

## **Funding the Good Fight**

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My experience in the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA) was a uniquely privileged one since, unlike others, oral history was actually in my job description. From 1975 to 1989, my duties as an archivist at the National Archives of Canada included the acquisition, description and providing access to oral history collections of national significance. Involvement in the Canadian Oral History Association was therefore natural and in the early years, expected as the National Archives of Canada was one of the founders and a key supporter in funds and staff time. It was also logical since the mandate of the National Archives was not to create oral history but to collect it and the best way to prepare it for archival preservation was to influence creators at the beginning of a project. COHA, with its goal of bringing creators and preservers together, was an excellent outreach arm for the National Archives. Although the oral history mandates of both COHA and the National Archives remained the same over the years, the funding situation did not and COHA soon had to find its funding elsewhere. So, although my COHA resumé may include positions such as editor, president and conference organizer, my major preoccupation during period was fund-raising. Surprisingly, it proved to be both an exciting and gratifying experience as well as a creative one. It also provided me with new job skills such as organizing conferences and writing grant applications and a unique perspective of viewing federal government as both an employee and as a representative of an outside association seeking funds from it.

My own interest in oral history preceded actual involvement in COHA by a few years. Attending university in the late sixties and early seventies instilled in me a good set of social activist ideals which were probably not a perfect match for work in the civil service. My academic history and journalism degrees were an unlikely combination at the time since historians viewed journalistic writing as superficial and suspect in

terms of accuracy whereas journalism viewed historical research as "yesterday's news". Fortunately for me, the National Archives of Canada were looking for staff with exactly such an unlikely combination for their recently established Sound Archives unit and 1974 saw me enrolled in a course for new staff of the National Archives. Part of the requirement of this course was to write a paper on some aspect of archival activity. Application of my own well-trained biases led to a conclusion that archives mostly told the stories of elites (which were recorded on paper) and hence did not provide a representative record of Canadian society. What steps could archivists take to rectify such a serious problem? A late night deadline-induced revelation led to the answer: an active archival oral history program.

That early paper identified and contrasted various approaches to oral history such as the journalist and academic and ended with a call for a third approach: the archival, by which archivists would identify gaps in their holdings and would fill them with an active oral history program. This would be the ideal match of my academic background, political orientation and archival responsibilities. This became my professional dream. It still exists today as does the call for a more representative historical record. To me, COHA was and is a means to that end. Times have changed since the heady days of 1974 and the road has become longer and often uphill, but its legacy is a positive one and its dream still worth pursuing.

A brief return to 1974 may help to clarify the setting in which COHA was created. Although the late sixties counterculture was receding, the Canadian economy was still expanding which resulted in a hiring surge in the federal government and the creation of many new programs which reflected the spirit of the 60s. New government funding programs such as Opportunities for Youth and New Horizons (1) were established and the National Archives created new archival positions for film, photography and sound. The introduction of the portable tape recorder suddenly held the possibility of wide scale recording of peoples' memories and U.S. journalist Studs Terkel's best selling book, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Depression* in 1969 made the process a reality as well as popularizing it with the name "oral history." A subsequent Canadian version *Ten Lost Years: an Oral History of the*

*Depression* by Barry Broadfoot confirmed the public interest in oral history in Canada. A new wave of academics started to explore the oral history technique as a means of documenting unrecorded social and labour history. In British Columbia, William Langlois obtained funds to establish Reynoldston Research and Studies, an oral history program which was soon merged with the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. The stage was now set for the creation of the Canadian Oral History Association in 1974.

The founding conference held at Simon Fraser University was a success. The National Archives of Canada paid the speakers' expenses and Provincial Archives of British Columbia published the proceedings. The creation of the association itself engendered two major debates. First, should the name of the Association be the Aural History Association reflecting its audio roots or the more popular term oral history. Popularity won out over accuracy and after a year of being the Aural/Oral History Association of Canada the "Aural" was dropped from the name. The second debate was whether oral history was a technique or a discipline. Although the rapid growth of stand-alone oral history projects in the United States soon led its practitioners to refer to themselves as "oral historians," the Canadian experience was different. The practice of recording recollections on a sound format was not new as folklorist Marius Barbeau had commenced it as early as 1911 and life histories projects were supported and published by museums(2). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had broadcast oral history programs in the 1930s and initiated full scale recording in the 1960s. This soon led to Bill McNeil's popular radio series "Voice of the Pioneer."

