

The SIFC-CPRC Indian Film History Collection: The Development of an Oral History Collection

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In July 1982 Tony Snowsill and Christine Welsh, under their company name Direction Films, began negotiations with the University of Regina to establish a research base from which a documentary film series would be produced. The project began in 1982 as a two-year research program intended to form the basis of a film series that would be an "Indian History of Canada" and was administered through the Canadian Plains Research Centre. The film project was to be titled "Through Indian Eyes": An Indian History of Canada. It was to depict Canadian history from an Indian point of view. In an attempt to guarantee the authenticity of the research, Snowsill and Welsh turned to aboriginal people. As they put it "we sought out the oral historians and the repositories of tribal lore and recorded what they had to tell us."¹ This process changed the direction and goal of the project from that of a film project to an oral history project. Although Snowsill and Welsh referred to this new direction as being a "second but equally important"² one, the recording and gathering of Indian oral history became the primary goal of the project. Snowsill and Welsh wanted to go beyond this step however and wanted to organize and store the resulting material in a central archive that would provide easy access to researchers. Over a two and one half year period (July 1982 – December 1984) Snowsill and Welsh did interviews with elders in a number of communities and negotiated the acquisition of existing Indian oral history collections.³

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1. U of R Archives 95-42 CPRC Progress Report 1984: 2.
 2. U of R Archives 95-42 CPRC Progress Report 1984: 2.
 3. U of R Archives 95-42 CPRC Progress Report 1984: 2.

The project caught the attention of the senior administration of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC).⁴ In a letter dated December 14, 1983 from Del Anaquod then president of the SIFC to Dr. Lloyd Barber then president of the University of Regina Anaquod indicated the following concerns

*I realize that the project is well underway and much of the work has probably been done. I would however like to express my personal opposition to such a project, particularly when we are approaching the same foundations/corporations etc., for financial assistance for our own research initiatives and in turn establishing the College as a credible academic institution. However, I do appreciate that the project was proposed well before I became President of the College; if the project did have official SIFC support, I will of course acknowledge it.*⁵

In his reply Barber assured Anaquod that the project had been discussed with the SIFC. As Barber put it, "the initiative for the Indian history project was discussed fully with your predecessors at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and was wholeheartedly endorsed and sponsored."⁶ In February of 1984 Barber sent Anaquod a report of the project for his information. Anaquod forwarded the report to Blair Stonechild, then Head of the Department of Indian Studies at SIFC. Stonechild was not "overly impressed by this project" and suggested that "Indian people could have done a far more with a project such as this" (U of R Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre).

For the next nine years the collection was housed at the Canadian Plains Research Centre Office. As time passed, demand for access to the collection grew especially by SIFC staff and students. As a result an inquiry was made by Rob Nestor then a graduate student at the Canadian Plains Research Centre and a Librarian at the SIFC in June of 1993 regarding plans for the Film History Collection. Soon after in July of 1993 negotiations began for the transfer of the collection to the SIFC. It was agreed by James McCrorie then Director of the Canadian Plains Research Centre that the collection would be transferred to the SIFC. As a result on September 3, 1993 the Management Committee of the Canadian Plains Research Centre passed the following motion:

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4. The SIFC is federated with the University of Regina and is the only Indian controlled degree granting post-secondary education institution in Canada.
 5. U of R Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre.
 6. U of R Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre.

Moved that the Indian Oral History Collection of Tapes and Documents, being the property of the University of Regina and held in trust by the Canadian Plains Research Centre, be placed on permanent loan with the Library of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College.⁷

The collection has since been held and maintained by the Library at the SIFC.

Scope of the Collection

The Indian Film History Collection is made up of 717 audio tapes and 1,238 transcripts. Most of the material concentrates geographically on Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia. There is no accurate total for the number of pages of the transcripts, however a conservative estimate of 15 pages per transcript would put the total at at least 18,570 pages. The majority of the collection is made up of interviews with individuals. For example, of the 467 transcripts in the collection that concentrate on Saskatchewan, 304 are interviews with individuals. A number of the tapes are in an Indian language and some of these are recordings of songs. For Alberta, of the 396 transcripts, 366 are interviews with individuals; of these 52 are recorded in an Indian language. Manitoba is represented in the collection through 39 interviews with descendants of early fur traders from the Hudson's Bay region. Of the 135 transcripts in the collection referring to Ontario, 117 are interviews with individuals. With respect to British Columbia, there are 83 tapes of individual interviews and of these three are in an Indian language. In addition to the interviews, there is also in the collection a number of documents labeled "Research Documents." These include a number of papers both of published and unpublished that were collected during the 1982-1984 period.

