

A Janus Look at Oral History

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THE emerging field of oral history is about to celebrate its third birthday as an officially organized member of the scholarly establishment. The Georgian grandeur of Airlie House, near Washington, D.C., is to be the site where scholars and librarians involved with oral history will come together in November to scrutinize, discuss, and listen as the more venerable writers of our day descant on the developing issues in the new field. It will be the fourth such colloquium to be held annually since 1966, and the *Proceedings* from the past 3 years show a developing pattern of questions, disagreements, and concerns that permit the projection of future issues in oral history from the short record of the past.

For the uninitiated, oral history started in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when Columbia University historian Allan Nevins began to record the memoirs of persons significant in American life. Gradually similar projects developed at other institutions. The technique has come into use increasingly as a tool for historical research in such fields as politics, science, the arts, agriculture, natural resources, industry, labor, and ethnic and local history.

Columbia University's Oral History Office undertook from the beginning an interdisciplinary recording program, and today its program is probably the largest in total budget and output, ranging from a series on the unsuccessful presidential candidates, to social security history, to a 45-person series on the Federated Department Stores. Berkeley, too, has a broad program. No sooner had Columbia's Allan Nevins deposited his first transcripts than a similar office began to operate in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, where recordings now cover such diverse subjects as conservation, maritime history, winemaking, and the rise of the Progressives. The sister campus at Los Angeles soon followed suit, simultaneously with many others over the country, until in 1967 there were reported nearly a hundred projects, some general, some limited to a specific subject or locale.¹

The extensive budget of the Department of Defense makes possible large and highly comprehensive interview series in the military services. One such program tapes Marines, from the buck private just emerging from a brush with the Viet Cong, to long, formalized sessions

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¹ *Oral History in the United States, a Report From the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University* (Butler Library, New York, 1967).

with Marine major generals. Two years ago the interviews had already numbered 1,792 from field units in the United States and 1,258 from the Pacific. There are projects also in the Air Force Academy in Colorado and the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

Medical programs also loom large—from the history of surgery, conducted at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York, to psychoanalysis in California, dermatology in Florida, and a broad, comprehensive series in the National Library of Medicine at Bethesda, Md. Some observers suggest that posterity will envision the 20th-century masses frantically engaging in warfare but simultaneously enjoying the compensating activities of their medical brethren, who were developing more and more competence in putting the Humpty Dumpty together again.

Today, however, one can find a variety of interesting examples of oral history documenting such subjects as agricultural history at Cornell University, computer development at IBM (where more than a hundred key IBM people have been interviewed, apparently by real live interviewers), labor history at the University of Hawaii and at Pennsylvania State, forest history (moving this fall from Yale to the University of California at Santa Cruz), and black history, such as the Civil Rights Archive project in Chicago and an office just opening at Howard University. "Great men" projects are fast becoming a vehicle for recording otherwise vanishing sources in politics and public service; such are the series built around John Foster Dulles at Princeton, Gen. George Marshall at Lexington, Va., Herbert Hoover at West Branch, Iowa, and other recent U.S. Presidents—all under the umbrella of the Archives of the United States, with the Eisenhower project contracted to Columbia. Just starting is the Earl Warren project at Berkeley, courtesy of the National Endowment Fund.

These practitioners from their several fields began to coalesce when UCLA's Oral History Office issued invitations for the first colloquium at Lake Arrowhead, Calif., in 1966. Before then, each person had been operating in a state of insularity, unilaterally learning the new trade by his own trials and tapes. Because there had been little opportunity to profit from the difficulties of other oral historians or to know the kinds of research in which they were involved, the support was strong for some kind of national organization. UCLA's James V. Mink was chosen as *ad hoc* Chairman To "Do Something" during the following year, and in conjunction with a steering committee, he and Louis Starr of Columbia University created the structure of the Oral History Association.²

Crossing the threshold of the establishment is a convenient *beau*

²James V. Mink is University Archivist at UCLA and Director of the Oral History Program. He has been active in the Society of American Archivists. Louis Starr worked with Prof. Allan Nevins in the early days of Columbia's Oral History Research Office. Since 1956 he has been director of that office, as well as associate professor of journalism in the Columbia School of Journalism.

