

THEN/HiER Small projects: HerstoriesCafé Report- December 2011
Rose Fine-Meyer and Kate Zankowicz
Herstoriescafe.ca

HerstoriesCafé has been an important connecting tool for people who work in and think about history, history education and heritage issues. Over the past year, the Café has been an opportunity for interested individuals, history teachers, and history educators to access local history, be it archival materials for their classrooms (two of our talks showcased the collections held in the Toronto Archives) or by networking with historians who are working in the local history field.

With the support of THEN/HiER's small project grants, we were able to bring together diverse groups of people who are working with local women's histories in a much-needed forum; academic historians got the opportunity to meet with history educators who work in museums; school teachers benefited from meeting with archivists and learning about the primary source material available to them locally; community members benefited from meeting with heritage professionals and contributing to the dialogue of how Toronto women's history is expressed and remembered.

What follows is a play by play of how HerstoriesCafé took history education to the streets of our city and made history education more inclusive and multi-vocal. We plan to continue and to expand our work in the coming years.

Our first talk, with scholar Nina Bascia (University of Toronto), dealt with the history of women teachers' unions, and was held in an historic building on Spadina Avenue in the garment district, a fitting place in which to talk about the labour union movement in Toronto.

Historian Afua Cooper (Dalhousie University) was our second speaker who spoke about the range of Black women's experiences in Toronto in the 1890s with her talk about Ann Maria Jackson and Peggy Pompadour at the historic St. Lawrence Hall—a central building in the history of the abolitionist movement in Toronto. Seventy-five people attended this talk on a cold and snowy evening.

Our third talk, with scholar Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (University of Toronto) was held at the historic International Student Centre building (Cumberland House) at University of Toronto to recognize International Women's Day. Her talk, "Women: Health, Peace and the Environment," was appropriate for the day and included several international students.



Our fourth was held at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), entitled “Women and Museums” with speakers Janet Carding, Lynne Teather and Cara Krmpotich (ROM and U of T). This event attracted 120 people and according to all involved, we made institutional history that night—it was perhaps first time in which women’s history was actively discussed at the ROM.



The fifth talk, "Women's Work and Child's Play: Women and Children at the CNE, 1879-Present," was held at the Canadian National Exhibition archives with speaker Emily Beliveau. A tour of the archives was included, which included a special behind-the-scenes view of rare CNE artifacts and documents.

The sixth talk, "Late Victorian and Edwardian Society Teas in Toronto," was held at historic John Mackenzie House, the home of the Ontario Historical Society (OHS), with historian Keith Walden (Trent University) where we served a variety of teas and unpacked the gender and class dynamics of tea rooms.



The seventh talk was held in historic Trinity Bellwoods Park and focused on the history of women and bicycles. Steve Brearton, local urban historian, spoke about the history of women in Toronto; Evalyn Parry performed musical historical monologue-songs about famed women cyclists in history, connecting to historians, educators and the biking community in Toronto. The wonderful summer evening weather provided a special backdrop to the talks and music, which filled the open space of this historic public park.

The eighth talk, entitled "Women of Record at the Archives of Ontario," took place at the Provincial Archives of Ontario amidst an amazing range of women’s history material, and which inspired archive staff to programme an incredible evening of diverse local histories, ranging from Elizabeth Simcoe’s diaries to photos and journals of several Woman’s Christian Temperance Union members. A tour was included, which provided an opportunity to engage directly with primary documents and artifacts held at the archives and put on display for this evening event.

The ninth talk took place at historic Christie Mansion, at Regis College, and featured Dr. Cecilia Morgan speaking about the work of Celia B. File on the Six Nations Reserve in a talk entitled "Among the Six Nations: Celia B. File and the Politics of Memory, History, and Home in Southern Ontario, 1920s-1960s."

Our final and tenth talk of the year was held at the historic Gladstone Hotel and addressed feminist food history. Franca Iacovetta gave a talk entitled "What's so Feminist About Food History? Women and Food: Canada in the 1950s and 1960s", which focused on her upcoming anthology on food history. Jello, rum balls, rice krispies squares and other "retro" foods were enjoyed by all in attendance.

Each talk included an investigation of its own local site history, often provided by those working at the historic buildings, and provided a wonderful opportunity for further insight into our knowledge of historic spaces. The opportunities to work collaboratively with communities of history educators allowed us to obtain space at many of these historic sites. It also provided opportunities for networking. Several historic museums have invited us to return to provide more talks, and to develop ways to further engage with local communities. Each event also featured a question period which allowed community members to engage in a conversation about diverse local histories—a conversation that is so vital to the strengthening of our sense of place in the city, our historical awareness and our engagement with the past.

The response to our events has been extremely positive, and has resulted in many plans for future talks. We have speakers planned for monthly talks well into 2012, which will provide multiple opportunities for people to share their knowledge about the histories of Toronto. We have received a number of letters and comments about these events and it is clear that HerstoriesCafe is fulfilling a pressing civic need: uniting people from diverse backgrounds to explore the place they live, uncover the missing stories in that place, and learn together.

Educators come away having been introduced to new narratives and access to new resource materials and online databases. Teachers and professors have brought their students who have used these talks as a springboard for further historical research. The talks have introduced a broad range of people from different communities to each other who have had a chance to network, which has been extremely positive and has spawned ideas for new talks and initiatives.

The HerstoriesCafe has developed a reputation and our talks are now posted across the province on different websites and through a variety of history and history education listservs. We have done HerstoriesCafe outreach and spoken about our work at a luncheon for a group of professional women who are interested in this initiative and its significance to the community.

All our heritage partners have found our talks a wonderful way to bring a more diverse group into their institutions and sites, as well as a way to increase their visitor numbers. Finally, we are also expanding our educational mandate and are actively discussing the possibility of using HerstoriesCafe as a mentorship programme in various schools throughout the city to further bridge the gap between history education taking place within and outside of schools.

Finally, our efforts have been rewarded with two special heritage nominations this year. We were nominated for a Community Heritage Award by both *Heritage Toronto* and by *Canada's History Society*.