

ORAL HISTORY IN A COMPANY TOWN: FLIN FLON, 1926-1946

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La présente recherche en histoire orale a pour but d'actualiser, comme les sources écrites l'avaient déjà suggéré, le fait que Flin Flon présentait, de 1927 à 1945, l'image typique d'une ville fermée (Company town). Tout en respectant soigneusement les démarches de l'histoire orale, telles que les définissent manuels et principes méthodologiques, la nature même de ce dossier posait des problèmes particuliers aux chercheurs. En premier lieu, les habitants de cette ville n'étaient pas portés à discuter avec des étrangers le passé d'une Compagnie qui les employait toujours. Ensuite, la plupart des femmes étaient peu disposées à participer à cette recherche, pensant que leur travail ou leur expérience ne valaient pas la peine d'être notés. De leur côté, les immigrants non-anglophones hésitaient avant de parler devant un micro, conscients de leurs faiblesses en anglais. Enfin, en raison de la petitesse de la ville, beaucoup de gens ne voulaient pas critiquer leurs concitoyens.

Les interviews purent confirmer partiellement les pratiques paternalistes et autres abus que suggéraient les sources écrites; mais, chose surprenante, ils montrèrent aussi un accord profond avec la manière dont la Compagnie avait su créer un esprit communautaire au sein de la population de Flin Flon. C'est ainsi que les administrateurs de la Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Co apparaissent aux informateurs comme les protecteurs de leurs intérêts en face des fluctuations du marché et des bouleversements économiques.

Les enregistrements furent particulièrement utiles pour documenter les conditions de vie et de travail dont aucun document ne fait mention. Ils apportent également des renseignements importants sur le rôle joué par les différents groupements ethniques en matière d'emploi, sur la façon dont s'organisait la vie sociale des habitants et même sur le quartier réservé de la ville. Mais il faudra surtout comparer ces enregistrements avec ceux que pourraient donner les personnes qui ont dû quitter le service de la Compagnie, en raison de leurs activités syndicales.

For more than a decade now many Canadian researchers have been using oral history interviews to gain insights into our collective past. Armed with tape recorders, social historians of every imaginable type have entered the field to interview those individuals who lived through the period or event that is the subject of their research. Unfortunately, the results of such excursions have often been as mixed as the interests and personalities of the researchers themselves. Indeed, most people who are associated with the oral history community can cite examples of overzealous researchers who have adopted a combative interview style which is reminiscent of '60 Minutes'. At the other end of the spectrum there are researchers who refuse to impose any structure on their interviews, allowing the subject to ramble off on a tangent that has little or nothing to do with the matter being studied.

These, of course, are extreme examples which do not do justice to the vast majority of historical researchers, be they professionals or amateurs, who utilize oral history techniques. A much more common problem, however, is that many researchers go out into the field insufficiently prepared for the problems that they will face.

This is not to say that the researcher does not know enough about the topic he or she is studying (although this is a frequent problem). The more frequent problem is that most historians, skilled as they may be at the art of analysing inanimate documents, are still struggling to develop the requisite skills for planning and executing interviews with "living and breathing" sources of historical information. Clearly, as practitioners of oral history we are still going through the painful trial and error process which will lead us towards a more effective methodology. A methodology, moreover, which will take into account the frailties, conceits, and prejudices of living subjects without excluding the valuable insights that these people can offer. This goal will be realized, however, only after we have carefully examined the successes and failures of the many oral history projects which have been undertaken to date. What follows, then, will not be a grandiose scheme for 'doing' perfect oral history but rather, will be a report on some of the problems and results uncovered in the course of one such study, 'The Flin Flon Oral History Project'.

From its inception in 1983 the FFOHP has sought to document the living and working conditions of the men and women who resided in Manitoba's first major mining community during the years 1927 to 1945. This particular period was chosen because it was during the first benchmark year that the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company began to develop the copper and zinc deposits that became Flin Flon's economic *raison d'être*. The second date, 1945, marked the end of the Company's absolute control of the work force, for in March of that year the vast majority of H.B.M. & S.'s non-salaried employees became unionized under the provisions of the Wartime Labour Relations Board.

