

Back to the 1980s: Revisiting and Rethinking the Role of Archives in COHA

Richard Lohead, Library and Archives Canada (retired)

Richard Lohead was editor of the Canadian Oral History Association Journal (predecessor of Oral History Forum d'histoire orale) from 1979 to 1982.

It was at a conference session on oral history and gerontology in the 1980s where I learned of the concept of life review, a process of critical reflection on one's past which often took place after retirement and one which could be well suited to oral history. This article is thus an exercise in my own career life review. It has provided an opportunity to look back of my involvement in oral history in the 1980s from the vantage of the present, a process which has resulted in a reassessment of the role of the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA) during that period.¹ Like the life review process, the journey produced both discovery and nagging doubts.

Oral history in Canada today seems to be thriving. There are well-established oral history centres in Winnipeg and Montreal and active programs throughout the country. There is widespread use of oral history in museums led by Pier 21. There is an on-going academic journal in the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*. The role of archives is passive, predictably focused on preservation of oral history. Yet, the beginning of oral history in Canada, unlike the United States and Britain, was characterized by a leading role by the archives in its promotion and creation. How so and why?

This article will seek to address the question raised by Alexander Freund in his article "Oral History in Canada: A Paradox" (2009) that "while COHA and its journal struggled, oral history mushroomed in Canada in the 1990s," Freund noted that

Canada's oral history movement collapsed in the 1990s when drastic budget cuts to public archives reduced not only the number and scope of oral history projects initiated and supported by archivists, but also prevented archivists from continuing to lead, as they had done in the early

¹ During the 1980s, while at the National Archives of Canada and the Provincial Archives of Ontario, I served as COHA President, Journal Editor, Treasurer and primarily conference fund raiser. See Richard Lohead, "Funding the Good Fight," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 25 (2005): 44-53.

1970s, the movement institutions, particularly the Canadian Oral History Association.²

My own review now suggests a somewhat contrary view that it was the archival leadership in COHA, with its focus on archival definition and legitimacy of oral history during the 1980s, which may have prevented COHA from positioning itself to capture the widening appeal of oral history in the 1990s.

The article will start with an outline of how my own involvement as an archivist coincided with the expansion of government programs, a redefinition of the archival record, and the beginning of an oral history movement. It will then focus on the 1980s, seeking to explain why archivists became the unlikely leading force in Canadian oral history. It will demonstrate how archivists (specifically English Canadian) defined the range of the oral history debate in the early 1980s with a focus on competing archival visions for oral history. It will seek to explain how continuing archival leadership and definition of oral history may have limited the possibilities for its growth and expansion, particularly as a tool for community identity and consciousness-raising. It will also note how changes in government funding and archival theory during this period both attacked and redefined the archival direction in oral history into the 1990s. The article will conclude with thoughts on the success of oral history in Canada, the crisis of oral history in the archives, and the future role of the Canadian Oral History Association.

The 1970s – Early Involvement of Oral History and Archives

The early 1970s was a period of government expansion and a fond memory for many archivists, particularly at the National Archives of Canada (NAC). A new building had opened in 1967 and the new concept of “total archives”³ reflected the expanding boundaries of the archival record from records management to the

² Alexander Freund, “Oral History in Canada: A Paradox,” in *Canada in Grainau. A Multidisciplinary Survey of Canadian Studies after 30 Years*, ed. by Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, *Canadian Literatures/Cultures* 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 305-35.

³ Rebecka Sheffield defines the concept of “total archives” as follows: “Total Archives is a documentation strategy developed in Canada as an attempt to document the political and social history of the country. Total archives emphasize the collection of records, both public and private, in a wide range of media, including architectural drawings, cartographic material, audio-visual records, and microfilm. Although the strategy evolved over a long period, the concept of Total Archives was not formally articulated until 1980 in a report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Ottawa, 1980). The report explains Total Archives as an ‘attempt to document all aspects of historical development, seeking the records not just of officialdom or of a governing elite but of all segments of a community...’” The Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, 63-64, <http://www.archivalobjects.com/total-archives.html>.

creation of separate media sections in Art, Photography, Film and Sound. The increasing number of archivists soon took steps to establish their own professional association separate from the Canadian Historical Association in 1975.⁴

The early 1970s also witnessed the arrival of the portable tape recorder which led to a rapid expansion of recorded interviews about the past, now popularly termed oral history. By the mid-1970s, oral history was reaching the status of a new phenomenon. Books by journalists Studs Terkel and Barry Broadfoot, using oral history exclusively to document the Depression years in the U.S. and English-speaking Canada, became best sellers.⁵ Oral history techniques were being recognized as a valuable and accessible tool to document labour history, women's history, and multicultural studies. Oral history was frequently cited as a means to democratize history by filling in gaps in the historical record. National oral history associations were created in the United States (1967) and Britain (1971) and in Canada (1974). But who should take the lead in this new and ambitious campaign?

For many in Canada, oral history may have elicited a sense of déjà vu. One of the most popular types of radio programs on the English language Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) since the late 1950s was recorded recollections of pioneers by broadcasters Bill McNeil and Imbert Orchard. Similarly, oral history techniques were a key feature of the National Film Board's (NFB) Challenge for Change documentary series in the 1960s. In fact, use of recorded oral history in Canada could be dated back to the 1910s when folklorist Marius Barbeau recorded the life histories of Indigenous and Francophone subjects for the National Museum of Man.⁶ This long tradition of using recorded personal recollections by government agencies such as the CBC, NFB, and museums tied in nicely with the new mandate of archives to acquire sound film and broadcast documents.⁷ Although the arrival of the portable tape recorder quickly led to the new term of "oral history" and oral history associations, the Canadian government had continually funded recorded interviews as part of its policy to promote and preserve Canadian culture in face of the omnipresent threat from south of the border. When U. S commentators noted that the distinguishing feature of Canadian oral history was its focus on the original recordings, not the transcript as was the case in the United States, this position was explained as reflecting the long standing practice of recording interviews by folklorists and

⁴ The Association of Canadian Archivists was founded in 1975, after separating from the Canadian Historical Association.

⁵ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (NY: Avon Books, 1970) and Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years, 1929-39* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1973).

⁶ The National Museum of Man was renamed the Canadian Museum of Civilization in the late 1980s, and the Canadian Museum of History in 2013.

⁷ The Historical Sound Recording Unit was established at the National Archives of Canada in 1969. During the 1970s, other provincial archives followed suit and created separate media units.

broadcasters, but also the archival perspective that the most important aspect of oral history was preservation of the original record, not how it was used. . The argument that oral history interviews could be valuable archival records quickly led to the position that archival concerns for good recording and preservation quality should be addressed at the beginning of the interview process. The National Archives of Canada funded a large portion of the founding conference of the Canadian Oral History Association and produced an “Oral History: Dos and Don’ts” tape to help guide prospective interviewers. (See photo below.)

