ORAL HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF MATERIAL CULTURE

by Gerald L. Pocius

Our visions of the Canadian past have until recently been heavily shaped by an elitism that marks much of historical research, with a concentration on the political or military leader;[1] much of this bias stems from the reliance of historical studies on written documents as a primary source of information.[2] Only the educated elite left such reminders of their lives, with no equivalent profusion of the written word produced by the generations of fishermen along Nova Scotia's rugged coast, the Irish who tilled the land in the Ottawa Valley, or the solitary trappers who set their lines across the North. Recently, this historical bias has begun to change as scholars interested in the study of the past — historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and cultural geographers, among others — have begun to turn to alternative sources for information.

Of all these sources, artifacts hold the most potential for altering our views of the past. The artifact offers perhaps the only democratic source for rewriting history since it is a product not just of the elite but of all people in all regions, even those that are marked by a scarcity of written documents.[3] The danger of using artifacts to study the past is that they often become ends in themselves, with research becoming bogged down in the minutiae of door knob markings or graining techniques and losing sight of the thoughts of the people who fashioned such objects.

Oral evidence is another source that is increasingly being utilized to understand the past. Used most extensively by folklorists and anthropologists,[4] oral materials can stand alone as a source with which to launch a detailed study of a particular problem. However, like all historiography, different sources are usually combined in an effort to arrive at the most complete understanding of a particular problem. The use of different materials provides a source criticism to check the validity of one commentary against another.[5] Oral testimony can provide such a check in the study of artifacts. This essay will focus on the uses of oral evidence in the study of objects, and indicate where the strengths and weaknesses of such a combination of sources lie. However, it is important to recognize that my comments are directed at this as a preliminary stage of source criticism, and that both artifacts and oral evidence are only the first steps toward understanding the hopes and fears of the people who produced them.

Much has been written on the use of oral sources for the study of the past, with a seemingly never-ending debate about the trustworthiness of oral history.[6] Critics question whether personages or events can be portrayed accurately in a data base that has been transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation, often without a fixed textual form. Leaving aside the fact that any oral evidence is an important insight into the local culture's own conception of its past,[7] many of the critiques of oral history that question its reliability and use have been aimed at non-material sources; in fact, most of the standard treatises on oral history do not address themselves to any great extent to the problems of using oral evidence to study artifacts.[8] Some of the questions that oral historians have raised, such as the dating of specific events that are mentioned in a particular oral commentary, are of a different nature when connected with an artifact, since any object can provide some form of corroborative evidence for the oral commentary. In fact, Vansina has claimed that artifacts often facilitate the persistence of oral information.[9]

Oral materials gathered from a local community — be they about objects or any other aspect of thought or behaviour — must be recognized as a distinctively cultural commentary. What is collected will be determined by the intricacies of the specific culture. The presence of a particular artifact within the community might be viewed as a historical fact, but the nature and extent of oral information available about that object will vary depending on cultural attitudes and beliefs. Objects link the past directly with the present and are direct expressions of the cognitive whims of their makers at the time of their creation. The bearer of an oral commentary about an object might neglect certain aspects of the past that are relevant to the artifact and emphasize others, depending on the present version of historical consciousness and how the object does or does not fit into it. For example, in a Newfoundland community that I am studying the present residents are exclusively Roman Catholic and primarily of Irish descent. However, the community was initially settled by English in the seventeenth century, and only after a hundred years or so did Irish immigrants gradually replace them. The lack of oral information concerning the earliest English houses in this community — many of which are still standing — can only be understood by recognizing the community's present conception of its past as a history filled with Irish fishermen rather than English merchants. This view has obviously led to a gradual decline in the amount of oral evidence available in the community concerning these English structures, while much oral material is still available about the houses of the earliest Irish settlers; in fact, oral testimony can still be obtained about houses of Irish immigrants that are no longer extant. Thus, in this community, information about artifacts that does not fit the folk history of the area has been altered to support that history or eliminated to a large extent from the oral tradition.[10]

The recording of oral materials in researching the history of objects usually involves information gathered in the present that is used to understand artifacts made or used in the past. Obviously, the best method of understanding artifact construction or

use would be through observation, but this is often not possible when researching objects.[11] The presence of an artifact in a community leads to questions being asked of local residents about the object, but it is crucial to recognize when the object's manufacture or use is too far in the past to make the informant's oral evidence completely useful. In general terms, the closer to the present that the artifact was made or used, the better are the chances of obtaining accurate information about it; this is especially true if the creator or user is the person being interviewed. The farther an artifact goes back in time, the more difficult it is to obtain information about its early history. Many researchers using oral sources posit that it is difficult to obtain information about events or practices over 150 years old,[12] and this largely holds true for objects. If artifacts are still found in a particular community but have not been used for generations, we can expect the oral information about these objects to be minimal and often fabricated to please the interviewer.

