History on the Grand

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"Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Business History as Local History Through the use of Oral Interviews"

Oral history, to the uninitiated, sounds like a painful procedure a dentist might perform. In fact oral history is a way of doing history, a way of collecting evidence, of engaging with the past, and unique to oral history, a way to truly dialogue with historical figures. This might sound a bit shocking at first. For many people, "doing history" is supposed to be about uncovering the past, the long distant past it seems. So how can we actually dialogue with the actors in our past, especially the distant past? If former prime minister Mackenzie King thought he could talk to his deceased mother and even turn of the century prime minister Wilfrid Laurier, surely others can do it too?[1] The key is in how you view history, in how you view the past.

Before the 1960s, Canadian history texts generally began with the "discovery of the New World" by European explorers. Historians made these sorts of conclusions because of their preference for archival sources, essentially written documents. In the same way, historians have also traditionally shied away from seeing non-textual things as evidence, such as artefacts. While historians were busy focusing on written documents, they left the study of pre-contact aboriginal societies to anthropologists and archaeologists and that is why older texts tended to start with the European discovery of Canada. But this all changed with the rise of social history in the 1960s. This new approach to history valued the study of ordinary people in the past, the workers, the women, the visible minorities, and not just the rich or powerful, the kings or prime ministers.

This meant a change in the way historians did history, in the types of evidence that they collected and valued. This led to a growing respect that historians placed on oral history and to the idea that there are valuable pieces of information we can discover this way and we do not just have to rely on the traditional written records that historians have always valued.

The tradition of handing down the history of each aboriginal nation orally from generation to generation was firmly established long before the Europeans began colonising North America and it has continued to thrive. However, the term oral history, for many, conjures up memories of the old children's game of telephone, where one person says something and then each person whispers it to the next person until the message travels around the circle. By the end of the game invariably the message has been changed and twisted from the original one, usually in a pretty humorous way. But we must challenge ourselves to think about oral history differently, to take it seriously, especially when we are dealing with native history, but also for all types of oral history.

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[1] See C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976).

One of the best ways to discount the scepticism surrounding oral history is to place it in terms we can appreciate. For native peoples, stories passed on orally from generation to generation are carefully and lovingly preserved and respected so that they become part of the fabric of the culture. We can compare this to someone reciting the words to *O Canada* incorrectly today. Because these words are part of our lexicon, that person would be immediately corrected by one of his or her peers.[2]

We can see the importance of oral history through the words of an aboriginal woman herself. Annie Ned, a Yukon elder in her nineties, recently cooperated with anthropologists and gave oral interviews about her people's history. She explained that it was not just her telling stories to the researcher, but in fact she was just a type of messenger. "I'm going to put it down who we are," she said. "This is our *Shagoon*—our history. You don't put it down yourself, one story. You don't put it down yourself and then tell a little more. You put what they tell you, older people. You've got to tell it right. It's not you telling it, it's the person who told you that's telling the story," and so on and so on.[3] Annie Ned reveals for us the type of reverence oral tradition holds for native peoples and I would argue that this can be true for all types of history, including local history.

Oral history has such an important place in native culture that many historians have come to respect it in the same way that they do written records. One of the most interesting calls for the need for oral history that I have ever heard comes not from a historian but from one of Canada's most celebrated authors.

Margaret Atwood has written numerous novels and collections of short stories and poetry. Her works tap into a real sense of an age or a period. She does this perhaps most potently in her historical novel *Alias Grace*, where she takes as her main character a real historical figure, Grace Marks, who was convicted of a murder which occurred north of Toronto in 1843.

Atwood reveals the challenges of writing this historical novel when she explains "there is—as I increasingly came to discover—no more reason to trust something written down on paper then than there is now. After all, the writers-down were, and are, human beings, and are subject to error, intentional or not...and their own biases."[4] She further shares her frustration "as well not by what those past recorders had written down but by what they'd left out. History is more than willing to tell you who won the battle of Trafalgar and which world leader signed this or that treaty, but it's more reluctant about the now obscure details of daily life. No body wrote these things down because everyone knew them and considered them too mundane and too unimportant to record."[5] So Atwood

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[2] I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Susan Neylan, Wilfrid Laurier University, for this defense of native oral history.

