

## **Some Reminiscences of COHA**

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At our 1989 annual meeting held in Calgary, during an Association of Canadian Studies conference, the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA) almost ceased to exist. A motion was made to dissolve the association by someone who, in their wisdom, felt that the association had run its course, had achieved what it set out to do, and was no longer needed. At the time I was Acting Secretary and couldn't believe my ears. Up to that point I had been a "behind the scenes" member but at that meeting I found I possessed a fighting spirit underneath a normally calm exterior. The motion to dissolve COHA was defeated after some passionate discussion on both sides, and another motion to continue the association was moved, seconded and adopted.....and to my great surprise by the end of the meeting I found myself "elected" the new COHA President. I was the only one willing to take on the job and it was effective immediately.

This COHA memory has remained with me as one of the most exhilarating times of my life...as well as one of the scariest...for the road ahead seemed quite difficult, and I would need to enlist the help of many supportive people. The next four and a half years were my busiest and most rewarding COHA years for some of the following reasons: the many friendships forged across Canada; getting to know many regional, provincial, territorial and national practitioners and keepers of oral history; discovering so many exciting oral history projects being carried on across many disciplines; the pressure of helping in the planning of a "renewal" conference held at Osgoode Hall, Toronto in May 1991; and the team effort involved in achieving the long-time COHA goal of publishing a national oral history directory, which was launched at the National Archives of Canada in January 1994. None of these milestones would have been arrived at without the hard work of so many dedicated volunteers from coast to coast to coast – people who held a similar passion for oral history.

A look back reveals that COHA had its roots in the Oral History Committee, Archives Section, of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA). That committee, the Provincial Archives of British Columbia's Aural History Division, Simon Fraser University's Communications Studies Department and the then Public Archives of Canada (PAC) were the four sponsors of COHA's founding conference held just over thirty years ago – October 18-19, 1974 – attended by 170 people. Léo La Clare, Head of Sound Archives, PAC, had been Chair of the CHA's Oral History Committee, and he was elected the first COHA President. Those participating in COHA's founding convention held at Simon Fraser University included: historians Jack Granatstein, Nicole Gagnon, Bruno Jean, David Millar, George Cook and Jean Morrison; authors/broadcasters Elspeth Chisholm, Robin Woods, Anita Gordon, Barry Broadfoot, Peter Stursberg, Imbert Orchard and James Gray; archivists Léo La Clare, Derek Reimer, Allen W. Specht and Trevor Powell; ethnomusicologist, Dr. Ida Halpern; educators Dr. John Widdowson and Dr. Donald F. Campbell; museum curators Gregg Finley and Jane McCracken; and geographers Gordon Wilson and W.J. (Bill) Langlois. La Clare and his executive drew up the Constitution and By-Laws, brought them before the membership at the second COHA conference held in October 1975 in St. John's, Newfoundland, where they were adopted. It was at this conference that the initial name of the Canadian Aural/Oral History Association was changed to the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA). Denis Gagnon, French language Secretary, designed the striking logo for the association which has graced its letterhead, pamphlets and publications ever since. No doubt a few PAC secretaries did a lot of typing and proofreading in the early days before personal computers.

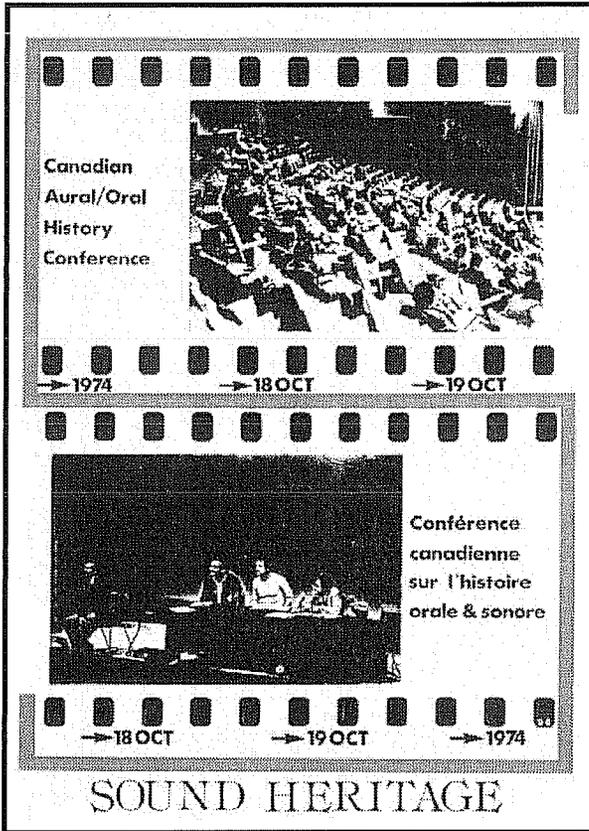
Reading some of the first COHA executive's minutes of meetings and correspondence at the Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, gave me an insight into the professional dedication of people whose "day jobs" were in provincial and federal archives, university folklore departments, and museum heritage departments. They were initially from British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Newfoundland. Eventually the volunteer COHA executive came more and more from members who were the "creators" of oral history materials, rather than the preservers. In COHA's 20th year of existence, 1994, the office of President was taken up by Public History professor Janet Trimble of the University of Western

