Oral History—An Appeal for More Systematic Procedures

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ORAL HISTORY is here to stay. Colleges and universities, following the lead of Columbia, have established or are in the process of establishing oral history units. State and local historical societies are beginning to supplement manuscript holdings with oral history interviews. The experiences and points of view of persons associated with Presidents Truman and Eisenhower are being recorded in the name of oral history by the Truman and Eisenhower libraries, and widespread publicity has been given plans to record the thoughts of the members of the Kennedy administration by oral history techniques. Yet, in spite of the proliferation of oral history units and the increasing attention accorded the term oral history, there is far from complete agreement on what oral history is.

The term oral history originated in the efforts of Allan Nevins to conserve knowledge and experience that was being lost through lack of adequate records. He applied the term to a systematic program initiated at Columbia University in 1948 for recording, transcribing, and making available to researchers the thoughts of persons believed to have information of value to historians. The end product of Nevins' program is a manuscript that is reviewed by the person interviewed and, at a date determined by that person, is made available to all qualified researchers. Thus oral history as conceived by Nevins combines a technique for recording information with a service to historians and other researchers.

How far the current use of the term oral history departs from Nevins' concept was indicated at a session on oral history at the recent meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. One speaker understood oral history in terms of a historian's taking notes during an interview for purposes of his own research and thereby applied the term to what historians have been doing since the dawn of their profession. Another speaker, in the role

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of commentator, considered a verbatim record of the interview an essential element of oral history; he too, however, applied the term to interviews conducted solely for purposes of his own research. These wide variations in usage stem from ambiguities in the term, for, in a strict sense, the product emerging from the Nevins program at Columbia is neither oral nor history. The taped record of the interview is considered an intermediate step toward a typewritten manuscript, and the transcript quite obviously is not history but rather raw material with which historians can work. Nonetheless, in spite of its inadequacies, the term has become generic. Since oral history is now part of our language it seems advisable to make its meaning clear by limiting its application to cases in which the taped record is transcribed and made available to other researchers. Most of the value of oral history lies in these procedures. So do the most serious problems connected with the technique.

The major problem connected with oral history is how to avoid confusing the researcher about what each of the three parties involved in creating a transcript—interviewer, person interviewed, and transcriber—contributes to the final product. If these distinctions are not clear the researcher may draw quite erroneous conclusions about the person interviewed. He may, for example, conclude that the person interviewed is articulate when actually it is the transcriber who is articulate; he may conclude that the person interviewed is insightful when, in fact, much of the insight was provided by the interviewer during moments when the tape recorder was turned off. As researchers discover that both the tape recording and the transcription may differ from the actual interview they are likely to lose confidence in the integrity of oral history procedures, at least if they look to the transcripts for more than interesting stories and amusing anecdotes. Yet the problem can be solved; the establishment of certain guidelines by those who administer oral history units can aid substantially in clarifying who contributed what to oral history manuscripts.

The first rule is that the interviewer must assume responsibility for making the taped record reflect what occurred during the interview. It is almost inevitable that in the course of an interview the tape recorder will be shut off a number of times. These situations and others cause a break in the recording: fatigue, telephone calls, the desire of either participant in the interview to deliberate before proceeding, and the desire of the respondent to tell the interviewer something that he thinks important but that, for a

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variety of reasons, he does not want on the recording (at that point at least). With the recorder off, conversation frequently occurs that determines what is said when recording is resumed. Unless the interviewer notes the gap in the recording the listener will have no means of knowing that the gap occurred. The interviewer may indicate the break by resuming the recording with a summary of what took place while the recorder was off—for instance, "I'd like to get on record your reaction to the suggestion I made while we were having coffee a few minutes ago. As I recall, I said . . ." In most cases this procedure is simple enough, once the interviewer recognizes its importance. If, however, the person interviewed wishes to say something but refuses to have it recorded, about the best that the interviewer can do is to mark the break with a phrase such as, "Resuming the interview . . ."

