
"The railroad" vehicle for the reconstruction of the historical memory of Girardot from the oral accounts of railwaymen.
Case study: life stories of three railwaymen



“El ferrocarril” vehículo para la reconstrucción de la memoria histórica de Girardot desde los relatos orales de los ferroviarios. Estudio de caso: historias de vida de tres ferroviarios

O veículo "ferroviário" para a reconstrução da memória histórica de Girardot a partir dos relatos orais dos ferroviários. Estudo de caso: histórias de vida de três ferroviários.

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Abstract: The economic, political, social and technological development of the territories reflected in the world today are narrated through stories that represent their territorial cultural identity, therefore, capturing these events as a starting point for the reconstruction of a Memory is essential, especially if they are told by their protagonists. Reason for which this qualitative biographical research arises. For the study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with three railway pensioners, also, a theoretical triangulation was applied under the concepts of historical memory, cultural heritage and oral stories, and finally, an opinion poll was carried out to understand the importance of the railway and its reconstruction from the individual narratives of the railwaymen. The compilation of the oral accounts of the three railway pensioners will obtain the recognition of the narratives as fundamental vehicles for the reconstruction of the memory of Girardot, just as, such a historical journey made possible the analysis of the close relationship of its inhabitants with this, what that achieved an approach to the realities and practices of individuals in the historical journey for the reconstruction of the memory of a city.

Keywords: railway, Girardot, historical memory, cultural heritage and oral stories.

Resumen: El desarrollo económico, político, social y tecnológico de los territorios plasmados en el mundo hoy en día se encuentran narrados a través de historias que representan su identidad cultural territorial, por lo tanto, el plasmar dichos acontecimientos como punto de partida para la reconstrucción de una memoria es esencial, sobre todo, si son contados por sus protagonistas. Razón por la cual surge la presente investigación cualitativa de corte biográfico. Para el estudio se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a tres pensionados ferroviarios, también, se aplicó una triangulación teórica bajo los conceptos de memoria histórica, patrimonio cultural y relatos orales, y por

último, se realizó un sondeo de opinión para comprender la importancia del ferrocarril y su reconstrucción a partir de las narrativas individuales de los ferroviarios. La recopilación de los relatos orales de los tres pensionados ferroviarios permitió el reconocimiento de las narrativas como vehículos fundamentales para la reconstrucción de la memoria de Girardot, al igual que, tal recorrido histórico posibilitó el análisis de la estrecha relación de sus habitantes con este, lo que permitió un acercamiento a las realidades y prácticas de los individuos en el trayecto histórico para la reconstrucción de la memoria de una ciudad.

Palabras clave: ferrocarril, Girardot, memoria histórica, patrimonio cultural y relatos orales.

Resumo: O desenvolvimento econômico, político, social e tecnológico dos territórios moldados no mundo de hoje são narrados através de histórias que representam a sua identidade cultural territorial, pelo que a captura destes acontecimentos como ponto de partida para a reconstrução de uma memória é essencial, especialmente se forem contados pelos seus protagonistas. Esta é a razão para a presente investigação qualitativa biográfica. Para o estudo, foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas com três pensionistas 55 ferroviários, foi também aplicada uma triangulação teórica sob os conceitos de memória histórica, património cultural e narrativas orais, e por fim, foi realizado um inquérito de opinião para compreender a importância do caminho-de-ferro e da sua reconstrução a partir das narrativas individuais dos ferroviários. A compilação dos relatos orais dos três pensionistas ferroviários permitiu o reconhecimento das narrativas como veículos fundamentais para a reconstrução da memória de Girardot, tal como, uma tal viagem histórica tornou possível a análise da estreita relação dos seus habitantes com ela, o que permitiu uma abordagem das realidades e práticas dos indivíduos na viagem histórica para a reconstrução da memória de uma cidade.

Palavras-chave: caminho-de-ferro, Girardot, memória histórica, património cultural e histórias orais.