Ontario, London; then in 1996 Ken Clavette of the Ottawa and District Labour Council accepted the responsibility for the office; and since 2003 the chair has been Patricia Skidmore, History professor, Brescia University College, London, Ontario

It is interesting to discover that our "pioneer" executive members were grappling with the problem of just how such an organization might work, given its diverse practitioners. Here is an excerpt from a letter by Janet Cauthers to Léo La Clare dated 16 September 1975: (1)

..Perhaps we are so different that we cannot be a conventional professional organization, since the majority of the practitioners of aural (sic) history are and will continue to be remarkably diverse. The interests of scholars, journalists, creative writers, broadcasters and unsophisticated members of local historical groups are not the same, may be quite disparate and even incompatible. The problem of providing appropriate standards for all of them, and an organization which can benefit all of them, is one that needs more discussion. Are we indeed a "discipline" apart from any of these other activities?....

Cauthers was raising a matter which reappears throughout COHA's 30-year existence. Cauthers, La Clare, McCracken, Widdowson and Rosenberg especially wrote very long letters on organizational matters during that first year, and as one would expect there were growing pains and strong opinions on how to proceed, some give and take, and an obvious dedication on everyone's part to see the organization get off the ground and succeed. The illustrated proceedings of the founding conference were published in *Sound Heritage* - a publication of Aural History, Victoria, B.C. (2) (See Illustration on next page.) The original tapes, transcripts and papers were preserved at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia in Victoria.(3)



From the outset there was a desire to create a national oral history directory, as well as to begin a newsletter in order to be a "clearing house" of information to communicate to COHA members on matters related to technology and report on existing and planned projects, and to conduct membership drives. Léo La Clare applied to have the association become an official non-profit organization in November 1974 so that the membership could receive tax receipts for their dues and donations. The first newsletter, the *Bulletin*, was published in 1975, edited by Léo La Clare. As Neil Rosenberg noted in a letter to the second President, Robert Cosbey (Department of English, University of Regina): "Our clearing house function is a very important one".(4) The first *Journal* was published in 1976, edited by Léo La Clare with editorial assistance from Denis Gagnon, Lorraine Geddes and Marlene Pratt. (See illustration.)

Uppermost in the first executive members' minds was the need to have a pan-Canadian association and the correspondence shows their various efforts to balance a conference held out West with one in the East, and then one in the centre of the country. The vast distances the executive had to travel to attend meetings created problems and Canada Council grants were sought to assist with travel costs. These difficulties were also very much a part of my tenure on the executive. Those who managed to attend distant conferences often had sympathetic employers to thank for the associated costs.

COHA owes thanks to universities for the financial and personnel support they gave, especially the essential services performed by editors of the *COHA Journal* who followed archivists Léo LaClare (1976-78), Richard Lohead (1979-1982, 1984-1985) and Allen W. Specht (1983). The university-based editors were Professor James H. Morrison, Department of History, St. Mary's University, Halifax, (1990-1994) – during whose tenure the physical dimensions of the annual publication were changed making it much easier to handle and to sit up on a library shelf. – and Ronald Labelle, then folklorist at the Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton (1995-2004) – during whose tenure the publication was renamed the Oral History *Forum d'histoire orale* in order "to give COHA a more bilingual character." (5) Morrison enlisted Dr. Margaret Harry, Department of English, as Book Review Editor, and received administrative assistance from Marjorie Warren. Winona Stevenson Wheeler of the then Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, University of Regina, guest edited Volume 19-20 entitled "Indigenous Voices from the Great Plains/Voix autochtones des Prairies (1999-2000). The executive appreciated that the institutions who played a large part in the creation of oral history projects were participating in the costs of printing, postage and handling. In due course a COHA website was set up by a student employed by the Ottawa and District Labour Council under the direction of Ken Clavette.(6) This website continues to be maintained by Clavette and provides useful information to the membership.

