FAMILY STUDIES AS AN APPROACH TO ORAL HISTORY

by Laurel Doucette

From the point of view of conventional elitist history, the many tiny villages and hamlets which dot the Ottawa Valley countryside are totally insignificant.[1] Unlike the larger towns, who owe their existence to their proximity to a major trade or transportation route, or to the early establishment of a commercial enterprise, the smaller centres grew out of a local need for basic supplies and services, and in many cases have never progressed beyond the point of fulfilling that need. Thus, while local histories have been published for most of the larger towns, the tiny hamlets continue to be overlooked, and little evidence of their existence can be found in printed or archival sources.

One such hamlet is the village of Venosta, located forty miles north of the city of Hull in the Gatineau Hills. It came into existence in the 1860's as a supply and service depot for the surrounding farms, and continues to fulfill that function to this day. Having known as a child the rich cultural life of the Gatineau Valley, with its blend of Irish and French traditions, I decided as a graduate student in folklore to return to my home village to undertake a collection of local customs. It was obvious from the paucity of printed sources that I would have to collect as much history as folklore in order to produce a coherent picture of local culture and traditions. Realizing the amount of work this would entail, I decided to narrow the scope of the collection for purposes of my thesis to a study of family traditions, with a concentration on one particular family group. The group in question, my maternal aunts and uncles, were descendants of one of the original settlers, James Kealey, who with his eight brothers and sisters had homesteaded in the immediate vicinity of the present village over a hundred years ago. My informants were thus related to practically everyone within miles, and the history of the village is practically synonymous with that of the family.

The actual fieldwork was carried out during 1974 and 1975, with most of the recorded interviews being made in the fall of 1975. Although I was present in the community for summer and Christmas vacations during these two years, those times proved awkward for recording interviews; summer is the season of most intense agricultural activity, and Christmas is a period for socializing. I was able to spend these vacation periods, however, as a participant-observer, and noted many calendar customs and traditional agricultural practices. Major recorded interviews were ultimately conducted with eight informants. Throughout the fieldwork period, I photographed objects, sites and old photos which were of interest from the point of view of family or community history. The final phase of research included an examination of archival and library sources for relevant data.

The collection, consisting of $23\frac{1}{2}$ hours of recorded interviews, two field notebooks, and over three hundred photographs, covers a wide range of traditional genres, and would in fact provide sufficient raw material for several folklore theses. In terms of history, this material can be seen as falling into three categories, which of course overlap -- family history, local or community history, and regional history.

Family history, of course, predominates, since I asked directly for information of this sort. While the informants' knowledge of early family history --

that is, before settlement up the Gatineau -- was scanty, it was generally accurate, insofar as it could be verified, and serves as an example of the persistence of folk memory. It is believed that the original ancestor, Darby Kealey, sailed from Sligo, Ireland, early in the nineteenth century and settled in the Black Rapids area of Nepean Township, near the present site of the Ottawa Airport. While I could find no report of Darby's entry into Canada in British Colonial Office Reports, other documentary evidence, such as census reports, land grants, and early descriptions of Bytown, indicates that many of the Ottawa Valley Irish came from the northwest counties of Ireland, near the port of Sligo; that the Kealey name was associated with Black Rapids from the earliest days of settlement; and that Darby indeed had arrived early in the century, since he was raising a family in Upper Canada by the mid-1820's.

In contrast to these snatches of information which might be termed the ancient oral history of the family, the informants' knowledge of immediate family history -- that is, after settlement up the Gatineau -- was thorough and accurate. The male informants were particularly good at tracing the physical aspects of settlement -- location and ownership of lots, construction of houses and barns, establishment and management of family business enterprises. The women, on the other hand, specialized in genealogical material, providing me with sufficient information to draw up a family tree covering four generations and containing close to three hundred names.

Generally the informants did not remember dates of events, unless the event had coincided with some occurrence in their own lives, and they could use this as a point of reference. Obviously this same reference system had been used by previous generations. In trying to date a family narrative about a fatal logging accident, I was told that it had occurred on the day my grandfather was born; the baby's mother arose after giving birth to sew the lining for her brother-in-law's coffin. The date was January 27, 1864, and one of the informants can point out the exact spot where the accident occurred.