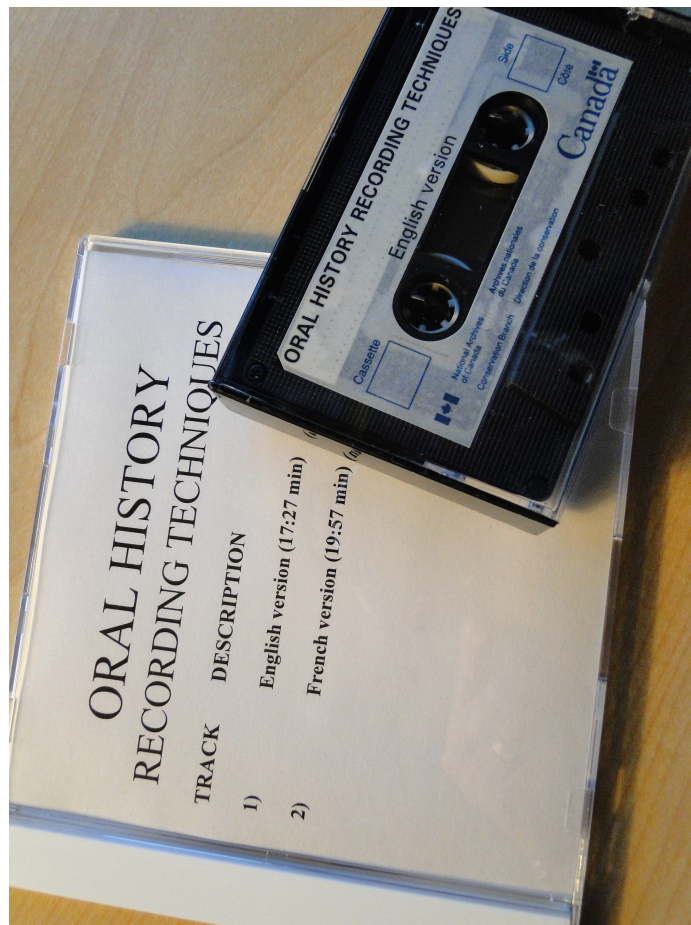


Photo courtesy of Richard Lohead.

As a new hire in the Sound Archives with a background in history and journalism, I quickly became an advocate of oral history as an archival cause. The establishment of a new in-house archival newsletter initiated by staff provided the opportunity to submit a short article entitled “Oral History, Labour History, and the Ginger Goodwin Case” which argued how oral history interviews recently

acquired by the NAC provided new information on the assassination of the British Columbia labour organizer during the First World War period.⁸ A subsequent requirement to write a paper as part of a certification course for archivists provided the opportunity to make an even bolder case for archival leadership. The article, entitled “Three Approaches to Oral History: The Journalist, Academic, and Archival,” argued that journalists and academics were using oral history as part of their professions, but archivists were best placed to use it to fill the gaps in the historical record. It was soon published in the first issue of the *Canadian Oral History Journal* (1975), edited by Leo LaClare, then head of the Sound Archives section and co-founder of the Canadian History Association.

This was an ambitious, if somewhat self-aggrandizing, approach as it suggested that archivists should lead in the creation, not just the preservation, of oral history. But actual leadership in oral history in the 1970s was in British Columbia, not at the National Archives in Ottawa. Reynoldston Research and Studies,⁹ a stand-alone oral history research centre, was the co-founder with the National Archives of Canada of the Canadian Oral History Association. However, the growing influence of archives was becoming apparent as the Reynoldston centre, with its active program of interviewing, was soon transferred by the British Columbia government to the Provincial Archives. The program was then expanded into a full-scale archival oral history undertaking. Subject areas for interviews were identified by archival staff based on under-represented areas in the historical record. The interviews were undertaken by archivists or specialists in the field and then deposited in archives. Transcripts were made to produce a full-length article, complete with archival photographs which were then published in a very attractive periodical (Sound Heritage series – see photo below). The interviews employed historical, journalistic and folklorist approaches. Archivists were involved in the creation, preservation and distribution of the oral history documents.¹⁰

⁸ The article “Labour History, Oral History, and the Ginger Goodwin Case” was subsequently published in *Reynoldston Research and Studies* 2/2 (1973).

⁹ For interesting background on the U.S. origins and revival of Reynoldston Research and Sound Heritage, see its website: <http://www.reynoldstonnewyork.org>

¹⁰ A unique feature of the B.C. oral history program was its emphasis on making oral history holdings known to the public. The program was described as follows on the Provincial Archives of British Columbia website (<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/sound/general/sound.html>):

Through its *Sound Heritage* publications (1972-1983), the archives focused recording projects in subject areas not well documented by other sources, such as ethnic history, labour history, local history, and specific occupations. In contrast, recordings by archives staff generally dealt with topics that complemented existing archival holdings, including BC politics and government, and the history of broadcasting and filmmaking in the province.

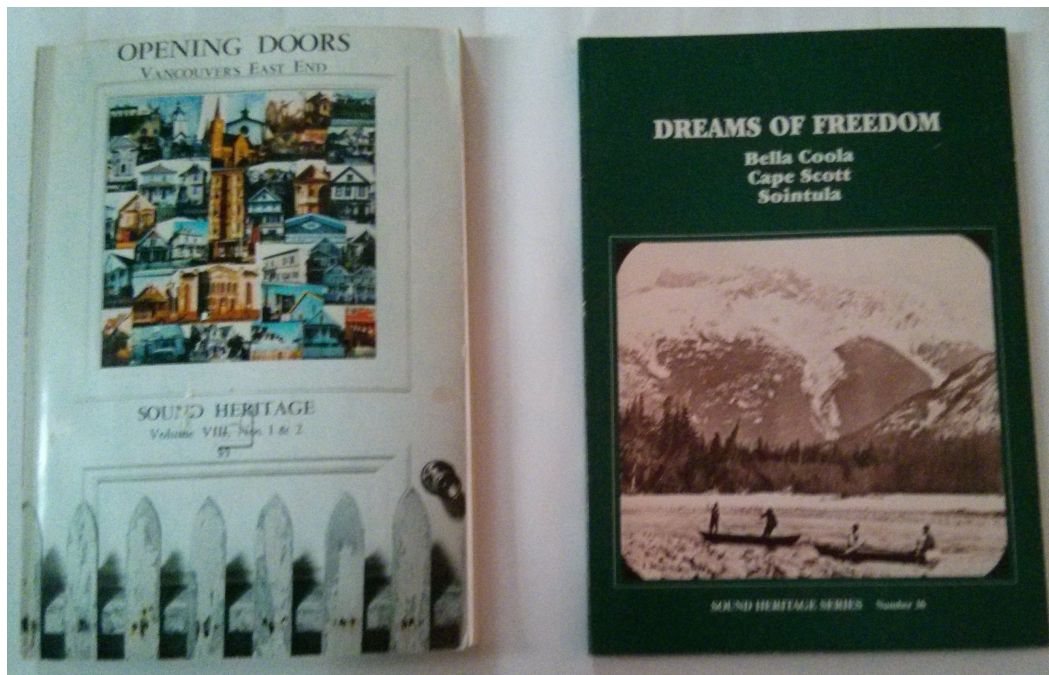


Photo courtesy of Richard Lohead.

