

APPLICATIONS OF ORAL HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF LABOUR AND BUSINESS

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For the past four years, I have been a participant in an oral history project dealing with labour and business. The project is nearing completion and this is probably as good a time as any to present some of my views on the possible contributions of the oral history method to research in these areas.

I should emphasize at the outset that I am neither an historian, folklorist, journalist or archivist. Rather, as a teacher in a School of Administration and a specialist in the area of labour relations, I have attempted to use the oral history method to preserve the observations and experiences of those who were active contributors to industrial relations and commerce in New Brunswick and other Atlantic Provinces. In all likelihood, the structure and methodology of this project does not differ substantially from those in other areas. However, the orientation of the project is perhaps its unique feature, i.e. to seek out and interview those in the middle or upper middle levels of activity or experience in areas of labour or business.

Although I admittedly have had limited exposure to the scope of the numerous projects underway in North America, I am of the view that business history and labour history have been placed in a low priority in research using either the traditional methods or the oral history method. It would also appear to this observer that a large portion of the works which are attempted are directed at either those who wield great power and influence or those who are "typical" or average in some respect.

Interviewers seem to follow a well trodden path to the national labour leader or the "typical" worker. In the areas of commerce the prime targets are the small struggling businessmen or the giant industrialist. The result has been a failure in general to contact those who can best provide insights in overall problems while tempering their views with practical experiences. In this paper, I would like to discuss the usefulness of such interviews and their potential for enriching the written record. Before doing so, it might be best to briefly describe the project in which I was engaged and which will serve as a source for later examples.

Background to the Project¹

In June 1974, I was introduced to Horace Pettigrove by some of my colleagues at the University of New Brunswick. Mr. Pettigrove had just been awarded an honorary doctorate by the University in recognition of his forty years of distinguished service as a federal labour conciliator. We had a lengthy luncheon with Mr. Pettigrove, listening to his detailed recollections of negotiations and strikes and his impressions of individuals he had met over the years. It later appeared to more than one of us that a tape recorded interview with the retired conciliator would be a valuable record of an industrial relations system much different, and perhaps simpler and more spontaneous than that of the present. As we discussed the plans for this interview,

we soon realized that in the local area there were other retired persons in business as well as labour who might be willing to share their experiences on tape. In the following months, a seven session, ten hour interview was conducted with Horace Pettigrove². Names of other possible interviewees were collected and plans were made to apply for a grant to cover the costs of interviewing, typing and editing transcripts and travelling to interview sites. Over the next year, two grants were applied for and received; one from the University of New Brunswick Research Fund to start up the project and the other from the Canada Council for the bulk of the interviews over a two year period. A total of twenty interviews (approximately eighty hours) have been conducted to date, with two or three more interviews planned before the project is completed. Over two thousand pages of transcripts have been produced. Although this project is described in detail elsewhere, it might be best to briefly outline some of its major points.

The interviews were conducted with retired persons who occupied middle or upper middle level positions in labour or business. Politicians were interviewed but only in relation to economic development. Interviewees were selected because of their activities in New Brunswick, although they might also be asked about matters in the other Atlantic Provinces. In our grant applications we made it clear that the purpose of the project was not to compile any comprehensive history of labour or business in the Province or region. Rather, we wished to create material for archival deposit as an aid to researchers in such areas as labour, business, economic and administrative history. In line with this orientation, it was decided that the usefulness and accessibility of the interviews would be maximized if they were transcribed, and if the transcripts and the tapes were sent to the provincial and national archives.

Several of the interviews were conducted by two or more interviewers, at least one of whom was a specialist in the field covered³. The sessions lasted from one and a half to three hours and some interviews required six or seven sessions. When an interview was completed, a transcript was prepared and this was edited by the interviewer. All transcripts contain an abstract of the interview, a resumé of the interviewee, an index of the names mentioned and a copy of the release agreement. The release agreement⁴ was signed after the interviewee had examined the final copy of the transcript.

Oral History and Labour History

I mentioned earlier that there is considerable potential in the use of the oral history method to enrich and enliven the written works on labour history. It should be reemphasized that the greatest contributions may not necessarily come from the prominent labour leader or the average union member, but rather those who occupied middle and upper-middle echelon positions. I refer specifically to the union organizer, the regional representative, the local officer, the conciliator or members of labour relations boards. I hope to illustrate this point with some examples from the project described above.