In discussing family history, the informants revealed a great deal of information about other local families and about various aspects of early settlement in the immediate area of the village. This information needs only to be supplemented with interviews with the descendants of other homesteading families in order to produce a comprehensive view of the history of Venosta.

In addition to this material relating to the early days of the settlement, the informants contributed many details about local social life during the first four decades of this century. Personal experience narratives relating to parish picnics, community concerts, house and hall dances, and bouillons (a feast of stolen food, similar in nature to the Newfoundland scoff and the Acadian fricot) create a vivid picture of rural social life in the central Gatineau area up to the time of the Second World War.

Details of regional history tend to be infrequent and fragmentary in the recorded interviews, and occur only when they relate directly to the lives of the informants. While all of the informants shared the same concept of "region", the region in this case being the Gatineau Valley from Hull to Maniwaki, only the men had any real knowledge of the area, having worked in the lumbercamps near Maniwaki and on such projects as the railway, highway, or hydro-electric stations as young men.

To illustrate the kind of material which was recorded about regional history,

here are two extracts containing information which I had not sought directly, but which is valuable in itself. In the first case, the informant is a seventy-five year old farmer, Harry Kealey. Since he is known within the family as a psychic and healer, having knowledge of water divining, herbal lore, charms and omens, wart curing and ghosts, I had been questioning him about various incidents where healing was involved, one of which occurred during a winter in the lumber-camps. The conversation turned to life in the camps and the extreme cold during his second winter there in 1923. I asked if the shanty itself was cold, and he gave the following description of how the shanty was built. The third voice heard in this excerpt is that of the informant's wife; since he suffers from a hearing problem, it was sometimes necessary for her to repeat my questions.[2]

H.K.: They were made out of -- first year I went there, it was twelve years -- it was a concern camp [a camp owned and operated by a logging company] twelve years before that. The logs was just as good as ever in that yet, only the bark had been on them, you know, we had to peel all the bark off them on the inside. The old floors, we had to take them all out and put in new floors, we make them out of small poles, you know, [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] and adze them off then and make a real nice floor. And the old bunks, the old straw, or the old hay had been in there rotting, you know, for twelve years, it was a -- oh, it was an awful mess, worse than any pig house. [Interviewer: Uhum.] So, when you got it all cleaned out and a fire in it, you know, a new roof on it. All you have on for a roof is to take poles, put tar-paper on, then take more poles and put on top of that, or to -- there was some w -- wild hay right along the creek and we'd take that and put it in under the poles, you know, to keep the poles from tearing the tarpaper. [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] The ends were built up like, flat -- you take another piece in the middle, you know, of the building, you take two pieces at the ends and make them in short. Then you take two more logs and put them on top of that lengthwise. Then you put your rafters from your sills up to the middle there, you know, it's just -- oh, be like that, you know [informant uses gestures to illustrate his meaning]. Then from here up, all you'd have there was tarpaper from there to the roof. Just tarpaper it'd be, that's all. [Interviewer: Oh!] And that'd be -- uh, well, from the point of the roof to the sides, be maybe four feet of a -- the highest part, I guess, would be about four feet, that only just tarpaper. You could see the sun and moon and stars at the end of it all the time. Then the walls'd be packed with moss or packed with old hay or something.

Interviewer: That'd be squared logs, the walls?

H.K.: The bunks was all made out of -- you take little spruce or little balsams and make the bunks.

Mrs. K.: Yeah, but the walls, Harry, would be -- they wouldn't be squared off, they'd be just round poles.

H.K.: The logs? No --

Interviewer: Just logs. Oh yeah.

H.K.: -- they'd be round logs. You, you notched [pronounced natched] them down, you know, at the ends, put them all on top. Oh the logs, they were all made of the very best of timber, be all nice big logs. And -- have a door, you'd take a pine log six feet long or whatever length of door you had, you'd split that and make the boards for the door. [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] Put a sheet of tarpaper over that then, you know, to keep the wind out of the cracks. And you bored a hole in the side of the door, the jam there, made a wooden plug and you shove it into that hole for to keep the door shut. [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] It was hanging on a piece of lace or some darn thing, a piece of harness or something. Oh, I liked it in the camp.