At the federal level, the National Archives of Canada funded oral history interviews conducted by journalist Peter Stursberg for his books on Prime Ministers Pearson and Diefenbaker.¹¹ In this case, the recordings were preserved by the National Archives of Canada but the transcripts were used by Stursberg for the publications of his books. By the end of the 1970s, oral history was established in Canada with a large archival imprint.

Oral History in Canada in the 1980s: How Archivists became the unlikely leading force in Canadian Oral History

That the archival community would take a leading role in the establishment of the Canadian Oral History Association did seem unlikely when compared to the development of national oral history associations in the United States and Britain. In the United States, oral history provided a new way to raise historical consciousness of the American experience and enlisted support across a wide spectrum from universities and libraries to community groups to business and political leaders. In Britain, social historians, particularly Paul Thompson, took

¹¹ Stursberg's books included *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained 1956-62* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); *Diefenbaker: Leadership Lost 1962-67* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); *Lester Pearson and the Dream of Unity* (Toronto and NY: Doubleday, 1978); and *Lester Pearson and the American Dilemma* (Toronto and NY: Doubleday, 1980).

the lead and used oral history to further a critical analysis of British history.¹² Archivists were often associated in these countries as the passive and frequently unwilling end points of the oral history process and, in several cases, allied with traditional historians in articulating the critique against it.¹³

While archival support was clearly evident in the new Canadian Oral History Association, support for oral history was much less evident in the Canadian Archival Association (ACA). In fact, the role of archivists in oral history was a divisive issue within the Canadian archival community which was acknowledged in a formal debate co-sponsored by the COHA and ACA in Halifax in 1981. Derek Reimer from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia argued for archival leadership in oral history and Jean Dryden from the Provincial Archives of Alberta spoke against it. The arguments in the debate are worth noting as they indicate the contrasting approaches to archival involvement in oral history. What is also significant is that the archival options outlined in the debate dominated the activities and direction of COHA in the 1980s.

Reimer's argument focused on the simple premise that public archives should provide a representative record of society.¹⁴ The current holdings of Canadian archives, Reimer noted, "are the archives of white, middle and upper class, European adult men." For Reimer, this imbalance was the result of an

¹² Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). This book was the most cited reference for the defence of oral history in scholarly circles during the 1980s and its validity as historical evidence. In his earlier book, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), Thompson selected interview subjects to reflect existing census data to obtain a representative cross section of society, thus combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches in his oral history research.

¹³ This is a long debate, perhaps better framed as access vs. preservation. The core players in the U.S. Oral History Association were indeed library based (Columbia, UCLA, Baylor), and definitely had a strong preservation mandate. But the transcript was preferred as a better access document and product. To some, the end goal of oral history was an edited memoir. Many of the universities and libraries received private funding which reinforced the concept of providing a product. The case for recordings was often based on archival argument of authenticity and importance of the voice, but the cost of transcripts (and who would pay for them) was also a factor.

My position on the different path of development between Canada and the U.S. stems primarily from my observation, attendance, and discussion at U.S. OHA conferences. Oral history was viewed by many as a means of celebrating the American experience. The Canadian focus was more passive: "recording their memories before they are gone." This, of course, could be attributed to the always stronger sense of cultural nationalism in the U.S. which was embraced by the private sector. In Canada, the public sector was associated with cultural leadership and the "raising consciousness" aspect of oral history could be found more in the CBC and NFB productions. The original unedited interviews used in their productions were assigned to their archives which were transferred to the National Archives in 1970s and '80s, reinforcing the archival role in oral history.

¹⁴ Derek Reimer, "Oral History: The Case in Favour," *COHA Journal* 5 /1 (1981-1982): 30-3 All quotes cited are from this article.

acquisition process that displayed a definite, if unconscious, bias. “It is no accident that Canadian history has been federal, political, and constitutional. Archivists, as much as historians, have led it there by their collection policies,” he argued. Oral history now provides a means for archives to provide a more balanced record “by giving a place in posterity to the previously anonymous; by giving an image to the previously invisible. Ethnic groups, native people women and children can be given a documentary basis in oral history which otherwise would be non-existent.”

To Reimer, the archival selection process is in itself a subjective exercise and oral history is just another means of selecting historical documentation. Oral history could be a form of affirmative action for the archival record and archivists were the best positioned to take the lead. Reimer provided the following suggestion to those archivists uncomfortable with the role of interviewing: “if you can’t stand calling the recording of first person reminiscences and stories the work of an archivist, then call yourself ‘historical researchers’ or ‘cultural conservators’.” The activity may be thought of as parallel to conservation where the ephemeral record in whatever medium is preserved.

Dryden countered that archivists should not be running oral history programs because the function of archivists is “to preserve the record, not create it.”¹⁵ Dryden also expressed concern about the popular and over simplistic view of oral history in Alberta as “getting those old timers on tape before they are gone.” An even greater concern was that “many people believe that a special expertise is required to do oral history – an expertise only the archives has.” Dryden also expressed alarm with a growing popular opinion that not only was an oral history program needed immediately in Alberta, but that it could be done cheaply and effectively by the archives.

While Dryden acknowledged that archivists were in a good position to identify gaps in traditional records, they could not afford to the time and resources necessary “to do it right.” For Dryden, “other more traditional activities are far more important. Specifically, reducing our backlog and mounting an active acquisition program is far more important than creating more records which may be of marginal value.” For Dryden, the persons best placed to do oral history “are those who have an expertise in a certain area and who are conducting oral history for a project with a specific purpose.” These projects and other types of oral history should be preserved by the archives in accordance with their standard appraisal criteria for all documents. Dryden summed up her perspective with the statement, “archiving sometimes seems like juggling, and most of us are already trying to keep too many balls in the air at once. To add more when you are in danger of dropping the ones you’ve got, makes no sense at all.”

¹⁵ Jean Dryden, “Oral History: The Case Against,” *COHA Journal* 5/1 (1981-1982): 34-7. All quotes cited are from this article.

Dryden then set out her alternative role for archives in oral history. Archives should play a supporting educational role, offering pamphlets and workshops on how to conduct oral history that would be of archival value. Archives should focus on standardized descriptions of oral history holdings to make them more accessible. Finally, each provincial archive could serve as a clearing-house for oral history projects to prevent duplication.

