

# News / Les Nouvelles

## ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP IN HALIFAX

by James Morrison

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Have you heard of the Nova Scotia Oral History Association? You haven't! Well, you may soon if some of the participants at a recent oral history workshop in Halifax have their way.

The Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia and the Federation of Museums, Heritage and Historical Societies of Nova Scotia sponsored a three day week-end workshop of theoretical as well as practical "oral history" from November 25th to November 27th. All of the work sessions were held in the Nova Scotia Museum. The aim of the workshop was primarily to show the various ways in which oral history could be used, and secondly, to provide practical advice on how this valuable source could be tapped.

The first day of the workshop coincided with the opening day of an exhibition of black and white photographs entitled "Older Ways - Traditional Nova Scotian Craftsmen". This exhibit combined photographs of various traditional craftsmen and descriptions of their work in their own words - a vivid demonstration of how oral research could preserve many soon-to-be forgotten techniques of the craftsmen. The photographs and interviews were presented by Peter Barss and Joleen Gordon, both of whom took part as resource people in the workshop sessions the following day in the Nova Scotia Museum.

The workshop was officially opened on Friday evening by Dr. David Sutherland of Dalhousie University, who acted as chairman (of the workshop). He introduced James Morrison, who gave the opening address entitled, "Oral History - A Wider Perspective Nigeria to Northern Queens County, Nova Scotia".

Dr. Morrison, in his address, dealt with the many ways in which oral research was being utilized in Africa. He then pointed out how the methods and techniques that had been developed there could be transposed to Canada generally, and Nova Scotia in particular. As a concrete example of how oral research had been utilized, Dr. Morrison presented a short account of the history of Northern Queens County, Nova Scotia, with coloured slides to illustrate his material. Beginning with the initial settlement of the area in the early nineteenth century, his account brought the history of the south western section of the province up to the present day. Much of his material from the late nineteenth century on was gleaned from oral interviews.

The following morning, the real work began. The co-ordinator of the workshop, Mrs. Pamela Collins, welcomed the participants, about fifty in number, to the workshop, and introduced Dr. David Sutherland, who gave a brief talk on the "Value of Oral History". Dr. Sutherland expressed the hope that members of the academic community, especially in history, would realize the research possibilities that oral history offered, and make use of some of the methods to be discussed in the workshop. He then explained to the participants how the workshop would operate. For

the Saturday sessions, three major topics would be dealt with: pre-interview, interview, and post-interview. Although seemingly a lot to cover in two days, it was felt that this type of programme would provide everyone with at least some of the important points to watch for in doing oral research.

To facilitate discussion and in order to allow a greater exchange of ideas and experiences, the participating group was divided into three groups. Although the working sessions were to be taped, each group was requested to appoint a secretary who would note the major points of each discussion. Resource people were assigned to each group, to initiate and lead the discussions. Peter Barss and Joleen Gordon, mentioned above, took one group. Kathy Kuusisto, who is engaged in collecting oral history on Tancook Island, Nova Scotia, led the second group. James Morrison and Lawrence Friend, who worked together on the oral history project in Queens County, Nova Scotia, chaired the third group.

The first topic was the pre-interview. This session stressed the fact that some documentary research is essential before the interviews can be held. The oral historian must be aware of the extent and scope of the research before beginning an interview. After a short coffee break, each group moved on to a new resource person(s) and a new topic - this time, the interview itself. Generally, this session drew the most comment, as it is at this point in oral research that the researcher is now face to face with the object of all this preparation. Where does the tape recorder go? How do you relax the person being interviewed? Or perhaps, although nobody asked, how do you relax the interviewer? And, most importantly, what are the limits to one's interview? How much information does one wish to collect? Not surprisingly, the discussion on this topic went on after the session ended, and carried over into the lunch period.

The workshop re-convened at 1:30 to discuss the topic - post-interview, probably to many the most difficult, and to some, the most boring part of oral history research. This session discussed the filing, indexing, and storage of tapes and transcripts. The resource people stressed that each tape was, in effect, a manuscript, and therefore a primary source for the use of the researcher. To draw from this "manuscript" - not yet "history" - its maximum value, it has to be analyzed and compared with the researcher's many other sources. Only then can one begin to gather together the scattered skeins of the topic, and attempt to weave a history of a person, area, or event.

The final session of the workshop brought all three groups together in the main auditorium for a lecture on the legal aspects of taping. Mr. Brian Crocker, a lawyer from Halifax, described the libel laws which applied to Nova Scotia. However, he felt that this issue would probably not arise in oral history. He also pointed out that the copyright for any tape that is made belongs to the interviewer, and therefore the onus is on the interviewer to ensure that the information collected is not misused or misconstrued. This session brought out two problems that were to be pondered and, it was hoped, to be tackled at the next oral history workshop in April 1978. What happens to the tapes and other materials that are collected by an individual or society in Nova Scotia? Is there a code of ethics for oral research that could be applied to interviewers, in order to protect the oral informant, but also to allow at least a part of the information collected to be made available to other researchers? The day was saved from ending on such a ponderous note by the Heritage Trust Annual Dinner, held that evening at King's College. The workshop participants went from oral history in Africa to eighteenth century South America in one day, for after the dinner Dr. John Godfrey, President of King's College, spoke on "Heritage Projects in Latin America".

The third day of the workshop was a morning session only, with an evaluation of the Saturday session, and a talk by Burnley A. Jones on "Black Oral History in Nova Scotia". Mr. Jones spoke generally about the organization of the black history project begun in 1970, and gave an outline of the do's and don'ts for aspiring oral historians. The final hour of the workshop was thrown open to general discussion and the inevitable question was posed, "where do we go from here?". The consensus was that a return session was essential in the spring, to deal with the question of tape storage and the ethics of oral history. The second issue was the establishment of an ongoing oral history association. Although there were many at the workshop who felt such an association should be set up, most believed that it would be better to remain as members of Heritage Trust and/or the Federation of Museums, Heritage and Historical Societies of Nova Scotia for the present. Both issues are to be re-examined at the next oral history workshop in April 1978. In order to provide some continuity and contact for those undertaking oral history projects, an index of oral history research being done in Nova Scotia has been started by James Morrison. This is the first time such an index has been attempted and it is hoped that it will provide greater communication between those interested in oral history, its practice and use.

On Sunday afternoon, the participants, from as far away as Yarmouth, Nova Scotia and Moncton, New Brunswick, left for their homes, armed with their very informative workshop kit and, it is hoped, prepared mentally and physically for a winter of putting into practice what the oral history workshop presented in theory. We'll find out in the spring.