

Unit 1: Video 1 Transcript

A: I am Wendy Wickwire, and I teach in the Department of History, but I'm cross-appointed to the School of Environmental Studies. And I teach courses on British Columbia history, British Columbia environmental history, oral history, and one of my favourite courses is a course on the early history of anthropology in our region.

Q2: What is the value of oral history? What are its limitations?

A: Oral history, what I've learned from it, its value and its limitations—I lucked into this topic I would sort of say. I lucked into this topic, oh, in the 1980s when I was pursuing my own doctoral research. And it led me to—I was interested in songs, and it led me to Elders in the Southern Interior, Kamloops, and Lytton, and all through that—Nicola Valley, all through that region. Elders who sang beautiful songs. But also for me, I was very much interested in music. I realized that songs couldn't be dealt with in isolation of everything else, which led me to stories, which led me to their oral history, which led me to their perspectives on their past, which I integrated into a dissertation. And I would say, then, have propelled me all through my career. They are really the building blocks of my courses in British Columbia. I teach British Columbia, always trying to let the Indigenous voices, the Indigenous perspectives on their past lead the way. So my old recordings with 80- and 90-year-old Elders from those regions in the 1980s and '90s, really speaking to that past, have been invaluable. They've informed my publications in ways that I couldn't imagine. Just walking through British Columbia from the perspective of someone like Harry Robinson from the Similkameen Valley, who had such an unusual—in that many outsiders had never bothered to ask—but an unusual perspective on how he came to be there. How his people came to be here. How colonization played out in the region that he grew up in. And reaching way back and also talking more recently about the late 19th century past, as he was told it through old storytellers in his life and how he experienced it. His stories have led to three major books that I use in all of my classes, and that others seem to find valuable as well.

I—in my classes, of course, I am able to use the oral voice. Harry's own tellings of these stories and others, which adds so much to students to be able to hear these voices. In those days it was cassette recordings and books. These days, as I say to people, it would be all digital, online, that would be my goal someday. But just providing those voices in the classroom. Voices on often a very painful period of their past. Experiences of their past that didn't make

their way into our history books. So it's just been a useful tool on so many levels.

The limitations, I actually can't think of any limitations. I mean, limitations if you look at it perhaps methodologically or historiographically. There are always—well, does that really reflect the past history? Memory works in strange ways. It gets worked and reworked over time. In my classes, and I teach an oral history class, it is that which makes it exciting. That it—that people are sort of carrying this deep past, sometimes stories of early or first encounters with whites. They're carrying them into the 21st century. What does that say to us on the other side of the equation where that past kind of got locked up in traders' journals or in explorers' journals, and we have bits and pieces of those. We tend to forget and rely on those written sources. But with the oral sources—just the mere fact that it's living and being retold and has meaning in a 21st century, but it covers the face of two centuries of British Columbia history. That's, to me, what has propelled me forward in the classroom.