geste that, to the outside society, signifies approaching maturity. But inside that first colloquium there were signs that oral historians were still rather nervous in their newness: speeches and cocktail chatter centered often—too often—on how badly the emerging craft was needed. Too loud was the lament that the doers and actors in the 20th century do not, alas, keep diaries as did their forebears; too firm were the declarations that only the oral historian, with his trusty tape recorder, could restore the otherwise bleak outlook for the archivist. All of this was true enough: no doubt the amount of *significant* papers per V.I.P. has declined considerably in this century as technology continues to expand, as business is conducted and decisions are made with quick-vanishing telephone conversations or by jetting across the continent to confer face-to-face.

The point is, however, that by the time the second colloquium began, the participants no longer seemed so concerned with justifying their profession. There, at Columbia University's Arden House, they officially adopted the Mink committee's Oral History Association structure as their national organization, and they nominated and later elected Louis Starr as their first president. Oral history had come of age as a formal member of the academic community.

Accepting the formation of OHA as an appropriate puberty rite for the profession, the participants shifted their focus from "whether" to "whither oral history." Amid the hand-carved gargoyles, the deep velvet carpets, and the ubiquitous silver urns offering—symbolically—fresh red apples, the members confronted the next issue: the identity crisis. They realized vaguely that, two decades after the first oral historian had been created by Allan Nevins, the organism was acquiring some sort of image, a montage of a nosy journalist-historian who can store data for interviews like a computer, interrogate like the Grand Inquisitor, seduce like a Mata Hari, and ferret out truth like Sherlock Holmes. But was this image accurate? Taken singly, the guests at Arden House were, in real life, journalists (reformed or otherwise), historians, archivists, college professors, overqualified housewives, military officers, anthropologists, librarians, volunteers from local historical societies or religious sects (particularly the evangelical), government executives, and physicians—to name only a part of the group.

Their oral history projects formed just as dizzy a variety. A sampling revealed histories of professions and biographies of great men (George Marshall, John Foster Dulles, the former Presidents), and recordings of labor history at Penn State, of agriculture at Cornell, of forest history at Yale, of the civil rights movement, of military history, and—in Israel—of the resistance to Hitler's Reich at the Hebrew University. Some offices, like those at Columbia, U.C.-Berkeley, and UCLA, were general and comprehensive in their scope, aim-

ing their microphones at many different fields over the years. There were also folksong recording projects, sociological surveys, folk-tale and song collections, and news tapes—all obviously happily akin to the Rorschach blob called oral history. Again and again a definition of oral history was discussed. Some remembered the previous colloquium, where Louis Shore's imaginative speech expanded the possibilities for oral history into a McLuhanesque concept of recording sound, sight, and even thought waves.³ Others quoted Philip Brooks, of the Truman Library: "Oral history should be *history*, and it should be *oral*."⁴ But after the brainstorming was over, it appeared that anything that talks, sings, or squawks over a microphone could rate the term "oral history." Everyone went back to his own institution with a disturbing question in his mind about the nature of the group to which he had paid his \$7.50 to join.

A great deal of thinking and corresponding was done the following year (1968) between the second and third colloquia. At the Nebraska Conference Center in November 1968, it seemed generally agreed among those present that a Brooksonian definition of oral history might be sufficient. During the year an *ad hoc* committee had been working on an ethical code—called "goals and guidelines" so as not to insinuate to the more sensitive that oral historians might ever be *unethical*. At the previous colloquium the meeting on goals and guidelines had pulsed, boiled, simmered, and finally sogged into a heterogeneous nothing; but at the session in Nebraska, the committee's points—even their definition of oral history—were accepted unanimously with hardly a discouraging word.