INTRODUCTION

This article arises from the research project "The railroad" vehicle for the reconstruction of the historical memory of Girardot from the oral accounts of railwaymen. Case study: life stories of three railwaymen, developed in 2019 in the city of Girardot.

Girardot is a municipality of Cundinamarca located in the province of Alto Magdalena between Nariño, Tocaima, Flandes, Coello and Ricaurte, known for being one of the most important ports for the transportation of passengers and raw materials by rail, as it was connected to the department of Tolima and, in turn, had direct routes to La Dorada, Santa Marta and the capital of the country, Bogota.

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Figure 1 Map of Girardot, Cundinamarca, Colombia. Source: Arias (2016).



FIGURE 2
Locomotives at Liverpool Street Station 1948 Source Britania For You 2019

Undoubtedly, the steam phenomenon was replicated in Latin America as a
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way of opening to the new economic and social processes of the time. the
accelerated pace of the railroad phenomenon caused that "Just 10 years after the installation in England of
the first tracks on which a steam locomotive ran, concessions were granted in Mexico and Cuba to initiate
projects of this type" (Kuntz, 2017, p.11). An event that marked the path of railroad gear in Latin America,
leaving in evidence a safe and reliable way to look to the future (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3
Current Havana Railroad Cuba Source OnlineTours 2019

Figure 3 Current Havana Railroad, Cuba, Source: OnlineTours (2019).

Thus, the Cuban railroad is the first in Latin America and serves as a motivation for other countries:
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In 1851 Peru opened a route between Lima and Callao, and Chile the first section in the northern mining
area. Brazil (1854) and Argentina (1857) soon followed, although at first with modest extensions. Colombia
had an early experience with the construction of the Panama Railroad between 1850 and 1855, but rather
late to the rest of the projects that started only in the 1870s. (Kuntz, 2017, p.34)

As previously mentioned, the first railroad in Colombia was the Panama Railroad, and in Girardot the construction of railroads began in 1970, but it was not until 1940 that the first train arrived in the city.



FIGURE 4

Skoda locomotive declared a National Monument Source Own elaboration 2020

Figure 4, Skoda locomotive declared a National Monument, Source: Own elaboration (2020).

In that order of ideas, it can be highlighted that each territory and country in 60 the world has different ways of telling the story, since their experiences and anecdotes are characterized by being unpublished and representative of their social and family environment. However, most of the fragments that make up the history of Colombia reflect that it has not been told by its witnesses, but through data, figures and purely official contents by governmental or specialized institutions at the national level that rule out the possibility of finding rigorous concepts within the stories told by their own protagonists.

Language has been characteristic for framing the life of an individual within a society through oral accounts from which the different realities and experiences of a particular social group can be perceived and organized in order to describe the diverse realities framed by individual knowledge as a way of framing memory and historical facts as the main basis for the reconstruction of memory. Such historicity should incorporate the events of

the past as a primary and valuable source for the preservation of collective memory by using oral testimonies as an element of remembrance.

The need to base the history of the railroad on the oral accounts of its protagonists is necessary to give voice and life to those social actors whose direct experiences are the basis of their historical memory. The daily life and their real experiences will serve to reconstruct the historical processes framed in the creation and implementation of the railroad years ago, otherwise, they may disappear and lose their contribution to the history of the municipality.

Based on the above, the degree project "'The railroad" vehicle for the reconstruction of the historical memory of Girardot from the oral accounts of railwaymen. Case study: life stories of three railwaymen', had the purpose of collecting the narratives of three railway pensioners from the city of Girardot for the subsequent reconstruction of the historical memory as intangible

cultural heritage. The importance of this lies in the fact that the stories, being 61 inherited belongings of the past, their richness and value becomes increasingly fragile and important, therefore, preserving and respecting their existence and uniqueness nowadays becomes necessary to tell the history and progress of a territory and a society, since, in case of loss of these anecdotes it is not possible to recover them.