By the 1970s, oral history was not new to Canadians, just the name itself and its identification with the portable tape recorder. Consequently, participants at the founding conference came from a wide range of disciplines including broadcasters, writers, historians, folklorists and archivists. Perhaps only Barry Broadfoot and a few others would identify themselves as oral historians. Adopting the view that oral history was a technique, not a separate discipline, allowed the Association to bring together all the various disciplines which might usefully employ this technique. Such a position nicely side-stepped a growing debate in academic circles as to the validity of oral history by stating that the

validity of oral history should be judged by the standards of the discipline which created it. Finally this position reinforced the centrality of archivists within the Association since, while other disciplines created valuable historical documentation in the process of their work, it was the role of the archivists to acquire it and preserve it. This position enabled the new Association to reach out and enlist a wide range of practitioners in the short term.

In the mid seventies oral history was very much in the ascendency, especially in archives. Increased government funding for multiculturalism led to the creation of several new oral history programs such the Multicultural Society of Ontario. In addition to preparing the proceedings for publication in the *Journal*, Denis Gagnon of the National Archives designed its striking logo which remains to this day. Another one of Denis's achievements was leading a successful membership drive among libraries to subscribe to the COHA Journal which soon became the funding core for COHA for many years to come. The National Archives also initiated a survey of all oral history collections throughout Canada in order to publish a directory which had been identified at the founding conference as a priority. But the most significant oral history advance was in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. Their oral history program actually commissioned oral history interviews in areas not well documented in the archives, then edited the interviews and published them, complete with photographs in a periodical whose production quality alone probably led to display in a good number of doctors offices. Oral history, it seemed, was expanding its reach with the British Columbia leading the way.

Paradoxically, although archivists from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia and National Archives were major forces, along with folklorists, in COHA and led oral history initiatives within their own institutions, they were far from being representative of the whole archival community. Most archivists worked with paper records and questioned the validity of oral history recordings as archival documents. To many, the role of the archivist was to collect the existing record and not to create a new one. Oral history's popularity was becoming a divisive issue within the archival community. A more constructive dialogue was needed.

One of my satisfying accomplishments as an archivist was to organize a formal debate on oral history and archives at the joint session of the Association of Canadian Archivists and COHA in Halifax in 1981. Derek Reimer spoke in favour of oral history and Jean Dryden from neighbouring Alberta spoke against it. The session produced both heat and light and good discussion. The papers were published in a subsequent issue of the *Journal* and represent an excellent summary of all the arguments on both sides of the question. These still remain relevant today.

My own direct involvement in COHA started in 1978 when I was nominated to be editor of the *Journal*. The funding situation had changed considerably by this time. Conferences had been held annually since 1974 but funding was becoming more difficult to obtain as the government cut-backs took hold. The National Archives was no longer able to provide full time staff support in aid of COHA. Jim Morrison, a history professor at St. Marys, took over as president and a decision was taken to hold the next conference in two years in 1980 in Montreal as part of the Learned. This decision was due in part to the funding situation. By this time, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) was the only major government agency which provided conference funding but only did so for *scholarly* conferences. Holding a conference as part of the Learned would qualify COHA for such funding and the Learned Societies conference organizers would also provide a conference venue and residence accommodation. Increased academic credibility was needed if COHA was to secure continuing SSHRC conference support. Potentially low registrations by COHA members would be offset by attendance by members of other learned organizations.

