

Oral History in Canada: Ten Years Later

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In 2005, when the Canadian Oral History Association published the 30th anniversary issue of the *Oral History Forum*, I was invited to write some reflections on the history of the COHA, as I had been involved with the organization almost from its beginning. Ten years later, it is perhaps time to take another look at how the association has evolved. For me, it is very satisfying to see how the COHA is now fulfilling its role as a meeting place for ideas on oral history research in Canada. The goal of the association has always been to bring together individuals in Canada who explore the past through oral memory. These practitioners have tended to be spread in many different types of institutions and disciplines, and the COHA, along with its journal, gives them the opportunity to share their methods and approaches.

As the COHA now produces a high quality on-line academic journal, and benefits from the support of the University of Winnipeg's new Oral History Centre, it may seem surprising for readers to learn that not long ago, the very survival of the association was in doubt. For the first ten years of its existence, archivists had formed a core group of active members. The National Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, and the Provincial Archives of British Columbia were all directly involved in oral history at the time, and archivists in all three institutions took part in the creation of the COHA. Several individuals at the National Archives contributed their efforts to the movement. The names that stand out are Leo La Clare, Wilma MacDonald, Caroline Forcier

Holloway, and especially Richard Lohead. He became involved in the preservation of oral history records at the National Archives of Canada in 1975, and played an active role in the COHA for decades, culminating in the publication of the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada* in 1993.

After its hopeful beginnings in the 1970s, the COHA began to suffer from a decline in institutional support for oral history at the National Archives during the 1980s. Thanks to the efforts of archivists in Western Canada such as Alan Specht, Gilbert Comeault, and Jocelyn McKillop, successful COHA conferences were held in Victoria in 1983 and Winnipeg in 1984, but in provincial archival institutions, as was the case in Ottawa, resources became scarce, and it became apparent that the COHA would need to find a home elsewhere. After the 1986 conference held in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, the COHA struggled to survive for almost twenty years. No other major oral history conference was held in Canada until 2005, and at one point during those dark years, a motion to dissolve the association was actually put forward at an executive meeting of the COHA. Luckily, the motion was defeated, as a core group of members continued to see the need for a national organization devoted to oral history.

During the years when the association was unable to hold national conferences, the COHA Journal, which became the *Oral History Forum* in 1995, acted as a lifeline to provide continuing opportunities for all those who wanted to share the results of their research activities. Historian James Morrison carried the torch for several years at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. I then took up the challenge at the Université de Moncton, and finally Patricia Skidmore stepped in at Brescia College in London (Western University), to insure the continuity of the journal until Alexander Freund began the task of reinvigorating the COHA, along with his colleagues Nolan Reilly and Janis Thiessen.

An obvious question arises here: Why was it so difficult to maintain interest in the field of oral history in Canada? The problem is that, like any

research field, oral history needs to be grounded in a discipline with a measure of institutional support. When support for oral history work in archival institutions dissolved, it was necessary for the COHA to find a new home in university based research. Many Canadian academics were actively carrying out oral history work, but for the large part, historians simply saw it as a research methodology that could sometimes be useful to provide primary sources of information in order to complement official records. Those who were active in labour, aboriginal, and women's history, however, tended to rely heavily on oral sources in their efforts to document groups that had been either misrepresented or underrepresented in official records, thereby producing a more inclusive portrait of the past.

At the same time, some anthropologists and folklorists in Canada developed an expertise in the interpretation oral history accounts, seeing them as narratives that deal with the past, while at the same time being rooted in the contemporary experience of their authors. This approach considers an oral history account not so much as a record of the past, but rather as a process that transforms memory into narrative in the context of interpersonal communication. The theoretical concerns of this group of researchers may seem far from those of the archivists who founded the COHA, but the results of their fieldwork produced an important quantity of oral history documentation.

While each group of proponents of oral history has approached the subject from a particular viewpoint, rarely have they seen the need to share their experience with others in the context of an oral history movement. Now and then, academics would submit the results of their work for publication in the COHA *Journal*, that later became the *Oral History Forum*, but few were interested in becoming involved in the association on an ongoing basis. There simply were not enough academic researchers who considered themselves as being heavily involved in oral history, while the archivist as oral historian was a dying breed at the end of the 20th century.

