

Audio Transcript of Allan Quigley Recording

Section 2: A Brief History of Literacy

Hi.

I know some people find history kind of boring, so I hope by adding a few back-stories in this section of the Guide will make the history of our literacy landmarks more interesting.

When I set out to write my book, *Building Professional Pride in Literacy* back in 2006, (the “pink book” as some people call it), I wanted to include some of the history of adult literacy that I thought was important if I was to going to try to build more pride in our field. Our field, after all, is over 200 years old. Probably the first organized adult literacy program for adults in Canada was held at the YMCA in Kingston, Ontario in 1859. Even before Canada as we know it existed.

But, trying to write about our history, I had one big problem. We had no documented history of literacy education to refer to. No one had done the research. Even today, years later, we have no comprehensive history of Canadian adult literacy education. And the same is true in the United States for matter. Therefore, we have no memory. No heroes or heroines to learn from, no documented founders to inspire us or make us visible in the public domain, or even to help our field attract new teachers, tutors or learners. How can you be a profession with no knowledge of your history? And ours is over 200 years old?

BUT, here’s what is really interesting. When I present at conferences or give workshops on our history, it always seems this is the most popular topic I give.

For example, in Toronto years ago, I gave a talk on our literacy landmarks. The Toronto practitioners who attended were so interested, they started a discussion, then they actually started a movement to write their own histories of their own programs. Programs had learners involved in interviewing teachers, tutors and administrators—both past and present. Many put their stories on their websites which, I was told, built considerable pride among the learners and staff and was even helpful in recruiting new staff. Then they put those same stories together and published a local booklet entitled, *Beyond the Book*.

It included the story of the founding of the Toronto literacy program for the deaf. The history of a literacy program run by an active Ontario labour union. And another was written by the learners and staff at an Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Toronto. They also added my landmarks in that *Beyond the Book* publication and they later asked me to help develop a low vocabulary version as part of their teaching materials.

That booklet was used in many parts of Ontario, I was told. Maybe something like this could happen in your own area or province? Who were the founders of your program? How did your program get started? Who were some of the memorable learners and staff?

But I digress.

Back in the mid-90's, then teaching at Penn State University, I had read about a number of what seemed to, be significant literacy programs through our history. So, for my book, I came up with the following criteria to select what I have called literacy landmarks. These criteria included:

1. A program or literacy movement had to have made a lasting impact on our field.
2. It had to have been organized with a clear literacy purpose.
3. And, it had to have been offered to, mainly adults with low reading, writing and, as was often the case, low numeracy skills.

So, that's how you come to see the landmarks in this Guide and in that earlier book.

But here's the more interesting back-story. .

I wanted to travel to the locations where each of these landmarks had been located to see what remained. Were the landmarks as described in the documentation accurate? Were there any local documents or artifacts still in local libraries or museums? Did any of the original buildings of the landmarks still exist? Could I maybe interview anyone in the area that knew about the history of these programs? Further, were those teaching in the current programs aware of their own landmark history as an influential program?

So here's what happened...

I applied for some travel funds that are made available out of Ottawa every year for research that academics can *apply for—compete* for, more exactly (these are what are SSHRC grants). But I was turned down by Ottawa. I then applied to a national U.S, Literacy Centre at Harvard University that had grants available for research on adult literacy. I was turned down again. Their letter said: "We don't fund this type of research."

I also applied to a literacy funding program in England and to an adult education program at a University in England that also made research grants available in adult literacy. I was turned down again.

No support for literacy history from three countries. Pretty depressing.

What this all told me, and one reason why I am sharing these backstories, is not to grumble about the past (well, okay, I'm grumbling), but to indicate that most research funding agencies, at least in my experience, then, and I believe now, are focused on finding better methods and ways to teach adult learners. And I don't disagree. I totally get it.

But then I ask, "How can we build our field without even knowing where we have even come from? As George Santayana who once said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it?"