Going back in my mind to some additional highlights, one that stands out is the very successful "Oral History in the '90s" conference held in Osgoode Hall, Toronto in May 1991. Approximately 75 delegates gathered to breathe new life into our association. Richard Lohead's diligent efforts ensured a stimulating roster of speakers on relevant issues, and Chris Kates' tireless overseeing of local arrangements resulted in a happy, well fed group of delegates. The resultant renewal of the association took place over two days within the cosy ambiance of Barristers' Lounge, an 1891 addition to this historic building, with its lofty gargoyles looking down on all our sessions.

At the risk of leaving some important names out, those who attended and/or spoke at this rejuvenating conference included: Gerry Berkowski, Vera Rosenbluth, Shirley Peruniak, Brian Osborne, Jill Jarvis-Tonus, Milly Charon, Gabriel Scardellato, Gary S. Marcuse, Mac Swackhammer, Shelley Posen, David Neufeld, A.M.J. Hyatt, Diana Fancher, Rick Stow, Mavis Waters, Lynda Moon, Rosemary Nagel, Bruce Grainger, James Morrison, Joan Fairweather, Carolyn Vachon, Rosemary Nagel, Ronald Labelle, Jean Bruce, Janice Simpson, Chris Kates and Richard Lohead. Many of the papers presented were subsequently published in the *Journal*. The original tapes of this conference form part of the COHA archives in Ottawa.

One of the final events of the 1991 conference in Toronto was a reception held in historic Campbell House, near Osgoode Hall, where we gathered to carry on animated conversations with old and new friends. At this reception we honoured CBC's "Voice of the Pioneer," Bill MacNeil, presenting him with a plaque citing his 35 years of giving "voice" to the stories of ordinary Canadians. Bill's natural wit and charm warmed the and everyone in it, if the wine and cheese had not already done so.(7) It was a great way to end a memorable time in the life of our association.

Ironically, I found that an Ontario oral historian used the phrase "Oral History in the 90's" first – in proposing an interdisciplinary session for the Learned's in 1990. It was written on an enclosure to a letter addressed to me. Since this was the title we actually used for our renewal conference, I would like to belatedly thank her publically for her kind input.(8) However, this bit of serendipity is just another benefit

of having the "raw materials" - the archival records - to go to if you need to check up on past events. Lots of comments spoken or written may not appear in a polished set of approved Minutes or a signed official letter.

The Ontario Oral History Group grew out of Conference '91 and it had several successful years of active programming for its members thanks to the enthusiasm and dedication of Chair Chris Kates and her executive. Mark Rosenfeld and Mark Epp consecutively followed in Kates' footsteps, although the group eventually ground to a halt, probably due to a lack of willing volunteers (the mainstay of COHA over the years). The region in which a conference was held always increased the awareness of COHA locally and resulted in a large number of people from that city attending the event. A Saskatchewan Oral History Conference was held in Regina in 1981, the proceedings of which were later published by the Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), edited by Krzysztof M. Gebhard. SAB's oral history collections are some of the best described in the country. An Atlantic Oral History Association sprang up thanks to the efforts of James H. Morrison and in 1986 its members hosted a joint conference with COHA and the Society for the Study of Ethnicity in Nova Scotia which was held in Baddeck. This was another highlight of my membership in COHA, held as it was in the Alexander Graham Bell Museum, and including a delegates' reception held at the Miners Museum in my home town of Glace Bay.

One of the coldest nights on record in the nation's capital was by far my ultimate highlight of all. It was January 27, 1994 and the occasion was the official launch of the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada/Guide des fonds d'histoire orale au Canada* at the National Archives of Canada. Michael Swift, Assistant National Archivist, did the honours demonstrating his long standing support for COHA. The publication was compiled by Project Co-ordinator Normand Fortier and involved our entire executive: Joan Fairweather, James H. Morrison, Richard Lohead, Carolyn Vachon and the author over the previous two years. It had been a dream for a lot longer. Upwards of a hundred guests gathered at 395 Wellington Street, including past executive members Léo LaClare and Denis Gagnon, Regional Representatives from across the country including Gilbert Comeault, Winnipeg, Manitoba and Chris Gebhard, Regina, Saskatchewan and many COHA members and friends

came out to celebrate this achievement. The marble walled and floored foyer of the building was a fitting setting for the wonderfully co-ordinated programme led by André Martineau of the Public Programs Branch. A small reception for the principals was held beforehand in an oval-oak table centred conference room, while another took place after the speeches for the large number of people who had braved a raw Canadian Winter evening.



