

Tape-Recorded Interviewing: Some Thoughts From California¹

By CORINNE LATHROP GILB

University of California

DESPITE the torrent of newsprint, office memoranda, carbon copies in triplicate, and published memoirs that seems to flow in the wake of every contemporary human activity, the inner workings of social institutions, major events, and 20th-century man himself often go undocumented. The telephone and airplane have made lengthy discursive letters an unnecessary luxury. The man with an urge to introspection no longer needs to keep a diary; he can go to a psychiatrist. A conscious or unconscious concern for public relations colors many if not most of the records destined for public viewing. And so, to help document the undocumented and to shed new light on what is already of record, the tape-recorded interview can be a real boon to scholars, present and future. Large corporations are beginning to record interviews to supplement their archives. Local historical societies, public museums, and public libraries are preserving regional folklore by gathering tape-recorded reminiscences. At Columbia University and the University of California, extended "oral history" interviews are being recorded as source material for scholars in the liberal arts and social sciences.²

Oral history in California began more than 70 years ago when Hubert Howe Bancroft's interviewers recorded stenographically the memoirs of leading Westerners. The University of California at Berkeley revived the Bancroft tradition in 1952-53, when the Bancroft Library and Prof. James Hart of the English department

¹ This article is based in part on a paper read before a meeting on December 29, 1955, of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, and in part on a paper read at a meeting of the Northern California Chapter of the American Studies Association on April 13, 1957. The writer is now in charge of the Institute of Industrial Relations oral history project, and is an instructor in humanities at Mills College.

² See Helen McCann White, "Thoughts on Oral History," in *American Archivist*, 20:19 (Jan. 1957); Owen W. Bombard, "A New Measure of Things Past," *ibid.*, 18:123 (Apr. 1955); Vaughan D. Bornet, "Oral History Can Be Worthwhile," *ibid.*, 18:241 (July 1955); and Dorothy Worrell, "The Past—Recorded for the Future," describing the work of Tales of Cape Cod, Inc., in *Radcliffe Quarterly*, 11:14 (May 1956).

persuaded Alice Toklas to record in Paris her memories of San Francisco and of her friend Gertrude Stein. Since 1953 the author has headed an oral history project that began experimentally in the Bancroft Library and in 1955 became the Regional Cultural History Project, now housed in the General Library.³ By 1957 the project had completed nearly 40 manuscripts (of 100 to 600 pages each) transcribed from tape-recorded interviews with California leaders, including legislators, judges, lawyers, three ex-regents and an ex-comptroller of the university, artists, writers, a publisher, authorities on water and power, an anthropologist, a land speculator, the president of a food canning and shipping company, and the president of a shipping line.⁴ In November 1956 the University's Institute of Industrial Relations, in Berkeley and Los Angeles, asked the author to undertake a similar project in the field of labor-management relations, beginning first with leading employers and labor officials in California and including eventually similar leaders throughout the Western States.⁵ In 1957 the history department of the University of California at Los Angeles was making plans for an oral history project on that campus.

The interview technique is not a new method of gathering data for the social sciences. Sociologists have long used the "unstructured" or "depth" or "life-history" interview. It is natural for a historian, economist, or political scientist writing about a contemporary subject to supplement available documentation with interviews. The oral historian is unique only in that he is making his interviews for other people to use sometime in the future and therefore has special problems and obligations. The modern tape-recorder and more recently the tape film have opened up new

³ From its beginning the project has been able to draw upon the information and contacts of interested experts both on and off the campus: James Hart, George Stewart, and James Caldwell of the English department; Walton Bean of the history department; Sanford Mosk and Paul Taylor of the economics department; T. J. Kent of the department of city and regional planning; Assistant Librarian Marion Milczewski; George Hammond and Robert E. Burke of the Bancroft Library; faculty members in agricultural economics, law, political science, and sociology; Berton Ballard of the State Bar of California; Curator Paul Mills of the Oakland Art Museum; Alfred Frankenstein, art and music critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and a number of others.

⁴ Roughly three-fourths of the interviews to date have been conducted by the author; two on literary subjects by Roland Duncan; and several on the organized blind and on water and power by Willa Baum.