One aspect of labour history which certainly needs attention is that concerning the innovations in collective bargaining practices and disputes resolution procedures. Without an understanding of the evolution of our present practices, we could too easily come to accept them as permanent fixtures of the industrial relations system. Through applications of the oral history method, we could trace the experiments with systems of conciliation, the development of specific contract clauses and the expansion of a protected right to organize. For example, the Rand Formula has become a standard feature in Canadian labour relations. Also called the Agency Shop, this is

a contract provision whereby the employer agrees to deduct an amount equal to union dues from all bargaining unit members whether or not they are members of the union. The development of this clause is discussed by Horace Pettigrove, the assistant to Justice Rand during the Ford dispute of 1945 in Windsor:

PETTIGROVE: When we came to the formula, he (Rand) said: "What would you think of an associate membership?" Now you must remember my thinking was that he was management oriented. Well, I said: "What is that?" He said: "For example, if you belong to a club and you have an associate membership, you wouldn't have any right to vote or anything like that, but you would pay your dues and you would have the facilities of the club. But then you wouldn't have any vote in the union, or anything like that". I remember distinctly, I said: "That's original thinking." And he said: "That's a mighty rare bird - original thinking. I'll tell you sometime where I got the idea." Anyway, he said: "Well, what's the dues?" Well, I said: "I guess \$1.00 a month." There were 15,000 employees. "Well," he said: "for argument's sake, would you say about 60¢ a month?" "Oh," I said, "I wouldn't go for that at all. That's union busting tactics." "What do you mean, I'm not here to bust any union!" Well, I said: "That would be the effect of it. How would you explain that. Supposing I..." I took it for granted that he knew labour relations on the railway. I said: "These people are not union minded like they are on the railway." He said: "What is that expression 'union minded'." Well, I said: "When men go to work on the railway they almost automatically join the union. It's just accepted. They have had the bargaining rights there for years, and they have collective agreements. Supposing now, for example, Rand and Pettigrove were working there in the Ford plant. Rand, you join the union, and I don't. You are taking a 'holier than thou' attitude. You're looking down your nose at Pettigrove, he's a free-rider. You don't attend the union meetings or anything like that, but you feel a little superior to Pettigrove, you're looking down your nose at him. You are not completely sold on this union business, but a member of the Supreme Court comes in here and says, "Pettigrove, you pay 60¢." That absolves me of the stigma up to a point. What are you going to do? I would say, "it's just a matter of dollars and cents. Well, if Pettigrove pays 60¢, why the hell should I pay a dollar?"

INTERVIEWER: That would encourage people to switch from regular membership to associate membership.

PETTIGROVE: Yes, that was the whole point. Well, he said: "I'll think that over. I don't see any validity in your argument, but I will think it over." He would take about twenty-four hours to think it over, he would mull over these things. And the next day he said: "About this check-off thing, I think that if they pay anything, they pay it all. Now they won't have to pay any initiation fees or that sort of thing, but they will pay the dues, the regular dues. They will pay the same as the others." And I said: "That's fine, I could go along with that."

Another area in which oral history studies have a great deal to offer is in recording the events behind labour disputes. Often historians must reconstruct the background to a strike from written records and might miss the exchanges witnessed only by negotiators and conciliators. Referring again to the Pettigrove interview, we see a major coal strike which was actually encouraged by management to resolve its manpower problems.

PETTIGROVE: He (the employer) said: "Horace, if you insist on calling another meeting, I'll attend, I'll attend. I will meet with the executive of the union, but the answer is still no." I said: "Why do you say that, Harold?" He said: "Nobody knows any better than Horace Pettigrove, the mess that our manpower situation is in. We had people under the selective service who were forced into the mine. It's a mess, and I have got to have two month's strike to straighten this thing out. Now if you insist on the meeting, I will attend." I said: "It's your industry, Harold, we can forget about it." ... the strike went on for three months. He said: "I've got to have two months strike." And the next time I met him I said: "Harold, you missed out on your timing on that strike." He said: "Yes, but I won 52 out of 58 points and that's a damn good batting average in anybody's language."

