Chronicling the Seaway

PUCCIA PARHAM: Siena instructor author's new book

Posted By TREVOR PRITCHARD

No matter how many books Claire Puccia Parham goes on to write about the Cornwall-Massena area, her upcoming release will always hold a special place in her heart.

Parham, a history instructor at Siena College in Loudonville, N. Y., is the author of The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project: An Oral History of the Greatest Construction Show on Earth. Published by Syracuse University Press, the 328-page book includes interviews with 53 former engineers, carpenters, labourers, and their wives—many of whom still live in the Cornwall area.

“People keep asking me whether I’m going to write another book on the Seaway,” says Parham. “But she hasn’t ruled out mining the Seaway’s history for material one last time.”

While Parham first began interviewing retired workers 15 years ago, she became serious about turning them into a book nearly 20 years ago.

“The working conditions—particularly when the weather was bad—were often brutal, says Parham.

The Canadian workers came from across the country—indeed, anywhere that Ontario Hydro had a recruiting station. She was struck by how the workers—many of whom uprooted their families to take their jobs on the Seaway project—reacted viscerally to their new surroundings.

“I talked to a gentleman who’s quite reputable in the area... and he said he was always treated as an outsider, even though he’d been there for 50 years.”

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There was only one day during the entire construction project that Ontario Hydro didn’t have workers on the job, says Parham, and that was because it was so cold the machines wouldn’t start. One former employee she interviewed for the book told her he’d once worked 112 days in a row.

While officially 25 people died on the construction site, Parham says the real number could be twice or three times as high.

“If you didn’t die on the project—if you died weeks later of pneumonia—or in a hospital from your injuries—it didn’t count,” she says. “You actually had to, unfortunately, pass away right there on the spot.”

Despite the rigorous working conditions, many of the labourers forged lifelong friendships that transcended class and skill level, says Parham.

While Parham first began interviewing retired workers 15 years ago, she became serious about turning their stories into a book in 2004 after the publication of her first work on the history of Cornwall and Massena.

As for her next project, Parham—who will be the keynote speaker at the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation’s 50th anniversary celebrations in Massena this July—says she’s interested in researching the history of power generation at Niagara Falls, where many Seaway workers went next.

But she hasn’t ruled out mining the Seaway’s history for material one last time.

“People keep asking me whether I’m going to write another book on the Seaway,” says Parham.
"And who knows? There are many stories here that haven’t been told."

The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project: An Oral History of the Greatest Construction Show on Earth can be purchased online at www.syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu.

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