Thoughts on Oral History

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THE Forest History Foundation, Inc., with headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota, is concerned with searching for source materials on forest history and bringing them to the attention of reputable collecting agencies and qualified scholars. The foundation is not itself a collecting agency. For nearly 10 years, in carrying out its activities, the foundation has interviewed persons associated with the forests and forest industries throughout the country. During the last 4 years many of its interviews have been tape-recorded. These interviews — with old-time lumbermen, foresters, lumberjacks, loggers, sawyers, surveyors, and scalers, — conducted by members of the foundation staff, have preserved the reminiscences of persons who have neither the time nor the inclination to sit down and write at length about their life experience. Supplementing their personal reminiscences, some of the persons interviewed give background information about companies whose records the foundation has discovered and helped to preserve; still others supply data on companies whose records have been destroyed. For these reasons work in oral history has become an integral part of the foundation's program.[2]

In 1955 the foundation sponsored a 10-week survey of sources for forest history in the St. Croix Valley of Minnesota and Wisconsin.[3] The white pine forests of this valley played an important

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[2] The broad term *oral history* in this paper refers to spoken historical evidence obtained by trained historian-interviewers; recorded either by them or under their supervision in longhand or shorthand or by a recording device; and preserved either in its original form or in the form of typed transcriptions collated with the originals. The term *oral history interview* describes a particular form of oral history — spoken reminiscences recorded on tape with the aid of trained interviewer-historians and transcribed in typewritten form, in accordance with ethical and procedural standards. The latter definition, altered to express Forest History Foundation practice, is borrowed from Vaughn Davis Bornet's definition of oral history in "Oral History *Can* be Worthwhile," in *American Archivist*, 18:241 (July 1955).

[3] *Forest History Report No. 1; Survey of Forest History Resources for the St. Croix River Valley, Minnesota-Wisconsin*, by Helen McCann White, was issued in mimeographed form by the Forest History Foundation in November 1955.

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role in American forest history from the late 1830's through 1914. The foundation hoped to find in the valley the records of logging and lumber companies and other forest-related industries that had operated there. It wanted to find papers of persons connected with these industries. If records and papers had been destroyed, the foundation hoped to learn where, when, and under what circumstances destruction had taken place, so that an attempt could be made to fill from other sources the gaps in its knowledge. Since the logging and lumbering days are within the memory of men and women still living in the valley, the foundation wanted also to interview persons who had first-hand knowledge of companies, records, and events of forest history.

The St. Croix Valley survey, assigned to me, was carried out in August, September, and October of 1955. In conjunction with the survey I was asked to devote particular attention to the problems of oral history in the area. In preparation for this phase of the survey I studied the foundation's oral history interview files, reviewed my own previous experience in conducting and recording classroom interviews, and investigated the experience of others in making oral history interviews.[4] During the survey I experimented with interview techniques and, as a part of the survey inventory, listed all persons who, I believed, would be good sources for oral history interviews. As time permitted, I conducted and helped to process sample oral history interviews.

Persons in nine communities were interviewed. These persons had been associated in some way with the forests or forest industries. Most of them were elderly or past middle age; all lived in or near small towns and cities in the valley. Ninety-nine interviews (45 by telephone and 54 in person) supplied useful data for oral history. Twenty-five people were judged good subjects for oral history interviews, and tape-recorded interviews were made with five of them.

The background of the following comments is the total Forest History Foundation oral history program, but illustrations are drawn chiefly from experience in the St. Croix Valley survey. It is my belief that advance preparation, preliminary field interviews, selection of prospects for tape-recorded interviews, the recording of the interview, its transcription and emendation, and the formulation of terms of agreement regarding its ownership and use are all steps in the ultimate production of oral history interviews. Al-

[4] Especially useful were Bornet's article; Owen D. Bombard, "A New Measure of Things Past," in *American Archivist*, 18:123-132 (April 1955); and the experience of Lucile Kane, curator of manuscripts of the Minnesota Historical Society, and Clodaugh Neiderheiser of the Forest History Foundation staff.

