



Figures 1 & 2. Parts of the exhibit showcasing the 1919 Strike in the Urban Gallery of the Manitoba Museum.

Photos by the author.



Figure 3. Existing buildings in the Manitoba Museum's Urban Gallery were redesigned as a labour temple and as the Strathcona Restaurant (which was operated as a labour café in 1919 by the Women's Labour League). Photo by the author.



These commemorative activities, though held more than three years after the interviews, undoubtedly had an effect on the interview participants and shaped their oral histories. The interviewees were connected to people in the museum world, in academia, in the Winnipeg Labour Council, and in other groups planning centennial events and exhibitions. They had been informed that I would be inviting them to share shortened versions of their stories at the 1919–2019 centennial conference and that their recorded interviews would (with their permission) be archived at the University of Winnipeg. They clearly understood the significance of their oral histories: they would be helping to

special/strike100/in-the-water-511305892.html. See also Adele Perry, *Aqueduct* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2016); Graphic History Collective & David Lester, *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019); Owen Toews, *Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2018); Evelyn Peters, Matthew Stock & Adrian Werner, *Rooster Town: The History of an Urban Métis Community, 1901–1961* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018).

counter the “[dominant] narratives of the rise of Canadian capitalism and parliamentary democracy.”¹⁷

In Canada, events of significance for labour history have not always received the same degree of commemorative attention as other elements of the past. Public commemorations of Canadian involvement in war have tended to attract more government support.¹⁸ It is only in the 1980s, Cecilia Morgan reminds us, that school curricula and textbooks began to be more attentive to “conflicts between labour, the state, and capital,” moving beyond their traditional presentation of Canadian labour as “peaceful, temperate, and, above all, complacent.”¹⁹

In the excerpts from the oral histories that follow, it is clear that family memories and political consciousness interact with each other and develop over time. An ongoing tension exists between *collective* memory – the “common past, preserved through institutions, traditions, and symbols”²⁰ – and *individual* and *familial* memory. Oral historian Alistair Thomson argues that “oral history can help us to understand how and why national mythologies work (and don’t work) for individuals, and in our society generally. It can also reveal the possibilities, and difficulties, of developing and sustaining oppositional memories.”²¹ For the descendants of those involved in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 who I interviewed, this was apparent. Some (Tom Paulley, Lisa McGifford, and Sandra Oakley) used their ancestors’ stories to craft a personal narrative of progressive politics and labour activism. Others (Margaret Owen, Kathleen Christensen, and Ross Metcalfe) had a more conflicted understanding of their ancestors’ lives.

Several participants at the Winnipeg General Strike Centenary Conference observed a willingness on the part of Winnipeggers to reflect at the 100th anniversary in a way that had not happened at earlier anniversaries of the strike. And yet these six oral histories reveal that while descendants of those

17. Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s–1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 161.

18. Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 102. See also, for example, government attention to the centennial of the battle of Vimy Ridge (1917–2017) and the sesquicentennials of Canadian confederation (1867–2017) and the founding of the province of Manitoba (1870–2020): Veterans Affairs Canada, “100th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge,” <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/vimy-ridge/100-anniversary>; Government of Canada, “Canada 150,” <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/anniversaries-significance/2017/canada-150.html>; Manitoba 150 Host Committee, “Manitoba 150,” <https://manitoba150.com/en/home/>.

19. Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 164.

20. Peter Seixas, “Introduction,” in Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 5.

21. Alistair Thomson, “Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia,” in Robert Perks & Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 352.

involved in the 1919 strike may be more willing to discuss the strike now that it is a few generations removed, some aspects of the strike are still underdiscussed. Most interview participants were willing to speak of how their own understandings of labour and social justice were shaped by stories of family members involved in the strike. But their discussion was limited in terms of the role of the strike in the broader history of capitalist expansion – and was nonexistent when it came to the place of the strike in the history of Indigenous dispossession.

Lisa McGifford comes from a strong labour tradition, which has influenced both her professional choices and her understanding of her relatives' memories of 1919. She is executive director of the University of Winnipeg Faculty Association (UWFA). She worked in community health for some time before getting a law degree and then coming to work at UWFA. Her mother, Diane McGifford, was an NDP MLA in Manitoba from 1995 to 2011 and also worked as a university professor. Diane was involved in various forms of activism and introduced Lisa to that world, as Lisa recalled.

There was a strike at the University of Manitoba. It was cold and raining and fall ... and we took soup to the strikers. And she [Diane McGifford] wouldn't cross the picket line to teach her course, which ... she was a grad student at the time, so you know, how you teach to eat. She didn't cross the picket line as I am sure the employer would have liked her to do. So, that was really the way in which I became aware of unions.²²

These experiences were part of the reason Lisa went to law school; she felt that “workers needed better representation than what was available to them.”²³

Lisa McGifford's great-grandfather, James McGifford, went out on strike in 1919; his son Bob was about ten years old at the time. James “was friends with everyone who was involved with organizing of the Winnipeg General Strike.”²⁴ Another great-grandfather, John Fifer, was also a striker in 1919 and apparently lost his job at Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway as a result.