The second rule is that the transcriber shall make the transcript reflect what is on the tape. Although typing skills are involved in transcribing, translating spoken into written words goes well beyond typing. Good transcribers must have a high level of verbal ability, yet such people often find it difficult not to improve as they transcribe. Bad grammar and run-on sentences may so offend that even where reason forbids the hand corrects. Moreover, such improvements are sometimes rationalized on the ground that since the person interviewed will make such changes when he receives the transcript, the changes might better be made by the transcriber. Since it is a rare researcher who will check on the transcriber by listening to the tape, where it is available—and for reasons to be indicated later it is often not available—and since the person interviewed is likely to be pleased by a transcript which flatters his verbal skills, the "improvements" by the transcriber are unlikely to be recognized for what they are: errors in transcription. On the other hand, an accurate transcript may complicate the work of the interviewer, for the person interviewed may be so distressed by the way he expressed himself that his rapport with the interviewer is adversely affected. Moreover, later interviews may be colored by the effort of the subject to project an image consistent with his self-concept. Interviewers may be tempted to avoid these complications by accepting less than accurate transcripts. Unless thoroughly instructed, interviewers are not likely to appreciate the importance of accurate transcripts; in fact, they may be relieved when repetitive and obscure questions are transformed by transcribers into cogent inquiries.

These two rules must be applied to all oral history interviews

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without equivocation. The argument is untenable that such guidelines are justified only if the person interviewed may become subject to biographical treatment. If practitioners of oral history select their method according to their evaluation of the significance of the person interviewed, they must assume responsibility for informing those using oral history materials about what rules applied in each case. This is clearly unfeasible. Moreover, interviewers and transcribers cannot know how the manuscripts they are creating will be used in the future.

Even with the most skilled and conscientious transcribers, part of the interview will be lost in transcription, the extent of the loss being related to the speaker's use of inflection and other untranscribable elements of language. The preservation of tapes after transcription would seem justified for this reason alone. Yet it is common practice in oral history to provide that the person interviewed may revise his transcript, even to deleting substantial parts if he wishes. The object of this practice is to encourage frankness and good rapport during the interviews and considered reflection on the accuracy and completeness of material in the transcript—the kind of reflection not possible in the give and take of an interview. Obviously, such an agreement precludes the possibility of preserving every original record. Budgetary considerations are also involved; new tape for each interview can add appreciably to the cost of oral history. Although more funds can solve the latter problem, the former seems to permit no clear-cut solution. Perhaps the best that can be done is to inform each person interviewed that he may decide if the tape will be preserved and, if so, under what circumstances it may be used.

A good oral history memoir demands, on the part of the interviewer, thoroughgoing research on subjects he expects to raise during each interview and, equally important, a continuing analysis of how the content of the interview may have been affected by his relations with the person he is interviewing. It is a well-known phenomenon of interviewing that how a question is answered depends on how the respondent "sizes up" the questioner. What is said during an interview depends on the rapport between the parties involved. Since this rapport is almost certain to change with increased contact the response to a question may vary with the point in the interview at which it is asked. Early in a series of interviews the respondent is likely to be guarded in expressing what he senses are unpopular or unsophisticated notions, but as the interviews progress he may more readily lapse into cherished

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myth and commonplace idea. Furthermore, the context in which a question is raised will also affect the answer. Because of changing rapport and changing context, it is not unusual to find the same question answered differently during an extended interview. These phenomena are associated with any interview in depth. Oral history, however, presents a further complication, for the record does not remain anonymous. Thus, in oral history, the interviewer is researcher, audience, and avenue to posterity. Occasionally it appears that a respondent restricts the interviewer to the latter role by neatly packaging his life in wrappings that he thinks posterity will find acceptable. If the interviewer finds the record thus created to be less than adequate, he must break out of the role to which he has been confined.

Knowing that such phenomena exist may be of little value to an interviewer unless he knows how to cope with them in a way that will make his efforts more effective. If, for example, he decides to repeat a question that has already been answered, he must calculate the most appropriate timing and wording. If the interviewer is to make this kind of judgment with reasonable assurance he needs more than perfunctory guidance by administrators of oral history units. Oral history interviewers, it seems clear, could benefit from a formal training program. Such a program certainly should draw upon the knowledge of persons in the social sciences who have had considerable experience with extended interviews.

It can be argued that the value of oral history materials would be enhanced if those who used these materials were aware of what sources interviewers consulted in preparing for interviews and what observations interviewers made during the course of interviews. Saul Benison, whose experience with oral history is rarely equaled, insists that the interviewer should make clear the sources from which he developed his questions by attaching a bibliography to each manuscript. Several interviewers associated with the oral history project at Cornell have suggested that each interview should be accompanied by a description of the physical environment where the interview was held and of the prevailing mood. These suggestions have not been adopted—not because they lack merit but because of ethical considerations. Since the person interviewed may determine the content of his oral history manuscript it seems inappropriate to attach material created exclusively by the interviewer. The desirability of recording the interviewer's observations, however, suggests the need to reexamine present arrangements.

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