

Stories of Citizenship: Using Oral History to Understand the Past

Grade Level: 11-12 and Secondary V (Quebec)

Lesson Length: 75 minutes

Curriculum Links:

- History (Canada, Chinese Canadian)
- Law (Citizenship, human impact of laws)
- Social Studies (Civics, citizenship)
- Language Arts (First-hand testimony)

Lesson Topics:

- Canadian citizenship law (historical)
- Oral history as a source

Lesson Goals: By the end of the lesson, students will be able to...

- Identify and summarize key points from oral history accounts;
- Read and apply historical citizenship and naturalization laws;
- Understand the importance of using different kinds of sources when exploring the past;
- Understand and explain the strengths and weaknesses of oral history

Equipment:

- Handout, "Stories of Citizenship: Using Oral History to Understand the Past" ([link](#))
- Audio clips from the website *Chinese Canadian Women, 1923-1967* (www.mhso.ca/chinesecanadianwomen)
 1. Judi Michelle Young clip
 2. Poy Tong clip
 3. Alice Louie Byne
 4. Keith Lock
- Computer or audio equipment to play clips

Advanced Preparation:

1. Explore the website *Chinese Canadian Women, 1923-1967* (www.mhso.ca/chinesecanadianwomen) and in particular the Exhibits "I thought I was Canadian but they didn't recognize me as Canadian': Legislation and its Impact" and "The sense of where you come from': Timeline of Chinese Canadian History"
2. Photocopy the Handout (1 per student)
3. Ensure that clips are in a format that can be played on available classroom audio equipment (computer or CD player).
4. (Optional) Instruct students to explore the Exhibit "I thought I was Canadian but they didn't recognize me as Canadian': Legislation and its Impact" from the website *Chinese Canadian Women, 1923-1967* (www.mhso.ca/chinesecanadianwomen) prior to class.

Lesson Plan:

1. Introduction to historical citizenship laws (15 minutes)

- Drawing on information from the Exhibit “I thought I was Canadian but they didn’t recognize me as Canadian’: Legislation and its Impact”, present the history of Canadian citizenship laws. Include the following points:
 - Prior to 1947, there was no legal category of “Canadian citizen”. Canadians were “British subjects” and nationality was governed by a disjointed set of laws. At this time, a wife’s citizenship status was automatically the same as her husband’s. Additionally, citizenship did not necessarily lead to voting rights. Voting eligibility was determined differently in different provinces and at a federal level, and age, gender, ethnicity or race, profession and other factors might be relevant to whether or not you could vote. The following quote, from Solicitor General Hugh Guthrie in Parliamentary debates in 1920, demonstrates this mindset:
“So far as I know, citizenship in no country carries with it the right to vote. The right to vote is a conferred right in every case... This Parliament says upon what terms men shall vote... No Oriental, whether he be Hindu, Japanese or Chinese, acquires the right to vote simply by the fact of citizenship” (Debates, April 29, 1920; 1821)
 - In 1947, the federal government revised citizenship laws, creating the category of “Canadian citizen”, giving women independent citizenship status, and including voting rights as part of the package of citizenship rights.

2. Citizenship laws – using historical legislation (25 minutes)

- Distribute the Handout.
- Instruct students to read the first section, “Citizenship and Nationality Laws” and answer the questions.

3. Introduction to oral history (5 minutes)

Explain that this lesson will show how oral history interviews can deepen one’s understanding of history.

- Oral history is the documentation of recent history by means of a recorded, structured interview.
- Oral history is useful for capturing non-recorded histories, in particular those of groups like women, immigrants and ethnocultural minorities, which are often left out of historical accounts.

4. Listening to oral history interviews (30 minutes)

- Instruct students to follow along on the Handout section “Citizenship in oral history”.
- Play clips 1-4 for the class.
- After each clip, ask students to summarize the content of the clip regarding citizenship. Ask students how this clip can be understood with the relevant section of the law – giving evidence that supports the law, contradicts the law, or displays an understanding of citizenship that is not apparent in the law alone.
 - **Clip 1** – Judi Michelle Young: She believes that her father’s 1899 naturalization was granted in part because of his language ability. Section 4(b) of the law supports this.

- **Clip 2** – Poy Tong: He believes that owning a business (other than a laundry) was necessary for citizenship, and that a woman lost her citizenship by marrying a Chinese man. Section 4(b) mentions “good character” and 4.3 notes that decisions are at the “absolute discretion of the Minister” and should reflect the “public good” without appeal. Perhaps this was interpreted to exclude laundry owners from naturalization. Section 13 explains married women’s citizenship status.
- **Clip 3** – Alice Louie Byne: She was denied the opportunity to apply for the civil service because she was perceived as not Canadian, though she was born in Canada. Section 13 provides a possible reason (marriage to an alien), but in fact does not apply in this case. Section 3 states that she is a British subject, and has no race-based exceptions. The likely explanation is that the person administering the application assumed that a non-white person was necessarily not a British subject.
- **Clip 4** – Keith Lock: He says that Chinese Canadians perceived their lack of voting rights in British Columbia as an indication that they were not full citizens, and that this changed after WWII. Section 3 states that his Canadian-born father was a British subject under the law. This demonstrates that despite some people (i.e., Hugh Guthrie in 1920) claiming that citizenship and voting rights were not linked, these were often linked in the public perception.
- After all clips have been played, ask students which clip(s) they found the most interesting, engaging or powerful, and why.

5. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

- Lead a discussion that addresses the benefits of using oral history when studying history, and weaknesses of using oral history.