The second excerpt is from an interview with Fred Kealey, sixty years old and also a farmer. This conversation is contained in an interview about local singing traditions and his own repertoire in particular. We had been discussing how songs were passed from singer to singer. The informant gave an example of a song he had learned from a neighbour who had married into another community and had added their songs to his own repertoire. This other community, known locally as Irish Creek, is no longer in existence, the land having been flooded when the Paugan Dam at Low was constructed in the late 1920's. At the time of expropriation, some of the families moved into nearby villages such as Lac Sainte-Marie, but many left the district. The informant's description indicates a keen perception of local settlement patterns, and an appreciation of a lifestyle characterized by sociability. The place names mentioned refer to various settlements along the Gatineau or along the Lièvre, or "Lever" River, another tributary of the Ottawa running parallel to the Gatineau twenty miles to the east.

F.K.: You see, Bartley used to get, he -- his wife Ida -- well they weren't married at that time, you know -- but they were from Ryanville, back in the Irish settlement there, you know [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] and they were very much for being together, you know. I mean, that's -- they were back a long piece there, you know, and there was about maybe ten or fifteen Irish families there, you know, and they'd all be around from house to house at night the same as, we'll say, the Manitou, you know.

Interviewer: Oh yeah. And they'd, I suppose, have their own songs that'd be different from the songs somebody else had.

F.K.: Yeah, they'd have their own songs, if somebody got out and heard a new song, you know, or something like that, you know. Even years before that, like when Lima and Mona [older sisters of the informant] was young, those guys used to -- and the girls too -- they'd come down to here, drive down with horses -- that's -- be close to twenty miles -- they'd drive down here with horses because they had to go through a French settlement, Lake Sainte Marie, to get here, you know. [Interviewer: Oh yeah.] They didn't, they didn't mix much with the French. That was Irish Creek they called it, you know.

Interviewer: Oh, at Ryanville.

F.K.: Ryanville, yeah, they called that the Irish Creek.

That's before, before the Paugan flooded the land, you see. It took, it took about, oh about seventy-five per cent of the farms back there, you know, people had to move out.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know that.

F.K.: Oh Jesus, yes.

Interviewer: I figured it just took them out along the Manitou.

F.K.: Oh, no, no, away back there, that, that was hit the worst because that, that was one of the best farming districts on the Gatineau [Interviewer: Oh.] was Irish Creek. There was, well there was Hogans, Skehans, Sages, Ryans, Newtons, they were all -- Knights -- they were all back there you see -- McCormicks --

Interviewer: Was that in Aylwin Township?

F.K.: No.

Interviewer: In Low?

F.K.: No, it's in Hinks Township.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, yeah.

F.K.: You see, then you went back further to Pemichongo and that was, there was I guess eight families of Knights lived there. Well, they were part French, you know, but they, they pretty well associated with the Irish Creek, you see, because they had to come through, like, the Irish settlement to get to Lake Sainte Marie.

Interviewer: They'd probably intermarry then with the Irish Creek settlers.

F.K.: Yeah, quite a bit, quite a bit, yeah.

Interviewer: Would the -- the people from Irish Creek would come down here to dances and parties and things?

F.K.: Yes.

Interviewer: Oh yes, because Gladys [informant's sister] mentioned at her wedding there were even people from Ryanville.

F.K.: Oh yes, oh before that even -- there was cars, they all had cars that time. Like the people around Ryanville, a lot of them had cars before we had, because they were, they were better off, they had better farms than most of them right around here. And they had a lot of timber, a lot of bush. You see they came in from the Lièvre [pronounced Lever] side, that's how they settled there [Interviewer: Oh.] for MacLaren's [a large lumbering company], you see, that was MacLaren's limit. And they came in from the Lièvre side, that's, that's why they got, got there. They were between, between the Gatineau and the Lièvre, you see. They came in there before Lake Sainte Marie moved back, you see.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, Lake Sainte Marie was settled from this side.

