

Workers' Oral History: Recording, Preserving, and Promoting

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Ken Clavette was COHA Chair from 1996 to 2001. He is a worker historian and currently employed as the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Learned Journals.

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In 1994 the Ontario NDP government led by Bob Rae established a \$100,000 "Workplace Heritage Grant" to be operated by the Ontario Heritage Foundation. The intention was to provide grants to document economic and technological changes affecting workplaces in the province. In Ottawa a few union activists, associated through the labour council, met to develop a proposal. While there was change currently taking place in the city, we felt it was more important to document the workplaces that had long ago disappeared. Time was running out; if someone did not act the voices of those who had laboured in Ottawa's factories and foundries would themselves disappear.

We were aware, in a vague way, that there was a name for the act of recording voices and preserving them. We all knew Gil Levine, who had been doing these types of interviews in the labour movement for years. One of us, Naomi Gadbois, had a copy of one of Paul Thompson's books. But we all would have been hard pressed to say we knew what "Oral History" was. What we did know was if we did not act to record the stories of Ottawa's industrial workers the job would not get done and those workers would pass on, taking their stories with them.

We cobbled together an application, hampered by not being able to include Gil Levine, the only oral historian we knew, in our number because he had already agreed to sit on the Ontario Heritage Foundation awarding jury. We applied and were awarded a \$20,000 grant for the "Preserving our History" project; to mobilize and train workers to collect oral histories. Thus began the relationship between workers in Ottawa and the Canadian Oral History Association – a relationship that has led to 20 years of collecting workers' history, and presenting those stories to the broader community.

We benefited greatly from the knowledge and experience of many who had built COHA. Richard Lohead and Wilma MacDonald were key advisors, as were archivists like Dan Moore and Peter Delottenville, and of course, Gil Levine.

Our first challenge was choosing the medium that we would use. All the published material we found was dated, most having been produced two decades earlier in the early 1970s. It was based on the then new technology of cassette tapes, which freed the oral historian from those large and clumsy reel-to-reel machines.

But, this was the 1990s and video was an accessible and affordable means of recording, even if not without its challenges. However, most of the experts we consulted felt that video would be far too intimidating for older interviewees in their 60s, 70s, and 80s.

There was the additional challenge of training people to use much more complicated equipment; the need to be aware of lighting as well as ambient noise would not be easy. We were told it could not be done.

Undeterred, we held our first training course in 1995 aided by archivists, historians and union members working in broadcasting. By tapping into the latter resource we were able to bring skill sets to the table that were not readily available to most oral historians and we did include video training. Our first course of 35 people was opened up to local heritage activists.

Within three years, those we trained collected 45 workers' oral history interviews related to: Beach Foundry (1914-1980), Ottawa Car and Aircraft (1893-1948), members of the Plumbers Union Local 7, and members of the Child Care Union CUPE 2204. All the interviews, and a growing collection of related artifacts, were housed at the City of Ottawa Archives.

We understood that most oral histories are collected and then housed in archives. Only a small fraction of those interviews are heard by the general public. But, we made a commitment that our interviews would be used to tell stories to the public. So, we used part of the grant to produce two short documentaries, *On All Fronts* and *Made In Ottawa*, telling stories of working at Ottawa Car and at the Beach Foundry. We have continued this tradition; we collect oral histories but plan from the start to use them to educate and inform the public about workers' history.

Because we were located in Ottawa and had early support from COHA, it was natural that when asked to serve on COHA's Board we agreed. Ken Clavette's name was put forward and he quickly became chair, serving from 1996 to 2001. He successfully led COHA through a very difficult period. After years of support from the National Archives, funding cuts had left the organization with only the good will of the archivists who had supported and built it through the first 20 years.

Thanks to support from Richard Lohead, Wilma MacDonald, and younger archivists like Tina Harvey who joined the COHA board (after interning with the Labour Council's Workers' History Committee), we were able to maintain the organization through some hard times. October 15-18, 1998, COHA co-hosted the national annual conference of the American Oral History Association in Buffalo NY. Funds were secured to allow Ronald Labelle, the editor of the *Forum*, to continue to publish through lean years and the journal's survival owes much to his determination. It was during this period that an online presence was established with our first COHA website. Then COHA was handed off to Patricia Skidmore and new hands that continued over the next 15 years to build a national voice for oral historians allowing it to reach its fortieth year.

Locally, workers continued to develop resources to promote workers' history, and oral history was always a key element of the work undertaken through the Workers Heritage Centre and later the Workers' History Museum. As we advanced we became an oral history group in Ottawa that others turned to for guidance and support. We have held general training sessions with other heritage organizations, and presented specific sessions for groups that range from museums, a historical association, and a theatre company, to graduate students. We continue to train people to use video recording equipment. We continue to share our oral histories with the public through our documentaries and with academics through our archives collection.

Using video means we can capture more than just the voice of a worker but the whole person with all the human reactions. It also means we can easily produce documentaries with our interviews. Contrary to the early warning against using video, we have found that only on two occasions have people requested that they not appear on camera, and that we only record their voice. And while we train people to work in a team (interviewer and camera operator), most interviewees tell us that once they start to talk, they forget all about the camera and don't even know it is there.

Since its founding in 2011, the Workers' History Museum (WHM) has developed collections of interviews on the struggle to win family leave and the achievements of Black trade unionist and Canadian ambassador Cal Best. It has also produced video documentaries on both these subjects, *A Struggle to Remember: Fighting for our Families* and *Simply the Best*, to bring them to the general public.

WHM is currently conducting interviews on the Rand Formula, (a Canadian system of union security), the struggle to win equal rights for LGBT employees in the federal government service and, in cooperation with the Public Service Alliance of Canada, documenting a Charter of Rights Case (Osborne v. Canada) that won political rights for federal and provincial government

employees. These interviews will be crafted into short documentaries to have the workers tell their stories.

Oral history is an ideal medium to tell workers' history. Most workers do not leave a paper trail. Documents that do exist are usually produced by employers not workers. The voices of workers are key to a complete history, a history we want to share. COHA was key to launching workers' oral history in Ottawa, and we were proud to play a role in helping COHA reach its 40th anniversary.