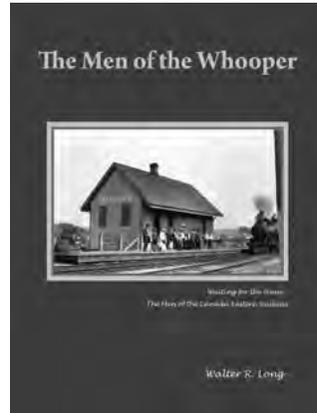


**David Frank**

## **In Praise of Local History**

Jo-Ann Fellows, *385 Northumberland Street* (2014), 123 pp.

Walter R. Long, *The Men of the Whooper* (2014), 156 pp.



My reading list for Labour Day this year included two recent books of local history published by people who have spent most of their lives in Fredericton. These are not the kind of titles you will find at airport displays or in big box bookstores, or in university bookstores for that matter. I bought one of them from the author at a public event, and the other at a pharmacy on the north side of the city.

These are modest, self-published books, produced by authors who are writing for themselves and their neighbours and along the way capturing parts of local history that are too easily passed over in more formal publications. I did not know what to expect, but I was pleased to find a number of insights into the experience of living in 20th-century working-class Fredericton.

The first example is a book about growing up in the capital city during the 1940s and 1950s. It is presented as a “fiction”, in the form of short chapters about a girl named “Joanie,” whose family lived on Northumberland Street. Hence the title, *385 Northumberland St.*

In these pages Jo-Ann Fellows captures a time when Fredericton was still small enough to be a pedestrian city. People walked to and from work, and children ran back and forth to school, coming home for lunch. Married women were expected to stay home, although Joanie's mother seems to have been among the first to break the province's general embargo on the hiring of married women in the civil service that was not formally lifted until 1967.

All this was happening before the big boom in higher education and government services that has had such a large impact on the city. Joanie's father was employed at a local woodworking plant, near the old Victoria General Public Hospital, where employees were regularly treated for their injuries on the job. Later he was lucky to be able to secure a government job.

She also includes a story about the eight-year-old Joanie marching in a parade during a strike at the Chestnut Canoe factory, across the street from her cousins' home on York Street. It's an event still remembered among an older generation, and a few years later Joanie was proud to be able to explain the value of unions to her father: "Did he think that he would have enjoyed paid holidays, statutory holidays, and sick leave, along with a reasonable salary and a pension after he retired, without being a member of a union?"

The second book is on a larger scale, a tribute to the hundreds of men who worked on the Canada Eastern Railway, the line that ran from the mouth of the Nashwaak River at South Devon on the north side of Fredericton through to Chatham on the Miramichi River. One of the trains on that route was known as the Whooper, after the legendary Miramichi ghost. Hence the title of the book: *The Men of the Whooper*.

We learn how this local railway line helped to integrate Central New Brunswick into Canada's vast network of rail transport. With more than a dozen locomotives and hundreds of railway cars to service, the Devon shops were a busy place. We learn about the pride workers took in the technical and operational knowledge they needed to do their jobs safely and efficiently.

This is also a personal book, as the author, Walter Long, worked on the railway from the 1940s through to his retirement in the 1980s, and he recalls numerous people and incidents from that era. The names of the crews in the book's many photographs and lists read like a who's who of South Devon families. For a whole community, the railway was a way of life.

As in the first book, the author recognizes the importance of unions in promoting the welfare of workers. When he first started on a repair gang, he was working ten hours a day, six days a week, for 51 cents an hour. He went on to complete an apprenticeship in car repair in Moncton and Halifax before returning home as a full-fledged member of the carmen's union, and his hours of work and his pay improved. He also touches on a general concern that unions could become too bureaucratic and too distant from the rank and file. This is especially relevant in present times when so many members have not experienced and do not recall the beginning days of their unions.

So, a short thank you here to the local authors who are helping to tell some of the neglected stories about our community. Historical researchers need to look at these kinds of books, and not just for academic purposes. Now, when I walk down Northumberland Street into town or bicycle across the train bridge to Station Street, I feel that I know just a little more about the social history of the city where I also live and work.