The cycle for COHA now became quite simple. Conferences had to be held in order to produce papers for the *Journal*. The *Journal* had to be published each year to meet obligations to annual members whose dues were coming in, particularly libraries.(3) The membership dues were needed to finance the publication of the *Journal*. Conferences therefore had to be self-financed. Not holding a conference in 1979 led to the suggestion to publish the directory based on the results of the survey. However, anticipated funding from the National Archives was not available at the time. Like many volunteer organizations which grew during the years of government expansion, government cutbacks

suddenly put COHA's continued existence in doubt. A successful Montreal conference suddenly became both a challenge and a necessity.

Organizing the Montreal conference became one of my most memorable experiences in COHA. In order to receive SSHRC support, the program had to have strong academic participation and content. A simple call for papers was not sufficient because there were not enough academics who would be interested in delivering a paper on just oral history. They had to be identified, convinced and then matched to a particular panel. A survey was made of academics who had undertaken recent oral history research and then panel themes were created which matched their work with that of other oral history practitioners (e. g., the Role of Oral History in Writing Popular and Professional oral history). Most academics were unaware of COHA's existence and unfamiliar with oral history issues.

At this point, it was decided that the whole conference program would be easier to organize and the application to SSHRC stronger if I sketched out the topics and issues for the participants in advance. I used draft versions of the abstracts and sought review and comment. The approved versions were then sent to SSHRC. To underscore the emerging academic credibility of oral history, English scholar Paul Thompson, whose book on the validity of oral history had received excellent reviews, was approached and agreed to be a special guest speaker. These careful preparations were productive: COHA received a substantial grant. The result of the conference was increased credibility for COHA in academic circles and articles were published in two subsequent issues of the *Journal*. The same formula was used again in 1982 for another conference with the Learned in Ottawa. Organizing large scripted conferences in this fashion had more similarities to being a television producer than a conference co-ordinator for a learned society. The conferences kept the COHA name in the foreground and served both members and observers. COHA conferences and SSHRC grants applications continued to be successful in the early 80s. Allan Specht and the staff at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia took the lead in organizing a conference in Vancouver in 1983 and Jocelyne Mc Killop of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba did important work in organizing a conference in Winnipeg in 1984. In 1986, a partnership with the Society for the Study of Ethnicity in Nova Scotia

produced a memorable conference in Cape Breton Island, a long recognized centre for oral tradition in Canada .

At the beginning of the 90s oral history itself was growing stronger in Canada with increasing acceptance within academic circles. Conferences were no longer the central source of papers for the *COHA Journal*. But the steady stream of government cutbacks took its toll on not only funding but on the ability of the COHA executive to recruit new members. It seemed that the existing members could no longer afford the time commitments and neither could they find other possible candidates. The question was raised: maybe COHA had succeeded in its primary mission and could now proudly withdraw from the field. A full scale meeting of the COHA executive plus key proponents and practitioners of oral history in Canada was needed to identify and debate all the options. But financing such a meeting was a problem. SSHRC and other provincial funding organizations only provided support for conferences in which papers were presented. Reflection on my past experience in creative conference funding resulted in the idea of inviting key figures in oral history to present a paper on some aspect of oral history and then coming together for a closing session on the future direction of oral history in Canada. It would be a way of ensuring that key oral history figures were present at the meeting and would help COHA find a means of financing the session. The idea worked well.

Grant money was received, the meeting was held, and excellent papers were presented. The conference portion was then followed by an animated discussion which lead to a decision to continue COHA and make a concerted attempt to realize its long standing objective of publishing an inventory of oral history collections in Canada. This was to become both the highlight and final chapter of my fund-raising career.