[3] Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples: Volume 1, Beginnings to 1867*, 4th edition (Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 10.

[4] Margaret Atwood, "In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," in *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982-2004* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004), p. 213.

[5] Atwood, p. 213.

found herself wrestling not only with who said what about Grace, but also with things like how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names and how to store parsnips.

When we “do” oral history what we are doing essentially is revealing the footsteps of ordinary people in the past and helping to uncover those so called mundane and ordinary things in the past about which we crave information today.

I have been “doing” oral history for over a decade, professionally as a historian, and unofficially as a daughter and granddaughter. My first taste of oral history came in a very personal way as it often does. My maternal grandmother always lived nearby when I was growing up in Cambridge. She was a regular part of my life as were her stories of growing up in an island mining community in Newfoundland. But for my cousins in Vancouver, the joy of listening to a grandmother’s stories was something they rarely got to experience. As my grandmother’s health deteriorated, my west coast cousins and their mother, my mom’s sister, vowed to capture some of those stories that they had never gotten to hear first hand. So for her birthday one year they sent my grandmother a small tape recorder and asked her to record some of her experiences growing up. My grandmother felt self-conscious about doing this so asked my mother and I to sit with her while she told her stories into the tape machine.

As a history graduate student I thought this was fantastic. This was not only my first real experience with oral history, but I actually learned more about my grandmother and her early life than I had in my previous quarter century visiting her on a weekly basis. It was because she was being asked to tell her story that my grandmother made a conscious effort to include lots of details and colour and description. I learned the most amazing things about this woman and I guess for the first time I began to see her as that, a woman, rather than just as a grandmother.

I learned that because of a debilitating case of the skin condition eczema, she did not formally attend school until age 10. I learned why she started smoking (the effects of which undoubtedly shortened her life). She was an asthma suffer from an early age and during her first pregnancy with my now 67 year old uncle, she experienced severe breathing problems so she asked her doctor what she could do about it. His advice, unbelievable to us today, was to take up smoking, arguing it would help her to relax.

A very special thing about oral interviews is that you do not only discover stories about the people you are interviewing but you can also benefit from all those stories that have been handed down to them throughout the generations. For example, my grandmother told the story of how her parents came to be married. It seems my great grandfather was a widower twice over and of middle age when he met my great grandmother. My great grandmother was the youngest of a large family and was quite reluctant to marry at all, let alone a man much older than she was. For this reason the courtship was quite drawn out but eventually ended in a wedding. It was not until my great grandfather walked into the church for the ceremony and removed his hat that my great grandmother realised he was bald. She had never seen him without his hat on before, which certainly reveals

something about the formality of the courtship expected in the earliest years of the 20th century.

My grandmother took this task of recording her life story very seriously. It became a sort of mission for her despite her increasingly failing health. As it turned out, the final tape was in the mail somewhere over the prairies on the way to my cousins in Vancouver when my grandmother died on a snowy day in early 1995. As I learned more about her and her early experiences and those of her parents, it made me want to take up this tool of oral history for more personal as well as professional uses.

On the personal side, I have promised myself that I will continue the research someday by interviewing my own mother and her siblings. This multi-generational use of oral history is becoming increasingly popular with historians, especially social historians and scholars interested in the history of women. Sociologist Marilyn Porter is known for this type of work and was a pioneer in the field in the late 1980s. For example she undertook a multi-generational oral history project of mothers and daughters in a Newfoundland fishing town in order to explore the change and continuity of so called "women's work."[6] In particular she was interested in how the women of different generations understood their work and how it fit into the overall economic strategy of the household. In terms of methodology, this approach of oral history interested Porter very much because she felt that it allowed the subjects of the study to remain much more in control of the material. Rather than feeling like lab specimens being "studied" from above, her interviewees could enjoy a more democratic and open sharing of information between researcher and subject.