Front row - Normand Fortier, Richard Lohead, Joan Fairweather and James Morrison; back row - Wilma MacDonald, Michael Swift and Carolyn Vachon, after the launch of the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada/Guide des fonds d'histoire orale au Canada* at the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 27 January 1994. (Personal photo submitted by the author.)

The executive members and visiting Regional Representatives enjoyed a celebratory dinner at a small restaurant on Nepean Street afterwards.

Over the next while, thanks to then CHA President Veronica Strong-Boag, the head office of the Canadian Historical Association provided a handling and distribution service filling orders for the *Guide*. Joanne Mineault kept a database of the purchasers of the *Guide* for the record. Subsequently, the COHA executive mailed out a copy to all of the contributing institutions, some 354 institutions, and the Audio-Visual Archives Division of the National Archives assisted COHA by absorbing the cost of distributing copies to municipal, college and university libraries. Eventually "free" copies were given to new members joining the association.

Contributions from institutions preserving oral sources were limited, however. The non-contributing institutions, those who did not have adequate staff to properly describe their oral history tape collections, could not complete Fortier's questionnaire forms. In some cases, repositories that did not respond to our mail-out were contacted again by phone, especially where there were clear indications that they held oral history collections. "A few repositories explained that they could not respond at all, lacking the resources to describe, even in a cursory manner, the collections they hold."<sup>(9)</sup> Sadly, therefore, some important oral history collections are not to be found in the final publication. Also one of the criteria for being listed in the publication was that the oral history collections be accessible in an institution which could provide reference services. For these reasons, it is safe to assume that the institutions which hold oral history collections have a big job to do in the area of describing their holdings for the benefit of returning life histories to the communities in which they were created, as well as to make them available to the research public.

Having been raised in Cape Breton where the story-telling of my Scottish Gaelic speaking family was an important part of our culture, I have always wanted to encourage the preservation of the stories – along with the textual, graphic, music and other records – in order to be able to preserve the complete story of my labour community. Oral history interviews have been able to fill in gaps in the records of our communities and to shed light on the lives of people who have helped build Canada, or fought wars for Canada, and yet who leave scarce written materials.

The people who are attracted to oral sources are, I believe, people who are interested in people, often hitherto without a voice in "traditional" history books, whose stories are important to be heard. Hence, whenever COHA members meet among themselves, or with others from an array of disciplines, they have an instant bond. They listen well and they are listened to. They have interesting stories to tell. Long may they continue to meet, to exchange information about their projects, and to promote the preservation of such information.

Today the archival records of the Canadian Oral History Association / Société canadienne d'histoire orale (at least those that either were created by Ottawa-based executive members, or which were shipped to Ottawa.) are preserved in the holdings of the Library and Archives Canada, under Call Number R9056. The COHA fonds consists of records created by executive members from its founding in 1974 to approximately 1994. In 2000, during Ken Clavette's tenure as COHA President, several boxes of records were deposited in the then National Archives and, as luck would have it, it fell to me to organize and describe them. This welcome processing project was added to my next Social & Cultural annual work plan. Stéphane Thibodeau, Algonquin College Archival Technician, had begun the task of reboxing the COHA records in late 1996-early 1997 during a work placement project. He weeded out a lot of duplicates and labelled a lot of file folders during that time.

When my processing was completed, the COHA fonds measured 4.21 metres of textual records (stored in 22 containers) covering the period 1971-1996. The COHA fonds was arranged into the following Series: Constitution and By-laws, Minutes, Correspondence, Financial records, Conference materials, Publications, and Membership files. The Minutes series includes Minutes of Executive Committee meetings and Annual General Meetings. The Correspondence series includes the letters written and/or received by Executive members. The Financial records include financial reports, bank statements, and applications for grants; the Conference materials include programmes, correspondence, reports, speakers' papers, evaluation forms and proceedings. The Publications series includes newsletter materials and official newsletters arranged chronologically, manuscript articles for the *COHA Journal* and a set of its official publications (library items.). A large portion of the Publications

series is devoted to the various attempts by the association to finance and publish a national inventory of oral history collections beginning in 1976 and culminating in the publication of a significant guide in 1993. The fonds contains a wealth of information on oral history holdings in many repositories across Canada such as libraries, museums and archives generated during the major survey carried out between 1991 and 1993.

Added to the textual records are 323 graphic images (largely unidentified), 46 audio reels (ca. 103 h) and 22 audio cassettes (ca. 21 h) covering the period 1971-1996, as well as 9.01 MB of textual records (digital format). The electronic records are mostly databases created by Normand Fortier for the *Guide* from questionnaires. The sound recordings were acquired by the Sound Archives Division many years before the bulk of the textual records came in. Now that the textual records have joined the audio recordings of conference proceedings, the story of COHA is more complete than it has ever been before.