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though the conclusions present one person's limited point of view and experience, they may be of some value to others interested in the oral history process.

Preparation for Oral History Interviews

Careful preparation is necessary to produce fruitful oral history interviews. Poor preparation or no preparation often results in tedious, rambling, pointless recitals of slight historical value. On the other hand, some believe that prepared interviews lack spontaneity and may become interlarded with dramatic incidents of doubtful origin. In my experience, the valuable results of preparation by both interviewer and interviewee have far outweighed any supposed loss of spontaneity, and preparation has encouraged rather than discouraged a truthful narrative.

First, the interviewer must prepare. He should study the field of history in which he will be working, the region where he will carry on his investigations, the persons he hopes to interview, and the subjects on which these persons may have information. Before going into the St. Croix Valley, I studied valley and county histories, biographical sketches of old settlers, general works on forest history, and manuscript collections and inventories of collections relating to the St. Croix Valley. From these and other sources, a card file of notes was prepared on places, events, dates, persons, and companies of significance to the forest history of the valley. These notes helped me to find persons associated with forest history and, having found them, to ask them specific questions.[5]

A second step in an oral history field program is a personal introduction to someone who lives or has lived in the region where the interviewer will work and who has a wide, friendly circle of acquaintances there. Such a person can provide introductions to others and can explain briefly the objectives of the interviewer's search. Robert E. Slaughter, who was born in the St. Croix Valley and who for more than 60 years has been associated with the lumber industry, gave such service to me many times. His introductions and his kindly advice were of the greatest value in carrying out the survey. Introductions of this kind established confidence between strangers more quickly than any other approach used during the survey.[6] An introduction is followed by an appointment to call on

[5] See Bombard, in *American Archivist,* 18:127, describing research preparation for the Ford Archives oral history program.

[6] Bornet sees value in having a "faceless" interviewer; he asserts, "A more accurate and reliable job will result when the interviewee knows little more about the life, thoughts, desires, and prejudices of the historian-interviewer *after* the interview than he did before it began. The pattern of his ideas will then be more likely to be his

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the interview prospect.[7] One introduction leads to others, and the interviewer rapidly widens his own circle of acquaintances.

Supported by notes and introductions, the interviewer takes a third step: the first meeting with persons whom he considers prospects for oral history interviews. Ideally, this first visit is a leisurely, rambling exploration of people, events, and ideas. The interviewer is above all a captivated audience, happy to listen to whatever the interviewee is moved to say. The obligation to listen amiably has often been neglected by field workers in oral history. They want to discuss only certain subjects. They have other appointments close on the heels of this one. They must get home on time. The last bus leaves at four. So they fidget and furtively glance at their watches. The interviewee comments later: "The young whippersnapper wasn't interested in me. He only wanted to know about my grandfather." The nervous, hasty approach does not encourage the interviewee to speak freely. Time — and more time — and patience are needed while the listener follows down many a fascinating path and stumbles on unexpected treasure. He adds notes to his card file and, when he can tactfully do so, gradually draws the speaker to the objects of the search.

A few comments on note taking should be made here. When one must choose among many persons those who are most worthy of recorded interviews, it is important to have notes of preliminary conversations. Another reason for taking notes is that the person who conducts the preliminary interview may not always be the one to make the followup oral history interview, although ideally he should be. Within the limited time of the St. Croix survey, I could make only 5 of 25 possible oral history interviews, but my preliminary notes may save repetitious investigation by another foundation interviewer. It is best, of course, to take notes during the interview. Some persons have found that those interviewed are distracted by note taking, and indeed, some interviewers themselves find their

own." Bornet, in *American Archivist*, 18:250. One must support this ideal but qualify the terms because they ignore the fact that many persons do not care to entrust their personal reminiscences to "faceless" strangers. They want to know about the interviewer — both the person and the professional man. They often have prejudices, particularly against a young city person's supposed lack of appreciation for what is old and what is rural. Often the person who supplies introductions can provide interviewees with necessary background information about the interviewer. If he does not, then the interviewer must furnish it during the preliminary interview. In this matter, as in all others, the interviewer-historian must not, of course, lose perspective or forget his professional objectives.