This and according to Benadiba (2015):

The importance of oral transmission was set aside by the professional historians who laid the foundations of what is considered "scientific history" during the 19th century. At that time, the professionalization of history began, and when it became a discipline, historians adopted a method in which the written document took center stage. It is a narrative history, which privileges political and war events, rescuing the great characters, the "notables". (p.91)



FIGURE 5
Girardot railroad workers Source Cubides and Sandoval 2017

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Figure 5 Girardot railroad workers, Source: Cubides and Sandoval (2017).

Thus, the general objective of the research was to reconstruct the historical memory of Girardot from the oral accounts of railway pensioners in order to understand the narratives that are woven around the railroad, based on a case study of 3 pensioners of the Girardot railroad. Similarly, the first specific objective was to compile the facts that have influenced the historical trajectory of the railroad from the accounts of the railroad pensioners in order to elaborate a systematization of oral experiences that allow reconstructing the historical memory of Girardot, this from semi-structured interviews that

would make possible the collection of the greatest amount of personal stories of the 3 railway pensioners.

It was also proposed to describe the process and evolution of the opening of the railroad in Girardot in order to analyze its impact as a means of historical, social and cultural development in the region, based on a theoretical triangulation developed under 3 categories of analysis: historical memory, cultural heritage and oral stories. In which memory is understood as that which is fed every day by memories, small or large, that help to create conductive threads in the mind and projects episodes that can be particular or symbolic that are established in the mind of the individual after processing them to be preserved until the person forgets them or dies.



FIGURE 6

The Amagá Railroad was sold to the Department of Antioquia in 1923 Source *Semana Magazine* 2019

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Figure 6. The Amagá Railroad was sold to the Department of Antioquia in 1923. Source: *Semana Magazine* (2019).

Cultural heritage is represented as that which is inherited from the past, from the cultural ancestors that allowed the creation of identity in the territories and that represent what a social group is today; this can be material or

immaterial. Finally, the oral stories that serve to describe in detail the events and experiences that each individual witnessed at a certain time, in this case, with the arrival and development of the railroad in Girardot.

Finally, the aim was to understand how the recovery of the historical memory of Girardot constitutes an important mechanism that contributes to participatory communication, by means of an opinion poll that allowed to determine if the railroad was important for the Girardoteños and if they considered pertinent the reconstruction of the historical memory of Girardot based on the stories of the railway pensioners.

Thus, capturing the memories of the people who participated in the creation and development of the railroad in Girardot on paper will make it possible to show and portray all the memories, practices and customs lived inside the train, in its different trips and journeys that are representative at the time of capturing them under an intangible cultural heritage. 64

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research has a qualitative approach and has a historical cut as a basis to proceed to the field research, which gave rise to describe how the history of the railroad is structured at local, national and international levels and how from the oral accounts of the pensioners, and not from the experts or technicians of the economy and national development, the historical memory of Girardot can be reconstructed.

This research approach was used to describe and analyze how the stories of the railroad can be understood from a human perspective based on the oral accounts and narratives of the railroad pensioners. Therefore, the elaboration of narratives and life stories developed here are inserted within the

biographical method, that which allowed the case study and participant observation, that is, conversation and narration as an essential part of the biographical documentary construction that unites oral sources with a sense and meaning of their own to show a descriptive and interpretative analysis of their own lives.

The subject population of this research was taken from a group of three railroad pensioners currently living in the city of Girardot. These people are approached to portray their life stories and are the ones who agree to the proposal of being part of this project to tell and publish their story. They become part of the research because they meet the requirements set for the development of this, these are to have been workers of the Girardot railroad and to be pensioners of the same.