Dryden and Reimer provided two major options and directions for archives at the beginning of the 1980s. One was an activist option: for archives to use oral history to obtain a more balanced and representative record. The other was a passive one: to acquire oral history documents as any other archival document. There was also a compromise position, supported by this author at the time, which justified the need for archival leadership in oral history with the argument that while the value of oral history should be judged by the discipline which creates it, the common end product of the oral history recording may also represent a significant addition to the archival record. Archivists must therefore take the lead in identifying the significant creators of oral history in all disciplines, inform them of the potential archival value of their recordings, and provide advice on how to prepare their interviews for archival preservation lines. Thus while other disciplines may create valuable historical documentation in the process of their work, it was the role of archivists to acquire it. This position also reinforced the centrality of archivists within COHA.¹⁶

The key factor, however, in determining the overall direction of oral history in the 1980s was not the impact of the above debate, but rather a changing economic and political landscape. Reimer had ended his talk with a cautionary note about the dangers of a view that the priority of public archives should be to preserve the records of their sponsor (i.e. government records). Dryden stressed that archival budgets could not afford to take responsibility for oral history. By the mid-1980s, a trend to a more conservative political and economic environment had taken hold throughout the country. Paradoxically, this shift took place first, and was most pronounced, in British Columbia. The responsibility of the Provincial Archives was restricted to only government records, and funding for the Sound Heritage oral history program was discontinued in 1984.

Although this shift was not as immediate in other parts of the country, reduced government spending meant the reduction and/or elimination of many funding sources for oral history projects and caused archives to retreat to “core activities.” Unlike the United States, where oral history projects frequently

¹⁶ Richard Lohead, “Oral History: The Role of The Archivist,” *Phonographic Bulletin*, International Association of Sound Archives 37 (November 1983). This position was actually a fallback from the 1975 article that advocated the Reimer position. It was an attempt to articulate a compromise position that could be supported by the whole archival community.

received private sector support through private donations or foundations, Canadian heritage initiatives relied heavily on government funding.

The impact on COHA was an increased focus toward preservation rather than creation and also toward academic-oriented oral history since the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) soon became the only consistent funding source left.

COHA activity during the 1980s soon became characterized by the following formula: obtain funds from SSHRC to hold a conference (usually as part of the Learned Societies); publish the papers from the conference in the *COHA Journal*; and use subscriptions to the Journal from university libraries to pay for the cost of publication. During the 1980s, the *COHA Journal* largely depended on conferences to produce potential articles and since the Journal was published at first semi-annually and then annually, conference organizing became a dominant activity for COHA.¹⁷

COHA was particularly active during the early and mid-1980s and held conferences in Montreal (1980), Ottawa (1982), Vancouver (1983), Winnipeg (1984), and Baddeck, Nova Scotia (1986). Other oral history conferences were held by the Atlantic Oral History Association (1979-1982) and the Saskatchewan Archives Board (1981). Archival staffs from the regions were frequently the lead organizers. The conferences were well attended and usually resulted in increased oral history activity in the region. There were other positive development even in a period of general government restraint, most notably in Manitoba where the provincial government funded oral history projects in communities which were under-represented in existing archival holdings, such as Francophone and Indigenous peoples.¹⁸ The Manitoba project was based on community support and involvement and included a multi-disciplinary approach. The project was administered by the Provincial Archives of Manitoba which provided oral history workshops specifically oriented for deposit and preservation in the archives, The program was initiated in 1986 and continued in the 1990s when it was merged into the larger Heritage Grants program.

But a persistent theme during the 1980s was to win the argument for the validity of oral history as historical evidence and the centrality of archives in this battle. Many COHA supporters echoed Dryden's concerns about "bad" oral history and viewed COHA as a means to improve the quality of the oral history product. There was a continuing attempt to identify good versus bad oral history which frequently pitted journalistic versus academic approaches. Journalistic oral

¹⁷ Richard Lohead, "Funding the Good Fight," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 25 (2005): 44-53.

¹⁸ Gerry Berkowski, "Moving and Speaking Between the Lines: The Manitoba Oral History Grants Program," in *Documents that Move and Speak: Audiovisual Archives in the New Informational Age* (NY: International Council of Archives, K.G. Saur, 1992), 112-20.

history was often associated with a lack of prior research and producing unchallenged stories, critiqued as being more folklore than fact. To be considered as evidence, oral history interviews had to be deposited in archives so they could be examined, used, and possibly refuted by others. Citations based on anonymous and undocumented interviews in the sole possession of the interviewer were considered akin to gossip and hearsay. “Good” oral history required a rigorous application of the correspondence theory of truth in which several persons independently told the same story. Sympathetic scholars stressed that oral history interviews should be undertaken after all other existing archival sources had been consulted and thus represented an additional and more rigorous level of research.¹⁹ One of the biggest challenges confronting supporters of oral history was that many archivists and historians still considered oral history interviewing as a technique of journalists and folklorists, not historians or archivists. This perception may have inhibited archivists from making the case for oral history not only as means of reconstructing or recovering past events but also as a valuable means of recording what participants thought about past events.

Evolution of archival attitudes towards oral history from 1970s to 1980s

While oral history programs were often the victims of government funding cutbacks in the 1980s, there was a gradual acceptance of oral history interviews as a legitimate archival record. This evolution can be demonstrated by a review of the various levels of archival oral history developed during this period. The activist archival approach can be seen in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the B.C. Sound Heritage program, the Manitoba community oral history grants, and the National Archives oral history program for federal politicians. While the B.C. and Manitoba models were targeted at underrepresented areas of the archival record and the National Archives of Canada focused on elite history, both types of oral history programs were commissioned by the archives. The next level could be described a pro-active archival acquisition approach to oral history. This involved archivists using oral history interview techniques to interview donors in order to improve the finding aid, to offer blank tape and loans of tape recorders for oral history projects of archival interest, and to identify key oral history creators such as broadcasters and authors for archival acquisition of their interviews. A more traditional approach included developing acquisition selection criteria for oral history, providing access to oral history manuals and/or workshops, and, finally, producing inventories of oral history holdings. All of the

¹⁹ David Frank, “George MacEachern: An Autobiography,” *COHA Journal* 7 (1984): 13-21. The critique from traditional historians about the weakness of memory also found its mark. Oral history was often defended not as substitute for the written record but as useful supplement.

above levels, however, did recognize the legitimacy of oral history as an archival record.