James McGifford had a friend who was a Webster. I don't know what the first name was. But my grandfather was friends with Jack Webster and Jack Webster was also Scottish. This mattered then, as people hung out with their groups, right? But Jack was Catholic, and my grandfather was a Presbyterian. They didn't always see eye to eye, but being immigrants kind of transcended that particular divide, and they were very close friends from the time that they were seven years old. And they went along with the strikers, and one of the things that they and the other bunch of kids found – boys, I am sure – was a boxcar full of goods that were destined for the mayor of Winnipeg. They broke in. [laughs] And the thing that they found there among other things was bananas, and they had never seen bananas before. They knew that they could eat them, so they ate them, and were violently ill as a result because they ate A LOT of bananas. [laughs] And Jack grew up then to become a chief of police in the city of Winnipeg, which was kind of unheard of because of him being Catholic.

22. Lisa McGifford, interview by the author, Winnipeg, 20 September 2016, audio recording, University of Winnipeg Oral History Centre (hereafter UW OHC).

23. McGifford, interview.

24. McGifford, interview.

Labour Party for school trustee in the 1920s, was a member of the Left Book Club in the 1930s, and took public speaking lessons from J. S. Woodsworth.

During his interview, Tom shared a couple of his grandfather's documents with me: a letter regarding the origins of the Labour Church in Winnipeg, and Les Paulley's written summary of the events of the 1919 strike. At a time when many of the elites in the city's Anglo-Protestant churches were preaching against the strike, the Labour Church offered Winnipeg's workers an alternative interpretation of the Christian gospel. Les Paulley explains the Labour Church's origins and significance in an undated letter:

The Labour Church would never have come into being had it not been for the persecution and final expulsion of the Rev. William Ivens from the pulpit of McDougall Memorial Methodist Church [formerly located on Main north of Higgins]. Mr. Ivens was a brilliant platform speaker and at times his addresses touched the border of pure oratory. I respected and admired him greatly and although often feeling somewhat irritated by his many manifestations of egotism concluded that this characteristic might well be essential to those who felt impelled to assume leadership roles. In any event Mr. Ivens was an unabashed pacifist who detested violence in any form. Toward the end of World War One he thundered his denunciations of war profiteers and such from the pulpit of McDougall Church and included in his castigations the Scribes and Pharisees and money-changers within the Temple. Without in any sense becoming a Marxist he clearly recognized the class divisions obtaining in Canadian society and felt the answers to all the world's problems could mainly be found in the social gospel of Jesus Christ. He acted in full accordance with all that this implied. No stretch of the imagination is required to see that he soon became regarded by the "Establishment" as a menace. He had to go.⁴²

Rev. Ivens' departure led to the formation of the Labour Church, and as it "rapidly began to flourish the decline of McDougall Methodist was equally rapid."⁴³ The Labour Church "reached the zenith of its development" in the 1919 strike: branches sprang up in Weston, Fort Rouge, West Kildonan, Morse Place, Elmwood, and the West End.⁴⁴ Regarding the 1919 strike itself, Les wrote,

It was simply the unified effort of thousands of men and women, few of whom were students of history or social science, to achieve their objectives by the peaceful withdrawal of their labour-power from the industrial market. ... Opinions may well differ, but it remains true that the strike was the finest manifestation of working class unity, courage and resoluteness ever to appear in the history of our country and that it was led by noble men who, with all their faults and weaknesses, imperishably inscribed their names upon the scarlet banner of human liberty.⁴⁵

If Tom Paulley's oral history was the most fervently supportive of the 1919 strike and its role in his personal politics, Ross Metcalfe's oral history was the

42. Leslie Paulley to "Mrs. Fast," n.d. Courtesy of Tom Paulley.

43. Paulley to "Mrs. Fast."

44. Paulley to "Mrs. Fast."

45. Leslie Paulley, "The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919," unpublished manuscript, n.d. [c. 1969–72]. Courtesy of Tom Paulley.

most conflicted. He described his family's extensive involvement in the economic development of the city of Winnipeg.