These persons are:

TABLE 1
Data analysis unit

	Victor Salamanca	Manuel Pedro Alfonso Charry	José Gabriel Almanza
Age	70 years	71 years old	71 years old

Table 1 *Data analysis unit*
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City of birth La Florida, township of

Anolaima, Cundinamarca

Girardot, Cundinamarca

Chicoral, Tolima

Company for

which they worked

National Railways of

Colombia

National

Railways of Colombia

National

Railways of Colombia

For the development of this research, three tools were used as instruments: semi-structured interviews, a theoretical triangulation and an opinion survey, which were developed as follows:

The research focused on the collection of data, stories and concepts that would broaden the historical context of the events that took place during the arrival of the 'Great Giant' (as the railroad was called) to the city of Girardot. This type of instrument was used to collect qualitative data for the construction of a specific framework of the history of the railroad for the city of Girardot. Likewise, it acts as a tool to highlight meanings, concepts, discourses and experiences to address individual topics of the railway pensioners. This instrument served for the collection of details about time and made it possible to identify events and occurrences with a greater scope about the past, the present and to forecast a future.

The use of this instrument made it possible to discard redundant information and clarify the meanings of the observation. This determines the variability 66

of the study phenomenon and helps to validate the information presented to broaden and deepen its understanding under the three categories of analysis (historical memory, cultural heritage and oral narratives). The concepts expressed therein represent and allow a more complete interpretation of Girardot's historical memory, based on the impact of the railroad and the stories of its protagonists.

It is an information gathering tool that allowed the collection, registration and classification of the data provided by 533 people from Girardot who expressed their opinion on whether or not the railroad was important in the history of the city and if its historical reconstruction was relevant through the stories and narratives of the railroad pensioners.

RESULTS

The oral accounts of three railway pensioners in recognition of memory as part of life itself and of the individual, which made it possible to observe that the railroad in the city of Girardot is not only part of the urban landscape of the municipality, but is also part of the life of the railwaymen (the main protagonists of its history) and of the Girardoteños who remember part of the railway cultural legacy in recognition of the importance of these dynamics for the city.

Thus, oral stories are fundamental vehicles for the reconstruction of Girardot's memory, being of great symbolic value that promote the social identification of its inhabitants and of the territory supported by the processes of remembrance of the railway dynamics from an anecdotal perspective and personified by the active voice of its protagonists.

It is necessary to study the railroad and its history not only from the economic or touristic factors, but also from the life stories of its protagonists, since the 67 railroad pensioners are part of the historical memory of the city of Girardot. The railroad pensioners remember the railroad as one of the most important advances of the city of Girardot, since important economic, social and cultural factors revolved around it, which allowed the municipality to become an important port for the country, which makes them feel proud.

Consequently, the railroad workers' own identity was rescued in order to promote the individual ancestral wisdom that allows recognizing the railroad as cultural heritage, endowed with anecdotes and life history. It was also possible to collect the experiences of the railroad workers, because as they are elderly people, it was necessary to collect part of their stories before they were lost in time.

Thanks to the theoretical triangulation, the concepts expressed therein represent and allow a more complete interpretation of historical memory from the incidence of the railroad and the stories of its protagonists.

CONCLUSIONS

From the general objective of this research it can be concluded that it is possible to reconstruct the historical memory of Girardot from the oral accounts of the railway pensioners, since it is possible to understand the narratives woven around the railroad through the facts told by its own protagonists, those who for years were part of the railway development of the city and who positioned in the municipality a cultural identity based on individual memories and narratives.

Also, from the compendium of the facts and narratives that took place around the railroad, a systematization of oral experiences analyzed under three categories of analysis that are fundamental to understand the importance of 68 the railroad in the city, such as historical memory, cultural heritage and oral stories, can be achieved. Similarly, the trajectory and progress of the city under the opening of the railroad and its effect as part of the historical development can be outlined, since the description of the theory and the oral narratives of the pensioners allowed for a contrast of propositions that fit with the conceptualization of each category.

Finally, it is important for the girardoteños the history of the railroad in the city and that it is necessary to recover it and to constitute it as a mechanism of participative communication so that not only the pensioners of the railroad participate in this project to spin the history of the city, but each one of the people that with their memories and anecdotes can contribute to the development of the same one.

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