In essence then, the project has focussed upon the fate of the working class in an isolated resource town at a time when it had no union protection. Not surprisingly, given the economic preponderance of the Company and the absolute dependence of the isolated community upon it for jobs and services, the documentary evidence strongly suggested that Flin Flon was an almost perfect example of the single-industry 'Company Town' during this period.

These initial impressions were bolstered by a rather extensive two month study of all of the traditional primary and secondary sources that were available on Flin Flon. After this research was completed, and because the researcher was a novice in the area of oral history, several weeks were spent examining most of the available literature on the methods of oral history research -- chief among which were Paul Thompson's The Voice of the Past and the various pamphlets put out by the Public Archives of Canada.

At this point in time our intrepid researcher thought himself to be quite an expert both on Flin Flon's history and on the technical and interpretive aspects of oral history research. Thus he went to Flin Flon laden with an excellent tape recorder, a plan for carrying out 100 interviews and a lengthy background paper on Flin Flon's early history.<sup>1</sup>

Although primarily a narrative treatment of Flin Flon's development and the labour relations in town, this paper argued that H.B.M. & S. had worked out a complex, flexible and highly successful strategy for controlling its workforce and the town. It told of how the Company managers, who had supervised most of the construction work between 1928 and 1930, hand-picked the 1,200 workers which would compose H.B.M. & S.'s permanent workforce from the approximately 2,000 workers who had taken part in the various construction projects. It also demonstrated that as early as 1929 senior Company managers had indicated that they would tolerate no labour unrest, for in that year W.A. Green, the Mine Superintendent, dismissed all 60 members of a carpenter's crew which had petitioned Green to fire a particularly hard-headed foreman.

The paper also outlined the Company's use of scientific management techniques, its refusal to consider the possibility of unionization for its workers and the hard fought strike of 1934, which the Company won. After this point in time a distinct change in H.B.M. & S.'s industrial relations policy was noted. Having refused to rehire 200 of the most militant workers in the aftermath of the strike and having whipped up enough anti-Communist hysteria in town to keep everyone in Flin Flon wary of any kind of radicalism, the Company could afford to bend a little in its treatment of the workforce.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, a 'Company Union', the Employees' Welfare Board, was established immediately after the strike ended in order to handle 'legitimate' employee grievances. Beyond this, half of the wage cut which had helped to precipitate the strike was rolled back. From this point onwards wages continued to rise yearly, although not as rapidly as profits, and after 1937, one of the most comprehensive benefit programs in Manitoba was slowly introduced for H.B.M. & S.'s employees.

These policies, together with the heavy handed repression of all anti-Company and radical sentiment, seemed to produce exactly what the H.B.M. & S. Co. desired -- a contented and quiescent work force. Having suppressed the oppositional consciousness which had arisen in 1934 and then actively improved the material conditions which had bred it, H.B.M. & S. assured itself of peaceful industrial relations. In fact, so successful was the Company's policy of controlling its work force that, in 1944 when Federal wartime regulations made it inevitable that the work force would be unionized, the Company's employees chose the most conservative, non-confrontationist union to represent their interests. Indeed, it seemed that by choosing the Trades and Labour Congress rather than the more militant C.I.O. affiliated International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, the workers demonstrated just how effective the Company's labour policies had been.

The paper also contained considerable data on working and living conditions, recreational facilities, town policies and some of the more unique features of life in a town which had a large number of single males -- most notably the existence of a red-light district where a lonely miner could find liquor, women and usually, a card game.

