

# Problems for Practitioners of Oral History

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ORAL history, in spite of its recent and unprecedented popularity, is a subject on which American historians are astonishingly uninformed. More than a few of us have the mistaken notion that oral history is exclusively the function of local historians whose only mission is to amuse doddering old men and members of the D.A.R. Others, who should know better, believe that oral history is something new, an outgrowth of the new technology, completely dependent on tape recorders and other complicated gadgets. One has only to recall H. H. Bancroft's 19th-century interviews to know that these misconceptions are unfortunate and absurd. Today, oral history is increasingly in the hands of trained historians and is becoming more important as well as more popular every year.

Just why so many historians underestimate the importance of oral history is something of a mystery. The answer probably lies in our common background. We are simply not accustomed to thinking in terms of oral evidence. As graduate students, we are taught to rely primarily on the written record and to question the credibility of word-of-mouth evidence. Such unequivocal training is entirely proper, for the best history is always solidly based on the written evidence. But the time has come to recognize that historians are "to some extent tradition-bound," as Louis Starr has delicately phrased it, "particularly when it comes to source materials."<sup>1</sup>

While we cling tenaciously to our methodological traditions, the volume of oral history source materials is increasing at a staggering rate, and the output promises to increase rather than diminish. Even the daily newspapers are preaching the gospel of oral his-

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<sup>1</sup> Oral History Research Office, *Fifteenth Anniversary Report*, p. 9 (New York, Columbia University, 1963).

tory. James Reston, writing only a few days after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, suggested that the close associates of the dead President should immediately "put down on paper their recollections of anything he said or did in their presence that will provide the material for future historians." For those "who cannot or will not write," he added, "the tape recorder can be used to capture their memories."<sup>2</sup> Precisely such an oral history program is already underway in connection with the proposed John F. Kennedy Memorial Library.

This widespread enthusiasm for organized oral history projects is an asset to both professional historians and archivists. But, in my opinion, the focus of attention in oral history now should shift away from organizing new projects. Oral history offices, more or less patterned after Columbia's, are proliferating. What we now need is greater attention to the problems of oral history on the part of practicing historians. Specialists in the recent period of American history, in particular, must learn to utilize the source materials already available through the various oral history projects; but, more important, they must be increasingly ready to become oral historians themselves in order to complete their own research.

The use of the oral history source materials already available can pay rich dividends. In fact, historians who overlook the pertinent transcripts at Columbia University and at the Harry S. Truman Library, to name only two places, are taking a considerable risk. Both of these repositories contain valuable oral recollections—as well as a certain number of useless and wonderful Freudian fantasies.

The increasing necessity to use personal interviews as a research technique poses the more serious problem. As a result of man's lengthening lifespan, there are more surviving witnesses to past events than ever before. And it is a foolish historian who refuses to talk to the main surviving characters in the field of his study. Moreover, oral history techniques offer the possibility of surmounting certain thorny research problems peculiar to the recent epoch. It is a fact of life since World War II that many of the most important documents are classified for reasons of national security and therefore are consigned to a special archival limbo. We can perhaps agree that the existing security classification system is too rigid and needs to be changed. To circumvent the problem of classified written records, however, the historian may resort

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1963.

to personal interviews. The documents themselves may be stamped TOP SECRET, but the authors of the documents are not. For these and other reasons, oral history will probably become one of the standard tools of those who work in recent American history. Yet it is difficult to obtain information about the pitfalls, the possibilities, the techniques, the advantages, and the disadvantages of oral history.

How much will it cost, for example, to finance a venture in oral history? Should one use a tape recorder and transcribe verbatim records of the interviews? What limitations are inherent in oral history? To none of these questions can we find satisfactory published answers—a singular omission in our professional literature.

Here are a few elementary observations about oral history based on my own experience in the past 3 years and offered with the conviction that even the simplest lessons of experience deserve to be cataloged at this stage in the development of oral history techniques.

From 1961 to 1963 four colleagues and I, financed by the National Science Foundation, studied the relations of science to the Federal Government in the period 1940 to 1960. Our focus was on the formulation and administration of national science policy. Our first task was to go through a mountain of written records in the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and other depositories. But when we had finished, certain questions remained unanswered. In order to complete our research, we were forced to resort to oral history techniques and to learn to be oral historians by rude experience. Before we finished, we had interviewed 62 scientists, Government administrators, and politicians. These are the lessons we learned.

