

Chronicling the Seaway

PUCCIA PARHAM: Siena instructor author's new book

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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.

"There are many things to explore, but I don't think anything will ever be as important to me as this book," says Parham, who first began studying the Seaway's construction as an undergraduate student at St. Lawrence University nearly 20 years ago.

"It was a long research process, and it also meant a lot to the people who were in it. So I don't know if I'll ever achieve (again) the joy that I was able to document this."

Built between 1954 and 1959, the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway and the the Moses-Saunders Power Dam were life-changing experiences for many of the project's 22,000 workers, says Parham.

The Canadian workers came from across the country -indeed, anywhere that Ontario Hydro had a recruiting program in place, says Parham.

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.

"A lot of them just didn't like the isolation of the area, and sort of the reaction, sometimes, of local people to workers," she says.

"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's been there for 50 years."

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

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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