Armed with all of this information and firmly convinced of the validity of his thesis concerning the Company's attempt to establish its hegemony over all aspects of life in Flin Flon, our researcher approached the interview stage of his project fully anticipating that he would get

full confirmation of his theories on tape. Even before arriving in Flin Flon a plan of action had been developed for the prospective interviews, which as previously mentioned were to include approximately 100 subjects. Based upon fragmentary census data and newspaper accounts, the decision was made to conduct interviews on the following statistical basis: working-class subjects, 80% and middle-class subjects, 20 %; men, 65%, women, 35%; and finally, in terms of religious affiliation, Roman Catholics, 40%, Protestants, 50% and Other, 10%. As for ethnicity, it was felt that there was not sufficient data to formulate any reasonable population breakdown along ethnic lines.<sup>3</sup>

Along with this statistical breakdown a general plan for questioning was developed. The style was to be as informal as possible, with interviews conducted in the interviewees' homes whenever possible. Although no questionnaire was drawn up most of the interviews were to focus on some or all of the following topics: home life, domestic labour, condition of dwellings, working conditions, wages and hours, the strike of 1934, the Employees' Welfare Board, feelings about the Company, general conditions of life and labour in Flin Flon during the 1930's, changes occasioned by the War, women at H.B.M. & S., and reactions to unionization. Beyond this, questions concerning the role of Flin Flon's churches, fraternal associations and service clubs were to be asked whenever the opportunity presented itself. Finally, the issue of ethnicity was to be probed as gently as possible, within the context of discussions on ethnic organizations or concentrations of ethnic groups in particular job categories.

Needless to say, many aspects of this plan were never realized. In more than six weeks in Flin Flon the researcher obtained only one half of the desired interviews. As for the statistical breakdown, only the 80%/20% breakdown along class lines was adhered to. Indeed, after a few weeks in town the researcher was willing to conduct any interview, regardless of how it might skew his neat statistical formulations. Thus, by the time most of the interviews were completed in Flin Flon the breakdown by gender was 80% men and 20% women, by religion 33% Catholic and 66% Protestant, while the ethnic breakdown was hopelessly weighted in favour of people of Canadian/British Isles extraction.

It should be noted that those interviews which were completed owe much to the aid that the researcher received from members of the Flin Flon Historical Society, the stewards and executives of Flin Flon's local of United Steelworkers of America, and several other prominent residents who used their powers of persuasion to have other people consent to an interview. Without their timely assistance, advice and warnings concerning controversial issues, the researcher would never have completed more than five or six interviews.

The reason for this is really quite simple. Despite earnest attempts to understand Flin Flon society in the period 1927 to 1945 the researcher was almost totally ignorant of the contemporary reality in that town. He was an outsider who thought that because the events he was interested in had taken place 40 or 50 years ago people would be willing to answer any question concerning them. He certainly did not understand that the strike of 1934 could become a hotly debated issue in 1983 and only gradually did he come to understand the sense of loyalty that most people felt towards the Company that they had worked for or depended upon for so long.

In short, the researcher's time in Flin Flon was spent not just learning about the facts of that town's history but also about the carefully nurtured social dynamic that developed in this isolated mining town. In order to survive and to achieve some modicum of happiness, workers and their families could not continually flail against the Company. Much as they might have resented H.B.M. & S. at certain times they also felt indebted to it for providing jobs and for the financial aid that it gave to the community's churches, schools, clubs and civic government. The townspeople were also well aware that certain factors like the vagaries of the world metal markets were beyond the control of themselves or the Company. In fact, there was a definite commonality of interest, an "us" (meaning Company & workers) against "them" (the consumers of base metals) attitude that developed over time.

For their part, the H.B.M. & S. managers, although answerable to New York and Toronto and physically segregated from the community in their Company dwellings, tended to feel that they had a vested interest in Flin Flon and in the general well being of the work force. In fact, by all accounts men like R.H. Channing, R.E. Phelan, W.A. Green, Maurice Roche and several other senior managers went out of their way to establish personal bonds between themselves, the workers and the rest of the townspeople.

What all of this pointed towards was the existence of a certain paternalism. And, knowing about it, the researcher could now ask questions about the advantages and disadvantages of such a relationship. In the course of such questioning a considerable amount of information came to light concerning many of the Company's labour policies. For example, in order to 'protect' its workers and the townspeople from Communism, H.B.M. & S. required that new men hired on after the strike of 1934 provide two reliable witnesses who could prove that they were not Communists.<sup>4</sup> Also, because of their 'interest' in community affairs, some Company managers made a point of hiring men who had proved their civic-mindedness by joining the local chapters of B.P.O. Elks, Knights of Columbus and other such organizations - bodies which the managers in question oft times controlled.

