

Pier 21, From Immigration Facility to Museum and Oral History Archive: A Research Note

James H. Morrison

Abstract: Oral history has been integral to the Pier 21 National Historic site since its inception. This paper provides a historic overview of the site, traces its beginnings as an exhibition/museum and research center and examines the role that oral history has played in establishing Pier 21 as a premier Immigration Heritage attraction in Canada. The paper will then conclude with some macro and micro challenges that the facility is facing.

Over a million immigrants entered Canada at Pier 21 in Halifax harbour, Nova Scotia. In late March of 1928, a new immigration facility in Halifax opened its doors to European immigrants to Canada. Four years in the making, the facility was as modern as the period would allow. Pier 21 was almost 600 feet in length with covered ramps that attached it to an annex for baggage/cargo and gave access to the nearby railway line that would provide new immigrants with connections across the country (Mitic and LeBlanc 13). Situated on Canada's east coast, the Immigration Building was a twelve-month operation. Unlike other ports on Canada's east coast, Halifax Harbour did not freeze over in the winter and could thus berth ships any time of the year. On 28 March, 1928, the first ship, *Nieuw Amsterdam*, had arrived and for the next 43 years, the site known as Pier 21 would welcome over a million.

Canada, before 1914, had been a prominent destination for European immigrants. With the end of World War I, and a new exclusion policy in the United States (Avery 11), it was anticipated that Canada would once more benefit from those wishing to leave a war-torn Europe and migrate at least temporarily to the new world. This was "Amerika" and many did not differentiate between the United States and Canada when seeking the so-called promised land.

Unfortunately, within two years of its opening, Canada began the decade long nightmare of the depression and, as emigration is economically driven, migration through Pier 21 tailed off dramatically. Mitic and

LeBlanc noted that immigration in the 1930's was 90% less than what it had been in the 1920's (Mitic and LeBlanc 52).

It was not until the beginning of World War II that Pier 21 once more became active with over 500,000 Canadian soldiers shipping out of Halifax through Pier 21 for the European theatre. In 1940, several voyages began bringing "Guest Children" (British children evacuated due to German bombing) to Canada. They arrived at Pier 21 and were subsequently dispersed to Canadian homes. With war's end in 1945, men and women of the armed forces returned from Europe through Pier 21 and in 1946 and 1947, some 50,000 British, Dutch, French and Italian "war brides" plus children came through the Pier.

By the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's, Pier 21 had resumed its role as the immigrants' first contact with Canada. With the need for labour, both skilled and unskilled, Canada welcomed Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Hungarians and other European immigrants through Pier 21. Its use declined by the mid 1960's because the European economic imperative to migrate had declined and, with changes in Canadian immigration policy in the early 1960's, "New Canadians" were arriving from West Indies, Asia and Africa. By 1976, more than 25% of arriving immigrants were Asian in origin (Kelley and Trebilcock 348). In addition, instead of traveling by boat almost all were landing by plane in large urban centres like Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver. Technology and new immigration flows had rendered Pier 21 redundant and it closed in 1971.

Nevertheless, 1971 also marked the acceptance by the Canadian government of a policy of Multiculturalism that recognized Canada as a bilingual country with a multitude of cultures. This policy would indirectly provide the rationale for the resuscitation of Pier 21, not as an active immigration building receiving immigrants but as the only standing immigration building in Canada from an immigration era that had long since passed.

In the 1980's and early 1990's a group of interested people led by former immigration officer John LeBlanc began to seek funding to restore the Pier 21 building and install a museum commemorating Canada's immigrant past and its multicultural present. Over a million came through Pier 21. The Pier 21 Society was formed in 1988 (Tinkham 3). A grant of \$4.5 million was provided by various levels of government in

1995 to commemorate the G7 meeting in Halifax, with the provision that the Pier 21 Society of volunteers match that amount from private sources. This was done by the capable President of the Pier 21 Society, Ruth Goldbloom, within sixteen months. The money was in place – now, what to do.

At this stage I became involved in the Pier 21 Society based on my academic background in ethnic history and oral history techniques. Many of those immigrants were still alive and could be contacted about their experiences. In addition, there was a dearth of information about the actual processing of immigrants. This information Pier 21 needed to have in order to ensure historical accuracy. Thus, in 1998 I undertook a short-term oral history project to not only collect oral history from those who came through Pier 21 as immigrants but also to enquire about the screening process from immigration officers, doctors and nurses, churches, charity groups and others involved in the process. These interviews became the information source not only for the structure of the exhibition site, but also the genesis of the present oral history collection which currently has over 250 interviews and is stored in the Pier 21 Research Centre.

The focal point of the exhibition [<http://www.pier21.ca>] is the immigrant experience. Why did they leave their homeland? What was the journey to Canada like? What were their experiences at Pier 21 and finally, what have been their subsequent experiences in Canada? (There is also a section of the exhibition that deals with the returning Canadian military personnel which I will touch on later.) In four major components of the exhibition, oral history plays an important part. In a small theatre that seats 75-100, there is a 22-minute multi-media presentation called "Oceans of Hope". This presentation is virtually three dimensional with 5 vignettes about Italian, Jewish and Ukrainian migrants, a returning Canadian World War II soldier and a war bride. These vignettes have been drawn from the oral history collection.