The accuracy of such oral information can increase, however, when specific informants are sought out who are known by the community as especially gifted local historians who, for a variety of reasons, have learned more about the oral traditions of the past than other members of the community and are able to pass it on to others.[13] Whenever I asked questions about the early history of a certain community I was studying, I was always sent to one man who was known as the repository of the community's history.[14] Even when I was interested in recording other versions of this history from neighbours, I would often be told simply to "go see Mr. Vince."

The actual dating of an object — be it the date of acquisition or the date of construction — is often a source of inquiry in oral interviews. Again, the farther removed this actual date is from the present, the more difficult it is to obtain an accurate estimate. In my study of houses in one Newfoundland community, many men living today built their own houses or helped their fathers to build theirs. The dates obtained in oral interviews of the construction of these structures can be considered accurate because of this first-hand knowledge. The same can be said for any alterations that took place within living memory, such as the removal of large chimney hearths. Specific information that has been passed down to the informant being interviewed by the person who initially built or acquired the object can sometimes be useful even if it is not first-hand knowledge. The dates that are most reliable are those that are tied to a particular event in the life of the person who originated the oral testimony. Several older residents of the community I am researching can remember their fathers telling them that they built a specific house just before they were married. The approximate age of the structure can then be determined from the living descendent's information about his father's age at marriage and how long he has been dead.

In using oral materials to date objects it is crucial that at least a partial connection be made between the object and its reported creator. This is important since much inaccurate information can be gathered when the dates of objects are discussed. Certain cultures often have a numerical figure which is used to convey the notion that a particular artifact is considered "old" although the number itself is not accurate. In Newfoundland, for example, when asked about the age of any older artifact, an owner who does not know an exact date of purchase or construction frequently reports the object to be "a hundred years old."[15] This hundred years is used to convey the notion of age; in fact the object may be two hundred years old or only fifty, but without this specific knowledge it is placed simply in that category of objects considered old. This concept of what is considered old varies from culture to culture and must be recognized in analyzing oral testimony; for example, the Victorian furniture found in the front room or parlour of a Newfoundland outport house is considered today the epitome of "old-fashioned," while in other areas such objects would be considered of relatively recent date.

Since classes of artifacts are constantly replaced and each class changes over time, the presence of a particular object, by its very nature, makes a statement about continuity or change. The person who constantly remodels his house may be commenting on the desirability of current tastes, while the person who wants what is considered "old-fashioned" furniture may be attempting to validate the values of the past over the present. In certain cultural contexts, keeping up with present styles may be crucial, and residents may be reluctant to admit the age of specific objects. On the other hand, as communities move away from their traditions and begin consciously to market the past and become involved in such trends as preservation and restoration,[16] residents may vie with one another for the honour of having the oldest artifacts and may fabricate oral evidence to support this. One of my students, studying architecture in a community near St. John's, recently found that many residents claimed their particular house was the oldest in the community, sometimes positing dates of construction that were obviously inaccurate. They believed that the student represented some type of preservation movement (although he constantly denied any such connection) that might bring money to the owners of what were determined to be the oldest houses.

Like the process of dating objects, the place of origin of particular objects can most accurately be obtained when the person who is being interviewed has acquired the object himself or was told by someone else specifically where it was obtained. When this is not known, informants in certain cultures often have particular geographic locations or ethnic groups that are given as a source to explain unknown origins. In Newfoundland any fine interior furnishings found today and considered old are often claimed to have come from England, although it is equally as likely that they were manufactured in Canada or the United States.

The provenience of past artifacts is sometimes judged by the origins of that object-type today, and a local resident will sometimes extrapolate backwards. There is some evidence to indicate, for example, that the building lumber available in Newfoundland in the past was wider than that found today.[17] However, when local residents are questioned about the wide planks in early houses, they often speculate that all the wood came from England or British Columbia. Even though the wood may have been obtained locally, these origins are often given since the wide wood that is used in building today comes from western Canada and since England has often been used as the probable source of anything exceptional found in Newfoundland.

In studying artifacts the scholar must recognize that what he is attempting to learn about a particular object may not be what the culture itself has considered important enough to transmit orally over several generations, or even important enough that it can be recalled by the informant who used the object or witnessed its use. Generally it seems that the artifacts and processes most frequently remembered and discussed orally are those which the individual used or witnessed in use sometime during his lifetime but which were later replaced by a more modern artifact or technology. For example, many older male residents of one Newfoundland community can remember the use of pit saws to cut lumber when they were young, and some actually used such a saw. These saws have not been used for fifty years or so, but when a discussion about early house-building arises, their use is often the first topic an informant will mention and is frequently his focus of conversation. The other intricacies of house-building that are still in use today, such as methods for laying out the floor plan, framing, or clapboarding techniques, are rarely discussed, and often an informant, when questioned about these topics, will not be able to provide the elaborate detail which he can offer about pit sawing. There seems to be a greater interest in technologies that have been used in the past and are considered to have required an inordinate amount of labour than there is in the newer processes used today;[18] this fascination seems to foster a vigorous oral tradition.