⁵ Especially helpful to this project have been Margaret S. Gordon, associate director of the Institute at Berkeley; Irving Bernstein of the Institute's staff at UCLA; labor leader Robert Ash; arbitrator Sam Kagel; and employer representative Paul St. Sure. Robert Knight of the Institute's staff at Berkeley has supplied much background information from his own researches in Northern California labor history.

avenues for those interested in documenting the present for the use of future researchers, but technology has not yet found a substitute for the human mind. The recorded interview is not automatically a thing of value. It may be a spate of words signifying nothing. Like any other researcher, the oral historian is concerned with what kind of information to look for and where to look for it, what questions to ask and how to ask them. The following generalizations about this new field are offered only as hypotheses, based on one area of experience and subject to further testing and revision.

A *sine qua non* for the oral historian is to know what is already well documented. The more ambitious the scope of a recording project, the more difficult but necessary this is. Otherwise the recorded interview becomes an expensive and time-consuming process of duplicating what can already be found in newspapers, letter files, and other available sources.

It is not enough simply to locate gaps in available documentation. If no one up to now has thought something worth documenting, the simple truth may be that it is not worth documenting, especially when so much source material already existing goes unassimilated and uninterpreted. Interviews should attempt to shed light on major historical trends and significant human experiences and should not make a fetish of the anecdotes of old men and the name-dropping chitchat of public figures.

The oral historian cannot set out to document the wide sweep of human endeavor without knowing what he is trying to find out, any more than any other researcher can. He must, in fact, be able to formulate research aims with far more insight and foresight than the average researcher because he is providing source material for scholars to use many years hence and must anticipate what they will be concerned with.

He starts, of course, with a basic frame of reference — for instance, the cultural history of a region, the history of an industry, the politics of the New Deal. He must then decide what he is trying to learn about his topic. If he is documenting the cultural history of a region, with what in the region is he most concerned: that which is typical of the region, that which affects large numbers of people within the region, that which is more or less unique to the region, regional influences on the rest of the country or the world or vice versa, or perhaps the fields in which the region is undergoing the most drastic change? Having chosen one or more of these possible approaches, the oral historian must go on to frame tentative hypotheses before he is ready to make an intelligent

selection of persons to be interviewed. If his field is labor history, he may be impressed by the growth of multiemployer bargaining, and so he will select people who can give the most authoritative, thorough, articulate, and candid eyewitness accounts of how various types of multiemployer bargaining units have arisen, how they are organized, and what their effect has been. He may also wish to interview employers who have opposed the growth of multiemployer bargaining, and his interviewees should include labor leaders and former NLRB officials as well as employer spokesmen.

Although the interviewer needs to be aware of broader significances to be able to probe for them and to recognize what is relevant to them, he should also not neglect what is unique and specific in the person he is interviewing. The oral history interview is something quite different from public opinion polling; it is intensive and personal and inevitably to some degree biographical. At its best the interview reveals how the catastrophic and evolutionary events of our time have affected an individual life and how in turn that life has affected events. When an interview explores the whole life of a man, scholars can better evaluate any specific thing he says and interrelations are revealed that would not otherwise be apparent (for example, between economic interests and political activities).

There is much to be said for the biographical approach on its own merits. The interviewee can be led to tell his life story not as a limited memoir or an exercise in self-glorification or justification, but as a deep and sensitive exploration of how one individual has seen and reacted to the world about him. Just imagine what insights into 20th-century American culture might be gained through perceptive and detailed explorations of the thoughts and experiences of men like Dave Beck, Billy Graham, Al Capone, or William Faulkner.

In criticizing those who would be more scientific about their study of individuals, André Maurois once wrote rather petulantly: "Who is keeping a record of Bertrand Russell's dreams, so that the Freudian biographers may interpret them at a later date?" If some facts are not recorded during a person's lifetime, they are lost forever and cannot be reconstructed. Fortunately, the oral historian has the tools at hand, provided he also has wisdom, skill, patience, and the cooperation of his subjects, to record — figuratively speaking — even the dreams of contemporary man.

