

INTERVIEW WITH BARRY BROADFOOT

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ACCESS: When travelling the country to gather history from the mouths of ordinary Canadians what approach did you use? How did you get your information?

BROADFOOT: Ninety percent of the time I used the tape recorder, but there were some times when I couldn't. I might meet somebody in a bar or in a cafe or even in a friend's house. Or, I might pick up a hitch-hiker, and I wouldn't be about to use the tape recorder, so then I used notes, and remembered as much as I could of what the person said.

ACCESS: Could teachers use this technique in an English or Social Studies class to do a local history?

BROADFOOT: Absolutely. No doubt about it in my mind. You could do it about one person, which would be a biography, or you could do it about a family. You could do it about a farm or a neighborhood or a region or a village or a town or a city or a province or the world.

ACCESS: Why did you choose the oral history approach to meet your subjects rather than use the more conventional methods of research?

BROADFOOT: I used the oral history attack, I suppose you can call it, because I had been a newspaper man for 29 years. I had used the tape recorder a lot in later years when I was troubled by an arthritic right hand. Also, I know

the value of a quote - a direct quotation. All the dry history in the world, all the facts and figures and boring statistics only make up the skeleton.

ACCESS: It sounds like the newspaper man in Barry Broadfoot came out in your stories.

BROADFOOT: Yes, I used stories of people with their colloquialisms and their expressions and even their ramblings and their anger and their frustrations, all based on their memories. I put flesh and blood on the skeleton and created a living book.

ACCESS: You wanted a personal approach, history in the first person. Did all your contacts pay off in your travels around the country as you sought out people to interview for your books, or can you give me an example of a time when something just didn't pan out?

BROADFOOT: I remember many that didn't pan out because either the people were senile or had poor memories, or their lives just weren't interesting. I remember one case in which I heard that there was a very interesting gentleman down at Osoyoos in British Columbia and at the time I was in Kamloops. This person had been recommended to me highly and I decided I would go to see him. I drove from Kamloops to Osoyoos, which is a half-day drive, met the gentleman and realized in two minutes that he wasn't going to work out. My instinct and my experience as a newspaperman told me that. So I had to drive all the way back to Kamloops again, wasting the whole day.

ACCESS: In the four books of oral history you have on the market, how many Canadians have you interviewed?

BROADFOOT: I guess you can say about 200 a book, but not all the people I talked to are in the books. However, that is still a lot, because you see, I selected most of those people myself. If I wanted a missionary who was in the North in 1935, I had to go out and find one.

ACCESS: So it wasn't by pure chance that you met everyone in your books?

BROADFOOT: Oh no! Some of them were by pure chance, of course. If you pick up a hitch-hiker and you lead him into reminiscing, and he has a delightful story to tell, that's pure chance. Often I would go to people I know, especially on the prairies, or people I know, if they know of others who could help me. That is the way I worked.

ACCESS: How do you do your books? Once you have recorded your interviews how do you put a book into print?

BROADFOOT: Well, there seems to be a sort of magic figure of about 225,000 words that I write for every book, but of course publishing prescribes that only about 130,000 words appear in a book. In other words, a book is a box with four sides and a top and bottom and the words have to fit in. So there is a great deal of editing, but it is not editing like an editor who would take a piece of copy and stroke out phrases and letters and words. It is more editing on a basis of throwing out whole stories.

ACCESS: You want to retain the personality and character of the person you interview.

BROADFOOT: Exactly, and if I have three stories dealing with an old farmer who was burned out by the drought in the Thirties, I read the three stories knowing I can use only one, and then I will throw two out. I might cut out whole paragraphs or whole sections from his interview. I might take 2,000 words from one story and chop it down to 600 words, but what I am saying is I don't edit copy like you edit on a magazine or a newspaper, where you knock out phrases and words. I try to retain the whole measure of the speech.

ACCESS: Which book of the four did you most enjoy doing?

BROADFOOT: I most enjoyed doing Ten Lost Years, because it was a new experience to me and every day was exciting. There was not a day that I did not wake up with a sense of eager anticipation, and if I could live out my life that way I would be a happy man. I think that the best book was The Pioneer Years, but they are all good books.

ACCESS: Why would you rate The Pioneer Years as the best book?

BROADFOOT: Because I so enjoyed the quality of the stories that these old people told me, their sincerity, their honesty and their kindness to me. And in doing all four books with Canadians right across the country, I have never met one person I did not like.

ACCESS: Doubleday must have a fair bit of faith in the book, as I know they must have in you. The final question. Who is Barry Broadfoot - is he a contemporary historian, or who, or what?

BROADFOOT: Barry Broadfoot is a chronicler. He uses his own methods, he leads the way in Canada in this form of writing. In fact, he developed it in Canada. He has imitators and maybe they will turn out to be better than he is. But I don't call myself an historian in the sense that I could work teaching history in a university. I call myself a chronicler, a collector of peoples' tales and stories. Really what I am is a collector of people.