, supposed that it was because her mother was used to it. Another described her

mother as a frugal woman who refused to replace her ice-box with a refrigerator because it was not right to have such extravagances. These kinds of comments provoke questions about the attitudes to the objects of daily life, about habits which surround their use, and about the ideas which determine their role in our lives.

Another woman who was still using a wood-and-coal stove in her urban kitchen remarked on its cheerful and companionable sound - the crackling of wood in the firebox and the humming of the kettle at the back of the stove; in contrast an electric stove was cold and lifeless. To her a common-place household object, the stove, represented much more than a device for supplying heat for cooking and warmth. This example is a striking reminder of the potential of artifacts to enrich our understanding of the past. Interestingly, these insights were elicited more by chance than by direct questioning. Perhaps the interview created an atmosphere which allowed each woman to muse about the object-user relationship. In so doing, they permitted us to glimpse the cultural complexity of that relationship.

It is an article of faith of researchers in material history that artifacts can speak. As a curator I know that people have stood before some exhibits with tears in their eyes; they have walked through restored houses with exclamations of happy memories; and they have watched the operation of tools and machinery with fascination and curiosity. Artifacts do speak to us in direct and meaningful ways; it is only as researchers that we do not know how to decode their language. Human speech, as it comes to us in oral history, can help us decipher what the artifacts of human life have to say.

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