

## Remembering Pilkington: Pleasures and Perils of Public History

by Elysia DeLaurentis and Debra Nash-Chambers  
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Since its publication by the Wellington County Historical Society in November of 2006, *Remembering Pilkington Township: Lives, Loves and Labour* enjoyed brisk sales and positive feedback. Despite recording the history of a relatively small township, sales have tapped a market that extends beyond nostalgic buyers with direct ties to Pilkington, to a wider audience who see the book as a representative reflection of the patterns of farm life and values shared by other agricultural townships in Ontario. The book's popularity can in part be attributed to community involvement, generous publicity, and content that strikes a chord with its readers. Mostly, however, it is a success as a result of the intensive work that went into it. Creating a history based on volunteer efforts, uncertain funding, and community submissions can be almost overwhelming in the amount of labour it requires. Although as the book's editors, the authors of this paper were pleased with the wealth of material with which to work, obstacles to overcome included the varying quality of submissions, the fickle nature of public expectations, and a relatively short time span in which to complete the task. This paper is designed to highlight the processes of the book's creation, to share insights into the successful strategies used, and to serve as a cautionary tale for those considering a public history project that might entail similar challenges.

### THE TOWNSHIP:

Pilkington Township appears on most maps as a narrow strip of land between Elora and Woolwich Township, stretching from Alma in the north to Ariss in the south. The Grand River flows through the area, long providing waterpower, ice, food and recreation, but from the beginning forming a natural border between communities. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century it formed part of the land, six miles on either side of the Grand River, which had been granted to the Six Nations by the British Crown. In 1798 William Wallace obtained the portion afterwards known as Woolwich Township from the Six Nations. He in turn sold the eastern strip of it to a man named Robert Pilkington.

Pilkington pursued a career with the British Royal Engineers and from 1793 to 1796, served in this capacity in Upper Canada under Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe.<sup>1</sup> After completion of his term with Simcoe and other business in the Canadas, Pilkington returned to England. Though he owned other property, the tract that he purchased in Woolwich Township Pilkington bought with an eye to settlement. He hired James Crooks of Flamborough to serve as his land agent in Upper Canada while he recruited in England, encouraging carpenters and other tradesmen to emigrate to his portion of

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<sup>1</sup> In her diary, Elizabeth Simcoe notes sketching trips that she and Pilkington made around the Toronto and Niagara regions. It was under Lt. Gov. Simcoe's orders that in 1794 Pilkington and a group of Royal Engineers traveled to Ohio, where Pilkington designed and supervised the construction of Fort Miamis on the Maumee River. The fort was to be used by Natives loyal to Britain during the American Revolution and was captured by the Americans later that year. Mary Quayle Innis, ed. *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1965): 94, 118, 123, 162.

Woolwich Township. These first families were hired to construct the mills and buildings that Pilkington knew were necessary to have in place in order to induce others to settle. When by the early 1830s a handful of people had arrived and cleared land, the eastern portion of Woolwich became informally known as “The Pilkington Tract”. Things looked promising until Pilkington died suddenly in 1834. With his estate in debt, lawyers raised the price of his land forcing some settlers to pay more for property that they had already cleared and built upon, than they would have paid for similar land in surrounding townships.

Inflated land prices greatly slowed settlement in the years following Pilkington’s death, but an awareness of the quality of the soil and the growth of nearby market villages continued to bring farmers to the area. In 1852 the Pilkington Tract was incorporated becoming Pilkington Township. That year, the village of Elora ceased its municipal affiliation with the Township of Nichol (in which it sits geographically) and was incorporated within the new boundaries of Pilkington, a union that lasted only a few years. Beyond this brief marriage, Pilkington is different than other Wellington County townships in that there is no town or village within it. Inverhaugh, Ariss, Ponsonby and Alma have existed from early on, but only the hamlet of Inverhaugh is nestled entirely within the township. The most important market towns for Pilkington farmers were Guelph, Elora, and Elmira, all of which lie outside the township’s boundaries.

## **THE COMMITTEE:**

Despite its long existence, until 2006 Pilkington Township had no history book of its own. That is not to say that nothing had been written. William Reynolds had seen the land change since his arrival in 1830. A successful farmer, he had also been involved with the development of the area’s infrastructure in his roll as local magistrate and church elder. In 1866 he wrote a short history of the township which was published in the *Guelph Mercury* that year. Later, W.F. MacKenzie of Guelph undertook the daunting task of recording the history of the entire county, the results of which he published in a series of articles that ran in the *Guelph Mercury*. His articles relating to Pilkington Township appeared in that paper in 1907. The previous year, Elora historian and photographer John R. Cannon began publishing the material he had long been gathering about the early settlers of Pilkington in a series that ran in the *Elora Observer*. These installments later became the first chapter of his 1930 publication, *The Early History of Elora and Vicinity*. Since that time, periodic newspaper articles have explored aspects of its history, and at least one attempt was initiated to create a history book for the township in 1994.<sup>2</sup> Pilkington Council minutes of that year reveal that councilors wanted the township to have a history book, but with only a couple hundred farms in the area, decided that there would be too limited an audience, so declined to fund it. As a result that book never came to fruition, but the surveys showed that the interest was there.