[7] If the interviewer has some doubt about the possible value of a person's reminiscences, a preliminary telephone conversation with the person can help him decide whether to make an appointment for a face-to-face interview.

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attention wandering from the speaker to the note-taking activity. If the interviewer can take notes and at the same time listen well, perhaps the interviewee is also less apt to become distracted. Some people interviewed ignore the note-taking process; to others note taking indicates that what they are saying is worthwhile. Conversely, not to take notes may make them think that the interviewer finds their testimony of slight value.[8] In my experience many persons seemed to enjoy the note-taking process and actively cooperated by repeating statements, looking up names, addresses, and telephone numbers, and spelling out unfamiliar words. Not to take notes during interviews, particularly during a series of interviews, is, I believe, to hamper one's research and to risk making a false impression of carelessness on the persons interviewed, who are quite aware of the tricks anyone's memory may play on him.

During the preliminary conversation, the interviewer tries to decide whether the interviewee's testimony should be tape-recorded. The following qualifications were considered in the St. Croix Valley survey, to determine whether oral history interviews should be made:

1. First hand experience in forest industries.
2. Knowledge of particular companies and their records.
3. Knowledge of or personal relationship to individuals active in forest industries.
4. Willingness to speak on these subjects.
5. Ability to speak on these subjects.
6. Reliability of testimony.
7. Experience or knowledge not otherwise recorded, preserved, or closely duplicated in records that are already preserved.

If he has decided that an oral history interview should be made, the interviewer must then explain why he wants it. "What will you do with it? I didn't do anything important. Who is interested in my story?" These are frequent questions. Before he can answer directly the interviewer must define his own position in the community. He is not a gossip peddler, nor will he participate in local personal feuds. Often he must illustrate some of the conventions and procedures by which a historian operates. During the St. Croix Valley survey, for example, it was necessary to explain to several people how reminiscences could be used by the historian — along with diaries, court records, census schedules, city directories, newspapers,

[8] One veteran interviewer points out that people sometimes overestimate the value of their testimony if notes are taken freely during the interview. Bornet, in *American Archivist*, 18:243.

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and the records of business concerns — to recreate a picture of life in the valley during the heyday of the lumber industry.

As the interviewer speaks of the historian's craft — in terms simple or complex, according to the interest and background of his hearer — he may also talk about published sources. Persons in a field area can often give useful and detailed evaluations of published books about their region. Sometimes they are able to support or refute opinions expressed in such published works. In the St. Croix Valley, for instance, an old gentleman described his experience during a great forest fire and explained why, in writing about it, a famous author had been led astray. When the interviewer reveals a knowledge of published sources, he often relieves the interviewee of any obligation to draw upon these sources in his own narrative. Frank, objective discussion of sources and of the requirements of history inspires respect for the profession and the desire to give honest testimony.

The interviewer has another task to perform during his preliminary conversation with the candidate for an oral history interview; he must make definite preparations for a recording session. With the interviewee he outlines a plan for the interview. He may suggest that the interview should be recorded in three parts on three half-hour tapes. One part might include an autobiographical sketch; another, aspects of the person's professional career; and a third, special subjects on which the person can make a contribution. On the other hand the interviewer may wish to define only the general subject of the recording and set no limits on time or tapes. He will then give assurance that the interviewee will receive a typed transcript of the recorded interview and that he will have an opportunity to emend it before it becomes a permanent record. After these explanations the interviewer makes an appointment, preferably within a few days, for the recording session.

