

Family History Projects: The Scholarly Value of the Informal Sample

DAVID H. CULBERT

IN THE UNITED STATES a tremendous interest in oral history, family history, and genealogy has become widespread during the past few years. The trend suggests something Carl Becker long ago termed desirable: "everyman his own historian." My own work in collecting family history projects compiled by students at Louisiana State University as an optional class assignment is but part of a larger movement towards grassroots history. I want to explain what kinds of information come from family history projects, and to suggest the scholarly value of such an informal sampling of the changes in American society reflected in the family and the local community.

Family history is no longer a stranger in the classroom. In numerous colleges and even some high schools, teachers use family history to increase interest. Sometimes students focus on a particular problem; they employ an interpretive framework such as the role of women in families, or family experiences in the Great Depression and World War II.¹ Others—not necessarily students—prepare genealogical studies of their ancestors or interview persons for oral history programs. In the *Foxfire* project, students talk to mountain people in upstate Georgia to learn about special skills still used in that isolated, completely rural part of the United States. At Cornell University, Gould Colman directs an active oral history program. One recent project involved decision-making in farm families.²

In the classroom it is easy to get some, though not all, students to interview members of their own families to learn about the lives of

The author is a member of the history department, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He read this paper at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, in Toronto, October 3, 1974.

¹ Kirk Jeffrey, "Write a History of Your Own Family: Further Observations and Suggestions," *The History Teacher* 7 (May 1974):365-73. The Organization of American Historians held a workroom session on "The Use of Family Biography as a means to Teach History," in April 1974. See Jeffrey's remarks at that session, "Some Uses of the Family Biography Assignment," a manuscript in the author's possession.

² Eliot Wigginton, ed., *The Foxfire Book* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972) and *Foxfire* 2 (Garden City, 1973). *Foxfire*, a quarterly, is available for five dollars a year by writing to Rabun Gap, Georgia 30568. Concerning the Cornell Project, see Cornell University, *Bulletin of Cornell Program in Oral History*, 1968-.

parents and grandparents. If genealogy is concerned with lineage, names, and year of birth and death, family history attempts to understand the life of an entire family over several generations. Tamara Hareven recently suggested what this can mean:

The historical study of the family is now reaching what might be defined as the "second state" in the development of the field. While the initial work has been concerned primarily with the analysis of family and household structure, a growing number of studies are now looking at family behavior outside the household as well, and at the interaction of the family with other social institutions.³

Students find such ideas very different from what they have been brought up to think of as history. In the South the past has great attraction for many inside and outside the university. But it is a special sort of history—in Louisiana largely confined to the antebellum years, the Civil War, and Huey Long stories. Much of the twentieth century, including the Great Depression and World War II, seems not to interest many. The Depression is a topic for a history class, or something which happened in Chicago; it is not interesting and important.⁴ History remains apart from family and community; indeed it virtually exists outside of time.

Such an attitude is reflected in the collections of the Department of Archives and Manuscripts at Louisiana State University. Its rich holdings for antebellum Louisiana are not matched for the years after 1900. In part, this reflects a change of habit in recordkeeping. After 1900 it became much less common to keep a diary or letter-book. Partly it reflects an idea which historians and archivists can never do enough to combat—that history consists only of unique events, that it is worthwhile to keep records of a dictator like Huey Long, or of Civil War battles, but not worthwhile to keep records of the average person or family.

My own first serious thinking about the need for histories of average people came while I was a graduate student at Northwestern University during the 1960s. I spent one year as a teaching assistant for Jesse Lemisch, an outspoken critic of many types of traditional history. Lemisch was particularly distressed by the tendency of historians to

³ "Editor's Preface," *The Family in Historical Perspective: An International Newsletter* (Spring 1974), p. 1.