Almost ten years later that interest was still evident when Elysia DeLaurentis pondered the possibility of creating a book. When this suggestion was made at the June 2003 meeting of the Wellington County Historical Society, response was favourable. The general consensus was that a committee should be formed, as had been done with the

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<sup>2</sup> Questionnaires sent to residents re. the possibility of that project are now housed at the Wellington County Museum and Archives: A1999.22

Peel Township book a few years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Through that meeting, word of mouth, letters sent, and invitations in local papers, the Pilkington Township History Book Committee came into being and consisted of eight people, half of whom had some knowledge and experience with local history. The others were elderly residents or ex-residents of the township who were keen to see a book created. Ultimately, those who had initially shown interest in the project comprised the Pilkington Committee, which was chaired by Elysia DeLaurentis.

Over several meetings, the Committee discussed content and developed strategies to organize the endeavour and to publicize the news that a book was in the works. From the outset the Committee decided that it should invite contributions of family and farm histories from anyone with a Pilkington connection which would allow the people of Pilkington to tell their story in their own words. This decision was ultimately a significant factor in adding nostalgic charm to the final product. The other purpose behind the decision to encourage community involvement was to generate local interest in the book, thereby stimulating future buyers and potential financial backers.

Knowing that excitement and buzz about the book would be a key to its success, the committee focused on publicity and community involvement so that the project would appear frequently in the media while at the same time become the topic of discussion at home, work and church. Over the course of the following year, newspaper articles about the Pilkington project were published, brochures were created and distributed<sup>4</sup>, and three public meetings were held. For the latter, Committee members used their contacts and obtained the support of local organizations who were willing to assist the Committee by not charging for the use of their space. Each meeting featured photographs and historical information, a presentation on the progress of the project, and the chance to ask questions of the Committee. An Antiques Roadshow-style event was organized by the Committee as a fundraiser that succeeded in generating almost \$1000 towards the book's publication.

In the course of the book's completion, it became apparent that the Committee could have been, and in hindsight should have been, broken into two groups responsible for separate areas of the project. The half comprised of residents and former residents helped with general brainstorming, but due to a lack of experience and the encumbrances of advancing age, could neither offer much in the way of assistance with most of the functions regarding the book's publication, nor productively participate in the decision-making process at meetings. Some items agreed upon at the time, later revealed themselves to not have been heard by all. However, these members were essential to efforts made to "drum up" local support, staff events, and generate interest through their networks with local church, agricultural, and women's groups. Without their dedication, the book would not have received the volume of submissions that it did.

The other half of the committee was composed of individuals who were university educated with professional or personal backgrounds in local history. It was this half of the committee who in the end undertook the tasks of grant writing, typing, generating promotional materials, all computer work, and negotiating with possible printers,

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<sup>3</sup> Max Mountjoy, ed. *Portraits of Peel: Attiwondaronk to Mapleton* (Peel Township: Peel History Committee, 1999). The Wellington County Historical Society assisted the committee in obtaining funding and offering guidance.

<sup>4</sup> Aside from making flyers available in public areas, the Committee also targeted residents of the geographic area that was formerly Pilkington Township via a distribution service offered by Canada Post.

publishers, and editors. Had the committee been broken into two specific groups designed to undertake these different functions from the beginning, the tasks and the meetings would have been accomplished much more efficiently.

### **THE PHOTOGRAPHS:**

The Committee knew that a well-illustrated book would have greater sales appeal and anticipated being offered numerous photographs. At the same time it realized that images used in the publication would have to be digitized, but thought it unwise for anyone to be personally responsible for the receipt and return of so many heirlooms. Following the example of the Peel Township Book Committee who had held “scan your photos” events, the Pilkington Book Committee approached the Wellington County Museum’s Archivist, Karen Wagner, for help. As the materials gathered during the book’s compilation would ultimately be donated to the County Archives, she agreed to supervise the scanning of photographs loaned by the public. Informed by media announcements, lenders booked appointments at the WCMA to have their photos scanned while they waited. Using this process, the front and back of the pictures were photocopied and other identifying and contact information was recorded. The images were also given WCMA photo numbers in advance to allow for ease of sorting, and so that numbers could be cited in the book along with the donor’s name. This process would simplify later requests for duplicates of the images published in the book. Now interested parties need only contact the Archives and quote the photograph number.