1. *Interviewing is a remarkably expensive method of doing research, especially if a tape recorder is used.*

Not considering background research, but including time for preparation, travel, transcribing, and editing, the ratio of manhours to actual interview time may be conservatively estimated at 40 to 1. In other words, an average of 40 hours' work will be required for every hour of taped interview. Translated into dollars, this means a large investment. Costs can be reduced somewhat by not using a tape recorder, for then transcribing and editing will not be necessary. In any event, one can expect to spend more than originally estimated for an adventure in oral history.

2. *Using a tape recorder is not necessarily wise; in fact, there can be positive advantages in not using one, depending on circumstances.*

A majority of those interviewed will be inhibited and therefore less candid if they know that their remarks will be preserved on tape. In a surprisingly large number of cases, the very act of recording an interview leads to an unfortunate sequence of events: transcribing a verbatim copy of the interview, submitting it to the respondent (as he has requested), and having him run a red pencil through some of his most revealing comments. This happens because certain spoken sentences seem harsh or even disconnected when they appear in cold print. One elderly scientist I interviewed was terribly distressed when he read the transcript of his own remarks. Thinking that he appeared senile, he set out to edit and revise his comments so thoroughly that their usefulness would have been impaired. Luckily, I was able to dissuade him.

I myself found that a tape recorder was a physical hindrance, a valuable and sometimes heavy piece of equipment that had to be guarded and carried around at considerable inconvenience. Like other mechanical devices, it occasionally but stubbornly refused to work. The chances of a pen or pencil suffering mechanical failure in the midst of an interview are remote as compared to those for a tape recorder.

3. *Notes made during an interview or immediately afterward were sufficient to record the pertinent historical data, especially if we worked in teams.*

Operating in tandem has several advantages, the most important of which is that one man does not have to carry the entire burden of the interview. An associate, bringing a slightly different perspective to the conversation, can materially enlarge the scope of an interview by asking supplementary questions. While one man talks, the other can unobtrusively take notes and a conversational atmosphere is possible. We found that two men, comparing notes immediately after an interview, could accurately reconstruct most of the statements of the man interviewed and that therefore a tape recorder was not really necessary. When we operated without a recorder, we took pains to write a brief summary of each interview, including personal impressions of the man interviewed. We never volunteered to send our notes to him, and we were careful to give broad assurance that statements from the interview would not be quoted except in extraordinary circumstances—and then only after obtaining his permission.

4. *A relatively brief and pointed conversation is more practical and perhaps more useful to the individual researcher than a long and permissive interview in depth.*

Few will deny that a man's background is important, but biographical information about a well-known politician or scientist can usually be found in printed sources. Consulting this background information is an essential part of the preparation for an interview, and to go over it again in the interview is usually a waste of time. A historian working on a particular piece of research is interested in particular unanswered questions. A half dozen issues or important questions, carefully considered in advance, can be raised and discussed in

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an hour. A clever historian, in that time, probably will be able to learn what he wants to know. It should not be forgotten that time is a prime consideration both to the person being interviewed and to the historian away from home on a research trip. Unfortunately, organized oral history projects, by over-zealously proclaiming that interviews in depth are the only kind worth doing, sometimes perform a disservice to individual historians who want to conduct short interviews about certain specialized subjects.

One famous scientist, who previously had been interviewed in depth by the Columbia Oral History Research Office, is a case in point. When I wrote to him to request an interview, he jumped to the conclusion that a large amount of time would be necessary to cover the subjects I had in mind. His reply stated brusquely that he was "somewhat appalled" by my letter, adding that it would be "impossible" to deal with any one of the four questions I had raised "in any responsible manner" in less than "several hours." And so he declined to see me. He later went so far as to claim that my statements seemed to him "ridiculous" if "seriously intended" and "unethical if they were not." Since I had approached him with "some exceedingly broad and deep general topics"—important questions by his own admission—he refused to see me. Had I raised only superficial questions, paradoxically enough, he would probably have agreed to talk. An hour is not very long, but if time is severely limited, surely only the most important questions should be discussed. Although this scientist is well known as a prima donna, his response might have been different had he not already been persuaded that oral history is a waste of time unless it is done in depth. But there is another moral to this story, which raises my next point.

*5. Each prospective subject to be interviewed must be approached carefully and tactfully, for if the initial approach touches a raw nerve, the interview is doomed to failure.*

A letter giving a summary of the interviewer's own background and research objectives is, of course, in order. An indication of the questions to be discussed should also be given. Any convenient and appropriate approach will suffice; the important thing is to demonstrate your own competence and to avoid sounding either officious or obsequious.