But perhaps the changing archival attitudes toward oral history can be best highlighted by tracing the path of oral history of prime ministers. Peter C. Newman published two best-selling books about the Diefenbaker and Pearson periods in Canadian politics: *Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years* (1963) and *Distemper of Our Times* (1968). The books were largely based on confidential information obtained by Newman from key inside sources in return for anonymity. The recordings, if any, were not deposited in archives. Consequently, many critics and scholars dismissed the books as unsubstantiated rumour and gossip. A short time later, broadcaster Peter Stursberg approached the National Archives of Canada (NAC) at the time of the founding of COHA to fund his interviews for his own series of books on the Diefenbaker and Pearson periods, which were published from 1975-1980.²⁰ The NAC agreed and the subsequent interviews were recorded and deposited in the Archives. The books were well received with some commentators noting that they also served to confirm the information obtained by Newman. After the books were published, Stursberg then proposed an on-going oral history program with retired politicians and national public figures. The NAC indicated interest in acquiring the tapes but no longer wanted to be identified as “creating the record“ by sponsoring an ongoing oral history program. A compromise solution was reached through a partnership with the Library of Parliament, which became identified as the sponsor of the program.²¹ The program continued until 1993, when it was cancelled by the NAC in the first wave of federal cutbacks in the 1990s.

Paradoxically, the role of the NAC in the acquisition of the oral history of prime ministers and federal politicians actually increased shortly after eliminating its own program. In the early 1990s, the NAC obtained special funds to help

²⁰ See footnote 10.

²¹ Under this arrangement the Library of Parliament would provide its Hansard transcribing service for the interviews while the NAC would pay Stursberg a set amount for the interview recordings as an acquisition purchase. This process led the NAC to develop specific selection criteria and pay scale for oral history interviews based on uniqueness of information, completeness of the funding aid (the transcript), technical quality, and access conditions. The Stursberg interview received the maximum amount, which was then matched by the Library of Parliament. Retired broadcaster Tom Earle and French speaking journalist Catherine Bergman replaced Stursberg in 1986. The interview sessions were professionally recorded, usually one hour to a hour and half with the total number of sessions varying with the individuals. The program was unique in that transcripts were produced for all the interviews. The interviewees are listed in the Oral History Guide, now accessible online from the Oral History Centre at <http://oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>. The two citations are Canada, Library of Parliament: Catherine Bergman, and Canada, Library of Parliament: Tom Earle. The collections are included within the larger Canada, National Archives of Canada fonds entry.

process the archival fonds of prime ministers Mulroney, Campbell, Clark, and Turner. Several of the Prime Ministers had authored books based on oral history interviews and others wanted funds to be used for new oral history interviews. The expectation that archival funds would be used to undertake oral history interviews as an alternative or supplement to written memories continued into the Martin era. A final ironic demonstration of the acceptance of oral history was the controversy over the publication of Peter Newman's book on the Mulroney period, *The Secret Mulroney Tapes: Unguarded Confessions of a Prime Minister*, which were based on exclusive interviews with Mulroney before and during his period as prime minister.²² Unlike his earlier books on Diefenbaker and Pearson, which were dismissed because of reliance on unrecorded interviews rather than textual sources, the Mulroney book was given considerable credibility and publicity since it was based on actual recordings which were deposited in the University of Toronto archives.

For Canadian oral history, the 1980s represented the rise and retreat of the archival definition and leadership of oral history. COHA was founded in 1974 as part of an international wave of recognition of oral history as something new and different. Yet, in the Canadian experience, recorded interviews were already well established and recognized as essential for folklore and broadcasting and even as testimony in judicial inquiries. Archival leadership in COHA may have also reflected the interest of newly established sound and moving sections in federal and provincial archives to identify oral history as an audio-visual document, not a transcript. For some archivists, it was also part of a larger battle to make the case for social history and a more democratic and representative archival record. The archival role in Canadian oral history was significant as it became the landscape for debate on oral history in Canada in the 1980s. One could argue that oral history techniques were not in question until they laid claim to archival territory as historical evidence.

The continued presence of COHA and its Journal throughout the 1980s did help oral history gain acceptance in historical research circles and in the holdings of archives. But, by the end of the decade, the combined effect of increasing acceptance of oral history and continuing cutbacks led some to question whether a separate Canadian Oral History Association was still needed and /or possible. A special COHA conference held in Toronto in 1991 resulted in a decision to continue the Journal, since it could now obtain submissions without the need of conferences, and that the Association would apply to SSHRC to publish an inventory of oral history holdings in Canada. The *Guide to Oral*

²² Peter C. Newman, *The Secret Mulroney Tapes: Unguarded Confessions of a Prime Minister* (Toronto: Random House, 2005).

*History Collections in Canada*²³ was published in 1993 and was well received within both the scholarly and archival communities. It seemed that oral history was finally accepted by the archival community, and to many it represented the crowning achievement of COHA. The Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada was the first national inventory of oral history holdings in any country and its entries demonstrated the strong Canadian oral history tradition and archival leadership. But it also signified the end of the archival era in COHA. The 1990s brought a continuing round of government cutbacks to archives which led to frequent reorganizations and the elimination of sound and moving image units in several archives. An organizational structure based on functions, not areas of expertise, was widely adopted which meant that there was no longer staff specifically dedicated to oral history. Although public recognition and support for oral history was increasing and oral history was becoming an steadily increasing part of the archival record, this was not reflected in increased government funding. It was not an environment to support new initiatives and most public sector archives were not permitted to seek private funds. The Canadian oral history situation stood in marked contrast to that in the United States which was less dependent on public funding and had more private sector involvement and support.

Re-assessment of the archival role in COHA

In reflecting back on my involvement in oral history during the 1980s, a particular recollection now takes on new meaning. While at the 1991 COHA meeting in Toronto which was organized to decide on what seemed to be the fading future of COHA, a sympathetic supporter told me that “you do not have to prove the validity of oral history any more, it’s time to move beyond this,” implying that this battle had been won. My unspoken reaction was “How could this be?” Oral history was under constant attack during the 1980s. Cutbacks were everywhere and COHA was struggling. Besides, key criticisms about oral history seemed a permanent part of the landscape: “memory is subjective, oral history is not reliable,” “oral history is just a fad based on technology,” “oral history is a lazy approach to history, an excuse to avoid real archival research,” “how could one’s person research be useful to others, who will actually use it?” These critiques still echo in my memory.

But oral history is now surviving and flourishing in Canada. It is accepted as a standard research tool in universities, particularly in the social sciences and also in building community identity and historical awareness. Canada is playing a lead role with internationally recognized oral history centres in Winnipeg and

²³ The Guide is now based at the University of Winnipeg Oral History Centre website: <http://oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>.

Montreal as well as innovative and established oral history programs in Pier 21 and other heritage institutions. How did I misjudge the future of oral history so badly? Perhaps because my definition of oral history was essentially a narrow one, based on acceptance within archives which, in turn, became the dominant mission and barometer of oral history success within COHA at that time.