All images were scanned as high resolution TIFs at 100%. For the most part this worked well, as most were published at that size or smaller, however it was not until laying out the book that the editors realized that it should have been done slightly differently. By scanning the images at 100%, one forfeited the option of using those images at a larger size. This means that a 4 x 6” photo couldn’t be reproduced in the book to fill the page without becoming blurry. In hindsight, the images should have been scanned at a minimum of 200% to offer the option of enlarging them if needed.

As a result of its successful campaigns, the Committee received almost 600 images and hundreds of contributions from people working century farms, from those with memories of their younger days, from people with stories of their ancestors, and from those relatively new to the area. Publicity and word of mouth ensured that submissions arrived from as far away as Texas and British Columbia. Some Committee members also undertook interviews which provided rich, detailed accounts of life in Pilkington in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **THE EDITORS:**

By appealing to the public for contributions, the Committee ensured that the project remained a volunteer effort. Projected costs did include editing, layout and printing, so monetary donations were welcomed<sup>5</sup> and applications were submitted for government funding. Money raised in advance would mean a more affordable book. Disappointed in the paucity of government funding, some of these costs had to be cut.

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<sup>5</sup> The Wellington County Historical Society, as the publisher, provided tax receipts for all donations made to the Society and earmarked for the Pilkington book. This facilitated and encouraged donations.

Elysia DeLaurentis and Debra Nash-Chambers eased the situation by offering to edit the book as a non-paid academic project, an editorial arrangement that is the exception rather than the rule in most large-scale public history ventures.

The collaborative experience of the co-editors was a rewarding one. Both had researched and written about local history and their professional backgrounds proved to be assets. DeLaurentis' archival and research experience complemented the academic skill set of Nash-Chambers whose research and teaching not only included prior work on Wellington County but emphasized social history, particularly family history. The advantage of having co-editors was that DeLaurentis, through her prior involvement, was thoroughly familiar with the material and Nash-Chambers brought 'fresh eyes' to the project. The bulk of the editing was undertaken during seven intense months in 2006, and was kept on task and on schedule. Such projects are time consuming and often tedious due to the quantity and uneven quality of material. Yet in the case of the Pilkington history, the multitude of submissions and supplemental research culled from primary sources became a plus rather than a minus, as inferior offerings could be pared down to eliminate errors, or be replaced with alternate material.

### **THE CHALLENGES:**

Though the editors were delighted with the quantity of material with which they were given to work, some of it presented problems. They discovered that differing views as to the purpose of local history existed both within the Committee and the community. For half of the Committee, and for most of the younger submitters, a collection of personal anecdotes and family histories, be they "good" or "bad", would combine to provide an overview of life in Pilkington. Others believed that the purpose of local history was to glorify the good in a romanticized perception of the past, and as such, allowed no place for the bad. This proved a hurdle for the editors who knew that conceptions of "badness" change by the generation, and that all submissions offer insight into the lives of residents. Items that some thought "not proper" for a book were incidents of poverty, crime, mental illness, and anguish. While these lamentable realities were not pleasant, they reflect life and are therefore valid aspects of a social history. The editors found certain participants' aversion to these negative aspects of family and community ironic, as most farmers will be quick to relate that farming is an occupation fraught with hardships brought on by weather, disease, markets, and dangerous working conditions.

The issue of addressing current political correctness within the broad spectrum of multigenerational sources also proved a challenge. Some chroniclers were hesitant to elaborate on instances of racism. Others included these accounts while acknowledging that such practices would not be acceptable by 2006 standards. This was most pronounced when the editors reviewed the tales about Pat Johnson, who in the 1940s was a local fortuneteller and one of Pilkington's few black residents.<sup>6</sup> Several recalled him, but none knew his last name. He had been known as Pat and by a disparaging term indicating the colour of his skin. Despite the fact that it illustrated the time in which he lived, with 2006 attitudes in mind, the editors felt uncomfortable dropping such an emotionally charged label onto the page. On the other hand if they referred to him by his

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<sup>6</sup> These reminiscences are found in Elysia DeLaurentis and Debra Nash-Chambers, *Remembering Pilkington Township: Lives, Loves and Labour* (Fergus, 2006) p. 96.

name alone, most older people reading the book would not know who was meant. In the end the editors replaced the offensive name with “Pat Johnson”, except in one instance where they retained a woman’s account that included the less offensive term, “Pat the Negro”.<sup>7</sup> Those born prior to World War II also occasionally made derisive comments regarding people from other ethnic groups or political affiliations. While they were not as jarring as racial epithets, such comments were also edited due to their offensive intent. While the tales of Pat Johnson provided the most flagrant example of the changing standards of political correctness, race was not the variable that provided a litmus test for the changing nature of social bias over the generations profiled in the book.