As a result of Snowsill and Welsh's efforts a number of important oral history collections were brought together. These include but are not limited to the following:

1. A 15 hour oral history of the Dakota (Sioux) in Canada, tracing their migrations to Canada after the Minnesota Massacre and the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the legacy of Sitting Bull and his people's unique place in Canadian history, and the settlement of descendants of his band across southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

7. U of R Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre.

2. The Bungee Tapes: a number of interviews conducted across Manitoba and Saskatchewan and recorded in the Bungee language – a distinct dialect combining French, English and Cree dating back to the 17th century. In addition to their linguistic value, these tapes contain a wealth of historical detail.
3. The Murray Dobbin Tapes: 80 tapes recorded by Metis historian Murray Dobbin during the course of research for his biography of Metis leaders Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, *The One and a Half Men*, which provides a unique perspective on 20th century Metis history.
4. The John Tootoosis tapes: a number of tapes recorded by Jean Goodwill and Norma Sluman during the course of research for their book *John Tootoosis: Biography of a Cree Leader*. Speaking predominately in Cree, John Tootoosis deals with pivotal events in the history of his people from their perspective, for example, the signing of Treaty 6, the Cree interpretation of the rights guaranteed under the treaty, the events leading to Cree participation in the 1885 Northwest Resistance, the aftermath of the Resistance, the impact of the reserve system and residential schools, the beginnings of Indian political activism and the building of Indian political organizations at both the provincial and national levels.
5. Oral testimony regarding treaties 6, 7, and 8 collected from elders throughout Alberta by the Office of Specific Claims and Research of the Indian Association of Alberta from the 1970s. These interviews, most of them with elders who have since passed away, throw considerable light on the treaty negotiation process and the Indian interpretation of the terms of these treaties.
6. Oral histories of the following: the Ojibway people of southern and central Manitoba; the Cree, Dene, and Metis people of northern Saskatchewan, particularly in the areas of La Ronge and La Loche; the "River People" of the Plains Cree who now live on reserves in the area of North Battleford, Saskatchewan; the nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy; and the Metis nation, with special emphasis on the Metis accounts of the events of 1885.
7. The Spadina Road Library Oral History Project: 50 interviews recorded with Indian elders living in and around Metropolitan Toronto which provide detail about their lives both on and off the reserve.

8. Oral histories of the Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi bands of Manitoulin Island and the North Shore of lake Huron including their migrations from Wisconsin and Michigan into what is now Canada; their participation, on the side of the British, in the American War of Independence and the War of 1812; their wars with the Iroquois; their participation in the fur trade; and details of lives as hunters, trappers, fishermen, and lumberjacks.
9. The Rupert House tapes: a large collection of interviews conducted with the Cree people living in the vicinity of Rupert House in northern Quebec, including both the "tipachiman" and "atiukan" (real and mythic) stories.
10. David G. Mandelbaum Papers: original field notes and interviews with informants collected by Mandelbaum in the early 1930s and forming the basis for his definitive ethnographic and historical study, *The Plains Cree*.
11. There is also a collection of audio tapes featuring John Tootoosis that provide a record of various speeches and meetings with provincial and federal officials. A number of the speeches are in Cree and have been translated.⁸

Value of the Collection

A majority of the individuals who were interviewed were born between the 1880s and the early 1900s. In addition to their personal experiences and recollections, they also comment on the experiences and recollections of their parents and grandparents. Consequently, a wealth of historical information is made available. Many of the interviewees comment on the treaties and how they have been used and interpreted by the Government of Canada and First Nations people. In addition, the interviewees also discuss Indian spirituality, worldview, family relationships, child rearing and the care of the elderly, to name but a few. The fact that over two-thirds of the material relates to Canada's four western provinces makes this collection very useful to those interested in focussing on Western Canada.

The collection has been used by a wide variety of researchers both inside and outside of academia. For example, researchers involved in land

8. U of R Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre.

claims and the Treaty Land Entitlement process in Saskatchewan have used the collection to document their claims. Students at the SIFC have also made extensive use of the collection, especially those interested in Indian people of western Canada and in particular the Cree. Researchers interested in family histories have also turned to the collection for information. The collection has also been used by academics from within the SIFC and the University of Regina and by academics from the University of Calgary, McGill University and University of Northern British Columbia, to name a few.

An important component of this collection is the extensive index that was created by the staff of the Canadian Plains Research Centre. The 415 page index is made up of a Subject Index (357 pages) and a Proper Name Index (58 pages). In the document files there is an index of the items to be found in that particular file. In addition, there is a cover page that outlines, in the case of an interview, the name of the interviewer, the interviewee, as well as the location and date of the interview.

Current and Future Plans for the Collection

During the summer of 1997, the Canadian Plains Research Centre converted the transcripts and indexes to a more modern electronic format (Microsoft Word). The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College Library plans to make the index available for researchers on the Web by the fall of 2000. Presently those wanting to access the index and the collection must visit the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College Regina campus. In the future it is hoped that this collection may be made available on a wider basis through publication (see below) and electronic means. The Canadian Plains Research Centre and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College are presently in the initial stages of having the audio tapes transferred to CD-ROM. The shelf life of the audio tapes is soon approaching an end, and as a result the audio tapes are not presently available to researchers. It is hoped that the funding will be in place for this project by July, 200. The Canadian Plains Research Centre is also in the process of bringing portions of the transcripts together into themes with the goal of publishing these thematic collections with introductions written by various authors.

The collection is still an active one in that it continues to grow. For example, a portion of the interview tapes and transcripts⁹ from Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser's *Loyal till Death: Indians and the Northwest Rebellion* have been donated to the collection. Hopefully, in the future, other interview tapes will be donated to the collection from private and public collections.

Source

University of Regina Archives 95-42 Canadian Plains Research Centre.

9. Waiser and Stonechild made use of two sets of interviews. Those in the collection are from the earlier interviews conducted in 1982.