This version had been put together by Oscar Winther of Indiana University (chairman), James Harvey Young of Emory University, Philip C. Brooks of the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Mo., and Amelia Fry of the oral history office at Berkeley. By voting approval, the members at Nebraska formally recognized oral history as a "method of gathering a body of historical information in oral form usually on tape," and in growing maturity the oral historians donned the following robe of ethical standards:

Guidelines for the interviewee:

1. The person who is interviewed should be selected carefully and his wishes must govern the conduct of the interview.
2. Before undertaking a taped interview for the purpose stated above, the interviewee (or narrator) should be clear in his mind regarding mutual rights with respect to tapes and transcripts made from them. This includes such things as: seal privileges, literary rights, prior use, fiduciary relationships, the right

³ Louis Shores, "Directions for Oral History," *ibid.*, p. 53-66.

⁴ *Oral History at Arrowhead*, the Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History, Oral History Association, Los Angeles, Calif., 1967, p. 6.

to edit the tape transcriptions, and the right to determine whether the tape is to be disposed of or preserved.

3. It is important that the interviewee fully understand the project, and that in view of costs and effort involved he assumes a willingness to give useful information on the subject being pursued.

Guidelines for the interviewer:

1. It should be the objective of the interviewer to gather information that will be of scholarly usefulness in the present and the future. The interviewer who is collecting oral history materials for his own individual research should always bear in mind this broader objective.

2. In order to obtain a tape of maximum worth as a historical document, it is incumbent upon the interviewer to be thoroughly grounded in the background and experiences of the person being interviewed, and, where appropriate and if at all feasible, to review the papers of the interviewee before conducting the interview. In conducting the interview, an effort should be made to provide enough information to the interviewee to assist his recall.

3. It is important that all interviews be conducted in a spirit of objectivity and scholarly integrity and in accordance with stipulations agreed upon.

Guidelines for sponsoring institutions:

1. Subject to meeting the conditions as prescribed by interviewees, it will be the obligation of sponsoring institutions to prepare easily usable tapes and/or accurate typed transcriptions, and properly to identify, index, and preserve such oral history records for use by the scholarly community, and to state clearly the provisions that govern their use.

—Unanimously adopted by the
Oral History Association
November 25, 1968

Even as the "Goals and Guidelines" were being voted on, there were intimations that the code was only a beginning. The evening before their adoption, William Manchester, from the perspective of his ordeal with the Kennedys over his use of tape-recorded interviews, noted that "things come out that are intimacies when your rapport is good." He strongly advised the interviewer to edit carefully the unsealed transcript, not only for the protection of the interviewee but also to maintain the interviewer's own standing as a responsible researcher. Joe B. Frantz, who heads the new Lyndon B. Johnson oral history project at the University of Texas, said after the code's adoption, "We need *more* than this." Foreseeing that oral history's continuing process of maturation will likely result in further evolution of the "Goals and Guidelines" as time goes on, he suggested a few refinements. For instance, it should be the accepted responsibility of the *interviewer* to advise whether to put certain passages under seal and also whether to include or omit personal reminiscences and anecdotes whose significance will likely increase or decrease in the future.⁵

⁵ Proceedings of the Third National Colloquium on Oral History, University of Nebraska Conference Center, Lincoln, Nebr. The quotation actually came from one of the author's (Fry's) notes.

Fully as important as a code of ethics is the attempt to develop means of facilitating the use of oral history interviews by the research community. Thus far the transcripts and tapes have been a closely guarded holding of the institutions who sponsored the recordings; any scholar wishing to use them has had to have the wherewithal to travel to the depository and then to seek special permission for their use. Recently a few oral history offices have been cautiously trying to increase the availability of these unique sources, whose cost of production is high. (An off-the-cuff survey at one OHA session showed that costs range anywhere from \$6 to \$12 per final-typed page.) Interlibrary loan is being considered as one possibility by some, and the Berkeley office is beginning to make available a photocopy of an open transcript to a qualified manuscript depository with holdings in the field of the interview.