The perceived shame associated with certain events also illustrated the generational changes in social conventions. When speaking to elderly residents, almost all told us versions of two specific stories. One was of Benny Elkerton’s dramatic suicide in 1941<sup>8</sup> and the other was of Ida Cromar being beaten with a rifle by the hired man on her farm, after which he turned the gun on himself<sup>9</sup>. Although these stories have been retained in local memory, and were deemed significant enough to share with us at the time, all of those who told them requested that their versions not be used in the book due to the stigma they attached to them. How did the editors respect people’s wishes while still including these two events popularly thought to be so significant? They went to a relatively blameless source, the local newspaper, and reproduced the accounts of these events as they were described at the time. Overall, contemporary newspaper articles revealed themselves to be a wonderful way to fill gaps, elucidate items recalled in passing, and through the distance of time, act as a more neutral contributor.

One of the largest tasks the editors faced was determining accuracy, and the extent to which this should or could be done. One of the advantages of interviews, recordings, and reminiscences was the intimacy and immediacy that they provided. Yet the editors were aware at the outset that people tend to remember the incidents that stand out in life, and that time can dim the recollection when it comes to specifics. For this reason they used the book’s introduction to caution researchers not to take these facts as gospel without consulting primary sources at local archives. At the same time, the editors hoped to ensure as best they could that written accounts were as factual as possible.

Of the hundreds of written items that were submitted, only a handful started life as typed and well-composed works of prose. These required little work to make them print-worthy, but the bulk of submissions were hand-written (in some cases scrawled), often disjointed, contradictory, and with little thought to spelling and grammar. Though accepting these hand-written submissions meant hours of data entry, the Committee wanted to ensure that even people with few computer skills would feel no impediment to making a contribution to the book. By digitizing submissions as they came in, the work it took to type, correct spelling, and reorganize sentences was not left as one enormous chore. To ensure that the original text was always available, the transcription was stapled to the original for quick referral if necessary.

Though time consuming, most editing of grammar was not difficult, even in keeping with the style of the author. What proved a huge task was determining the correct spelling of names. Former residents provided no less than six different spellings for the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.98.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

name “Wheeler”, but not one chose the spelling that the Wheeler family used. It was difficult for the editors to determine if an individual’s name was, for example, “Marjorie Thomson” or “Margery Thompson”, if either was right, or if these were two separate women. For many cases it was not until the index was compiled that the indexer highlighted alternate name spellings that needed attention. In order to be as accurate as possible, the editors relied on tombstone transcriptions and other sources that showed how the family likely spelled their own name.

Many people who submitted information had no previous dealings with recording history, so the editors were prepared for variety in what they received. While most reminiscences were fresh and immediate, other submissions seemed painfully familiar. Many contributors lacked knowledge of the nature and unacceptability of plagiarism due to their inexperience with academic work and publishing. This turned out to be an issue in accepting items from the general public. What assisted the editors in determining plagiarized passages was their familiarity with relevant published sources from which one could have “borrowed”. These included historical atlases, Elora history books, and published local history articles. A change in the writer’s style and tone also provided keys to identifying intentional or unwitting plagiarism. For example, the editors knew that any sentence using a stilted phrase such as, “...in the fifty-fourth year of his age”, had been written by another author in an earlier time. Some submitters copied entire paragraphs verbatim then signed their names to their offerings. They mistakenly believed that transcription made the work their own intellectual property. In one case a participant thought that by changing the word “hardy” to “sturdy” in a sentence, the phrase was no longer plagiarized. To protect the academic integrity of the book, the editors did not include any “suspect” copy that they could not identify and credit. Careful editing insured that these deletions in no way impeded the flow of the book.

## **THE CHAPTERS:**

Overall, the editors were pleased that the variety of information collected for the book revealed so much about life in Pilkington. Farming remained a consistent part of the socio-economic landscape, but it also changed with the passing of time and the development of new technologies. Following the patterns that emerged, the book is divided into chapters dedicated to labour, friendship and entertainment, education, religion, the hardships associated with rural life, improvements in rural services, and traditional family and farm histories. Each chapter seeks to explore the elements of life experienced by those living in a rural, predominantly agricultural area, and as such, chapter designations are based on the strongest recurrent themes that emerged from the massive, disparate collection of materials gathered over three years. Each offers an extensive pictorial record, with the published photographs chosen to reflect the thematic emphasis of each chapter and to document the time period being studied.