⁴ Some who lived through the Depression thought otherwise. In the 1930s several WPA projects studied the life of the average or poor Southerner intensely. See, for instance, Savannah Unit, Georgia Writers' Project, Works Projects Administration, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (New York, 1972); *These Are Our Lives: As Told by the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia* (New York, 1975); B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago, 1958); and George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, vol. 1 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols., Westport, Conn., 1972). In my paper, "The Great Depression: W.P.A. Interviews and Student Family History Projects," to be read at the 1975 Atlanta meeting of the American Historical Association, I will compare such WPA projects with current student projects.

record only the actions of famous men. In class he handed out copies of Bertold Brecht's "Questions of an Educated Worker." The poet asks, "was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?" My interest in family history began with Lemisch, though the connection did not occur to me at the time.

Lemisch called for "history from the bottom up." Frequently family history projects become an important way of learning about the past experienced by the poor or little-noticed person. I have received projects from students whose grandparents were illiterate. Family history enables historians to learn about those who were incapable of leaving written records, as well as those who did consider themselves significant enough to assemble a documentary record of some sort for posterity.

Most archivists are not likely to see family history except as a final product. Those who want to know more about getting students to write family history projects based primarily on interviews with parents and grandparents can look at my recent article on this specific subject.⁵ I have written a detailed description of possible student projects, including questions they may want to ask, and even telling them such things as to include a title page.⁶ I say this not to belittle my students but to suggest that in working with average sophomores at a large state university it pays to provide plenty of explicit instruction. Also, I talk individually with students about their projects and look at photographs which they bring in. Since the spring of 1972 I have received over 190 completed projects, almost all of which are now in the Department of Archives and Manuscripts at Louisiana State University.

One of the questions which archivists should consider is the historical value of such materials. It is one thing to praise their value as a teaching device—who can be against something which interests students and causes them to do a little work? But will such projects be used by professional historians? To me there is no question as to whether this will happen. With one notorious recent exception, most persons these days do not record their daily conversations. For the study of twentieth-century history, the study of oral history and family history is fast becoming a necessity.

Unfortunately, the value of family history, to say nothing of family history projects (both based in part on oral sources), has not yet been universally recognized by members of the profession. A recent review in the *New York Times Book Review* suggests the problem:

If fully documented history has severe methodological limitations, history

⁵ David H. Culbert, "Undergraduates as Historians: Family History Projects Add Meaning to an Introductory Survey," *The History Teacher* 7 (November 1973):7-17.

⁶ I first got the idea for family history projects from Richard D. Brown and Tamara Hareven, "Writing the Social History of One's Family" (Summer 1973, revised), copies of which may be requested from Richard D. Brown, Department of History, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Conn. 06268. Brown and Hareven are national coordinators of the Anonymous Families History Project.

based largely on oral sources has even more. Memories are inexact enough about current events directly perceived; the more distant an event, the more imprecise is recollection likely to be. When the problem is a subtle evaluation of character or motivation, only the fullest elicitation of often clashing recollections, corrected whenever possible by contemporary documents, will suffice.⁷

In reality, family history combines the remembered past with supporting documentation; and students ask for specific names and dates to increase the accuracy of the information they receive. As an historian, I see no way of asserting that oral testimony in a family history project is by definition less trustworthy than other kinds of historical sources—in every case great care must be taken.

It is cliometricians who are likely to find immediate value in family history projects. Stephan Thernstrom's *The Other Bostonians*, a study of social mobility in Boston from 1880 to 1970, is a case in point. In a recent issue of *Reviews in American History*, a student of social mobility finds much to praise in Thernstrom's book but asks whether quantitative analysis has not resulted in something rather academic. He notes the absence of "human interest," and concludes with a plea for a different sort of quantitative study:

Does measurement of upward and downward movement in an occupational elevator tell us what we really want to know about fluidity and the life chances of people in past societies? Or does such analysis simply open windows on an artificial structure which means little unless it is seen as part of the entire landscape?⁸

The reviewer fails to point out that the study of individual families and the inclusion of illustrative examples from such studies is the way to make the "entire landscape" real. Family history projects can humanize quantified data. I predict that family history projects, even those being written by average sophomores, will in time be recognized as a marvelous historical source and be as eagerly used by historians concerned with social mobility as city directories and census records are now.