While the COHA was struggling to survive in the 1990s, there were hopeful signs that the tide would turn: Qualitative research methods were gaining a higher profile in academic research, and a budding International Oral History Association was taking form, with strong participation from Latin America and Europe. Here in Canada, efforts were begun to turn historic Pier 21 in Halifax into a museum devoted to the immigrant experience, and oral history played a role in every step of the process, beginning with the creation of an interpretation centre in 1999.

The 2005 Winnipeg conference entitled “Oral History in Canada,” organized by Alexander Freund, came at a propitious time because by then, oral history had gained a new respectability. While many still considered it to be primarily a research methodology, it had at least achieved growing recognition as an important methodology. The wide range of articles published in the *Oral History Forum* since 2006 is a testimony to the relevance of the concept of oral history in contemporary research. But much remains to be done in order to realize the potential for oral history in Canada. Now that the oral history movement appears to have a solid footing in Canada, it would be time to tackle three main problems that remain.

First of all, the COHA has suffered from a lack of Francophone participation during most of its existence. When I proposed the new name for the journal in 1995, I suggested the use of the word *Forum* in the title, not only because of its meaning, but also because it can be used in both official languages. Looking back over the history of the journal, there has rarely been more than one French language article published each year, with the exception of the five first volumes and the special volume on the theme of “Life Stories and Collective Identity in French Canada” (Vol. 15, 1995). The COHA has never attracted much interest in the Québec academic community, despite the fact that the concept of

life history was very popular in the social sciences everywhere in the francophone world during the 1980s and '90s.

It seems that oral history has always been hindered by a common attitude among francophone historians who see it as nothing more than a research methodology, while researchers in fields such as ethnology and sociology tend to use the concept of *oralité*, but without associating it to history. On a broader scale, the French-speaking world has had little representation in the International Oral History Association. Given the present state of affairs, it is unlikely that francophone scholars will flock to the COHA, but I believe it is important for the association to maintain the bilingual name of its journal in order to make it clear that submissions in French are welcome.

Secondly, we need to find a way to reach out to those whose work is not grounded in academia. Here in Cape Breton, some fascinating projects are being carried out by groups like the Old Sydney Society and the Cape Breton Regional Library. Last year, for example, evening gatherings took place in several Cape Breton communities, where elders were encouraged to share their reminiscences of the past. Organizers of such events don't necessarily consider sharing their results with a wider audience, as their goals have mainly to do with community building and maintaining regional identity. Perhaps the *Oral History Forum* could publish a yearly review, with correspondents reporting on similar projects going on in various parts of the country.

A final problem to be addressed is the ongoing question of preserving oral history documentation. In 2009, I gave a talk at the biennial "Archives in Canada Conference," held at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. My talk focused on the preservation of sound archives in Atlantic Canada.¹ Using the

¹ Ronald Labelle, « Les archives sonores dans les provinces de l'Atlantique: un patrimoine en perdition? », in *Archival Narratives for Canada: Re-Telling Stories*

Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada, published by the COHA in 1993, I contacted 30 institutions in Atlantic Canada where oral history collections were held, asking in each case what, if anything, had been done to ensure the long-time preservation of their collections. I found that while some larger institutions had preservation policies, many museums and historical societies possessed neither the expertise nor the resources necessary to ensure that their collections didn't deteriorate.

A wider survey applied to the 354 institutions and organizations included in the COHA Guide would probably come to similar conclusions. An enormous amount of oral history research was carried out through local initiatives in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, and each year, much of that material is being lost through neglect, or because of deterioration of magnetic tape supports. In 2009, one bright spot I reported on was the availability of funding from the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA), where modest sums distributed through provincial archives were used by groups needing to digitize their collections. Since then, this source of funding has dried up, as the CCA's National Archival Development Program was eliminated in 2012. While federal funding made available for the preservation of our country's sound heritage used to be grossly inadequate, it is now non-existent. The COHA could lobby for the restoration and enhancement of a National Archival Development Program, recognizing the pressing need for something to be done.

Now that the COHA is finally on solid ground and that its survival is no longer in doubt, it would be time to look to the future and to see how the association can continue to carry out activities that will contribute to bettering our knowledge of the Canadian cultural landscape through the perspectives offered by oral history.

in a Changing Landscape, ed. K. Garay and C. Verduyn (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011).