

3.2 Oral history and the history of forests

Room 104

Chair: Carin Martiin

3.21 Rosemarie Fiebranz – ‘I never liked doing housework’: a discussion on intersections of norms, made visible by a woman doing men’s work in forestry in mid-twentieth-century Sweden

The 75-year old, retired woman lumberjack’s narratives are illuminating in many ways. She was often observing ‘from outside’, but as she had been brought up by her elderly grandparents, she was also familiar with the lumberjacks’ households’ traditional organisation of work. During her working life, starting *c.*1950, forestry changed a lot; the work was mechanised, and the male workforce gradually became employed all the year round. The older way of life, with small-scale farming for additional maintenance, faded away, and with it, for example, women’s customary work role in cattle-tending. In my paper, I will discuss the prospects to understand the construction and change of distinctions of work along the lines of gender, class, age and civil status, in times of sweeping social and economic transformation. With the help of the narratives of an individual who broke established norms in many respects, I hope to catch sight of possible hidden contents, gaps and contradictions in the representation of the working life in Swedish forestry around the middle of the twentieth century. Further interviews with lumberjacks’ (house-)wives are used for comparison.

Rosemarie Fiebranz has a PhD from Uppsala University (dissertation subject, ‘Land, Linen or Charcoal? Gender System and Household Strategies, Bjuråker 1750–1850’). She has been a Researcher in two projects in the Department of History, Uppsala University: ‘Woodland life – an intersectional perspective on processes of change in Northern Sweden, *c.* 1930–1975 (2007–2010)’ and ‘Gender and Work, Sweden *c.* 1550–1800 (2008–2014)’, and has written a paper on ‘Marital conflict over the gender division of labour in agrarian households, Sweden 1750–1850’, in *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900*, eds. Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson (Ashgate 2005).

3.22 Maria Vallström – Father’s little helper: the construction and contradiction of gender, place, and modernity in a Swedish lumberjack village, 1950–1975

In the 1950s guest workers from Finland, working as foresters (timber workers) in a district in middle northern Sweden, were offered by the company SCA to buy houses in small residential areas called ‘forester villages’ (skogsarbetarbyar). These villages (of which I have investigated five, mostly working with interviews) were built in connection with already existing rural villages, but they must have appeared as conspicuously modern with facilities not yet available for earlier inhabitants in the area, such as bathroom with WC, laundry machine and central heating. Foresters born in Sweden were also invited to live in these villages, but since most of them had left the trade, working with the building of watermills instead, the modern forester in this area often came from Finland.

The whole idea of building modern residential areas near the forest, but also in contact with rural villages, was to make the lumberjack modern, bringing him – and her – home from the woods. Thus it is possible to see the villages as ‘instructional spaces’, a term used in research on urban housing, but in my case possible to use in a rural context. Ideas of professionalisation, specialisation and rationality were ‘built-in’, creating new conditions for living and working, both for men and women. These conditions gave rise to unintended consequences, due to previous experience and evolving aspirations.

Most of the women were defining themselves and other women in the same situation as ‘housewives’, following the ‘instruction’. Being a housewife was one way of getting modern in this context, it was the ‘new thing to be’. At a closer look, they also used the term ‘being at home’.

These concepts were practised in a way that allowed quite a lot of work. Another modern option, of being a waged worker was, not surprisingly, difficult for women, except in the declining use of female cooks in more distant forest worker accommodations, but some of the women worked in the forest alongside their men. My interpretation is that forest work seemed natural, since the experience of hard work was common for these women, who had often formerly been small farmer's wives. The culturally accepted explanation of this forest work was 'helping'; she helped him doing *his* work. Their husbands attained a reputation as very powerful workers and good earners, but could also be described as weak, often suffering from war injuries and thus dependent.

The questions asked in this paper is: how was gender, place and modernity constructed and changed in this rural context? What processes could be traced in the experiences encountered by inhabitants in and near these modern lumberjack villages?

Maria Vallstrom (b. 1967), ethnologist is finishing a project called 'Woodland life – an intersectional perspective on processes of change in middle northern Sweden, c.1950–1975' (with Dr Rosemarie Fiebranz). Earlier she was employed at NIWL (National Institute of Working Life) and wrote her thesis on unemployment, finishing in 2003. Now she is working with a project (2010–13) on rural development with a bottom-up perspective, at SLU (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences), Uppsala and FOU Söderhamn (Söderhamn Research and Development).

3.23 Ruth Tittensor – Using oral methods to understand rural change (Scottish afforestation)

This paper examines the use of oral history to analyse Afforestation – the Most Significant Change in the Scottish Landscape for Two Centuries. I will discuss my use of oral methods, the relevance of the results to modern land management and the significance of people's knowledge of their local environment. By 1900, woodland covered only 5 per cent of Scotland's landscape. In 1919 the British government gave its new forestry agency a remit to buy and 'afforest' large areas of poor agricultural land, because of the pressing need to produce home-grown timber. Despite this, tree-cover had increased to only 6 per cent by 1960. But between 1960 and 2000 a phenomenal increase in tree-cover in Scotland was achieved, the resulting total of 17 per cent by area consisting of mainly non-native conifers. Although there had been academic accounts of the political background to this period of rural history, no-one had ever asked the people who actually afforested 11 per cent Scotland in 40 years: how and why they did it, how it affected their lives, what nearby communities felt about it or how landscapes and ecology changed.

The 5-year Whitelee Forest Oral History Project sought to answer these questions while the people involved are still alive. The remote Whitelee Plateau in southern Scotland was chosen for analysis. Participants from many backgrounds contributed their recorded knowledge, giving a full and verifiable picture. They described a farm landscape rich in natural resources, of great ecological interest, landscape value, benefit to nearby communities and owned by many farm families. But when, after 1960, over twenty farmers sold land to the state forest agency, huge changes were initiated when farm stock were withdrawn, their pasture deep-ploughed and converted into 6000 hectares of thick forest. Whitelee residents experienced five changes in technology and three phases of ecological change during the last century!

The project was overseen by Professor T. C. Smout, Historiographer Royal in Scotland, and sponsored by the British Forestry Commission.

Ruth Tittensor is an independent researcher in ecology and environmental history, an adviser in rural affairs and a prolific, versatile author. Her work links biology with social and landscape history. She graduated in Biology from Oxford University then took a research degree at Edinburgh University in the ecology and history of the Loch Lomond Oakwoods. Ruth worked as a freelance lecturer and researcher specialising in the ecology and history of woodland, farmland and coast. Projects included a survey of the ancient woodland The Mens and the unusual Yew (*Taxus baccata*) woodlands in southern England. The long-term Chilgrove Valley Landscape Project on the West Dean Estate

continued the theme of environmental history, with participation by ecologists, archivists, archaeologists and lay people. The results were used as the basis of management plans for the Estate's farms.

The Weald and Downland Open-Air Museum provided another focus for her work on cultural landscapes. She also carried out research for community and educational groups and statutory agencies. Ruth has produced many booklets on woodland history, farm conservation, honeybee forage and rabbit warrens. Her book resulting from the Whitelee Forest Oral History Project was short-listed for the Saltire Society 'Scottish History Book of the Year Award' in 2009.