Oral history as biography has its limitations, of course, since it deals with a person entirely at the level of his own ability to per-

ceive and articulate. It is often true that the actual self is something quite different from the self that is articulated. People see themselves and their environment through the lenses of their culture. In trying to be or appear to be honest a man may ascribe to self-interest actions that are manifestly not to his self-interest at all because, in the circles in which he moves, it is fashionable to think that the only real motivations are self-interested ones. Conversely, when he characterizes another person, the description may be less revealing of the person described than it is of the person doing the describing; we tend to see in other people only those qualities that have some utility or danger or other form of relevance to ourselves. But this kind of human limitation is oral history's greatest strength, for American culture is largely the composite of how each of us sees the world around him and behaves in response to it. If we could find a way toward fuller understanding of how the world looks to different types of individuals — to distort a little the words of Robert Burns, if we could see others as they see themselves — we might be well along the way toward the millennium.

Because oral history is still in its infancy and its creative possibilities have just begun to be explored, the need for careful standards should not be allowed to fetter vision and imaginative experimentation. It is better to risk a few crashing failures than to stay earthbound by excessive caution.

The procedures of interviewing at the University of California have been roughly similar to those practiced elsewhere and described in the *American Archivist*. Each interview has been preceded by careful research and preparation. Lists of questions are drawn up in chronological-topical order. Sometimes the interviewee is sent detailed questions in advance, sometimes he is given only a general outline, and sometimes he is given no advance warning at all, depending on his temperament. For every individual there are two types of questions: questions about subjects on which he is an authority and questions about himself. In the first type, controversial topics have not been avoided. An attorney for the northern California ranchers in their battles with the private power companies might be asked, "Were local juries to some extent biased against the power companies? In what ways could you benefit from this local sentiment?" A large fruit-rancher might be asked: "In the 1930's, did you think agricultural laborers should be entitled to relief when they were out on strike?" A union leader might be asked what key positions in his union were held by Communists in the 1930's, and a waterfront employer: "Do you think that water-

front labor relations would have been significantly changed if Harry Bridges had been deported?"

The author has prepared an extensive manual of questions on the interviewee himself. He may be questioned about the political, religious, and economic background of his family; asked which of his later major interests were aroused while he was in school and under what circumstances; and requested to evaluate his education in the light of later practical experience. He may be asked what his current reading habits are, what ambitions he has had for his children, and which candidates for political office he has supported over the years and why. An artist or writer may be urged to describe a typical workday. A businessman, labor leader, judge, or lawyer may be asked what his ethical problems have been in connection with politics, whether and how he has contributed to political campaigns, if and how he has tried to influence legislation. The interviewer may wish to know who a lawyer-legislator's clients have been, and a businessman who has also been in Government may be asked to compare the administrative techniques he has used in each job. In any case, the interviewer is concerned with finding out not only the "when, where, and what" of a person's life, but also the "why and how."

Direct blunt questioning is usually not the best way to get honest answers. Under the right circumstances, interviewees will feel relaxed enough to express their real feelings in such casual comments as the following:

Mexicans are very efficient labor. They keep their place, for one thing, and don't become landlords. . . .

At that time the Southern Pacific had almost absolute control of the legislature, but they did it only for self-protection, to protect their own interests. . . .

I suppose that, putting it very baldly and frankly, the group which was in power in the Board wanted to continue in power, and I was their boy. . . .

It is torture for me when I have to do a portrait, looking forward to it and at the same time feeling very much of an antagonism. . . .

I took this job [a highly responsible one] because it paid more money.

The asking of questions involves a science all its own. The exact wording of a question may greatly influence the quality of the answer. Technique must naturally vary as individuals vary, and it is impossible to prescribe a foolproof formula. But there are some general precepts that have proved useful in interviewing:

1. Most important is the kind of relations that the interviewer establishes with the interviewee before the recording begins. Tell the interviewee in advance and preferably in writing exactly what the procedure is and what will

be expected of him. Give him the right to edit all material and to stipulate in writing the uses to which it will be put, and follow scrupulously all the terms of the agreement. It is best that the interviewer and everyone connected with the project should not stand to profit in any immediate personal way from the information or the contacts derived from the interview. Never violate a confidence. Never talk about another interviewee in any but polite general terms.

2. Most people respond best when they are sent in advance an outline of the questions to be covered. This gives them time to refresh their memories and collect their thoughts. It does not mean that they will read prepared speeches into the record, for the experienced interviewer can easily bring the interview to an informal plane. Be careful about the wording of questions. They may antagonize, frighten, or overwhelm some people. Interviewees will usually talk at what they think is the level of maturity and information of the person interviewing them. Let the interviewee know that you already have much of the inside story, but do not let him know exactly what you know. Find out everything you can about the person before you interview him, the events of his life, his friends and enemies, his likes and dislikes. With this information you can ask unobjectionable, detailed questions that are the keys to open many doors.