In the interval between the preliminary conversation and the recording session, the interviewee has an opportunity to prepare for the oral history interview. He searches his mind for other names, dates, and events. He searches his house or office for letters, notes, documents, and business records to supplement his recollections. He may study these sources with a sharpened sense of historical values. His second thoughts may be more informative and accurate than his first ones were.

The Recording Session

The interviewer (who is here presumed to be the operator of the recording machine) takes the final step in preparing for the

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oral history interview when he sets up his recorder.[9] He explains briefly how the machine works. He may record and play back a bit of talk so that the interviewee will have an idea how to control his voice. He will be sure that the interviewee understands the length of time required for recording one reel of tape. Together they will review the general plan for the interview. Then, as the recording proceeds, the interviewer will make sure that the interviewee knows when a reel is almost finished, so that the narrative will not run off the tape. He may play back a portion of one tape before the next reel is put on the machine. Attention to these details is a necessary part of the recording process. Obviously they must be handled with care to ensure the best possible technical product and at the same time keep the atmosphere of the interview relaxed and natural.

The content of the oral history interview is influenced by the personalities of the interviewer and interviewee and by the preparatory work which precedes the recording session. But the interview becomes a more valuable historical source if, while keeping its own subtly original flavor, it follows certain useful conventions. Forest History Foundation experience suggests the following ones:

1. Autobiographical information on the interviewee is recorded as a part of every interview.[10]
2. The interviewee tells what source materials he has, knows about, or has used.
3. The date, place, full names of participants and others mentioned in the interview, and other information necessary for cataloging the interview are recorded on the tape.
4. The interviewer does not ask leading questions or attempt to put words in the interviewee's mouth.

It becomes clear after one has conducted many interviews that a person who is a good source of oral history can rarely tell, in one recording session, all that the interviewer wants to know. Because he cannot hope to paint a whole portrait in one sitting, the interviewer concentrates first on subjects of the greatest value to his own search and prepares the way for future interviews conducted by himself or others. The length of one session depends primarily on

[9] If the interviewer operates the recording machine it is almost impossible to keep the machine and microphone in the "unobtrusive" position recommended by Bombard in *American Archivist,* 18:129.

[10] Bornet suggests, in *American Archivist,* 18:248, that a biographical sketch of the person should be attached to the transcript and that, if such information is available in printed form, citations should be given. The writer believes that if such sources are available the interviewee should be asked, in the interview, to comment on their authenticity. If they are not in existence, then an autobiographical sketch in the interview is more valuable than a biographical sketch attached to it.

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the age and health of the person being interviewed, but to some extent on the interviewer's field schedules and other external factors. Some people feel strain after talking for an hour. Many more, in the writer's experience, forget all other responsibilities and are fresh and full of talk long after the interviewer himself has become weary. In general, the most favorable results seem to be achieved if the oral history interview is conducted in a leisurely fashion over a number of days rather than concentrated in one long day's session.

Interviews were simpler to conduct and more productive, in the St. Croix Valley experience, when they were undertaken with one person and no audience.[11] An incident that occurred in Stillwater, Minnesota, some years ago suggests, however, the possible value of group interviews organized around a special historical problem. There the local historical society sponsored a meeting at which a long-time resident of the St. Croix Valley read a paper on the Schulenberg-Boeckeler Lumber Co. Before 1900 this company had operated the largest sawmill in the valley, but few of its records remained. In the audience were many persons who had been associated with events described in the paper. The speaker welcomed their questions and comments, and the discussion that followed added greatly to the historical value of the paper. Similar forums or round-table discussions, each dealing with the subject of an interviewer's search and perhaps sponsored by a local historical society or public library, could well be sources of valuable oral history interviews. A group interview could follow a series of individual interviews, or it could introduce the interviewer to a community and bring together persons with whom he would later have oral history interviews.