For example, the women being interviewed often pointed out to Porter where her approach was faulty. For instance she set out to interview a mother and only one daughter in each family in the out port, but these women pointed out that this would mean she would miss the importance of birth order among sisters in determining work patterns. And like a good researcher, Porter consistently pressed her interviewees on things like dates and chronology so she could measure change over time. But these things seemed not to be important to her subjects. They instead saw the continuity of patterns of work and the meaning of that work as important. So Porter had to make the difficult realisation that it is often as important to notice what people do not remember as what they do. Above all, what Porter's work does is gives voice to these women's lives and experiences, lives that would otherwise not necessarily be documented as they went about their work in the isolated fishing out port.

Oral history has a particularly appropriate application to local history**.** Local history often revolves around the desire to commemorate a certain civic milestone or anniversary, the founding of a village, a building, a business, or an institution. We can research the dates, the statistics, the major personalities involved, but too often we do not go any further to put the flesh and blood on the bare bones of the chronology. "Where are the people?" we

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[6] Marilyn Porter, "Mothers and Daughters: Linking Women's Life Histories in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, Canada," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 2nd edition, edited by Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1991), pp. 396-414.

need to ask. And to answer this question fully we need to look for not just the big important people, but the ordinary folks too, the women, often invisible in our history behind male pioneers, the workers, often invisible behind the owners, presidents or CEOs. Oral history allows us to bring these people out of the shadows, to paint them into the scenes of our histories, to tell their stories.

Oral interviews can prove to be fulfilling and fruitful experiences in helping to uncover various aspects of our local history. This was particularly the case in researching the history of a prominent Waterloo Region business family with local roots dating back to the 1850s.[7] Perhaps the most memorable and moving interview was with a woman in her early 80s whose father and uncle had played key roles in building up the family business. "Jean" was in failing health but relished the opportunity to talk about her childhood and young adulthood. She described in vivid detail her family's first cottage on the shores of Lake Huron. She closed her eyes and with her colourful and detailed description she walked me along the boardwalk, up to the front porch of the cottage and then up the narrow stairs to the bedroom above where she and her younger brother would play on rainy days.

She also talked with great pride about her mother who learned to drive in the 1920s, a particularly daring endeavour for an otherwise anxious woman. This gave her the freedom to pack the children into the car and drive the 100 miles from Kitchener to the cottage on the last day of school in June. Though the 4-hour drive would have been taxing for a young woman with two small children, it would have been much more comfortable than the old stagecoach ordeal to Grand Bend in the early days of cottage life for this family and many others in Waterloo and Berlin around the turn of the century. Her words reveal the quality of life afforded by the prospering family business.

While Jean's story helps us understand more about the leisure activities of the growing middle class in Kitchener-Waterloo, it also helps us see local examples of larger trends in Canadian history. At this point in the late 1920s, as historian Veronica Strong-Boag explains, young women certainly pushed the boundaries that had kept their mothers and older sisters more sheltered. The increasing use of the automobile by middle class families certainly helped this along.[8]

Jean also vividly described her experience in another event in Canadian history that advanced the opportunities for women. During the Second World War, for the first time in Canadian history, the three services of the armed forces established divisions for women. Jean joined the women's division of the Royal Canadian Air Force. In 1943, just after graduating from McMaster University in Hamilton, Jean, like many other young women of the day, responded to her country's patriotic call for young women to take up

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[7] See unpublished manuscript Sharon Jaeger, "Filling in the Branches: J.M. Schneider, Ancestors and Descendants," 2004.
[8] Veronica Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1993).

non-combatant roles to help free up men for active service. The motto for the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force was "we serve that the men may fly."[9]

She recalled that she excelled at the entry intelligence test and soon found herself able to pursue one of her favourite hobbies, photography, in service of her country with the Air Force. She did her basic training at Rockcliff Park in Ottawa and also took a photo course in Moncton, New Brunswick, allowing her to visit regions of the country that she had never seen before. As was the case for many of these young women, Jean's parents were quite shocked when she first enlisted with the Air Force. They were very relieved to hear of her work in photography, seen to be a relatively safe duty close to home.