Ron Labelle in his article, “Reflections on Thirty Years of Oral History in Canada” in the 2005 issue the *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*, aptly articulates this point.²⁴ With reference to my article, “Three Approaches to Oral History: the Journalistic, the Academic and the Archival” (1975), Labelle politely points out that a significant and long-standing approach to oral history could have also been added: folklore. Folklorists along with sociologists and anthropologists share a belief that how people interpret the past is just as significant as what actually happened. Documenting perspectives, experiences, and changing attitudes towards past events, rather than seeking factual evidence, is the real strength of oral history. It is this wider definition and appreciation of oral history which has flourished since the 1990s, mostly in the fields of social sciences and the humanities rather than history. But for archivists in the 1980s, folklore focused on the telling of stories, and a close association with folklore would damage the case for the validity of oral history as historical evidence. The most cited book of the period was Paul Thompson’s *Voice of the Past: Oral History* (1978) which provided a strong academic defence of oral history as a legitimate tool for gathering evidence.

Labelle noted that while COHA started out in the 1970s with a good mix of journalists, folklorists, historians, and anthropologists, it was archivists who took the lead in continuing it into the 1980s. But archival leadership in COHA was as much by default as by design. Archivists who embraced oral history interviews as a valuable addition to the historical record viewed COHA as a means to make the case for oral history preservation with both creators and fellow archivists. However, many Canadian broadcasters and folklorists considered oral history just a popular extension of their long standing practice of recording interviews and stories (albeit with more cumbersome equipment), and did not see the need for their involvement in a separate body beyond their own existing professional associations. Furthermore, most scholars and archivists who supported COHA viewed oral history as a technique, not a discipline, and did not refer to themselves as oral historians. One explanation for this may be that the term “oral historian” was used by those who considered oral history primarily as a means to raise historical or community consciousness rather than a technique within a discipline which might also have value as an archival document. Thus the

²⁴ Ron Labelle, “Reflections on Thirty Years of Oral History in Canada,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 25 (2005): 7-14.

term “oral historian” was used more widely in the U.S. and the British national associations than in the archive-dominated Canadian Oral History Association.²⁵

There were also several unseen and unintended consequences of archival leadership of COHA. The focus on the validity of oral history as historical evidence and “filling in the gaps” in the archival record sidelined the contribution of the life history approach used by folklorists which was the predominant use of oral history in Quebec. Thus COHA reflected a view toward oral history more popular in English Canada and the United States. As noted by Labelle, the focus on oral history as a technique, not a movement, undermined the case for a distinct organization. The emphasis placed on deposit in the archives as a key objective for oral history downplayed the role of oral history in raising historical consciousness within a community where a book, pamphlet, video, or exhibition would be considered the primary objective of oral history.

The 1980s were also the start of a prolonged period of reductions in government spending, which included independent oral history projects but also agencies such as the CBC, NFB, and museums which used oral history in their productions. As archives were mostly government funded, oral history was a major cutback target since it was not considered a core activity. (In fact, the “fallback position” of archives as the vital end point of oral history from all disciplines was used to protect oral history within archives by positioning it as part of an archive’s core activities; a position which also served to reinforce an archival definition of oral history during cutbacks.) Finally, oral history’s definition as a tape recording placed it within the sound and moving image sections of the most archives where it had to compete for resources with higher profile broadcast and film documents.

Thus oral history in Canada during the 1980s was largely associated with an archival based definition of preservation rather than one based on raising historical consciousness. COHA’s support base during the 1980s was mostly archivists and sympathetic scholars and did not extend its reach into communities. Even though interest in oral history was growing, survival of oral history became tied to government funding rather than community support which could have provided a political base against cutbacks. Furthermore, as LaBelle points out, oral history was more suited to building a sense of regional identity and history which made a national association less relevant. Finally, COHA’s emphasis on the validity of oral history as historical evidence, rather than its ability to document attitudes and experience, limited its ability to capture the rapid growth

²⁵ Several COHA members also viewed the popular works of self-identified oral historians such as Barry Broadfoot and Allan Anderson with suspicion. To some, Broadfoot’s book on the Canadian Depression was considered as an opportunistic Canadian version of Studs Terkel’s breakthrough book published several years earlier. Broadfoot’s ensuing identification in the media as Canada’s oral historian may have prompted some to distance themselves from the term “oral historian.”

and use of oral history techniques in the social sciences and humanities in the 1990s and beyond.

New directions and new debates for oral history in the 1990s and beyond

But there were larger trends emerging in the 1990s in both archives and oral history that challenged archival leadership. A new purist yet more traditional definition of archives was being articulated in Canadian schools of archival science which focused on archives as documenting the activities and functions of individuals and institutions, rather than collecting records for the purpose of posterity. This was a major step away from the definition of “total archives” as a means to obtain a more complete and representative record for historical research. Suddenly, archival theory was taking a position that oral history did not really qualify as archival and its preservation should fall more within the mandates of libraries, museums, or independent centres.²⁶ Finally, as noted by Reimer, this

²⁶ The new archival theory was actually a return to a more traditional view of archives as documenting the functions and activities of its creator. As the Society of American Archivists notes in its glossary entry for archive on its website, there are two dominant approaches in archival theory. “Many archivists, especially those in the United States who are influenced by the thinking of Theodore Schellenberg, follow an inclusive definition of archives, which encompasses a wide variety of documents and records.... For Schellenberg, archivists appraise records for transfer to the archives on the basis of their secondary, research, evidential, or informational value. Other archivists follow the writing of Hilary Jenkinson, who argues that archives are 'documents which formed part of an official transaction and were preserved for official reference.' For Jenkinson, the records creator is responsible for determining which records should be transferred to the archives for preservation. Because Jenkinson emphasized that records are evidence of transactions, he did not recognize any collections of historical documents as archives...”

The current Wikipedia entry reflects the Jenkinson approach: “Archives contain primary source documents that have accumulated over the course of an individual or organization’s lifetime, and are kept to show the function of that person or organization. Professional archivists and historians generally understand archives to be records that have been naturally and necessarily generated as a product of regular legal, commercial, administrative or social activities. They have been metaphorically defined as ‘the secretions of an organism,’ and are distinguished from documents that have been consciously written or created to communicate a particular message to posterity.”

In reality, the mandates of archives, libraries, and museums are often combined or mixed and have evolved independently as a result of the political, cultural, and economic development of each country. By the end of the First World War, archives were seen as central to the exercise of nation building with their major client being historians. (Archivists frequently were trained as historians and were sometimes referred to unflatteringly as historians manqué.) In Canada, the National Archives of Canada collected both public and private records of national significance and was described as the collective memory of the nation. In terms of film and sound heritage, the National Archives of Canada was given the combined mandate of an archive, library, and cinemathèque. The new interpretation of archives being articulated in newly established school of

new definition of archives was also a more restricted one and advocated that the primary role of archives should be to collect the records of its sponsor, which for public archives meant government records. Wittingly or otherwise, in a period of reduced government revenues, it provided a rationale for cutbacks to private records and oral history. Although COHA may have won the battle for the validity of oral history as historical evidence, during the 1980s, it may have been a pyrrhic victory in that the mandate of archives to acquire and preserve oral history was now being questioned. Archivists were no longer the group to lead oral history in the 1990s.