The Typed Transcript

The interviewer is more familiar than anyone else in his office with the content of the oral history interview and with the speech idiosyncrasies of the person interviewed. For these reasons he may be able to make a more accurate first transcript of the interview. From his rough draft a typist can make a clean copy with one carbon, which the typist and the interviewer collate with the tape recording. The interviewer sends one copy to the interviewee, attaching to it his own notes of possible emendations. However much the interviewer may be tempted to correct this first transcript as he types it,

[11] Lucile Kane points out, however, that it may be advisable for an expert to sit in when one conducts an interview with a person having knowledge and experience in a specialized technical field. See her "Interviews and Reminiscences," in Minnesota Historical Society, *Service Bulletin No. 3* (St. Paul, 1951) p. 4.

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it would seem proper for the interviewee to see a text of the interview exactly as it transpired. Both participants will then have equal opportunity to emend the transcript.

The oral history interview, if it has been obtained after careful preparation by both participants, is essentially a record of their studied thoughts spoken in particular circumstances of time and place. The primary responsibility of the interviewer in processing the transcript is to clarify the thoughts with the least possible alteration of the text. If he adopts this view of his responsibility, he will be very reluctant to rearrange thought sequences, improve phrasing, correct errors of grammar, eliminate questions, omit false starts, or otherwise enter into the editorial province.

Sometimes the interviewee alters the text. If his changes improve the accuracy of his testimony, they should perhaps be welcomed. Yet how can the time-place character of the oral history interview be preserved if the text is materially altered by either participant? In transcribing final copies of the St. Croix Valley oral history interviews, all addenda were placed in brackets in the text and explained in footnotes. The problem of deletions is more complex. For example, one interviewee wishes to cut out a passage containing an uncomplimentary statement about a neighbor's grandfather. He has no evidence to support his statement and is afraid that someone who knows the neighbor will read it. The statement is accordingly deleted from the final transcript and erased from the tape. Another person describing life in a lumber camp in the 1880's digresses to talk about family affairs. She wishes to delete the remarks about her family because they are "too personal." The interviewer explains that this part of her interview also provides useful source material for historians. She is then willing to leave it in the text, "if somebody can use it." A third person who wishes to delete a significant part of his interview may agree to leave it in if the interview will not be used without his permission during his lifetime.[12]

Under most circumstances, notes regarding the kind and extent of all alterations made during the processing of an oral history interview should be available to research workers who use the interview. These notes may be summarized on a data sheet attached to each copy of the interview, or they may be kept filed with correspondence or accession notes on the interview.[13] Into a file of

[12] It is certainly a better policy to encourage the person interviewed to restrict the use of portions of the oral history interview rather than delete them from the text. Bornet suggests that closed portions should be typed separately in order that nonsecret material may be freely used. *American Archivist*, 18:251.

[13] The Forest History Foundation is experimenting with the use of a standardized

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this sort the interviewer may put notes on his impressions of the person interviewed, comments on any experience or prejudices that he feels may have colored the interviewee's version of events, and a description of the surroundings in which the interview was conducted. Such notes, revealing also something of the personality and objectivity of the interviewer, will help the research worker to evaluate the interview as a source of history.

When final collated copies of the approved text of the oral history interview have been completed, what shall be done with the tapes? If they are preserved, should not their text be altered to conform to the approved typed version of the interview? This is a difficult task if many changes have been made in the typescript. It is perhaps better to erase the tape completely than to preserve an imperfect version of the interview. Erased tapes can be reused many times. To preserve the tapes of oral history interviews, on the other hand, is to preserve the original source, the voices, and something of the personalities and atmosphere of the interview. The Forest History Foundation is considering a compromise plan to rerecord and preserve selected portions of each oral history interview recording.[14] Before the tapes are erased the foundation offers the interviewee or members of his family an opportunity to purchase them for the price of an equal number of new tapes. If the tapes of the oral history interview are to be preserved by the interviewee or his family, they should be corrected to conform to the approved typescript and should be subject to the same terms of agreement for their use that are worked out between interviewer and interviewee for the use of the transcripts.