3. Choose a quiet place to record, where there will be no distractions; but also let it be the most convenient place for him. The interview should be a tête-à-tête between two persons. Three is almost always a crowd.

4. Approach the interview in a relaxed and friendly manner. Do not read questions off a sheet of paper or notecards. Try to work with an air of informality so that the narrative seems to unfold of its own accord. At the same time, do not let the interview degenerate into conversation. Keep in mind that the transcript is to be read by other persons, perhaps living 50 to 100 years from now. Make explicit what is implicit between you and the interviewee. Describe unobtrusively any gesture or object he uses to complete his meaning. Let your interview enrich whatever documentary evidence there is but at the same time stand by itself. Do not let your interviewee shuffle through papers and scrapbooks, commenting on them at random. If the same papers are not attached to the interview, the comments will lose most of their value. Even if the documents are attached, the comments will be hard to read. Proceed in an orderly chronological-topical fashion. Cover one subject fully before going on to the next. Be thorough in your questioning. Part of the truth can be misleading and worth less than nothing. Be careful how you order your questions. Find out what he thinks is important first before you follow through with specific questions. Otherwise, the trend of the interview will be influenced by your questions and you will never find out what his spontaneous reactions would have been. Be sure to get him to distinguish between what he thinks now and what he thought at the time of the event you are discussing. Do not hurry him about this. It is hard, if not downright impossible, to recall what one thought 20 or more years ago. Find out whether he is speaking as a participant or eyewitness of the events he is describing, or whether he is speaking merely from hearsay. If the latter, ask him for the sources of his information. Ask him to define terms. Ask for descriptions of the physical setting. Get

descriptions of the people involved, what they looked like, their personalities, their characters. After a long factual narrative, pause to get the interviewee's value judgments about the facts. Inspired to an imaginative recreation of the past, the interviewee will warm to his subject and the words will pour out. If it is not exciting and interesting to the participants, the interview will probably also be dull for the reader. It is all a matter of rapport and pacing, a judicious mixing of control and *laissez-faire*.

5. The interviewer must be a good listener. Indicate by your concentrated attention and your manner that the interviewee and what he has to say are of great interest to you. Do not try to inject your own personality or beliefs into the record. The focus should be entirely on the other person. In general, the fewer questions the interviewer has to ask during the recording and the shorter they are, the better the interview. Encourage the interviewee to feel responsible for the narration and to take pride in it. As long as he is on the right track, keep quiet; your best responses may be a nod, a frown, a raised eyebrow, a pause, or a laugh. The test of a good question is the quality of the answer it elicits. Two of our best stock questions are the simple words "Why?" and "Why not?" Avoid long abstract questions in academic jargon. Adopt the other person's own idiom if you can do it convincingly.

6. In a lengthy biographical interview, people do not talk freely if their own self-esteem and inner security are threatened in any way. Treat the interviewee as you would a guest in your home. Show him that you like him. Whenever you can do so with honesty, agree with him on small matters. Be discreetly noncommittal on large controversies, even if you agree with him, because you may be interviewing someone from the other side tomorrow and word gets around. Do not, however, so overplay your noncommittal role that the interviewee is made to feel the disparity between his talkativeness and your discretion. Do not ask your questions in any way that will make him unnecessarily lose face. Make it clear that you yourself are not there to pass judgment. At the same time show that you are objective and dedicated to the truth of things. Indicate that you think he is the kind of person who has the courage to talk frankly and that you admire him for it. Do not accept pleasant banalities in place of candor. Your own manner can keep the interview congenial and at the same time frank.

7. People usually talk freely about their avocations and their acquaintances but are unable to talk well about what they do every day and the people dearest to them. Sometimes this is due to lack of perspective, which the interviewer can help supply. You can ask, "How much time did you spend on that? In rough percentages, how was the rest of your time spent during that period?" Or, "What sorts of duties took up most of your time while you were president?" Or you can give your impression of his wife or dear friend and ask if this is correct.