Oral commentaries about the past, regardless of the topic, must be considered in part a type of literary genre, subject to various kinds of basic analyses of form, style, and content.[19] Formulaic words or stock phrases[20] often appear in a discussion of objects, and their general use must be ascertained. Like other aspects of a local culture, certain types of artifacts or certain technological processes are often grouped through the use of specific terms that place them in local categorizations of artifact types. Roof styles, for example, have certain generic categories in most Newfoundland communities, such as "saddle" or "cottage" roof. Knowing these local categories can aid an interview where artifact changes have taken place. In my research, I could quickly ascertain the previous roof style of a renovated house by using the local categories in interviews.

It is important not to accept these generic terms as synonomous with the same term used in another cultural region or in scholarly research. The use of one term may be different for two different cultural regions, and these differences might shed light on cultural adaptation and change. For example, in the West Country of England the term "linhay" is used for a long outbuilding where livestock are kept.[21] In Newfoundland, however, the same term is used for the back narrow rooms on older house-types — often a shed addition. This different use of the same oral term indicates that the back shed in the Newfoundland house may originally have performed the same function as the West Country linhay, that of housing livestock. This terminological link is supported by oral evidence that describes just such a use in many areas of the island.[22]

Local terms for specific artifact types or processes may be considered ethnic generic terms — that is, local words derived by the culture for a certain category of objects — while scholars often prefer to create their own analytical categories to order and study a particular body of data.[23] Confusion sometimes occurs when a particular ethnic generic term coincides with an analytical category developed by scholars, and it is crucial not to equate one with the other. We folklorists, for example, use the term "folklore" to cover a specific area of academic endeavour, while the public at large equates the term "folklore" with anything not true; this is a case of one term being used as both an analytical category and an ethnic genre. In studying artifacts a false connection between these two conceptual groups can lead to establishing connections between a local object and a historical scheme which ultimately might produce inaccurate conclusions about the origins and use of the particular artifact type. In Newfoundland, for example, one of the earliest forms of building construction was a type of vertical post construction known locally as "studding." The local use of this term has been confused with the common notion of "stud" that appears in architectural literature; researchers have assumed, therefore, that Newfoundland stud construction must somehow find antecedents in the stud technology of the British Isles. However, this particular Newfoundland building form can be more accurately analytically considered as log construction. By not using the term found in oral tradition as the category into which this technology falls, other possible origins become clear. This technology appears to be much more akin to early French styles of vertical log construction built in other areas of North America as well as Newfoundland.[24] Thus, by recognizing the limitations of the use of the local term "stud" and realizing that its use can lock the researcher into scholarship dealing only with a certain type of technology, the origins of this Newfoundland form are less likely to be obscured.

Most of my discussion to this point has related either to the origin or use of artifacts. This information is usually of concern to both scholar and informant and is therefore likely to be elicited in one form or another in an interview. However, other questions provide a more complex problem.

Burdened by the reductionist positivist theories of the past, we have been made painfully aware of our neglect of the rich complexities of the people we study. Part of the reason for the increased interest in oral history stems from a deeper desire to record the individual's own explanations of his or her actions, free from the grandiose schemes of thinkers like Freud or Malinowski. But anyone who has done any amount of extensive fieldwork with people and the objects that they have fashioned realizes how difficult it is to elicit answers to questions about complex problems such as style, design, composition, innovation, or change. This does not mean that rules governing such behaviour do not exist, but rather that, like the rules governing language, they are not usually on a conscious level for any of us. Approaches other than the direct use of oral evidence are usually needed to explore these problems, although data gathered through interviews can be used as the basis for analysis.[25]