Because my grandfather was involved with the real estate thing [as president of the Winnipeg Real Estate Exchange and owner of land that became the Winnipeg suburb Wildwood Park], he also brokered all of the deals with the Shoal Lake Aqueduct, so you will see his pictures in Shoal Lake Aqueduct stuff as part of the St. James Pumping Station sale. So, he'll be the guy with the derby hat representing the government in that thing. I think back to a time when we don't seem to have any money – yeah, well, it was growing and there was an economic boom there. Like, I keep thinking that they built this Union Bank Building, the biggest skyscraper in the British Empire, and they have an aqueduct that could service the needs of about ten times the amount of the population than was required, but I think we've lost some of that planning for our future in the current generation. We speak a good game about global warming and protecting our wildlife, but we don't go at it in a big way. We don't bite the real bullet on the real cause. These guys built an aqueduct, I think there might have been 80 or 90 or 100 thousand people here and this pipe could serve 1 million people by water or something.⁴⁶

Though he described his family's involvement in land deals and the water supply, he did not connect his family's history to the history of dispossession of Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg and at Shoal Lake. Nor did I question him about this: Adele Perry's *Aqueduct* had been published only a few months before this interview, and I had not yet read it, unfortunately.

Ross Metcalfe's great-uncle was Justice Thomas Llewellyn Metcalfe, who tried the 1919 strikers. His grandfather's family lived near the judge, and his father was a young teen during the trials. "The judge lived at 461 Wardlaw. My grandfather built a house at 435 Stradbrook. ... They were only 100 metres away and could huck a rock across the street."⁴⁷ The family had to have guards escort them to and from school because of threats received by the judge.

And during the general strike, the judge had no children and my grandfather had five, and death threats were sent to the judge during the trials. ... So the federal government hired Pinkerton guards from Minneapolis. And for the entire time of that strike, my dad and his sisters were walked to and from school every day by Pinkerton guards from the United States, and a Pinkerton guard was outside their house at 435 Stradbrook.

Ross believes that Justice Metcalfe has been depicted unfairly in history books and that he was a fair and extremely diligent judge who wanted to help the strikers while still following the letter of the law. His father and his father's siblings would walk over to the judge's house when they saw the lights on late at night there.

The judge would be laid out on the floor fast asleep with law books all over the floor, and they'd wake him up and say, "Tom, you have to be in court tomorrow. You've got to get yourself into bed." And this is a quote [from my grandfather] that I will never forget. "He

46. Ross Metcalfe, interview by the author, Winnipeg, 1 December 2016, audio recording, UW OHC.

47. Metcalfe, interview.

looks up at his brother and us and he says, 'I've got to find a way to get these poor bastards off.'" And that was the line. I've got that. "I need to find a way to get these poor bastards off."

Through this quote, Ross offers a new, more favourable interpretation of the actions of the judge who tried the strikers, portraying him here as a labour sympathizer. Ross further aligns the Metcalfe family with the strikers in his discussion of employment implications: the name Metcalfe caused trouble for some of his family members following the strike. In 1926, his father was about to be hired for a job as an accountant but, when asked if he was any relation to Justice Metcalfe, was told, "No Metcalfe will ever work in this firm." Family members were reluctant to discuss the strike for decades, Ross recalled.

My aunt Marion and my father – who is Thomas Hatten Metcalfe, named after his grandfather, ironically – umm, they sure didn't want to talk about the Winnipeg General Strike until about 50 years later when I am studying in university. I had to pry it out and then, all of the sudden, my father said, "This is silly. Here, look at this [scrap]book. My mother made this book."

In a session dedicated to these oral histories at the Winnipeg General Strike Centenary Conference, Ross recounted that the judge became seriously ill shortly after the trial, and that as he was dying, he asked strike leader R. B. Russell to see him. Paul Moist, former CUPE president, was a member of the audience at this session, and he recalled that Russell's secretary had mentioned something about this in her memoirs:

Bob Russell was to retain a bitter kind of compassion for Judge Metcalfe all his life.

"The scales of justice must weigh this evidence and judge this evidence. I have no choice," said the judge.

Judge Metcalfe pronounced the sentence:

"Two years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary." "Go home for Christmas."

Bob was given Christmas Day to spend with his family. What Judge ever before pronounced sentence upon a convicted criminal guilty of seditious conspiracy, and then said "Go home...?"

...

When he was dying Judge Metcalfe sent for Bob Russell, he had something to say to him.

"No," said Bob Russell, "I will not go. I think I know what he wants to say. I could not go. Let him die with his guilty conscience."

After the death of Judge Metcalfe it was Bob Russell's turn to be conscience-stricken.

"I was sorry. I will always be sorry," he said.

He never quite forgave himself that he could not make himself go; that he had refused the last request of the dying Judge.⁴⁸

48. Mary V. Jordan, *Survival: Labour's Trials and Tribulations in Canada* (Toronto: McDonald House, 1975), 153–154.

Ross's oral history emphasized the reluctance of his ancestor to judge the strike leaders, the negative consequences for employment of some of his family members, and the judge's deathbed efforts to restore a relationship with at least one strike leader. In so doing, Ross created a familial narrative of strike-related suffering that gave an impression of allyship for his family with those of the strikers' descendants.