8. If you think the interviewee will be reluctant to answer a certain question or describe a particularly painful event in his life, wait until rapport is good; then take the initiative and summarize earnestly and with sympathy the events that are still painful for the interviewee to recall. If the event was one of bitter personal defeat, indicate the impersonal forces that helped bring it

about. When you have said all this, he will probably be ready and perhaps even relieved to tell you about it in detail. It may help if there are small inaccuracies in your version so that he will want to be sure his side of the story is fully and accurately told.

There are many other tricks of the trade that are not really tricks at all. In brief, the interviewer should possess not only wisdom, humor, and imagination, but also common sense, patience, humanity, and the ability to subordinate himself to his job.

In the Regional Cultural History Project, interviews have averaged about 4 sessions per person, with $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 recording hours per session. Sometimes they are much longer. It takes a good typist 4 to 6 hours to make a literal transcription of an hour of recording. She types an original and two carbon copies. One copy, as a literal and unedited record of the interview, goes immediately to a file drawer. The original is edited and then sent to the interviewee for his editing. Another copy is filed showing just how the transcript looked with the interviewer's editing before it was sent to the interviewee. In this manner each stage of the interview is documented. It is usually best not to send the transcripts back to the interviewee until all the recording is done. This avoids making him feel self-conscious. Moreover the whole transcript should be checked for completeness and continuity before it is passed on for the interviewee's final editing and approval. Despite conflicting views on the subject, we believe that the interviewer should untangle confusing sentences, cut out total irrelevancies, put an afterthought story back where it belongs, supply parenthetical information, and suggest additional topics. To some people this may appear to be an unjustified tampering with the record, but why freeze into immortality what was by chance said when the tape recorder happened to be grinding? An interview is after all an abnormal situation; people are sometimes so overstimulated by the "honor of the thing" (to paraphrase Mark Twain) that they say things they really do not mean. Like a photographer or an artist who is trying to picture reality, the oral historian must exercise some element of interpretative selection. We add first names and identifying phrases, put in chapter headings, write an introduction describing the person interviewed and the circumstances of the interview, and then send the manuscript to the interviewee for his additions and approval.

The interviewee's editing usually improves the value of the manuscript. The recorded conversation can sometimes be rather painfully revealing, and interviewees react to this fact with mingled pride and distress, but a surprising number do not eliminate even the frankest passages. Sometimes they add explanatory comments,

but these are usually even more revealing than the original statement.

People often ask what is done with the tapes. In the Regional Cultural History Project and the Institute of Industrial Relations Oral History Project, parts of the tapes have been rough-edited and filed away for more polished editing at a later time. This is practical only when the interviewee has given legal clearance and when the sound engineering is passable, the speakers' voices commanding, and the subject matter of general interest.

Whether a manuscript transcript is available for general use will depend on the nature of the legal agreement signed by the interviewee. In a formal contract with the Regents of the University, the interviewee grants to the Library (in the case of the Regional Cultural History Project) or to the Institute of Industrial Relations all literary rights to the manuscript. If he so desires, however, he may in turn be granted exclusive license to publish during his lifetime. Both parties have the right of notice and the right to edit, before publication. The interviewee may place all or any parts of the manuscript under seal for as long as he likes. If he has not placed the manuscript under seal, it can be used by qualified scholars. Some of the interviews completed under the Regional Cultural History Project may be found in the Bancroft Library or other parts of the General Library of the University of California and in the Project's office. Copies of labor history interviews will be available in the Institute of Industrial Relations Library at Berkeley and in the Institute's offices at U. C. L. A.

Scholars using tape-recorded interviews must keep in mind that the human memory is not accurate. Oral history cannot recapture the past as it really was but only as it is seen through the eyes of the present. The oral historian does not attempt to vouch for the accuracy of what an interviewee has said but only for the fact that he has said it. Although manuscripts are edited with care, the user will need to check time sequences and will undoubtedly find many small factual errors. Even the most extended interview will fail to include questions pertinent to the specific research of every potential user. Oral history is still in the experimental stage, and oral historians still have much to learn. But if they do their task well, their interviews will give to other scholars leads and ideas and insights they might otherwise not have had; and some day their interviews, as varied as the tales of Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury, should help to illuminate for posterity the values and emotions, the conflicts, the fears, and the accomplishments of this corner of the contemporary world.