The family histories were collated alphabetically for ease of reader access, and the conceptual design dictated that they would form the final chapter. The most difficult to compile, the chapter on religious life was one of the six chapters intended to offer a broader context for the family histories, as well as serving as a ‘stand alone’ social history by evoking the experiences of many generations. Though it met our conceptual and aesthetic criteria, the chapter on religious life took more editorial diligence than its

status as the shortest chapter would seem to indicate. Its placement in fourth position does not really reflect the place religion and faith occupied in the lives of the generations residing in Pilkington, with its sustained predominance of Mennonite and other Christian denominations. However, artistically and practically it seemed the logical placement for an important feature of life that lacked the most in printable copy. Pride taken in the existing published history of one's church, or feelings of inadequacy due to the seriousness of the subject, may have induced the rampant plagiarism associated with the themes of faith and devotion. Further, a broad pictorial brush had to be applied by including marriages and christenings to provide a sufficient photographic record for this chapter. Happily, the end product blends well with the rest of the contextual chapters designed as a prelude to the family histories.

The chapter titles had a purpose beyond mere chapter designation. Each states the theme, but also gives resonance to the lives of residents by quoting a phrase from one of the popular submissions that the editors felt reflected the essence of that section. For example, the chapter titled "Chores and Labour on the Farm" is prefaced by the quotation, "Anything and everything that had to be done". The phrase captures the spoken reflection of Florence Turner from her reminiscences of childhood responsibilities on the family farm<sup>10</sup>. It reflects both the unquestioning work ethic and interdependence of family on a working farm, as well as the lack of spare time afforded children prior to the greater mechanization of farming. Each quotation used in the chapter titles seeks to capture the spirit and values of the population profiled between the covers of *Remembering Pilkington*.

Throughout the process, the editors maintained a wonderful working relationship with Mark Heine, a talented layout designer who aided them in determining the look and internal organizational structure of the book once the final decisions on content were made. Due to the suggestions he offered<sup>11</sup>, the risk was reduced when the editors were making key artistic decisions. He worked directly with the editors and allowed them a great deal of input with regard to the look of both the covers and content. He guided the integration of longer submissions with those that were comparatively brief and with those that were so small that the editors dubbed them vignettes.

Because of its coffee-table book format, with its width exceeding its height, numerous vignettes could be tucked between larger entries. Most vignettes and larger submissions came with existing titles, however oral history transcriptions and untitled submissions were also given titles for consistency. Clear source attribution is provided after the descriptive title for each printed segment. Some internal titles are simple identifying statements like "Making Butter and Maple Sugar"<sup>12</sup> while others were more entertaining such as "And this Little Piggy Stayed at Home"<sup>13</sup>. The submissions chosen are a blend of history approached as "serious business" and as humorous anecdotes. For example, Anthony Bowman shared an amusing family story from the 1930s. Noah Bowman's car was prone to a sudden loss of steering, and after one of these minor accidents, his teetotaler mother, a conservative Mennonite, was left feeling nervous. She

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> When working on this project, Mark Heine worked for Landgraff Design of Mississauga. He now operates his own graphic design company out of Salem, Ontario.

<sup>12</sup> DeLaurentis and Nash-Chambers, *Remembering Pilkington Township: Lives, Loves, and Labour*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

then confessed to taking whiskey for her “racing heart” in order for the family to help her find some “medicine”.<sup>14</sup> All in all, the material reproduced in the book reflects the widely divergent personalities, fortunes and family dynamics of Pilkington’s communities, and the hiring of the designer was invaluable in assisting the editors to present it well.

## **IN CONCLUSION:**

As illustrated, the creation of a local history book based on volunteer effort, uncertain funding, and community submissions is a monumental and at times stress-inducing task. The editors were faced with a wealth of historically valuable material, but constantly had to overcome the obstacles presented by the quality of submissions, public expectations, and a relatively short time span in which to complete their task. Overall, the editor’s conceptual and aesthetic guidelines assisted them in compiling a collective social history of Pilkington that met their objectives and expectations as well as pleasing the Pilkington Committee and the publisher. The individual submissions, oral histories, approved reprints, primary sources and photographs, all worked well to provide insights into the patterns and significant changes in the lives of Pilkington’s residents over the past century and a half. Quick sales and the positive feedback received from peers and readers have been gratifying. Every public history project will have its own unique set of challenges that, with attention to detail and careful planning, can be overcome. In the end, the pleasures of this project far outweighed the perils.

Word count: 4558

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 121.