The Forest History Foundation keeps a first copy and carbon copies of the approved final transcript in manila folders in its oral history files. Correspondence-accessions folders contain related materials on the interview. Other copies of the approved transcript are presented to the interviewee and to institutions collecting source materials on forest history. Publication rights to any of these oral history interviews must be obtained from the foundation.

Agreements Regarding Oral History Interviews

Terms of agreement covering ownership and use of the oral history interview may be simple understandings between interviewer and interviewee or more formal contracts drawn up after the inter-

form sheet on which background information and processing notes are summarized. This sheet would be attached to all copies of the interview transcript.

[14] Bornet suggests certain precautions to ensure the preservation of a high-fidelity record of the interviewee's voice. *American Archivist*, 18:247.

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view has been completely processed.[15] This conclusion is based on assumptions about the interview process which are summarized here.

1. The interviewer wishes to make the oral history interview primarily for his own use, but he recognizes a responsibility to preserve it as historical source material for the use of others.
2. The interviewer states these purposes in his preliminary conversation with the interviewee and repeats them to him in writing.
3. The interviewee, by participating in the oral history interview, gives tacit agreement to its use for these purposes.
4. When the interviewer agrees to furnish a typed transcript of the recorded interview to the interviewee for review, he recognizes the interviewee's right to emend, or otherwise alter and restrict the use of the testimony, *within the limits of the general terms already stated.*
5. When the interviewee reads, emends, and finally approves the transcript of the interview he gives further consent to its use for the purposes stated.
6. The interviewee is not as a rule ready to agree to any specific terms governing the use of the oral history interview until he has seen his own words in typescript.
7. Both interviewer and interviewee have rights in the oral history interview, which they jointly have created. One has contributed the story of his unique personal experiences and the special knowledge he has. The other has contributed professional training and preparation and he, or the organization he represents, has paid all the costs of producing the interview. No matter how objective the interviewer, his background, personality, and particular research needs contribute to the choice of questions and the content of the interview. Both participants have invested time in this enterprise. Both wish to protect their interests in it.
8. Terms of agreement regarding the ownership and use of the interview are stated in discussions and in correspondence between interviewer and interviewee. Oral understandings are repeated and confirmed in writing. Terms may cover the number and disposition of typed transcripts, the disposition of the tapes, the rights of the interviewee's heirs, publication rights, and any special restrictions on the use of the interview or parts of it.

[15] There are two objections to the practice of obtaining formal agreements regarding the ownership and use of the interview before the oral history interview has been recorded, although this practice has been recommended by Bornet, in *American Archivist*, 18:250. The interviewee may become overcautious and inhibited in his recollection of events, and terms of agreement would be formulated for the ownership and use of an oral history interview that does not yet exist. Until it does exist it is difficult to anticipate the particular problems that may arise concerning its ownership and use. On the other hand, no interviewer wants to spend his time making an interview which he cannot freely use or which someone else will publish before he can use it. Perhaps the best safeguard of the interviewer's rights is the confidence established between him and the interviewee during their association.

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9. Formal statements of agreement, if considered necessary, are drawn up and signed after the approved transcripts are finally completed. Thus the agreements rest on the mutual confidence and understanding developed during the association of interviewer and interviewee.

Conclusion

My own experience and that of the Forest History Foundation both in oral history field work and in processing oral history interviews have provided the background of the thoughts presented here. The foundation's experience has been limited to the oral history testimony of persons associated with the forests and forest industries. My own experience, cited here, has been similarly limited and confined to such persons living in or near small towns and cities in the St. Croix Valley of Wisconsin and Minnesota. The experiences, and the thoughts nurtured by them, may have value in oral history projects associated with other industries. They may have some application to oral history field work in other small city-town regions of the United States. The oral history process described here is one in which interviewer and interviewee work together in an attempt to create objective, truthful, faithfully recorded, and accurately transcribed oral history. Their product, the oral history interview, they willingly dedicate to the uses of history.

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