Aside from narratives found in a very few memoirs and the occasional government report, there are few first-hand descriptions of early production processes and working conditions. Oral history projects would appear to be a rich source of information in this area. All one needs to do is ask a retired interviewee how he performed his job and the result will often be a discussion of machines, procedures and conditions which may have been outmoded many years ago. An interview with Joseph Vandebroek, a retired coal miner and mines inspector, contained this description of underground mining in 1915.

INTERVIEWER: Could you give me your impressions of what it was like when you first started working in the mines, how you felt the first time you entered a mine?

VANDENBROECK: Well, my first job was as what they called a trapper boy. A trapper boy's job was to open the ventilating door in level to let the, what we called a horse drawn trip. A trip consisted of about six to eight loaded cars of coal drawn by a horse. And these doors located at different sections of the level to force the ventilating air through the workings had to remain closed and they were only opened when this trip had to go through. Now the working day then started at six o'clock in the morning until all the coal was cleared of the workings of that day. So the working day sometimes lasted to five or six o'clock in the evening, from six in the morning.

INTERVIEWER: You put in a twelve hour day then. Do you remember how much you got paid for that?

VANDENBROECK: The pay at the time was 75¢ a day. A miner at the time was probably earning from \$2.75 to \$3.00 per day. He was paid on the amount of coal that had been produced, so much a ton. Incidentally, the ton in those days was a long ton, 2,240 lbs. Anyway, from that job I advanced a little to brake-holder. In order to get that, I would have to first say that the method of work or the seam in that mine was pitching seam, pitching at 20 to 25 degree pitch. So that the method of work was that they drove a slope down following the pitch of the seam to a certain depth and then they drove the levels or adits off that at right angles. And then drove what they called a balance which would have went up hill, up the pitch and off the balance were rooms again where the different miners work.

INTERVIEWER: They were using the room and pillar room method there also.

VANDENBROECK: My job there was to run or operate a friction drum and on this balance there was what they called the cage. Actually it wasn't like an elevator, it was just a platform which had a rope attached. This rope wound around the friction drum and next to this cage or platform was a counterform, was a counterweight again attached with a rope to this friction drum. Now the reason for that was the counterweight was heavy enough to bring this platform with an empty coal car to the level of the room that the miners worked in. But then the miner took the empty coal car off this and pushed the full one in. Now with the full one the platform was heavier than the counterweight so it brought the counterweight back up. Now my job was to put the brake on to let that platform with the loaded car go down the balance to the bottom level. And the pay there was \$1.00 a day again for the same number of hours.

Interviews may also contain descriptions of the general characteristics of persons engaged in a number of occupations. In the interviews conducted in this project there were often comments on the attributes of the successful logger, coal miner, fisherman, entrepreneur, labour conciliator and so on. For example, Frank Crilley, a retired longshoreman and labour leader, was asked to characterize longshoremen in general.

CRILLEY: Well, physically they have to be quite strong. Mentally, it is amazing, some of them, and I would say the majority of them have as high a degree, if not higher than most tradesmen, those in the running trades. People have formed a funny idea about longshoremen because they say they drink and things like that. But this was because of the fact that many times that a longshoreman was drinking he was picked up and beaten up by the police, whereas if he was in another strata of society, he was just sent along home. A longshoreman to be a good shed man, to look after the cargo in the shed, has to be intelligent and he has to use judgement. The man in the hold, whether he was unloading the ship or loading the ship, especially if he is loading the ship, he has to know how to stow that cargo so it will be safe, that it won't be damaged in transit. And his judgement has to be good. He has to realize when you come to different cargoes, he is notified, he used to put separation in for the different ports and it was a job that to my mind many of these men didn't have a great deal of formal education, but I would say that they had an exceptionally high degree of intelligence and a great deal of executive ability. The decisions a foreman would make longshore, would mean that if a winch broke down and he had to transfer to another hatch, the decision that he would make could cost hundreds of dollars in just a few minutes if he made the wrong decision. So he had to make instantaneous decisions and that's why a walking boss or a foreman, their judgement was usually exceptionally sound.⁷

Another way in which oral history may expand on the written record of labour history is through the use of dual interviews, i.e. interviewing two parties at the same time about a particular topic. In the project described here an interview was conducted simultaneously with a retired Federal Minister of Labour and a retired federal conciliator. One had direct experience in negotiations and disputes while the other viewed the scene from Ottawa with a national and policy-oriented perspective. Other obvious possibilities for dual interviews in the labour field would include the following:

- labour negotiators and conciliators
- national and regional union officers
- management and labour negotiators

The topics could include not only particular negotiations, organizing campaigns or disputes but also controversial aspects of labour relations, such as forms of conciliation and interest arbitration, legalism in collective bargaining and the media and labour relations.