The compilation and listing of all the existing oral history collections in one publication had been an objective, *raison d'etre* and dream of COHA since its inception. There had been several false starts along the way due to the usual combination of incomplete financial and staff resources. In retrospect, it seems that fortune finally turned in COHA's favour with this venture. The initial search of possible funding sources proved discouraging. The National Archives would provide office

and some staff support but not direct funds. The publication which had been termed as an index, directory, inventory and now a guide proved not to be eligible for any of the funding programs offered by the Canadian Council of Archives and the now Department of Canadian Heritage. A canvass of major private funding sources such as the Donner Foundation proved oral history's continuing ability to fall through funding cracks. Discussion with some SSRC staff finally pointed me towards the Research Tools program which was slated to be terminated in the next year but for which the COHA Guide would be eligible if the application was made by an academic. I would draft the application and Dr. James Morrison, a professor at St Marys University, would present it. The application was a distillation of every good argument ever used to advance oral history uses in the past. Concerns of potential referees were targeted and addressed (academic validity and value as research tool). Some perceived weaknesses were presented as strengths -- the delay in publishing this guide was due to a decision to wait until oral history holdings had reached a critical mass in order to respond to a distinct user need. Prejudices against oral history in archival circles were turned into support with the claim that the guide would allow archives to identify possible duplication with oral history holdings in other archives and therefore be useful in implementing a more stringent acquisition.

But archival distance from oral history posed another set of problems: how to encourage archives to respond to the survey questionnaire when most of the collections were either uncatalogued and/or a low priority for description. The proposed approach was to request that the archivist not attempt to describe the contents of the collection but just to summarize it with a few key words. This would allow the many uncatalogued collections to be included in the Guide whose subsequent publication would hopefully advance their standing as a cataloguing priority. The application also included references to similar oral history publications in other countries, sample copies of the survey questionnaire and entry description, and a detailed budget. The application was a strong one, but with the knowledge that there were many other applications from more traditional areas than oral history, expectations were not high. Preparations were on hold.

Such was the level of funding fatigue that when the good news did arrive, the successful team felt abashed at the amount of work that lay ahead. Reading the positive reports from all the referees led to considerable puzzlement. How did this happen? Was it due to Morrison's good reputation in the scholarly community or perhaps some of the academics who participated in the Learned Societies conferences in past years were now on selection committees. Either way, COHA would finally realize its long standing objective of publishing an inventory/directory/guide. More good fortune came COHA's way with the hiring of Normand Fortier to compile and edit the *Guide*. His ability to single-handedly take the Guide from an outline on an application form to a final product which surpassed all expectations gave COHA just cause for pride.

My role as fund-raiser ended on a happy note as did my activity within COHA. By 1993, I had a new position at the National Archives and was no longer "the oral history archivist". Archivists who share a passion for oral history are somewhat rare, but in 2000 Caroline Forcier Holloway joined the audio-visual section and soon inherited my own oral history backlog, unrealised goals (a pro-active oral history acquisition policy) and duties within COHA.

To me, COHA still holds promise and potential. It could be an effective lobby group making presentations to governments to create funding programs for oral history. It could develop contacts and alliances with creators and organizers such as free lance broadcasters and Learned Associations such as Folklore. The core of COHA may remain with those whose permanent work is directly connected with oral history such as professors who teach oral history courses, folklorists who record it and archivists who acquire it.

Many valuable memories of the past are only here today because of oral history. Much of the past is still neglected inside and outside of archives. The mission of COHA is valid and worth pursuing. The validity of its goals, such as updated index, will continue to attract support. Despite constant resource and financial challenges, a quick look at a well-used *Guide* or back issues of the *COHA Forum* reveal the depth of its collective accomplishment.

## Endnotes

1. The Opportunities for Youth and New Horizons (Seniors) programs funded several interesting oral history projects such the War and Canadian Society, which employed graduate students to document the impact of World War One on domestic Canadian society and Man Along The Shore, which documented the experiences of longshoremen.
2. Folklorists were a strong force within COHA and their long time work in creating life histories qualified them to claim the term "oral historian." Many good articles based on life histories can be found in the Mercury series published by then Museum of Man and Nature. Most oral history work in Quebec took the form of life histories which were more closely identified with folklore and sociology. Quebec was under-represented within COHA, although attempts were made at the beginning to maintain both an english and french language secretary.
3. Much underestimated work was done during this period by Donna Porter from the National Archives who diligently kept the finances updated, answered the calls from libraries concerning the *Journal* and maintained the membership list.