So, what to say? Being “bloody minded, “I made a concerted effort to visit as many of the landmarks by using my own money. I would make side trips when I had a chance to visit a nearby city or location using support from my university or maybe, from the conference where I gave a talk or a workshops. I basically would Piggy back on supported travel using my own funds.

And here’s an example:

I was invited to speak in Belfast, North Ireland, at a literacy conference. Sp I made a side trip and stayed in London for a few days in order to go to the Rare Book room in the British Library in London. An unforgettable experience. I was able to see the original 1816 version of Dr. Thomas Pole’s book as printed in Bristol in 1816. And I want to tell you about my visit to the Rare Book Room at the British Museum in London. . . Quite an amazing experience,

So when I went to the British Library I found you enter a kind of “inner sanctum” at the back of one of the huge library floors.

I first had to guarantee to the desk staff that I was not carrying a pen. They could stain the documents. I was given two sharpened pencils and a pair of plastic gloves. The room I entered was in complete silence. I was directed to a small carrel, lined with oak sides and a leather padding to put materials on. It had a key board to enter the names of the materials I wanted to see. A red button would light up when I could collect them at the main desk.

No browsing of shelves, disappointingly. To just get into that rare book room, you need to have a university request it in writing giving a stated research purpose. My university at that time, St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, had done that weeks in advance. Thankfully it arrived in time.

And I saw some pretty weird people there. One guy with a long white beard was always there wearing what seemed to be faded pajamas and wearing a toque. Kind of like Rip Van Winkle. But people clearly from various countries were studying music sheets and huge books that had to be hundreds of years old. Amazing.

So the photo you see of Dr. Pole himself in section two of the Guide is from the cover page of his 1816 publication as painstakingly copied by the staff of the Rare Book room... gloved and wearing plastic aprons, and handed to me like the Holy Grail.

Moving on, for the second landmark, the Port Royal Experiment, I wasn’t so lucky. I basically couldn’t afford to get to Port Royal, South Carolina...which is near the tourist area of Hilton Head.

But I did talk with the director of one of the largest literacy programs there. She was familiar with what later became the Penn School, as shown in the picture in this section, but she didn’t know a lot about the Port Royal Experiment. I had to tell her about that. She was very interested.

And I talked with my friend, Dr. John Rachel who teaches at the University of Mississippi and who published on this landmark working some of Reverend Richardson's original letters held in the archives that were housed at Tulane University in New Orleans. As it happened, years later I was able to see that same microfilm correspondence when I was on the on a board of a Literacy program in New Orleans. I remembered John had told me he could see tear marks on the original letters, and, yes, when I went to Tulane University in New Orleans, there were what appeared to be water marks, quite possibly tear drop marks, on his letters to the headquarters of the Gideons in New York. Richardson and his wife were always requesting more resources. Again, quite moving...

Moving on....I don't have much to add to what is in the narrative on the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky, but I did have the opportunity to visit the original Little Brushy School house where Coral Wilson Stewart held the very first moonlight literacy classes for adults in September of 1911.

Here's how that happened.

I had been invited to give a talk at the annual conference of Kentucky adult educators held in Lexington, Kentucky. The Little Brushy School House building was now a museum in Morehead—a city not far from Lexington. So a colleague of mine offered to drive me over to Morehead to see it. And you will see a photo of the two of us standing in front of the school house in Morehead. I remember how she had trouble getting a key to the museum door—I think the mayor had it—and we went in.

It was such a small room. A bit, what can I say, “staged” for tourists and visitors because there were boots and old lard pails placed on the shelves at the entrance, apparently to show how the kids and night time adults would bring their lunches, or dinners in the case of the adults.

There were long benches rather than desks for the students because the students held slates on their laps and used chalk to write in the early days. There was a big potbellied stove in the middle of the room. And, with the help of my colleague, I was able to take photos of the framed photographs around the walls. The pictures you see in Section 2 are of the actual adult classes. you look carefully, you will see how the men were wearing ties and what seems to be suits. Women are in their dresses. Some are holding a baby.