Another approach to the same problem is to make known to the scholarly community the titles and locations of oral history materials. The first idea was that OHA should compile a catalog, but this was quickly rejected because not only was the new organization too small to handle such a project, but the group quickly concluded that oral history materials do not differ in terms of use from other historical papers and therefore should not be treated separately. The obvious solution was to become a part of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

Though oral history had chosen NUCMC, that time-honored body wanted to be shown that an oral account is indeed a manuscript. The Advisory Committee of NUCMC is currently taking under consideration whether oral history interviews qualify as manuscripts and as collections, and whether there is a need to include them in the catalog. The committee returned to the question asked in the first colloquium: What are the limitations of oral history? "We do not want to expand into [just any] recorded sound," Arline Custer, editor of NUCMC, says. The requirement is that, to be listed, a "collection" must be 50 or more items or 1 linear foot—perhaps a reasonable beginning standard for a young profession, or paraprofession, struggling for academic respectability.⁶

All these issues—the struggles for avenues to more use of the manuscripts, for proper conduct and use of the interviews, for definitions of the field that can delineate but accept its heterogeneity—are continuing in a rich mixture of dialog and action that may eventually result in viable resolutions of the problems. But there are other issues that probably should never be settled, lest the entire lifegiving energy of debate and interaction be dispelled in the grip of *rigor mortis*.

⁶ Arline Custer, Editor, NUCMC, to David Larson, Mar. 6, 1969. Mr. Larson is Chief, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Ohio Historical Society, and Chairman of the Oral History Association Committee on Inclusion of Oral History in NUCMC.

Wherever there is more than one oral historian, these are points that should, and undoubtedly will, be discussed but never unanimously accepted.

One such perennial question asked at every colloquium and by every initiate exploring the new technique is: How does an interviewer establish rapport with an interviewee? "Answers" to this have ranged all the way from the helpless female who had to have aid to get the cord plugged in, to the labor interviewer in Hawaii who learned he had to drink Hawaiian (not U.S.) beer with his interviewees. The techniques are as varied as the span of personalities.

Another permanent debate topic is, "Resolved: One should edit the manuscripts." Regardless of Manchester's admonition, there are those who feel that any editing is tampering with the recorded word and others who maintain that no one, no matter how literate, is capable of recording an entire interview without letting drop an ambiguity or a misnomer here and there and that to leave them in is a disservice to the interviewee and to those who use the transcripts.

Equally debatable is whether tapes should be erased. The very thought has habitually chilled the atmosphere among those who classify the tape as the primary record, the transcript as secondary. Others feel that, since preserving tapes is expensive and requires special conditions, the decision should hinge on the affluence of the project and the relative importance of the person interviewed. (Erase most of good old "Pops" Jones; preserve every tape from the Governor!) Many projects keep a selected part of each interview and erase the other tapes.

Another permanent question is money. The one constant in the field of oral history is a financial condition bordering on the disastrous. It is a safe prediction that for all time to come there will be discussions of how to survive, whether by seeking funds from the department, the institution, a foundation, or, as Columbia is doing, by raising an endowment fund.

Still another question: How does one train an oral historian? Since practitioners usually belong to another discipline or field, most of the training to date has resembled informal apprenticeships. Some institutions, however, are developing more formal instruction by conferences, seminars, and courses, in library schools, social science departments, or history departments. A few of the pioneers are UCLA, Cornell, California State at Fullerton, and the University of Vermont. An interesting corollary in the public schools is Harry Kursch, writer-turned-teacher in Lake Mohegan, N.Y., who is using oral history as a class project for teaching local history in his junior high school classes.

Discussions, however, have unfailingly come around to consensus that, whatever the training, the oral historian has to have the pre-

requisites of a tough research mind, facility with the language, and social sensitivity. In other words, he should be that combination of journalist-historian, the Grand Inquisitor, Mata Hari, Sherlock Holmes, and, one might add, Vanderbilt or Mellon.

In conclusion, if there is any unity to be found in oral history today, this backward and forward look at the emerging field reveals it to be embodied in the sometimes exasperating persistence of the questions and problems that are shared by all. Perhaps, too, there is a unity found in the enthusiasm each catches from a belief in the importance of rescuing material from the memory of men.

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