There was also a shift and expansion in oral history practice away from a strict historical/archival definition to one based more on life history and identity, a move some might describe as a return to its anthropological and folklore origins. The new direction in oral history in the 1990s was articulated in the books by Portelli and Frisch. Arguably the most cited oral history authors since the 1990s, Portelli extended the range of oral history methodology as a form of narrative and sought to bridge the gap between the historical and social science approaches by arguing that oral history is equally as important to the writing of history for obtaining an understanding of what was perceived as happening as what actually happened.²⁷ Frisch critiqued the one-sided power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in the traditional historical approach, noting that the oral history interview itself is and must be a shared authority between the two participants if it is to realize its potential to reconstruct past events and document historical consciousness.²⁸ Both authors transformed a perceived weakness of oral

archival science decreed that records were not to be acquired for the purpose of posterity which thereby excluded oral history as an archival record.

Supporters of this view noted that oral history could still be acquired by other heritage institutions or its own separate agency, which may have seemed to some an easier and preferred option given the struggles over its acceptance as an archival record. In fact, long standing COHA activist Wilma McDonald, in her excellent and comprehensive article, "Origins: Oral History Programmes in Canada, Britain and the United States," *COHA Forum* 10 (1990): 12-24, seems to support this view. Macdonald reaches a conclusion similar to mine with her statement that "The growth of oral history (in Canada) may have been inhibited by its connection with archives and traditional history trained staff." But Macdonald's position is based largely on acceptance of this interpretation of archival theory which led her to state "the obvious fact that 'oral history' is neither history nor archives in the theoretical sense... leads the author to suggest that the creators themselves, such as university libraries may be more suitable institutions to be keepers of this media" and that archival practices were not a good fit for oral history documents. Of course, if oral history interviews were part of a creator's fonds, rather than a sole project, then it could be accepted for acquisition under this definition, but this led to other problems such as the question of obsolete formats if oral history recordings were not donated until long after they were created.

²⁷ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

²⁸ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

history (the subjective filter of human memory) into one of its strengths as a means to understand the construction of both past and current reality. Oral history thus expanded its range and its legitimacy.

Oral history interview techniques have now been employed as a means to not only uncover hidden and neglected history of marginalized groups (Indigenous multicultural, and working-class), but also subjugated experiences and knowledges (women and LGBTQ), studies of resistance, repression, and genocide (holocaust and apartheid) as well as consciousness-raising (social activism and truth and reconciliation programs). Although the term “oral history techniques” is generally accepted by the scholarly community to describe the use of interview methodology for obtaining personal testimony, the expanded definition of oral history and its adoption by social sciences is reflected by its own terminology. Alternative terms for the interview itself include: in depth interview, recorded memoir or personal narrative, life narrative, and life review. The person interviewed has been referred to as an interviewee, a narrator, an informant, a subject, and a participant.

Oral history is now commonly associated with recording experiences, documenting identities, and exploring meaning-making, all of which involve events in the past, but its purpose is not just to reconstruct past events or fill in the gaps in the archival record. This leads to another paradox in the evolution of oral history in that it seems oral history has been more accepted as scholarly research once it expanded outside the boundaries of archives. Much oral history “qualitative” research being done by social sciences involves documenting personal and often sensitive experiences, which are hidden or cannot be captured by quantitative methods.²⁹ For this type of research, it is argued that anonymity needs to be protected and the interviews are deliberately not deposited in archives. For many, this approach has tilted the balance of shared authority too far in the direction of the interviewee and cannot be considered oral history.

This division between the historical/archival definition of oral history and social sciences/humanities is clearly evident in major oral history manuals and the debate on research guidelines. For example, Valerie Raleigh Yow in her manual *Recording Oral History: A Guide for Humanities and Social Sciences* (2005) defines oral history broadly and simply as “the recording of personal testimony in oral form.”³⁰ Donald Ritchie, a major figure in the United States Oral History

²⁹ Patricia Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Leavy defines oral history “as a method of qualitative interview that emphasizes participants’ perspectives and generally involves multiple open-ended interviews with each participant.” The book is essentially a professor’s guide to graduate students for oral history methodology in social sciences but also outlines the contribution of feminist research to oral history methodology and vice versa.

³⁰ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2d ed (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, 2005).

Association offers a much more specific definition in his manual *Doing Oral History* (2003): “An interview becomes oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication. Availability for general research, reinterpretation and verification defines oral history.”³¹

At the heart of this division is the different research mandate of social sciences and history that is highlighted in the dispute over ethical guidelines for scholarly research. Social science practice reflects that of medical sciences with the guiding principle being to “do not harm” to the participant interviewee, especially as it pertains to sensitive and controversial subject matter. This is protected by a guarantee of anonymity for the interviewee. Historians counter that sensitive and controversial subject matter must be addressed and documented as part of scholarly historical inquiry. This division has resulted in historians seeking exemptions from the guidelines established by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and administered by Research Ethics Boards at universities. An excellent account of this debate is provided by Nancy Janovicek in her article “Oral History and Ethical Practice: Towards Effective Policies and Procedures” (2006).³² To some, the differing approaches and purposes between history and social sciences in the uses of oral history may prove to be a bridge too far.

Either way, oral history had moved on from its legitimacy being defined just in archival terms. The growth and rationale for oral history since the 1980s has been in new scholarship largely in the social sciences and humanities. The argument for oral history as building a more representative record, of giving voice to the marginalized, and making visible the contributions of those previously invisible in the historical record still remained a guiding force, but its leadership has moved beyond the archives.

But the leadership is diverse, located in regional centres and not linked with a central body which would make the total presence of oral history more visible. The challenge which has confronted oral history proponents since its beginning still remains: most practitioners still identify their oral history as a methodology within their own discipline rather than a separate entity in itself or a movement. It was this enduring fact that allowed the archives to take a leadership role with its argument that the common denominator of oral history from all disciplines was its value to the archival record. As Freund notes, “Canadians using oral history have often seen oral history in exclusively utilitarian fashion, thus ignoring the complexities of oral history and not identifying as oral historians.... Therefore, few people in Canada using oral sources identify as oral

³¹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³² Nancy Janovicek, “Oral History and Ethical Practice: Towards Effective Policies and Procedures,” *Journal of Academic Ethics* 4 (2006): 157-74.

historians and hence there is little support for the Canadian Oral History Association.”³³

But addressing the positive side of the Canadian oral history paradox, that oral history itself is thriving without COHA, might provide some insight for the future direction of COHA. Freund attributes a positive outlook for oral history in Canada to four major factors: the adoption of oral history methodologies in social sciences and humanities, particularly by postmodern and feminist researchers; the recognition of the legitimacy of oral history as evidence in courts, in particular, the Supreme Court decision on Aboriginal oral history; the increasing use and recognition of oral history in the popular media; and finally, the great number of oral histories already deposited in archives and other heritage institutions which will provide a critical mass for future research.

