

## Guest Editorial

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*The following summary describes the revitalization of oral history in Canada which is currently underway through the initiative of Winnipeg's Alexander Freund, Nolan Reilly, and Janis Thiessen. Readers are invited to share in the excitement and join in the renewal.*

In 2004, we (Nolan Reilly and Alexander Freund) began to discuss the state of the art of oral history in Canada. That something needed to be done became clear to us when we attended the oral history interest group meeting at the Canadian Historical Association's meeting in Winnipeg in 2004. Attendance was miniscule. (Later we heard of other oral historians' similar experiences at previous meetings.) Unfazed and believing we constituted a quorum, we moved and voted in favour of reviving an organized oral history movement in Canada. We started by looking at the history of the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA).

COHA began in 1974, when it was established at the first oral history conference in Canada held at Simon Fraser University. Its members were primarily academics using oral history methods (historians, folklorists) and archivists in charge of creating and archiving oral histories at their institutions. The association experienced strong growth in its first decade as oral history expanded across the country. But drastic funding cutbacks in the late 1980s and 1990s made it increasingly difficult for archivists and historians to maintain this initiative. Over the last two decades, archivists like Richard Lohead and Caroline Forcier Holloway and at the National Archives, and Gilbert Comeault at Archives Manitoba continued to nurture it.

Oral historians in Canada found it increasingly difficult to connect with other oral historians and to maintain an identity as oral historians. Most academics, including many graduate students, saw oral history as a method of inquiry, but not more. In other words, oral history in Canada did not acquire status as an independent method of historical enquiry and interpretation as it did elsewhere. Paradoxically, this inability of oral history to establish its independence occurred at a time when interest in and the use of oral history methods in Canada were expanding rapidly.

Many historians incorporated oral history methods into their research, high school teachers sent their students into their communities to interview just about everyone imaginable, and many organizations set about documenting their histories in oral history collections. Canada's legal system also became one of the first in the world to accept oral histories and oral traditions as evidence in its courts. It is somewhat ironic that more Canadians than ever engage in some form of oral history, but know little about others doing similar research in their communities or across the country. Furthermore, despite all the excellent oral history projects conducted annually in Canada, little is known about them outside the country.

While COHA struggled to survive, oral history associations in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Brazil, Spain and many other places thrived. Their memberships grew as researchers increasingly identified themselves as oral historians. A supporting system of oral history journals and publications was fostered in those countries and national and international conferences brought oral historians together to discuss their research.

Canadians working in oral history needed to congregate and plan. Our first initiative was to organize the Oral History in Canada Conference at the University of Winnipeg in August 2005. It was a great success. Despite limited funds, over three days of intensive discussions and panels, some 30 oral historians presented their research and led workshops on oral history and video history. At the concluding roundtable discussion, the nearly 100 participants expressed their satisfaction with the first national oral history conference in two decades.

The participants, including Gilbert Comeault, Caroline Forcier Holloway, Richard Lohead, James Morrison and other long time supporters of COHA, asked us to go the next step and take charge of COHA and its journal, the *Oral History Forum*. Although we understood the great responsibility associated with this, we accepted this request. Since then, we have worked amiably with them, other long time COHA associates, and COHA Chair Patricia Skidmore, the current editor of the *Oral History Forum* to effect a smooth transition of the association and its journal to the University of Winnipeg. We would like to give our most heartfelt thanks to Patricia, Caroline, Ken Clavette, Ronald Labelle, James Morrison and all others for their patience with us as we work through this transition. We are relying heavily on their great knowledge

of the organization and the journal. We hope they will stay with COHA many years into the future.

What have we accomplished to date and what are our plans for the future? First, we are developing in Winnipeg a working group of academics, archivists, curators, teachers, and community oral historians to ensure that a broad range of perspectives are represented in our deliberations. Janis Thiessen, a Winnipeg high school teacher who recently completed her Ph.D. in History at the University of New Brunswick, has agreed to serve as COHA's Secretary-treasurer. Thus, in the rest of this editorial, you will hear her voice as well. While we are putting together our local group, we will be contacting people across the country to assist us in the creation of a national advisory board. Anyone wishing to become involved in this initiative should contact us at the University of Winnipeg.

Second, we are digitizing all 25 back issues of *Forum* and *Journal* and hope to make it keyword searchable. We have already digitized the *Guide to Oral History Collections* and made it into a keyword searchable database. Over the next months, we hope to update the *Guide* to make it an even more useful resource. The *Guide* and the *Forum* will soon be available on the new COHA website <http://canoha.freeculture.ca/> which we are designing with the assistance of the University of Winnipeg. The website will be a resource centre for Oral Historians in Canada. For example, at our 2005 conference, it became apparent that many of us do not know about the specifically Canadian copyright laws. Therefore, the website will contain a document that addresses this specific issue within a Canadian context. Please subscribe to a listserv for COHA members at <https://mta.uwinnipeg.ca/mailman/listinfo/>. We wish to thank the University of Winnipeg for its financial and technical support in helping us set up these various electronic resources.

COHA must be a voice for and of its members. Even though we are taking over responsibility for COHA, we do not want to "run the show." This is your show and this is your Association. Thus, we want to use the listserv to discuss with you developments over the coming years. We see this as a forum for you to voice your suggestions and comments.

One of the most pressing issues we need to discuss is the future format of Oral History *Forum*. We will be editing the *Forum* beginning with the 2007 edition. Long before then, we need to decide whether we wish to go to an all digital format with a print-on-demand option. On the other

hand, do members want us to publish a print copy along with an electronic copy? The digital format opens many new options to us that are particularly valuable for the presentation of oral history. For example, we are contemplating an on-line section of the website devoted to reviews of books, projects, exhibitions, movies, radio shows, etc. that could be continuously updated and not bound by the once-a-year print format currently in use. Another idea we are pursuing is the integration of audio and video in on-line articles.

In addition, we are pursuing the relationship between oral history and oral tradition. At our 2005 conference, we included several panels on oral tradition. We believe that those who research oral traditions have many interests in common with oral historians. COHA and the *Forum* can serve as a platform for practitioners of both to learn from each other and begin a much-needed and overdue dialogue. We submit that such an exchange and exploration of common interests in oral history and oral tradition can make oral history in Canada serve as a global model.

Proper archiving and preservation of oral histories is critically important. The website and *Forum* will continue to address the significant role of archivists and librarians. Digital technologies present us with great opportunities, but also raise technological, ethical, and legal challenges and problems for oral historians. Archivists and librarians must continue to contribute their expertise to COHA.

Finally, we believe fundamentally that oral history is more than a research methodology. Taking our cue from Paul Thompson's *Voice of the Past*, we see oral history as a movement for democratizing history, in the broadest sense. Thus, we see our efforts most importantly as a consciousness-raising effort which will help those studying the past and present of society identify as oral historians. We want them to flock to our oral history interest group meetings at the CHA and other professional and community programs we would like to see develop across the country.

If oral history is a democratic movement, it must broaden membership, for example, to include more teachers. Teachers throughout the country have successfully used oral history in the classroom. We must invite them to join us and provide them with access to resources that are specifically designed for school teachers and class projects. We also must connect independent and freelance researchers, museum curators, members of historical societies, local and family historians, and

community activists (e.g. in the tradition of the British history workshops and the German *Geschichtswerkstätten*). Last but not least, this brings us back to the integration of oral history and oral tradition. We need to connect with researchers who have conducted oral histories and collected oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples. This is a huge project to which we are committing ourselves. We hope you will join us in shaping COHA's agenda over the coming years. Our goal, with your participation, is to revitalize oral history in Canada.