

## **A Forum for Surprises**

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*Patricia Skidmore-Skuce was editor of Oral History Forum d'histoire orale from 2002 through 2006.*

Because those who had given a lot to maintain the vitality of the Canadian Oral History Association asked me to help, I took on the role of Chair in 2003. Then, because Ronald Labelle, who had worked hard and long as editor of *Forum*, asked me to, I took on the duties of editing that journal. I have been an oral historian and teacher of oral history for 35 years. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. None whatsoever. It was life changing in every sense of the word.

Living and working toward a not-too-distant retirement in London, Ontario, I found that the chairmanship of COHA presented very few problems. I had fine advice and worked in conjunction with Caroline Forcier Holloway in Ottawa, who kept COHA's accounts and membership lists in order. Correspondence, Annual Meetings, contacts and projects proceeded apace. It was the editing side of my life that slowly got the best of me, necessitating a dramatic rescue.

Soliciting and receiving articles in late 2003 was the first task. It went fairly well. I pursued suggestions from stalwarts. Good material appeared in my university mailbox. This was to be a special issue on education. Several longstanding COHA members continued to serve as reviewers. I found a printer nearby who was sympathetic toward my neophyte status. Together, we figured out how to give continuity to the appearance of the volumes I would be shepherding. What tripped me up and changed my life was one particular author's contribution to that first (2004) volume, Volume 24.

Under pressure to meet a printing deadline, to be followed by a distribution deadline, I finished the painstaking edits on all but one of the manuscript articles. These comprised a set of analyses describing a large oral history project recently completed. I managed to gain from cooperative authors the acceptance of several suggestions. My editorial labour came simultaneously with the marking of essays and setting/marking of final exams for my oral history students at Brescia University College, but everything seemed to be proceeding apace. The printer expected my finalized copy for Volume 24 in three days.

That's when my mailbox offered a surprise: a final article had just arrived from its author, summarizing the project. This article, a summation of the project and over 200 interviews with retired Ontario teachers, was essential. Readers

would find it significant and the project authors would be glad they had chosen *Forum* for their vehicle. Still, this *is* a peer-reviewed journal. My Review Board members had all already done yeoman`s duty and were all even more busy at this time of year than I. But the new, key article must be properly reviewed. I prepared to go for a walk in the nearby park to clear my head and figure out how to proceed with this new contribution, how to get it reviewed and ready without unduly delaying publication of the volume.

As I walked, nearing a corner of Victoria Park, my gaze fell on a tall black glass building. In that building, I suddenly remembered, lived a tall retired gentleman with whom I had chatted some days prior. Our conversation stemmed from mutual surprise at finding a car parked squarely on the front lawn of St. Peter`s Cathedral, from where a tow truck driver was trying to extract it. We traded observations and I learned he was a retired civil servant from Toronto with years of experience within the Ontario Ministry of Education. As my mind made a connection between my problematic need for a reviewer and that conversation, it offered me a name – Peter. No last name, but at least “Peter” sounded right. I marched home, got that tardy manuscript envelope, and headed for the tall black glass building. Perhaps I had found a qualified reviewer.

I scanned the lobby listing, only to find that seven tenants were named “Peter.” Undaunted, I asked the building`s Superintendent if he knew which one was retired from the Ministry of Education. He offered a guess, I dialed up my target reviewer, and he agreed to come to the lobby to get the manuscript envelope. I remember that he looked somewhat mystified by this stranger`s sudden appeal to his expertise. In a short time, I received his review by email. I could not open the attachment with his comments. I replied by email that my computer was not cooperating and we agreed to meet so that he could walk me through his commentary.

Line by line, over coffee at the local restaurant, I absorbed his suggestions of ways to clarify and supplement the summary article. He was extremely helpful, enabling me to get the copy to the printer just in time. As thanks, I offered theatre tickets. Peter was interested in the current performance of a well known recent play.

A few days later we saw “Tuesdays with Morrie,” by Mitch Albom and Jeffrey Hatcher, at London`s Grand Theatre. The printer worked on Volume 24 and I worked on marking exams. When the proofs arrived, I remembered that Peter was interested in the whole project and I gave him the copy; he checked the other articles as well. Over the next few weeks and months, we explored other mutual interests. I was fostering a puppy named Finn for Dog Guides; Peter could easily persuade Finn to be very good. I had a daughter studying in Germany; Peter set up Skype for us. After many more months, Dear Reader, I married him. And for several years after that, Peter was instrumental in putting together the volumes

of *Forum* for the Canadian Oral History Association. He was also my technical consultant for many PowerPoint presentations and workshop projects to further best practices in oral history.

The Winnipeg team took over COHA and *Forum*, enabling us to retire from that work at the same time that I retired from Brescia University College. *Forum* and COHA went on to become very dynamic with courses, online publications, conferences and much more at <http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca>. Today COHA is ready to celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Peter and I have celebrated our 8<sup>th</sup>, living happily ever after and fondly remembering the surprises stemming from Volume 24 of *Forum*.