Fortunately, not every historian is reluctant to use sources other than census data in studying the family. Lenus Jack is completing a dissertation about several generations of his own family in New Orleans. Much of his training has been in anthropology, as the title of his dissertation suggests: "Kinship and Residential Propinquity: A Study of the Black Extended Family in New Orleans."⁹ His sources are

⁷ Nathan G. Hale, Jr., January 12, 1975, p. 24. Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York, 1970), footnote, p. 286, expresses a similar attitude: "It is inevitable that recollections should blur, that attitudes be altered to conform to present criteria, that opinions held five decades ago become unconsciously modified by subsequent events. I have made use of such [oral] reminiscences only when verified by other sources."

⁸ Howard P. Chudacoff, "Mobility Studies at a Crossroads," review of Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), in *Reviews in American History* 2 (June 1974):184-85.

⁹ Lenus Jack, "Kinship and Residential Propinquity: A Study of the Black Extended Family in New Orleans" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, in progress).

almost entirely personal interviews with his family, including nearly fifty relatives. Those who have studied the black family in America have argued that urbanization destroyed the nuclear black family and left the black man incapable of coping with urban, industrial America.¹⁰ Jack, by analyzing family customs, nicknames, living arrangements, and family social structure over several generations, denies such a general conclusion. I believe both his methodology and his conclusion say much about the future for family history as a method for understanding America's past.

Jack's reliance on an oral tradition enables him to say much about family customs, often neglected in more traditional accounts. For instance, family members believe that if a pregnant mother craves something and does not get it, the child will physically resemble the unfulfilled desire. "One young father," Jack reports, "lamented over the fact that he did not satisfy his wife's craving for crayfish during pregnancy. . . . His son's eyes were puffy and resembled, he thought, those of the crayfish."¹¹

Jack's methods are but a more sophisticated version of one of the principal ways students get information for their reports. The unique value of the result is the honesty with which grandparents talk to grandchildren about matters usually hushed up.¹² Each term some student turns in a heavily varnished account of his family, in spite of my repeated warnings to avoid such an approach.¹³ One boy turned in a project which stated that his eighty-five-year-old grandmother had a "beautiful voice" and still sang solos in an Episcopal church "though her voice lacks the power it formerly had." I told the student his grandmother must be a medical curiosity. He readily agreed that the tale was fabricated. "My mother typed the report," he added. "She put that in for my grandmother."¹⁴

Other examples suggest the honesty that I find in about 95 percent of the projects. One boy wrote about the family life of his father, in 1955 the star halfback at the high school in Baker, Louisiana, a small town about fifteen miles north of Baton Rouge:

My grandfather began to drink heavily shortly after my father was born and

¹⁰ In particular the arguments of E. Franklin Frazier and, more recently, Daniel Moynihan.

¹¹ Jack, "Kinship and Residential Propinquity," in draft, kindly lent me by the author.

¹² I have yet to see a project from a student who used his own family to promote a personal vision about what is right or wrong with American society. Thus the roughly composed projects have an honesty missing in more "literary" studies of average or poor Americans. A case in point is Kathy Kahn, *Hillbilly Women* (New York, 1974), in which each woman interviewed had a chance to read and correct the completed interview. Even more serious is Kahn's sense of commitment to her subject: "I could not have written *Hillbilly Women* from any other point of view than that of an activist in the struggle for working people's rights. But my point of view does not affect the truth of what is told here" (p. xi). Actually, her lack of objectivity raises serious doubts about the accuracy of most of the information in her book.

¹³ See, for example, my "Undergraduates as Historians," p. 10.

¹⁴ A copy of this project is in the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Louisiana State University.

began coming in late at night and my grandma got to where she couldn't take it any more, so she got a legal separation. Some months thereafter they got back together though and stayed together until their divorce in 1960. My grandpa has since married again and divorced again. Many times my grandmother refers to him as an alcoholic but my mother thinks it's just something that has been bothering him for a long time and he tries to drink this problem away. . . . My grandpa has been put in the Jackson, La., Hospital Alcoholic ward several times for treatments. . . . My father did a lot of things without a father [but] . . . talked of his childhood days enjoyably. . . . One of his favorite pastimes was when he and his friends would go to Zachary to moonlight for rabbits, shoot them, and then sell them to an old black woman in Scotlandville. They took the money and bought themselves some wine.¹⁵

The value of this report is not just the information about an alcoholic. We learn, in addition, how various members of the family viewed the problem, and how a son survived a situation where his father could not function as a real father. The relation of alcoholism to the family setting is particularly valuable. In another report a black girl wrote about a relative now in prison in Attica, New York. Her grandmother explained that the prisoner was in a place where he could be taken care of properly.