This sort of questioning almost always led to other details on hiring practices. Of course, while a man's willingness and ability to work was always an important consideration, a talent for athletics - especially hockey and baseball - could ensure a man a job. If you happened to come from the same home town as one of the foremen this too stood in your favour. Beyond this, if you were a staunch Roman Catholic, no matter what your ethnic background, Father Deblois could usually persuade Maurice Roche and J.P. Caulfield to find you a job in the Open Pit or Underground mines. For English-speaking Protestants (or Catholics for that matter) there were also informal contracts made in Church or Meeting Hall which could help one find work. If all else failed there were always one or two unscrupulous 'straw bosses' who were willing to find a man a job if he were willing to pay for it.

In all of the interviews conducted it was only the last of these hiring practices that was objected to. And, according to several sources, it was a practice which the senior managers took action to curb both before and after the strike of 1934.

While the foregoing illustrates how many of the interviews became more productive as the researcher began to better appreciate life in Flin Flon, there were some problems that were insurmountable. The gender discrepancy, for example, was a problem that would not go away. Many potential female interviewees, when contacted by telephone, would quite simply refuse to talk on the grounds that they had never worked. When it was explained that the project was concerned with domestic labour as well as wage labour some women relented, but the vast majority did not. Perhaps the only solution to this problem would have been to hire a female researcher who might have had greater success in obtaining interviews. Indeed, the success of Meg Luxton in getting women to talk about their lives in Flin Flon may be a case in point.<sup>5</sup>

One of the other frequently encountered problems was getting people who were non-British immigrants to go on tape. Embarrassed by their broken English or by heavy East-European accents, several interviewees would not allow the tape recorder to be turned on. Thus, while these people often provided good information and excellent leads for other interviews, there is no oral recording of their knowledge and only some sketchy handwritten notes to encapsulate a two or three hour interview.

The last problem that should be mentioned is the understandable reluctance of interviewees to name names, unless it was in a positive context. In a relatively small city like Flin Flon one does not want to go on record saying something negative about an individual who might still be alive or have relatives living in town. There were also cases where reluctance was expressed because the interviewee's comment about H.B.M. & S. might hurt their chances for advancement.

While such problems are seemingly insoluble for any researcher it should be remembered that gaps in the oral history segment of the project can be overcome by diligence in documentary research. Many times a bit of information may be confided off tape, and while it would certainly be unethical to quote the interviewee when he or she has requested anonymity, there is nothing wrong with double checking this information in more traditional sources such as newspaper reports. Oft times a researcher, as yet unsure of what may or may not be important to the study will skip over a pertinent piece of data. But once alerted to its importance a quick double check can yield excellent results.

Above and beyond this, the researcher always stands a chance of coming across one or more of those rare individuals who has always spoken his or her mind. In the course of one such interview innumerable gaps can be filled because difficult or sensitive questions do not disturb such an interviewee. Of course, the researcher still has to be careful to substantiate the information gained from such a subject for, just like more reticent interviewees, the outspoken individual is only human and may have his or her facts wrong.

This, of course, brings us to the most problematic aspect of doing oral history - the evaluation of the finished tapes. Because human memory is, by definition, fallible, all oral history tapes are to some extent suspect. This said, however, it must also be pointed out that more traditional sources of historical data are not perfect: newspaper reports can be wrong, government documents can be misleading and personal diaries can be out and out fictitious. Thus, tapes are really no different than

any other source that a historian has to work with and, in one sense at least, they are superior because the historian has a chance to ask questions that newspaper reporters, governments and diarists did not think important enough to write about at the time. Just like any other source oral documents must be carefully studied, placed in their proper historical context, checked against other sources of information and then interpreted by the researcher.