As Jean soon discovered, the women did the dark room work, such as developing portraits of the "big shots" as she called them. But there were opportunities for the women to get up into the air such as the time Jean got to go up in an airplane to practice taking surveillance photos while hanging out of the open window. She found the task cold and nauseating and did not mind that no women were being hired to that position since the "men wanted it," as she explained.

In July 1943 Jean's parents endured what her father later referred to as a "hot and noisy" trip to Ottawa to visit their daughter in Ottawa. After returning home, Jean's father sent her a post card picture of their Kitchener home, "in case you might forget what home looked like." On the postcard he wrote that he enjoyed seeing her in Ottawa, especially in her "A.F. Blue" as her uniform was called. Even some 60 years later Jean's face lit up as she described her time as a "WD" in the Women's Division, particularly marching to the Air Force music during their morning parades. Jean's story offers the example of one young Kitchener woman's experience during the war as well as reminds us that local family businesses were sustained by the women, as well as the men, in the families.

Oral interviews have also been used to paint a picture of life in Waterloo County during the war. The two volume project *Proudly She Marched* chronicles the experiences of women who came from across the province to train locally for the women's divisions of the armed forces. The authors interviewed more than 200 women to compile a picture of this chapter in local history.[10]

Oral interviews also played an important part in researching the history of Chicopee Ski Club, which opened in Kitchener in 1934. During these interviews some of the club's earliest members reminisced about social events at the first clubhouse, a stone farmhouse, since the lands were originally farmers' fields. Up until 1934 the only place to drink legally in Ontario was your own home and after 1934 the province began licensing hotels to serve beer by the glass in specially designated "beverage rooms."[11] Of course the old

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[9] Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

[10] Anne Kallin, *Proudly She Marched: Training Canada's World War II Women in Waterloo County, Volume 2: Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service* (Kitchener-Waterloo: Canadian Federation of University Women, 2007).

[11] See Sharon Jaeger, "From Control to Customer Service: Government Control of Liquor in Ontario, 1927-1972" (PhD Dissertation, University of Waterloo, 2000), chapter 2.

farmhouse did not have one of these licenses; indeed the club did not obtain a permanent liquor license until the 1970s.[12] The ladies of Chicopee, in particular, recalled the dread they felt when they saw the huge black boots of the local policeman coming down into the basement where they were enjoying their drinks. They rarely got into any trouble with the law and the après ski drink remained an important part of skiing throughout the club's rich history. These stories, such an important part of the feel and atmosphere of the pioneering years at Chicopee, nicely complement the colourfully written articles in the club's newsletter, *The Skier*, highlighting a valuable use for oral interviews.

Winter sports were not the only leisure activities formalising locally during the 1930s. Westmount Golf and Country Club opened in 1931. During interviews for the history of that club, the stories from its earliest years emerged to showcase not only an institution with strong links to the political and economic trends of Kitchener-Waterloo, but to the very social fabric of the community. For example, one man shared his memories of sitting quietly at the bar of the clubhouse listening to the older men discuss the political and economic issues of the day. Since he was only a junior member at that time he was not technically allowed to be in the bar, but he recalled learning more about the world and how it worked by listening quietly to the post-golf discussions and debates of these local politicians, judges, and factory owners during the Great Depression than he ever did in school.[13]

Business history also provides an opportunity for employing oral interviews. This is particularly the case for certain businesses. Uncovering the history of the Waterloo Region roots of the accounting firm KPMG initially proved particularly elusive. Because of the nature of the business of accounting, very few records were ever kept on the firm's history. Traditional archival research soon uncovered the fact that one branch of the firm first established a local office (its first outside Toronto) during World War One in Galt while another branch of the KPMG family tree established a presence locally in the mid-1920s when a chartered accountant began to practice out of his home in Kitchener. These and other branches went on to expand, through a variety of mergers, to Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph.[14]

It was really only through conducting dozens of oral interviews that the stories, memories and anecdotes of past and present staff, students, and clients could come into view, allowing this history to emerge as more than simply a chronicle of name changes and location shifts. Instead, the firm's history poured forth as a complex analysis of one business' evolution in a local context since these interviews revealed in interesting, colourful and often unexpected ways the intricate ties between the development of the firm and the growth of the local community. Trends such as women's evolving role as professionals, the formalization of volunteerism and increasing emphasis on work-life balance, evident in Canadian business history as a whole, revealed themselves vividly through these interviews.

