

Betty Belanus Workshop and Panel



On 21 April 2010, OHAA (Qld Inc.) and the State Library of Queensland were privileged to host a workshop and panel discussion with Dr Betty Belanus as our keynote speaker. Betty is a respected folklorist, author, education specialist, co-curator of a number of travelling exhibitions, a director of the Folklore Summer Institute (1989-90), and a curator for several programs at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. She is currently a curator at the Smithsonian Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

The workshop was in the afternoon and was attended by more than 20 people from around south-east Queensland. There was a diverse range of interests and occupations represented by the participants. They included university students currently studying oral history subjects, people undertaking a variety of oral history projects, teachers and academics. Betty was introduced to us by Lesley Jenkins who met Betty

while on her Churchill Fellowship in 2005. Betty then asked participants to introduce themselves and we enjoyed learning about them and the work they are currently doing or intending to do.

Betty had an interesting "cultural marker" exercise. Participants were asked to bring along an object or photograph that was of particular significance to them or their family. Betty explained that these objects will have a story attached and as that story is explored, it will lead to further stories. Betty then invited a number of the participants to share their "cultural markers" and explain their significance. There were some moving, interesting and even amusing stories associated with these objects. Some examples - one lady had a wooden elephant bought during a trip to India and when she looks at it, she is reminded of the person who sold it to her. Another lady had a photograph taken of a female ancestor in 1913 which through a series of coincidences she was able to learn more about. One lady had a gold cross on a gold chain that had been handed down through her matriarchal line which was originally given as an engagement present. One participant told of using photocopies of family heirloom rings then inviting his new fiancée to choose her engagement ring when he proposed to her overseas.

We then broke into small groups and chose one of the objects within the group and asked the owner more detailed questions about the object. Based on that information, we wrote up a museum exhibit tag. This exercise gave us all an opportunity to learn more about the participants as each group shared their description and discussed the emotional ties to the object.

The workshop time seemed to pass very quickly as everyone enjoyed the experience. Following a break, we then attended a panel discussion in the Library's theatrette. The panel comprised Dr Betty Belanus, Dr Helen Klæbe (QUT, Creative

Industries), producer Hamish Sewell (ABC Audio Arts Radio National) and Oral History and Digital Storytelling coordinator Gavin Bannerman (SLQ). Gavin put various questions to the panel to get their opinion on issues including changing technology and a very interesting discussion followed. The panel agreed that really "listening" is so important to the process of obtaining a good story.

There were number of web sites that were brought up during the sessions. All these have been included on the "Links" page on the OHAA (Qld Inc.) web site.