F.K.: Settled from this side, yeah.

Interviewer: Would Lake Sainte Marie have been a, a settlement based on lumbering, would that have started there because of lumbering?

F.K.: Uh, no, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Or just agriculture?

F.K.: Agriculture, yeah. A lot of farms, like Green Lake district and Desormeaux and all that, you see. But the Whitefish district, that was the Irish up there. [Interviewer: Oh.] You see, MacLaren's, they were, like, an English firm and a lot of -- more English-speaking people I guess got in there, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah. They had a mill at Buckingham.

F.K.: Yeah, and up at, at High Falls. You see, it's not too far across there to High Falls.

Throughout the interviews, historical material, whether related to the family, the community or the region, generally was presented by the informants through an anecdote, or in relation to an anecdote. These narratives most often related a personal experience, and were of interest to me as a folklorist because they followed universal patterns of style, content and function. Each anecdote crystallized an experience that had made a strong emotional impact on the informant; because of this affective quality, they had entered into the oral repertoire of the informant through repeated tellings throughout a lifetime. Objectively speaking, many of the anecdotes presented little in the way of factual information about the past. But they reflected a great deal about the real significance of various events in the lives of the local people. In addition, they provided a starting point for further conversation during which pointed questions could be asked in an effort to uncover specific details.

Having had the experience of doing fieldwork in a community of this size, it now seems to me that approaching local history through family oral history is possibly the most effective means of gathering a sufficient body of material to work with in putting together a history of the community, especially where documented sources are so scarce. Being a member of a local family is certainly an asset, not only in terms of relating to informants, but also in terms of dealing with a bewildering proliferation of names and minute details. While handling confidential family material might in some cases present problems, this difficulty was avoided by the informants themselves. They censored their own narratives by not mentioning names when they thought the information might prove damaging or embarrassing in any way. Since the tapes, now on deposit with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, will be used only for scholarly purposes, it has not been necessary to restrict them.

Throughout the fieldwork, the recorded interview was the most important collecting tool. In a folkloric context, the need for accurately registering traditions such as narrative and musical performances is obvious. However, in dealing with family and local history, the tape recorder was no less important as the most efficient means of gathering material. Although note-taking played an important part in the total collecting process, since I could note incidental comments at any time for later exploration, only a recorded interview left me free

enough to respond fully to the informants, and to guide the conversation in a profitable direction. Once the informants' initial shyness was overcome, they tended to forget the tape recorder completely, becoming totally involved in the topic under discussion.

While information gained from interviews should certainly always be checked against such library and archival sources as are available, it is wisest to examine primary sources if at all possible. I discovered that regional histories covering the west of Québec are particularly misleading; later writers simply copied earlier ones with no effort to verify facts, and many of the earlier works reflect the writer's ethnic or linguistic perspective more accurately than they reflect reality.

Before undertaking this fieldwork project, I faced the same doubts which plague every collector, doubts which were magnified by the fact that I was returning to my own community. Was I taking unfair advantage of my family, and using them for my own ends? Might I contribute to an erosion of their traditions by making them self-conscious about their way of life? Would I undermine family relationships by dredging up bits of the past which were best forgotten? On all counts, my fears proved groundless. The fieldwork has been universally welcomed as a means of preserving a common heritage. Relationships have been strengthened, both within the family and within the community, since a study of this kind tends to heighten awareness of shared traditions, and to promote a greater sense of identity. My informants have, if anything, gained an enhanced sense of self-importance, simply because someone found the details of their lives important enough to record. Finally, my collecting of family folklore has not changed the lore in any way, except to add a few more narratives to the family repertoire, narratives relating the funny things that happened the year I did the interviews.

NOTES

1. I wish to express my thanks to Dr. N.V. Rosenberg of the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, for his assistance in the preparation of this paper.

2. Excerpts are transcribed verbatim according to the system devised by Dr. Edward D. Ives for use in the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History, Orono, Maine. A full description of this system is contained in Northeast Folklore, XV (1974), 38-45. The tapes and other materials of this collection are deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive under Accession Number 75-301.