To which I might add two others. First, Freund identifies the existence of COHA as providing a “sense of community, which has become ever more important in an individualizing world.”³⁴ Since the 1980s, oral history has evolved against a backdrop of neo-liberalism, a philosophy which advocates the reduction of government services in favour of market-oriented solutions and gives primacy to individual responsibility over collective rights.³⁵ At its base, the true common denominator of oral history is recognition and validity of the experience of others, an interest and willingness to understand story and to value it. These characteristics unite all approaches to oral history and go beyond differences in methodology and questions of use. In this sense, the increasing popularity of oral history can be interpreted as a reaction to this individualizing trend and an affirmation of shared experience and community. Such an interpretation would position oral history again as a movement and provide a reason for an organization such as COHA. A second reason for renewed popularity of oral history is the role of agency, of persons such as Nolan Reilly, Alexander Freund, and Steven High who have recognized oral history as more than just a technique but as a distinct activity and who have re-established oral history in Canada with

³³ Alexander Freund, “Oral History in Canada: A Paradox,” in *Canada in Grainau. A Multidisciplinary Survey of Canadian Studies after 30 Years*, ed. Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, Canadian Literatures/Cultures, 7) (Frankfurt am Main.: Peter Lang, 2009), 322.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

³⁵ The neoliberal trend to individual responsibility and the preference for market-oriented rather than government solutions is aptly demonstrated by the changing attitudes towards genealogy. Genealogy was the long-time bane of archivists’ existence since its focus was only on individuals and their search for their ancestors rather than using the other significant holdings of the archives to write or interpret the collective history of Canada. Much to archivists’ dismay, genealogists represented consistently over 70% of all archival inquiries. Under neo liberalism and its new public management philosophy, the priorities for archives became focused on provide access to clients and a search for private-public partnerships. This combination of market-oriented solutions and individual responsibility could be seen in the rise of the private company, Ancestry.ca, which uses the genealogical data assembled by archival staff.

permanent centres in Winnipeg and Montreal. As Steven High, Co-Director of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia, notes, there is much more oral history activity in Canada today that is not widely known or recognized,³⁶ perhaps because there is no longer an active national organization which can serve to connect them and make their work known to each other.

Conclusion

Recollection of my own past experience combined with some hurried catch-up reading leads me to the following overview summary of the evolution of oral history in Canada. In the initial founding period of the 1970s, oral history was seen as a movement. In the 1980s, it became identified with the quest for legitimacy as part of the archival record. The 1990s moved oral history away from archival concerns to new uses by social sciences, and the post-2000 period may be seeing a return to oral history as a movement involved with communities in a process which democratizes both the historical record and the role of the oral history interview itself while expanding into digital media.

Perhaps an article should now be written to address the growth of oral history in the 2000s. Did the rise of oral history coincide with the increasing popularity of post-modernism and its focus on identity, and with feminist research and its focus on subjugated experiences? Did the rise of oral history represent continuing opposition to the neo-liberal individualizing trend by its reassertion of the significance of community and appreciation of the experience of others? Is oral history surviving in a neo-liberal age because it is challenging it? Or, from a more practical viewpoint: is it because oral history is now truly multidisciplinary – not just history and archival based? Does the diversity of oral history projects mean diversity of funding sources?

But another question posed by Freund remains: is the Canadian Oral History Association still needed today? Perhaps a first step is to examine why COHA was useful in the 1970s and 1980s and whether this rationale still exists

³⁶ Email correspondence: Steven High to Richard Lohead, 5 November 2014.

“There are a number of other oral history centres now, beyond Winnipeg and us [Concordia]. There are very active ones at Lethbridge (Centre for Oral History and Tradition) and U of Ottawa (in the department of Education). There are also strong clusters of oral historians, with multiple courses being regularly offered, in the history departments at Simon Fraser and Saskatchewan. U. Sherbrooke is organizing a daylong conference on oral history in Quebec this April 2015 (and there is a special issue of the *Revue de l'histoire de l'Amerique Francaise* on oral sources coming out this year). I also think that the Museum of Anthropology at UBC has been pivotal. Here in Quebec, the Centre d'histoire de Montreal has been a key player – they have won numerous awards for their oral history projects – including a prize from the U.S. OHA. Their curator was integrated into the seminar series of Columbia's Oral History Program last year. Pier 21 is a national leader of course.”

today. In the 1980s, COHA provided an excellent outreach vehicle for archives by making oral history creators in all disciplines aware of archival standards such as good recording quality and release forms. COHA also provided a mechanism to apply for grants to fund conferences and publications. COHA conferences brought together various practitioners of oral history throughout Canada and gave oral history a distinct visibility during the 1980s which culminated in the publication of the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*.

But the revival of COHA will depend on recognizing a new set of collective needs and benefits. Is COHA still necessary as it was in the 1980s to apply for national conference and publication funding? Is there a need for a national organization to lobby for common oral history concerns such as copyright, funding for digitizing holdings, and updating the COHA *Guide to Oral History Collections*? Could COHA serve as the forum to bring together the various practitioners of oral history to discuss and seek solutions to debates within oral history such as Research Ethics Boards? Could COHA be useful strategically to make submissions to government committees and agencies on issues affecting oral history and to join with other national organizations in campaigns which are beneficial to oral history? Finally, is a national organization still needed in the internet age to serve as a source of information dissemination and exchange for existing oral history programs, such as new legal decisions which may affect all Canadian oral history users?

Positive responses to the above set of questions would lead to more practical ones: Who should join COHA and what form should it take? Perhaps the first prerequisite for any national organization is a critical mass of people across the country that are actively working or teaching in the field. It is these people who should have a continuing interest in maintaining and utilizing the organization. Another group would be persons who view oral history as a movement, not just a technique, and would call themselves oral historians. A third group might be those who are interested in oral history theory and developments internationally. Finally, there are those who may wish to join the organization for a brief period of time to lobby for a particular issue or for the duration of their own particular oral history project.

One challenge that will continue to exist and should be acknowledged is that for many committed to oral history, their work for an organization is often done in a stealth capacity as an addition to their official duties or as volunteers. For that reason, perhaps the first step to decide the future of COHA might be to identify and establish contacts with those actively involved in oral history to decide what form and structure would be the most feasible to maintain.

Perhaps I can close my own recollection and reassessment of COHA with a final paradox and plea relating to archives and oral history today. The major crisis of oral history in the digital age may be an old one – preservation. All oral

history is worth preserving, whether at home, in archives or universities, but much is and will be lost due to obsolete formats of rapid changing technology. A national digitization strategy is needed, especially for oral history, to make all oral history practitioners aware of how to ensure the long term preservation of their interviews and to digitize the existing oral history collections in archives now at risk due to deteriorating and obsolete analogue formats. It is yet another archival challenge in oral history, and one which will need leadership from outside the archives to resolve it.