Secondly, near the exit of the exhibition, clients enter a faux-railway car. In four soundproof compartments visitors are shown 2-3 minute clips of videotaped immigrant stories as they sit and listen. Thirdly, a fifth soundproof compartment allows for a three minute "videod self-interview." When the electronic unit is turned on, a sample "story" is shown and the individual within the compartment has 3 minutes to tell

his/her story about Pier 21. These interviews are then stored in the oral history collection.

Finally, the permanent staff of the Pier 21 Research and Education Centre have all been given intensive oral history training. Visitors to the Pier 21 Exhibition are encouraged to talk with a staff member if they have had any contact with Pier 21 when it was an operating immigration site. If such is the case, and they wish to participate, they can be taken to the research and education Centre and be interviewed immediately. This interview is usually done after the visitor has seen the exhibition in order to perhaps evoke some remembrances of their experience.

As Halifax is a "university city" with six institutions of post-secondary education, liaisons have been established with local institutions. Several research projects utilizing oral history have been carried out by university students with academic supervision. These range from oral history interviews to accessioning oral history materials and conducting research utilizing oral history materials already collected.

Given the above, I would like to now examine some of what I call the macro and micro issues that have arisen since the Pier 21 Exhibition Centre opened in 1999. These issues relate to the collection of oral history, its value and validity in such an exhibit, and in the broader context, how Pier 21 fits into the larger Canadian heritage landscape.

It is important to realize that Pier 21 is not funded directly by any level of government but is dependent upon project funds and private donations. The issues thus raised are financial and methodological.

Micro Issues:

Technical:

Over the years since the first collection was done using cassette tapes in 1998, there have been profound changes in technology. Pier 21 has acquired a myriad of cassettes, VHS videos, compact discs and digital video disc material. A minor problem now but one that will become more acute in the future is this: in what medium should this material be archived and how can the medium be utilized if the appropriate technology is not preserved and available to play the archived material.

Subject Matter:

Pier 21's research material is not limited to the immigrant experience. Due to its financial situation, since its inception, it has collected not only from immigrants but also from immigration officials, service groups, customs officials and the Canadian military. Currently there is an interest in Canada's peacekeeping forces, none of whom went through Pier 21 per se but who represent Canada's military contribution in a multi-lateral world. The micro issue here is whether only site specific collection should take place or, given financial exigencies, should Pier 21 throw its net as widely as possible and be opened to whatever is available and more importantly whatever may attract funding.

Research Subjects:

Aside from the initial interviews (1998) which were quite selective, more recent interviews have been somewhat random. To some extent, they are based on a self-referential format and many interviews are done when the interviewee/informant visits Pier 21. Not all of these the three-minute interviews have included names or addresses for a follow-up with more intensive and extensive interviews.

An additional problem is deciding who gets interviewed? Those who have had a negative immigrant experience are not always prepared to come forward. Also, those who have not stayed in Canada but continued on to the United States or returned home (approximately 30%) are not part of the oral history collected (Roberts passim). In addition, Pier 21 with its new five year plan is extending its immigration time line back to ca 1500 or pre-contact and beyond 1971 to the present to encompass the "complete Canadian immigrant experience." Oral history can utilize oral tradition in family history to explore the period 1928-71 and pre-period immigrants. However, once we begin to examine the post-1971 immigration, there will be a deluge of information about a population very different than that which came through Pier 21.

Macro Issues:

Government:

As noted earlier, the Canadian government has espoused a multicultural policy for Canada for over 30 years. Naturally, this has political overtones for whatever government is in power. Bearing in mind a dependence on government and private grant funding that can be withdrawn at any time, Pier 21 still must strive to tell the "good" stories with the "bad." Canada cannot be said to have an unblemished record

when it comes to how it treats its various minorities. The macro issue here is to tell the story, blemishes and all, yet not endanger the viability of Pier 21 due to a withdrawal of funds from public and private sectors.

Access to Research Material:

Due to a lack of government support, Pier 21 still must be an income-generating attraction. It has won various awards for its "In Transit" theatre, its public relations and its web sites and has an ever growing database of material. In the interests of free enquiry, Pier 21 strives to make this material available to the public but at the same time must ensure that this material at a certain phase generates income. Some of the visual and audio material has been placed on the web site. The macro issue then is how to make this on-line material accessible to an interested public and for researchers but still ensure that the research undertaken by staff and others can somehow be paid for.

This paper has presented an overview of Pier 21, a highly successful exhibition/museum site in Halifax that is based at least in part on a national ideology of positive immigration. However, the collection of oral history does present micro and macro issues that must now be addressed if the site is to maximize its value and validity.

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