I would like to caution potential users, however, that there are several gaps in R9056 at the Library and Archives Canada and it would be satisfying to fill them in. Should you be looking for a home for any "official" COHA records you have in your possession (gathering dust in your basement?) documenting a time in the past when you might have served on the COHA executive, please consider preserving them in an archives. You may even have video/audio cassette tape recordings, photographs (and/or negatives), scrapbooks or any other materials related to COHA over the past thirty years. You may e-mail the archivist responsible for association records in the Social and Cultural Archives section of the Library and Archives Canada [Robert.Fisher@lac-bac.gc.ca](mailto:Robert.Fisher@lac-bac.gc.ca) – to ask how to go about depositing such records.(10) Your input will be greatly appreciated by the current COHA executive.

In closing, my memory goes back again to the threat of COHA's demise which became a catalyst for my four and a half years' service on the executive. While doing my archival research for this paper I came across an un-sent "draft" letter which I composed a full six months prior to that memorable annual meeting in Calgary. Here is a paragraph which captures the feelings of the Acting Secretary sharing her wish for a more vibrant oral history association in Canada with a fellow Maritimer:(11)

I wonder if the 'plight' of the COHA, in its 15th year of existence, is known by many people besides the executive members, and the regional representatives? I wonder what is going to happen to the association in 1989? R is planning an Ontario conference, if funds are forthcoming from SSHRCC, and A wants a "decision" made at a meeting to be held in conjunction with the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association Conference in Calgary in October. I hope there will be a representational discussion of the pros and cons, and feel we need to elicit input from the entire membership. I believe there are many people out there who would be interested in joining [COHA] but who do not even know that we exist. I think it would be the best of all possible worlds if the "creators" of oral history - the oral historians - would get more involved in their own association in Canada. When I read how vibrant the U.S., U.K. and Australian associations are, I wish we could spark a similar interest in Canada. The universities seem to have greater involvement in associations in other countries....

I know that COHA is going to survive and thrive given the energy of Professor Patricia Skidmore, along with Caroline Forcier-Holloway, Peter Geller, Ronald Labelle, James H. Morrison, Nicole St. Onge, Peter Skuce and Winona Stevenson, the current Review Board Members of Oral History *Forum* d'histoire orale. Bonne chance à tous. My very best wishes to all COHAers from coast to coast to coast on your thirtieth anniversary. Long may you continue to meet and share your stories.

## Endnotes

1. Janet Cauthers to Léo LaClare, 16 Sept. 1975. Executive Correspondence, Vol. 1, file 28, R9056, Canadian Oral History Association fonds/Société canadienne d'histoire orale (COHA/SCHO) fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
2. *Sound Heritage* was a successor to the Reynoldson Research and Studies publication at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (since renamed British Columbia Archives, a division of the Royal B.C. Museum Corporation), Victoria, British Columbia. The issue covering the foundation convention of CA/OHA was Vol. IV, No. 1, 1975, editor William J. Langlois, assistant editors Derek Reimer and Janet Cauthers.
3. W. J. Langlois "Notes from Aural History: Provincial Archives of British Columbia" in *Sound Heritage*, Vol. IV, Number 1, page 1.
4. Neil V. Rosenberg to Dr. Robert Cosbey, 25 October 1976. Executive Correspondence, Vol. 1, file 38, R9056, COHA/SCHO fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
5. Ronald Labelle, "Editor's Note," "Life Stories and Collective Identity in French Canada/ Recits de vie et vision collective au Canada Français," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, Vol. 15, 1995.
6. Ken Clavette is the COHA webmaster. The website address is <http://oral-history.ncf.ca>
7. Bill MacNeil's roots were in my home town, our fathers having been coal miners in Glace Bay, N.S.
8. Diana Fancher to Wilma MacDonald, 21 August 1990. Executive Correspondence, Vol. 3, file 3, R9056, COHA/SCHO fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

9. Normand Fortier, Introduction, *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada/Guide des fonds d'histoire orale au Canada* Ottawa: Canadian Oral History Association/Société canadienne d'histoire orale Journal, Vol. 13, 1993, xv.
10. The mailing address for COHA is P.O. Box 2064, Station D, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5W3. The mailing address for the Library and Archives Canada is 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N3, and their website is <http://www.collectionscanada.ca>.
11. Wilma MacDonald to James Morrison, drafted 8 May 1989 and marked "Not Sent." Executive Correspondence, Vol. 3, file 3, R9056, COHA/SCHO fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.