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[12] Sharon Byrne (Jaeger), Charlotte Doud, Fred Hosking, and Megan Sproule-Jones, *Chicopee: The First Sixty Years* (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1993), p. 78.

[13] Sharon Jaeger, *Westmount: Shadows of the Past* (Waterloo: Digital Print Inc., 2006), chapter one.

[14] Sharon Jaeger, *Roots: History of KPMG in Waterloo Region* (Waterloo: Bravada, 2007).

Group interviews helped manage the number of people being interviewed. The other advantage to group interviews is that those being interviewed tend to prompt each other's memories and build upon each other's stories. However, this can often lead to quite exuberant interviews. One particularly boisterous interview of a group of people, that had previously formed a small local accounting firm that had merged into the national firm, saw the interviewees recalling their former boss and his fondness for profanity. This was not just the under the breath type of swearing but bellowing exclamations in reaction to news, both good and bad, at the local accounting firm. As the interviewees demonstrated how he would bellow out his favourite four letters words, an unmistakeable sense of the colourful character of that small accounting office certainly emerged. But it also seemed that so too did the rest of the building where the interview was being held. Clearly oral interviews do not have to be formal staid affairs; often the best material emerges from the most raucous discussions. While these expletives certainly would not find their way into the written history of the accounting firm, this particular interview set a foundation for an in depth understanding of the nature of that chapter of the firm's past, illustrating such trends as the shift from informal to formal business practices as the firm grew.

The real potential of oral history comes from the art of truly connecting with interviewees and the intuition of knowing what questions to ask, when to ask follow up questions and when to just let the interviewee go off on a tangent. While interviewing a former student at the accounting firm who went on to become partner, he exclaimed several times, "wow these are great questions." They actually prompted him to recall things he had not thought of in years, things that truly helped put flesh and blood on the basic business history of this firm.

For example, he recalled his early days as a student and manager when most of his peers at the firm did not have children. The nature of the student experience was so intense that it was not uncommon for students to work together all day at the firm and then routinely socialise together in the evenings. To ensure that everyone would able to enjoy these social evenings together, they would all gather at the home of the two students who did have children, alternating each week, with the couples enjoying beer, peanuts, "Hockey Night in Canada" and the unspoken bond wrought of their shared experiences as students at the firm.

Clearly doing oral history is important. The key is overcoming the challenges inherent in the old telephone game. The complex interplay of history as an art and as a science helps address the challenges that historians have traditionally had with oral evidence. The scientific aspects of the discipline direct us to use oral history as a complement to other evidence such as diaries, letters, legal documents, or newspaper clippings.

The art of oral interviews calls upon the historian's finesse and instincts. This often means having a keen sensitivity to the personal issues at play as personal, often emotional stories emerge as a natural part of the interview process. During one interview a former student and retired partner of the firm was suddenly overcome by emotions while explaining how he came to choose the profession of accounting back in the late 1950s.

He was recalling that it was at his father's funeral that a neighbour mentioned that his father had always wanted him to become an accountant. This neighbour then went on to introduced him to the people who gave him his first job in an accounting firm.

Only when interviewees perceive an atmosphere of trust between themselves and the interviewer, can they reveal these personal, often painful stories. While the particulars of the story may not be germane to the history under study, they put the overall interview into context and provide the flavour and atmosphere necessary to understand the history of the person, the company, the institution, or the family. In the case of KPMG, the stories and memories shared by the dozens people interviewed elevated the history from a chronicle of bricks and mortar to a fully realised entity which has thrived and interacted in the community for nearly a century. This particular history could not have been revealed in all of its complexity and subtleties without the valuable evidence gleaned through oral interviews.