

## Unit 1: Video 6 Transcript

**Q7: How do you find historical stories?**

**A:** How do you find historical stories? I think more often than not, you start with a question, and the question is very often: “Really? Really? Is that what happened? I just don’t believe that.” Or a variant on that, a variation on that.

A number of years ago, my partner in crime and I were in San Francisco at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, and they had an exhibition on crime photography in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s in the States, in San Francisco. And it’s real Sam Spade stuff; you know, black and white. There’s a body outlined in chalk on the ground, this sort of thing. A knife sticking out of somebody’s head, this sort of stuff. And, of course, it was a very American exhibition, and one of the things they said, “Only in America will you see photographs like this. Only in America, this film noir kind of environment.” And I thought, “Really? Really? We’ve seen photographs like this in Canada. What would the story look like from a Canadian perspective?” And that started us down the road of doing research into crime and deviants in mid-20th century Vancouver. So it really started from this moment of disbelief. “That’s how you tell that story? Really? Is that possible?”

I became interested in the question of Aboriginal population numbers because of the way it impacts the rest of the story. So if Aboriginal numbers are falling because of disease from, say, as early as the 1730s, then there’s a whole lot of pieces in the narrative that don’t—the more conventional narrative that most British Columbian historians will be able to tell you—that don’t really fit together very well. If there’s an epidemic in the 1730s, then there should be some immunity by the 1780s. But even if there isn’t that much immunity, because immunities are inherited, if you survive an epidemic, then you have a little bit of immunity to it. And some immunities can be passed through mother’s milk, through nursing, too, to infants. So there should be some immunity built up. Let’s assume there’s not. Let’s assume that the 1780s and ‘90s are when we really see the virgin soil epidemics take off in British Columbia. Then that becomes the context for the fur trade. Now how does that inform the fur trade on the West Coast? Because it’s going to be big; it’s going to be big. If thousands of people are

dying, that's the backdrop for engagement with the Europeans, with outsiders. How does that change things? And it's got to. It has got to have an impact on the kind of relationships that are established and the kinds of reactions that people have, the kind of future they see for themselves. And so you might read a piece on how Aboriginal societies from, say, 1810 to 1825 were experiencing a period of cultural boom, where totem pole heights actually go up. Totem poles become bigger and grander in this period, between about 1800 and 1825. And that's seen as, okay, there's a lot of wealth. Well, there are new tools. There's a lot of new iron tools around, which make it possible to do things on a bigger scale, but that's not necessarily a sign of more wealth. It's different technology that's available. Okay. This is where I ask the "really" question. So in an environment where maybe a third of your population has died off or is dying off, this would be considered a period of improvement? Or are people just—they've had the epidemic, it's washed through, and now they feel like, "We've got to make up for lost time. I'm so glad to be alive. Let's express this through art and culture and music, dance," whatever else. Well, that too is important. That becomes their motivation at that point.

So, it's really that I think historians begin by saying, "Well, is that possible that that's true? Is there not another way of looking at that?" And then you go out and try to find the evidence that allows you to get some insights into it.