*6. The success or failure of an interview frequently seemed to depend on the status of the man being interviewed.*

Highly placed appointed officials, while still in office, will seldom divulge any information that is not already obvious, and getting to see these persons will be difficult. The same is generally true of elected officials. Day by day they are carving out a public record, and with few exceptions they will be content to stand on it. The most valuable oral testimony, I think, tends to come from men who, though not widely known, have been deeply involved in important matters. Their names will be obvious in the written records. Some of the most useful oral evidence I received, for example, came from a man who was neither a scientist nor a politician. He was a professional glad-

handler, an organizer, an entertainer. During World War II he was in charge of lobbying, banquets, and entertainment for Vannevar Bush's Office of Scientific Research and Development. He talked freely, for his role in important events remains unheralded to this day. Compared to his more widely known associates in OSRD, his candor was refreshing. Lobbyists, personal assistants, members of congressional staffs, secretaries, and general handymen for famous persons should be considered as above-average prospects for oral interviews, and it is a very good idea to compile a special list of their names while going through the written records.

As a research tool oral interviews have definite limitations, something that must always be remembered. Human beings have an extraordinary facility for forgetting unpleasant things. Moreover, many men whose memories may once have been faultless will have lost track of important details by the time oral historians reach them. Most persons interviewed will be apologetic and even defensive; many will embellish their own role in the events under discussion. Nevertheless, oral history is worth doing. The value to the researcher is not usually in the detailed new knowledge he will obtain but rather in having some of the intangibles of a past era revealed. Interviews are particularly useful in getting at "emphasis" and "atmosphere." *Emphasis*, roughly defined, means an indication of the relative importance assigned to the issues by the participants themselves; and *atmosphere* may be defined as the social, political, economic, and personality interrelationships that explain why certain issues were important and others were not. Moreover, interviews can provide an understanding of unexercised alternatives and may open the door to the subjective "feel" of a person or a period. A talk with Harry S. Truman, for instance, will probably not produce much in the way of new information, but it will be an unforgettable experience that will help in writing about him. An interview with Senator Warren Magnuson about the National Science Foundation Act of 1950 may not produce a single thought that could not be found somewhere in the public record, but just the same the conversation will be revealing. The emphasis on certain words, the suppressed chuckle when a seemingly humorless phrase comes up, are intangibles not found in documents. The excitement, frustration, boredom, or humor of a particular situation are often not discernible in the written record. Oral history techniques offer the possibility, without guaranteeing success, of recapturing the mood and the spirit of men and their times.

An experienced oral historian will readily admit that personal interviews are sometimes disappointing, frequently wasteful, usu-

ally expensive, and occasionally frustrating. Yet oral history, if properly conceived, has great promise as a research tool and clearly deserves more attention than it has received from American historians and archivists. The key to the constructive use of oral history, in my opinion, is to remember that it is a "supplement, not a substitute, for the written record."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Charles T. Morrissey, "The Case for Oral History," in *Vermont History*, 31:154 (Summer 1963).

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### **Patchwork**

An attempt to modernize existing procedures in the courts might be likened to remodeling a 17th century mansion house which has been extended and added to time and time again over the years. Eventually the mansion house outgrows its usefulness, and maintenance costs rise until it is no longer economic to remodel or refurbish. The records systems presently employed in the courts of Illinois have not changed significantly since the State was created. They have been added to and added to, until the number of records series kept has risen out of sight. The cost of maintaining such a patchwork is unnecessarily and unreasonably large, and it drains too much from the public coffers. We would urge that the mansion house be demolished, that all vestiges of the present system be removed, and, that we start anew with a fresh approach and build a modern structure suitable to the needs of the 20th century. It simply is not economic to remodel again. We should clear away the old and build for the future.

—JOHN W. METZGER, "A Proposal for the Management of Judicial Records in Illinois," in *Illinois Libraries*, 46:423 (May 1964).

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### **Retrieval**

On the 6th of August last the Honorable Town Council of the Town of Newport addressed General Carleton on the subject of the records of said Town, requesting His Excellency would be pleased to order said records returned to said Town; in consequence of which His Excellency returned said records by the last flag from New York, with a polite note expressing his sorrow for the damage said records had received by the sinking of the transport in Hell Gate which carried them from hence, and by their having lain three years without examination.

—*Newport (R.I.) Mercury*, Dec. 14, 1782. Julia Ward Stickley sends us this item and informs us that Gov. Joseph Wanton "was a Tory; when the British evacuated Newport, he went along, taking with him the town records! The ship carrying them was sunk in Hell Gate channel. Oddly enough, it was salvaged, and the records salvaged too. They were carried ashore and placed in a shop window (not for sale, just as the first available place to stow them) where they were seen by a R. I. officer, who appealed to Washington, who sent a special plea to Carleton that the records be allowed to be returned to the town!"