Oral History and Business and Economic History

Major sources of information about general business history are often financial records, legal documents and government and company reports. These may be elaborated upon considerably by interviews with officers of companies, and consultants and participants in economic development projects.

Written records can provide only the basic framework for histories of particular companies. Further details are available through interviews with officers, major customers and even competitors. For example, I participated in an oral history project with a businessman who started fifty years ago in his father's general store in Cape Breton and became one of the largest independent retailers in the Maritimes. The interview dealt with such topics as decisions to expand and change lines of merchandise, relationships with financial institutions, local transportation facilities and changes in the habits of customers.

Oral history projects also provide a means to understand the events surrounding decisions in the area of economic development. One interview dealt with specific failures and successes in economic development in New Brunswick as well as the evaluation of general beliefs concerning development. Another interview focused on developmental strategies from the viewpoint of a Premier. A third interview accentuated the role of electrical power generation in the economic development of New Brunswick. Such interviews are not only the source of insights into why key decisions were made but fill in important details not normally available from other sources. For example, the Beechwood Power Development in New Brunswick was a remarkable achievement; it was completed on time and at less than the projected budget. We learn that this was largely the result of close supervision by Edgar Fournier, then chairman of the Electric Power Commission and presently a Senator.

INTERVIEWER: Edgar, as I recall you supervised personally, very carefully, the construction of the Beechwood Project. Would you just describe to us briefly how you did it.

FOURNIER: Well I lived there in Beechwood for years in a little shack there, which was my home and I was on the job 24 hours a day. I would spend the evening discussing the projects of the next day. And I would make some tours at midnight and at two o'clock in the morning and find drunken people and things like that sleeping on the job. I was not too popular at times, but I think it was part of the job. I operated it as if it was my own business. And I was interested in the progress. And we had the progress charts on the wall which everybody could see and everything was divided into weeks and even into days. It was colored charts and I could see just looking at the walls what was done yesterday, and what was done last week. And if one colour was not keeping up with the rest of the colours, the questioning was of what happened to that particular phase of the project. And it keeps everybody on their toes. And there was no escape. I was right there. My wife would come and visit me sometimes, Sundays. I would go home, you know weekends and things like that. But I would come back again, that was my place. I just lived there.

The oral history method may be a major means to record the development of the co-operative movement in Canada. I mention this movement specifically because it is fairly recent and there are retired persons who are instrumental in the initial attempts at implementing and popularizing co-ops. One interview was conducted with an individual who had participated in a provincial investigation of co-ops and drafted the first legislation in this area in New Brunswick. In another interview we found that Donald MacDonald, the former head of the Canadian Labour Congress, was very active in the co-op movement at a point in his career after he had been a local union officer and before he was appointed a regional organizer. MacDonald describes the energy and philosophy of Michael Moses Coady, a major influence on the co-op movement.

INTERVIEWER: Yet Nova Scotia is also the seat of much of the co-op movement. Were you working with Michael Moses Coady?

MACDONALD: Oh yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of man was he?

MACDONALD: Marvelous. A giant of a man. Not only physically but mentally and intellectually, morally and every other way. A man of tremendous vision and drive and inspiration. I often reflect, that there was an amazing group of men, outstanding leaders developed at that time in that small area, who were years and years beyond their time. It was a great privilege to be associated with them. He was a physical giant, a very big man and his first cousin of similar ilk, the famous Dr. Jimmy Tompkins, was a tiny, frail little type, but also a tremendous man. I was fortunate enough to have been associated with those fellows almost from the start of their activities in the St. F. X. (St. Francis-Xavier) extension movement. And it was wonderful, wonderful experience.

INTERVIEWER: Can you contrast their views with those of what you call the industrial fascists and the despots? The co-op people had a great deal of faith, this of course is an understatement, a great deal more faith in the ability of the average people to make decisions for themselves.