The use of oral evidence is an important source in the study of artifacts because of any source it is the most reflective of the conceptions of a particular culture.[26] This gives oral evidence both its strength and its weakness, in that it is able to provide insight into local conceptions of the past while at the same time perhaps distorting events to fit that conception. Oral sources provide one step in understanding the history of the artifact, and oral histories and objects both have been too long neglected in our studies of the past. In the end, however, we must be sure that we do not stop at the sources themselves, but rather use them to provide a glimpse into the complex meaning of the lives of the people we hope to understand better.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of elitism in past historical studies see Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), pp.8–12.
2. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.46–52.
3. Glassie, *Folk Housing*, p.11.
4. For examples of studies by folklorists see Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), esp. chaps 6, 7, and 8; Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Folklore and Traditional History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); William Lynwood Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970); Neil V. Rosenberg, ed., *Folklore and Oral History*, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Bibliographical and Special Series no. 3 (St. John's, Nfld., 1978). For a survey of work by anthropologists see Charles Hudson, "The Historical Approach in Anthropology," in *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, ed. John J. Honigmann (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1973), esp. pp.129–30. Anthropologists have recently begun to utilize contemporary ethnographic information in studies of past artifacts, sometimes referred to as "ethnoarchaeology"; for examples see William H. Adams, "An Ethnoarchaeological Study of a Rural American Community: Silcott, Washington, 1900-1930," *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 335–45; Robert E. Ackerman, "Archaeoethnology, Ethnoarchaeology, and the Problems of Past Cultural Patterning," in *Ethnohistory in Southwestern Alaska and the Southern Yukon: Method and Content*, Margaret Lantis et al., University of Kentucky Studies in Anthropology no. 7 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), pp.11–47. For the use of oral evidence in historical archaeology see Marley Brown III, "The Use of Oral and Documentary Sources in Historical Archaeology: Ethnohistory at the Mott Farm," *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 347–60.
5. See R.J. Shafer, ed., *A Guide to Historical Method*, rev. ed., (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1974), pp.117–61.
6. Richard M. Dorson, "The Debate over the Trustworthiness of Oral Traditional History," in his *Folklore: Selected Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp.199–224; Richard M. Dorson, "Oral Literature, Oral History and the Folklorist," in his *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays toward a Discipline of Folk Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.127–44.
7. Jan Vansina argues that "Every distortion is in itself a piece of documentary evidence, either about the past, or about present-day society, and should be treated as such." (Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H.M. Wright [Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1965], p.112.)
8. George Ewart Evans' works are somewhat of an exception although they deal mainly with the oral traditions surrounding material culture, rather than the use of such evidence to research artifacts. Examples are: *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956); *The Horse in the Furrow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960); *The Pattern Under the Plough: Aspects of the Folk-Life of East Anglia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966); *The Farm and the Village* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969); *Tools of their Trades: An Oral History of Men at Work c. 1900* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1971).
9. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p.36; see also George Ewart Evans, *The Days that We Have Seen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p.16; George Ewart Evans, *From the Mouths of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p.182.
10. My notion of folk history comes from William C. Sturtevant, "Anthropology, History, and Ethnohistory," *Ethnohistory* 13 (1966): 22–26.
11. Glassie points out a hierarchy in researching these problems, from the most efficient to the least efficient: observation, interviewing, analysis of the artifact itself. See Henry Glassie, "A Folkloristic Thought on the Promise of Oral History," in *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History*, eds. Peter D. Olch and Forrest C. Pogue, (New York: Oral History Association, 1972), p.57.
12. Glassie, *Folk Housing*, p.10.
13. See C.W. von Sydow, "On the Spread of Tradition," in his *Selected Papers on Folklore Published on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Laurits Bødker (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948), pp.11–43, esp. pp.13–15.
14. Gerald L. Pocius, " 'The First Day that I Thought of It Since I Got Wed': Role Expectations and Singer Status in a Newfoundland Outport," *Western Folklore* 35 (1976): 117–19.
15. This is true for most artifacts in Newfoundland including gravestones and buildings. See Gerald L. Pocius, "The Place of Burial: Spatial Focus of Contact of the Living with the Dead in Eastern Areas of the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975), pp.69–70.
16. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.198.
17. C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective*, Carleton Library, no. 99 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp.46–47.
18. This was also the case in a study I conducted of fence-building technology. See Gerald L. Pocius, "Walls and Fences in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 26, no. 4 (Spring 1977): 19–20.
19. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p.211.
20. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p.72.
21. N.W. Alcock, "Devonshire Linhays: A Vernacular Tradition," *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 95 (1963): 117–30.
22. John J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation*, Department of Geography Research Publications no. 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p.120.
23. Dan Ben-Amos, "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres," in his *Folklore Genres*, American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, vol. 26 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp.215–42.
24. See Gerald L. Pocius, "The Newfoundland Fishing Stage: A Study in Maritime Vernacular Architecture" (Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, Salt Lake City,

Utah, October 1978).
25. For examples see J.W. Fernandez, *Fang Architectonics,* Working Papers in the Traditional Arts no. 1 (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977); Gerald L. Pocius, "Hooked Rugs in Newfoundland: The Representation of Social Structure in Design," *Journal of American Folklore,* in press; Henry Glassie, "Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact," *Semiotica* 7 (1973): 313-51.
26. Robert L. Schuyler, "The Spoken Word, the Written Word, Observed Behavior and Preserved Behavior: the Contexts Available to the Archaeologist," in his *Historical Archaeology: A Guide to Substantive and Theoretical Contributions* (Farmingdale, N.Y.: Baywood Publishing Co., 1978), p.270.