Though comprising a limited sample, these six interviews with descendants of individuals involved in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 are revealing. They demonstrate the differences between children's and adults' perceptions of the strike, as in the cases of Lisa McGifford's and Sandra Oakley's ancestors. They highlight the importance of less well-documented personalities in the history of the strike, as in the cases of Margaret Owen's and Tom Paulley's ancestors. They reveal that, while significant events like the 1919 strike may affect descendants' career choices and political views, they need not be determinative; people like Margaret Owen may admire their ancestors while also rejecting their views. Finally, as I noted in the introduction, these interviews attest to the importance of memory (both individual and collective) in oral history and, subsequently, in labour history. This small project is part of a much longer trajectory of work by labour historians who use oral histories and strikes to examine memory, the lived experiences of workers, and the history of the labour movement.⁴⁹ Oral histories like these help historians understand how individual and family memories shape and are shaped by collective memory and its national commemoration. They also, as Jonathan Moss reminds us, "offer individuals the opportunity to share their concerns and uncertainty over public memories."⁵⁰

With the centennial of the Winnipeg General Strike in 2019, we saw an increased willingness on the part of government to publicly commemorate the strike within Winnipeg.⁵¹ The 1919 Marquee, an installation of weathered steel and lights that incorporates a map and history of the strike, was erected on Lily Street at Market Avenue (near the former site of the James Street Labour Temple).⁵² The 1919 Streetcar, an evocation of the streetcar that was

49. See, for example, John Bodnar, "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," *Journal of American History* 75, 4 (March 1989): 1201–1221; Emily Honig, "Striking Lives: Oral History and the Politics of Memory," *Journal of Women's History* 9, 1 (Spring 1997): 139–157; Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, 1 (1994): 5–28; Jonathan Moss, "'We Didn't Realise How Brave We Were at the Time': The 1968 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike in Public and Personal Memory," *Oral History* 43, 1 (Spring 2015): 40–51.

50. Moss, "'We Didn't Realise,'" 42.

51. Darren Bernhardt, "'Lingering Hostilities' Blamed for Lack of 1919 Winnipeg Strike Monuments," *CBC News*, 19 May 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/1919-winnipeg-general-strike-monuments-1.5128440>.

52. Monteyne Architecture Works, "1919 Marquee – A Monument," n.d. [2019], <http://www.mont-arc.com/projects/display/project/84/1919-marquee-a-monument>.

tipped and burned during Bloody Saturday, was placed at Market Avenue and Main Street, directly across from City Hall.⁵³ A plaque in the basement of the Centennial Concert Hall, commemorating the James Street Labour Temple and for some time lost in storage, has been relocated and will be placed in a more prominent location.⁵⁴ These public displays are all the more important in light of the dismantling of the strike exhibit that was the recreation of Room 10 of the James Street Labour Temple at the Canadian Museum of History.⁵⁵ Yet labour supporters would do well to remember Cecilia Morgan's warning that "communities that now insist on their inclusion in the commemorative landscape can also fall prey to the allure of simplistic and celebratory histories that gloss over internal conflicts, ignore complexities, or downplay less-appealing aspects of their pasts."⁵⁶ As newspaper editorials and conference papers reveal, a reluctance to discuss 1919 strike history in the context of colonial history persists.⁵⁷ Though much about the strike has been researched, much more remains to be done.

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53. Darren Bernhardt, "100th Anniversary of Winnipeg General Strike Will Be Marked with Monument, Movie, Books," *CBC News*, 19 May 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/1919-winnipeg-general-strike-centenary-1.4669345>.

54. Keith Hildahl (former chair of Manitoba Centennial Centre Corporation), email and phone conversation with author, 24 and 27 May 2019.

55. "Meeting Room No. 10, Winnipeg Labor Temple," Canada Hall, Canadian Museum of History, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/phase2/mod4e.html>; Mia Rabson, "Winnipeg General Strike Is Out: Federal Museum Dumps Exhibit of Seminal Event," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 May 2015, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/winnipeg-general-strike-is-out-304963481.html>; Joanna Smith, "Museum of History to Exclude Winnipeg General Strike Exhibit," *Toronto Star*, 22 May 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/05/22/museum-of-history-to-dismantle-winnipeg-general-strike-exhibit.html>.

56. Morgan, *Commemorating Canada*, 184.

57. Sinclair, "Racism Intertwined"; Perry, "In the Water"; Adele Perry, "Labour Politics, Municipal Water, and Indigenous Dispossession in Winnipeg, 1919," and Owen Toews, "Racial Capitalism, Settler Colonialism, and the Conquest of the Strike," papers presented at the Winnipeg General Strike Centenary Conference, 9 May 2019.