

Lambton County Fellowship

For the independent and research-inclined Public History student, there is an exciting internship opportunity at the Oil Museum of Canada in Oil Springs, Ontario. The continuity between nineteenth-century oil production methods and the technology used today, as well as the enthusiasm of residents for their history, combine for an interesting corner of Canadian heritage.

I worked on a variety of projects this summer, with the flexibility to choose which projects deserved more time and attention. My favourite project involved working with newspaper articles, journals, land registry documents, obituaries, etc. to investigate the identity of the man who brought in Canada's first oil gusher, as there had been debate whether it was Hugh Nixon Shaw or John Shaw. My research concluded that it was the previously unidentified John Shaw, and I had the opportunity to publicize my research in an article in the *Sarnia Observer* and an interview with CBC Radio. Another major report involved seeking out additional information about Hugh Black and George Matheson, the men who were responsible for Canada's largest oil gusher in 1860s. Although they are significant in the Oil Springs narrative, a lot of details about their lives were missing, and I had the opportunity to discover when and where they were born, details about their families, and what they did after the gusher. I also analyzed the boom and bust cycle that occurred in Oil Springs in the 1860s, seeking out details about the number of oil wells and oil well production, but also more interesting themes like population numbers, local retail outlets, and the booming hotel industry. Since these research projects involved consulting such a rich variety of primary sources, I made sure to document and digitize all the sources I consulted, and posted them to Lambton County's FTP site, so future researchers would have a rich database to consult.

My oral history series was a great opportunity to meet more members of the local community and learn about oil history from the individuals whose families have lived in the area for decades, and have grown up amongst the jerker-lines and wells. I also researched, documented, and photographed a series of structures to submit nominations to the Canadian Register of Historic Places, an important step in the museum's on-going process to submit a bid for UNESCO World Heritage Status.

There were other learning opportunities. Charlie Fairbank, whose family has been continuously producing oil in the area since 1861, took me for a tour through his oil fields and I got to learn first-hand about his family and their business. The museum put on a Fashion and Variety Show, which I helped with behind the scenes.

The Oil Museum of Canada deals with much more than just the technical aspect of oil production. There are fascinating stories about Lambton County oil drillers travelling to dozens of countries around the world, exporting their technology and skills. There is an interesting social history. Even the technological side is fascinating because of the way that nineteenth-century jerker-lines continue to function effectively and efficiently! The Lambton County Fellowship is an exciting opportunity to flex your research muscles and work independently on challenging and interesting projects.

Links:

[*The Shaw Investigation: A Review of Sources to Determine Who Drilled Canada's First Oil Gusher Boom and Bust Analysis: Hotels and Boarding Houses*](#)

