

## Recherche en cours / Research in Progress: Community-building History

By Lorraine O'Donnell

In a recent reply to Steven High's H-Canada posting regarding historians sharing authority,<sup>1</sup> I used the expression "community-building history" to describe my work. CHA *Bulletin* editor John Willis asked me to elaborate on this for the benefit of fellow association members. It is my pleasure to do so here.

I seem to have made that expression up, at least in the way I use it. Googling the term reveals that others use it to designate either histories of community buildings (edifices), or histories of the practice of community building (that is, of community development). For my purposes, the expression means something different, namely *building community through historical practice*.

I fell into community-building history through the vagaries of Quebec City's job market and population makeup. It so happened that I needed a job while working on my history doctorate. The work to be had for an English-speaker with limited French (as I was at the time) was in providing research and project coordination services to local groups mandated with developing Anglophone communities. It so happened that I enjoyed this new work. It was rewarding to identify and solidify structures, institutions and networks that helped minority Anglophones to survive and thrive. I could see for myself how these projects enriched my life and those of my son, our English-speaking friends, and other members of our linguistic community.

Heritage and history are central to any ethno-linguistic minority group's identity. It follows that preserving and supporting these elements are important for the survival of such groups.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, then, many of the initiatives aimed at supporting Quebec English-speaking community development focus on these same elements. I was happy to discover that some of the community development work I took up as a sideline in fact complemented my academic history research.

Inspired, after finishing my doctorate I went back to school to study community economic development, defined as "strengthening local communities in an era of globalization" through participating "in the process of progressive social change."<sup>3</sup> Heritage and history were tangential to the course work but I was able to focus on these subjects in my written assignments. This gave me the opportunity of carrying out internet research to learn about some of the many history

and heritage-oriented community development initiatives in Canada and abroad. These include, to name just two significant initiatives, oral history projects driven by community priorities<sup>4</sup> and "heritage tourism" community economic development projects.<sup>5</sup> I have not come across examples of other people using the specific label of "community-building history" to describe projects like these, but I would.

My sideline is now my full-time work. To quote from my H-Canada posting,<sup>6</sup> "here are my main projects to date:

- Prospecting for Heritage' project (2005-06). Client: Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network. This project involved working with consultants in four regions of Quebec to identify and describe heritage resources (people, sites, primary and secondary sources etc). I developed an information sheet for data gathering. An interesting point emerging from the project was the extent to which the local consultants knew their history, how much it mattered to them, and the evident gulf (read: suspicion) between them and academic historians, whom they tended to see as outsiders who often got things wrong. I recommended that a big province-wide oral history project be developed to capture the stories of people whose culture is disappearing. You can read my report at [www.qahn.org/document.aspx](http://www.qahn.org/document.aspx).
- The Shalom Quebec project (2006-08). Client: Exposition Judéo-Québec 2008. The goal of this project is to create an exhibit on the history of Quebec City's Jewish community. The project is run by a board including members of the local Jewish community. It will involve consulting the community to build a timeline on the post-1960 period, and oral history interviews. I haven't written a public report but we are considering producing a popular history book and a conference that would bring together academic, institutional and community-based historians (in community development jargon, it would "build research capacity"). Information: [www.shalomquebec.com](http://www.shalomquebec.com).
- I've also been consultant on some smaller projects including supporting the Quebec City Women's Club work on a project to commemorate its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and another one to help Voice of English-speaking Quebec celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Both of these involve(d) lots of input from the groups.

For these projects, I've used as much as possible the participatory action research approach which aims to bring about social change and to involve the research subjects in the elaboration and carrying out of the research."

Community-building history brings its own set of challenges. Here are seven, in no particular order, that I have experienced:

1. Sharing authority: this phrase, which I picked up from Steven High, is easier said than done. One has to accept being told, often publicly (and sometimes wrongly) by anyone in a given community being studied, that one has got their history skewed or wrong. One also has to accept that the objectives and outcomes of a project one contributes to or heads reflect group priorities, not one's own.
2. Justifying cost-effectiveness: community-based research is famously under-funded.<sup>7</sup> In addition, community history projects tend to be developed by groups composed of dedicated and knowledgeable history-buff volunteers and community development agents. The former help out for free and the latter who are notoriously overworked and underpaid. It is hard (both on the morale, and possibly in the face of facts) to explain why they should spend their precious resources hiring an expensive professional historian. One may also have to accept a wage incommensurate with one's worth.
3. Money, again: one also has to contend with serious shortages in support staff (no secretaries, graphic artists or others to help produce reports), funds for essentials like publicity and holding meetings, and other perks available to some degree in universities.

4. The opposite of IBM: insufficient resources, different capacity levels on the part of team members, priorities and plans that change due to community rather than project priorities: these factors can make community-based work inefficient and ineffective, or seem that way.
5. Setting limits: community volunteers often carry out their activities off-hours. One has to know and enforce one's limits about receiving calls or attending project-related events on evenings and weekends.
6. Strange bedfellows: a community includes anyone who cares to or is able to be a member. Working on community-building history / heritage projects means dealing with people one might prefer to otherwise avoid, for political or other reasons.
7. "Community" is not "democracy." Leaders of minority communities, for instance, have been criticized for trad[ing] autonomies such as women's rights in return for control over a community."<sup>8</sup> One inevitably has to contend with undemocratic practices on the job.

But these are provisos, not meant to discourage. Practicing community-building history greatly appeals to my social side, since it necessarily involves teamwork. It also allows me to fulfil my desire to help bring about social change: in effect, I'm promoting local democracy (through participatory action research) and cultural diversity. In these ways, it satisfies me in ways that my academic research has not so far.<sup>9</sup> I feel lucky to be doing it.

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<sup>1</sup> March 31, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Portal.unesco.org/culture provides a useful introduction to this subject.

<sup>3</sup> I undertook the graduate certificate in Community Economic Development at Concordia University's School of Community and Public Affairs. The citation is from the school's website, at [scpa-eapc.concordia.ca](http://scpa-eapc.concordia.ca).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the The Ballymun Oral History Project in North Dublin, Ireland; see [www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/ballymun.html](http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange/ballymun.html).

<sup>5</sup> This is the focus of a "Introduction to Heritage Tourism" continuing education course offered at British Columbia's Royal Roads University; see [www.royalroads.ca/continuing-studies](http://www.royalroads.ca/continuing-studies).

<sup>6</sup> Posted on April 2, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> This point is discussed in Sarah Flicker and Beth Savan, "A Snapshot of CBR In Canada," ([Toronto]: Wellesley Institute, 2006); available online at [wellesleyinstitute.com](http://wellesleyinstitute.com).

<sup>8</sup> Pragna Patel, cited in a United Nations Commission on Status of Women press release on an expert panel discussion, March 13, 2001, available at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

<sup>9</sup> I of course recognize that some academic historians structure their work in order to be satisfied at these levels.