I tried to imagine this crowded room with the stove burning away in the winter and, what seems to be wall insulation in the photos, no doubt to help with the summer heat. But those wall coverings were all gone when we were there. The whole experience was quite unforgettable.

If you are interested in Cora Wilson Stewart who started the adult night school movement that swept America in a matter of decades, and had an impact on Canada's adult literacy education programming, try to get Yvonne Honeycutt Baldwin's book, as shown in the “Want to Read More” list at the end of this section. You will see there how she was years ahead of her time in

adult literacy. She included African American learners in her programs and reached out to First Nations adults to attend as well. Both of these marginalized groups were excluded from such programs at the turn of the 20th century. Here's a true heroine of adult literacy, but largely unknown in our field. I hope you will read more about Cora Wilson Stewart, "the Little General," as her father called her.

Taking us to the back-story of Hull House. This story began years before I even thought of writing and book, or becoming a professor for that matter.

I was a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University, located in DeKalb Illinois, about an hour's drive west of Chicago. It was 1984. My family and I had moved from Canada to DeKalb Illinois only to find out that many of the adult education classes were held in Chicago. This was because Chicago was where many of the adult graduate students in the masters and doctoral programs lived and worked. I commuted from DeKalb to Chicago with my professor, Dr. John Niemi, who taught the class called: "Teaching the Disadvantaged Adult."

Virtually all of my classes, including this one, were night classes because most of the adult graduate students in my classes had day jobs, and families.

On one of the commutes with Dr. Niemi to his night class, we visited what remains of the original Hull House. Now an historic museum managed by the University of Illinois in Chicago. As discussed in section two, Hull House was part of the national Settlement House Movement to assist immigrants coming to America in the early part of the 20th century. An amazing story. Try googling it up. Just enter hull house Chicago.

And if you might want to learn more about the founder of the Hull House movement, Nobel Prize winner, Jane Addams, you will find one of many biographies listed at the bottom of the discussion seen in section 2. Jane Addams is an exception to this history because her name and Hull House is still fairly well known in the United States.

Turning to the last landmark in this section of the Guide, here is what I want to add as my back story on Canada's iconic Frontier College. Like Hull House, they have a great website if you want to check it out.

Here is one of the best examples Canada has of what I have been saying about the passion, commitment and caring of adult literacy practitioners in our country. I can't add much to the narrative and photos you will see here, or find on-line, but I will close with a sad but, I think, humorous story about Frontier College.

Here's what happened.

It was 1976. I was just beginning my job as Director of Adult Basic Education at the Regina Plains Community College in Saskatchewan. My college sent me to attend what was the first national conference of adult literacy educators ever held in Canada. It was at Algonquin College in Ottawa. I had no idea what to expect. And was so surprised to see so many adult literacy

educators in that amphitheater at the college. I had no idea that there were so many adult literacy teachers, tutors, administrators and government officials involved in adult literacy, but there they were, from all across Canada.

The key note speaker that day was the president of Frontier College, Jack Pearpoint. He talked about the state of low literacy in Canada and told us a story I never forgot.

Apparently, Canada had recently been asked by the United Nations if they wanted to recommend any organization for the International Literacy Award which was given to the country that had done the most outstanding work to address low literacy in the world that year. Jack told us, since there was no federal governmental department that dealt with adult literacy, the invitation was sent to the Secretary of State's Office.

Now get this...

Canada replied to the United Nations saying there was no illiteracy in Canada. Adding, "We won't be applying. **No need.**"

The audience burst out in laughter.

Nevertheless Frontier College's name was submitted by supporters and the award was presented to Frontier College the following year. In 1977.

So, as a footnote to the back-stories, Canada has gone from saying, "**no illiteracy, no thanks,**" to providing ongoing financial and legislative support in every jurisdiction of Canada today. This despite education being a provincial responsibility.

So, here are a few back-stories I have on the literacy landmarks that have come before in our field. We have a proud past and proud story to tell.

So, again, if you haven't already, why not research and write up your own program's history? Let's make our field and the general public better informed and, hopefully, prouder of the work we do, and have done in the past.