This process, at least in the case of the FFOHP, has yielded the following tentative results.<sup>6</sup> First of all, the tapes, while confirming many of the abuses of lower level 'straw bosses' uncovered in the initial phase of documentary research, draw a somewhat different picture of the senior managers of H.B.M. & S. These men for the most part are revealed as father figures who disbursed money and discipline in equal measure and who were usually quite fair - as long as one abided by their rules.

This paternalism, while certainly negative in many ways, had its advantages for the people who originally settled in Flin Flon, for it meant that the Company could be depended upon to provide much of the expensive infrastructure that a new settlement needed. Beyond this, paternalism, because of its essentially human characteristics, helped to foster a sense of family and community amongst the young and essentially rootless population of Flin Flon during the early days.

The negative side of this paternalism, however, also came out in the tapes. The cost of breaking the Company's rules could be as high as being forced out of town. For example, much of the Scandinavian community that had lived in the 'Finn Town' section of Flin Flon prior to 1934, was forced to leave town in the aftermath of the strike to look for work. This was so because many of these men had supported the formation of a union too strongly for the Company to consider rehiring them.

Pursuant to this, because of the Company's post-strike ban on employing Communists and the members of any group that it considered to be 'communistic', one could argue that H.B.M. & S. was curtailing the civil liberties of its employees. For the most part, however, most of the interviewees did not remember it that way, or more precisely, did not fully understand that such a ban had been imposed. Luckily we can turn back to several other sources to confirm the existence of just such a ban.

The tapes are perhaps most valuable for the information that they have provided on living and working conditions. Largely unavailable elsewhere, information was garnered on the way in which houses were constructed, what sort of materials were used, how they were heated, kept clean and expanded as families grew in size. Working conditions were also described quite graphically for most of the major sections of H.B.M. & S.'s operations. Thus, in addition to the reports of the Company's Safety Engineer, we now have the workers' perspective on health and safety hazards and working conditions in the mines, smelter and zinc plant.

There are also several tapes which throw new light on Flin Flon's segregated district, especially concerning the informal but effective ways in which the police and the Company doctors regulated this red-light zone. Other tapes contain examples of ethnic networking, a process whereby established immigrants helped to bring their compatriots into Flin Flon's job market and social life. As regards the latter, many aspects of social

life such as dances, smokers, pub-life, recreational activities, house-building bees and the social activities of various clubs, churches and fraternal organizations are covered in many of the tapes. Finally, two tapes conducted outside Flin Flon with union organizers who had been in town before and during the strike of 1934, provide excellent partisan accounts of that confrontation.<sup>7</sup> When balanced with the accounts of the strike that were given by other interviewees and in various documentary sources, a much more detailed and critical analysis of this important strike can be pieced together.

While it must be admitted that all of the above mentioned results are at best tentative, they do show real potential for adding new data and new insights into Flin Flon's early history. Hopefully, future work on this Company town will use the results of the Flin Flon Oral History Project and further demonstrate the value of such research.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. James Mochoruk. "Labour Relations in Flin Flon, Manitoba: 1927-1939". Unpublished Paper, Manitoba Labour Education Centre, 1983.
2. Under the leadership of H.B.M. & S. Co.'s local lawyer, C.C. Sparling, a body called the 'Anti-Communist League' was formed on June 18, 1934. Although less active after the cessation of the strike the League remained in existence and waged public campaigns against the Canadian Labour Defence League, some local C.C.F. candidates and C.I.O. unions throughout the 1930's.
3. Accurate census data on Flin Flon is unavailable until the 1940's because in the published census results of 1931 Flin Flon is included in the category of unorganized territories, while in the census of the prairie provinces for 1931 no ethnic breakdown is given for the town.
4. James Mochoruk. Life and Labour in Flin Flon, 1926 to 1946. (In Press) Winnipeg: Manitoba Labour Education Centre, 1985.  
This booklet is based upon the results of the Flin Flon Oral History Project and is the source from which most of the following information is drawn.
5. Meg Luxton. More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1980.
6. Mochoruk, Life and Labour.
7. Portions of one of these interviews are available in published form in Mochoruk, "An Interview with Mitch Sago", Manitoba History. (Spring 1985).