MACDONALD: Completely, in true democracy. They believed that the ordinary individual could achieve anything, if you went to work in concert with other fellow human beings in order to achieve good ends. Now, that's a good way of putting it, faith, complete faith. One of the many appealing characteristics of Coady was that he could express frustration. He was a great platform performer. And one of the things that he used to harp on in trying to instill that faith into people who were almost desperate, was to compare the ordinary human being to a motor. And his analogy was that the ordinary human being was comparable to a motor that only utilized 10% of its power potential, 10% at the most. And, you know, we don't look for perfection, if we get people to exercise twice that much - 20% of their power and their potential, if we can get them to do this, it would transform the world. I think that it is true too. Who in the hell works to their full potential? Many do it physically I guess, but how many do it intellectually or spiritually? Few, if any. But he used to talk, a fantastic character and reading was his forte. He used to be after us to read! read! read! And with many of us, young and impatient for change, he used to be exasperated by what little reading was done, and what trash was being read by most people...

Conclusions

I have described above some possible applications of the oral history method to enrich the written record on the history of labour and business. This has been based on my experiences with an oral history project dealing with these areas in New Brunswick and the other Atlantic Provinces. The examples have been taken from interviews which are open to public access.

As emphasized earlier, I believe that the oral history method has considerable potential in labour and business when the focus is on those who occupied middle or upper-middle echelon positions. They have been close enough to important events to know of the details while at a level at which they can provide a broad prospective. In specific I refer to such parties as Deputy Ministers, consultants in economic development, entrepreneurs who have succeeded on a regional basis, local labour leaders, union organizers, conciliators and chairmen or members of labour relations boards.

The commercial and industrial relations systems throughout Canada have undergone rapid changes in this century: changes which are not fully understood or appreciated and which have been generally documented in only the most basic forms in written records. Ironically, we have in our midst longtime observers of or contributors to these changes who are willing and at times even eager to record their experiences and insights. Many do not have the time or inclination to write their memoirs. As retired, older persons, many may not be with us in a decade or two and their contributions to the historical record may be lost forever. It is hoped that future projects will provide the means through which they may preserve their observations and contributions.

FOOTNOTES

1. The title of the project is "Contributors to the Development of the Commercial and Industrial Relations Systems of New Brunswick and the other Atlantic Provinces". A description of the project is found in Gary N. Chaison and Edward D. Maher, "Labour and Business in New Brunswick: An Oral History Project," Canadian Oral History Association Bulletin, vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 1977), pp. 11 - 13. For a lengthier discussion of the development of the project, see "Panel on Oral History and Labour-Business History, Third Annual Conference of the Canadian Oral History Association, (tape recording), (September 8, 1976).
2. G.N. Chaison and E.D. Maher, "An Interview with Horace Pettigrove", (July 1974) 10 hours, 344 pages. The tapes and transcript are open to the public and are located at the New Brunswick Provincial Archives (Fredericton N.B.) and the Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives (Ottawa).
3. Participants in the interviews have been: Prof. E.D. Maher, School of Administration, University of New Brunswick; Prof. W.Y. Smith of the Economics Department, UNB; Prof. D.M. Young of the History Department, UNB and Hon. Hugh John Flemming, former Premier of New Brunswick. Horace Pettigrove, retired federal conciliator, has served as a research consultant to the project.

4. Twenty interviews have been conducted to date. In two cases the interviewee refused to sign the release agreement. Transcripts for three interviews are being processed at the time of this writing. Of the remaining fifteen interviews, the following restrictions have been set: eight interviews, no restrictions; six interviews, closed for the lifetime of the interviewee unless special permission is granted by the interviewee; one interview, closed for a period of three years.
5. G.N. Chaison and E.D. Maher, "An Interview with Horace Pettigrove", op. cit., pp. 93 - 95.
6. G.N. Chaison, "An Interview with Joseph P. Vandebroek" (July 1975), pp. 2 - 5.
7. G.N. Chaison, "An Interview with Frank X. Crilley", (July 1976), pp. 8 - 9.
8. G.N. Chaison, E.D. Maher, et. al., "An Interview with Edgar E. Fournier", (November 1975), pp. 13 - 14.
9. G.N. Chaison, "An Interview with Donald MacDonal", (January 1978), pp. 58 - 59.