Students with grandparents who were born overseas are particularly interested in family history projects since the problem of acculturation looms so large. In Louisiana, Italians were the only ethnic group to settle in any substantial numbers after 1865. Not surprisingly, each term I have received some particularly full accounts from those of Italian ancestry.¹⁶ It happens that to date not a single project involving Italians has dealt with immigrants who brought substantial wealth with them.

Recently one girl turned in a project describing the lives of her paternal grandparents, both Sicilian. They settled in Wallingford, Connecticut, where the girl's father was born in 1919:

Even though he didn't learn to speak English until he was almost six years old, it didn't mean the opportunities that the English speaking children had passed him by. In one way, he had a few more opportunities than them. His father made sure that he was aware of things around him; he took him to New Haven to the Shubert Theater, and also to several plays at the New Haven Arena. One opera he went to was *Aida*. The plays he went to were performed by an Italian company that appeared in the area. How many English-speaking children between the ages of 5-10 were able to say their fathers had taken them to a play, opera, or even to the theater?¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ There is almost no scholarly research on Italians in Louisiana. Humbert Nelli has two chapters on the 1891 New Orleans Mafia incident, in his book on Italians and organized crime in America (to be published by Oxford Press in 1976). Other than that the only detailed study of Louisiana Italians is Jean Ann Scarpaci, "Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880-1910" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1972). Scarpaci's exhaustive study is based primarily on newspaper accounts because "no material of a primary nature, such as letters, diaries, or organizational records of the Italian immigrant could be located" (p. xxiii). There are helpful primary materials in family history projects I have already received which bear on Scarpaci's topic.

¹⁷ A copy of this project is in the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Louisiana State University.

But another conclusion is perhaps in order: how many children would have enjoyed such a trip when they were that age or how many could remember it even if they had been forced to go? These reports frequently contain material which reveals something the author may not have been aware of.

This same project included some excellent photographs. Several shots showed how close the grandfather's house was to a bleak factory. Yet the grapes and chickens were easy to see.¹⁸ The grandfather's love of his miniature farm is clear in two remarkable letters he wrote in Italian to his son after the latter was transferred to Louisiana in 1953. One turned out to be his last letter. The girl who wrote the report added that "we, Charles' family, did not know what those two letters said until about three months ago. . . . Charles would never tell us what they said and he had saved them for many years, without telling us why." A translation follows:

Dear Charlie, I'm writing these few words to let you know that we are all in good health. . . . And to let you know it rained here two days and in the place where the chickens and the rooster are [they] are not happy, and the chickens have not been laying many eggs for the morning. . . . On the dresser in the room where your mother and I sleep we keep the photograph of God and the photograph of the two children; and the two of us see and always think of you and always your family. Let me know if you have made friends with any coons.¹⁹

And a postscript: "Please when you write, in Italian." Here is the final testimony of a hardworking immigrant, a man at peace with his family, his animals, and his "photograph" of God. And yet a man all-too-familiar with anti-Italian prejudice who imagined Louisiana as a place where his son might be tainted by making friends with Blacks.²⁰

Finally I want to mention a diary which a girl brought in last spring for me to see. She let the Department of Archives and Manuscripts microfilm the complete diary and she also wrote a good family history project which places the diarist within a community structure. Her German-born grandfather spent many years as keeper of the Chemistry Department's storeroom at the University of Texas. The diary consists mostly of daily entries listing every single item eaten on vacation trips to Germany in the 1920s. The diary also describes a 1929 vacation trip by automobile from Austin, Texas, to the Grand Canyon. The result is a fascinating account of automotive difficulties in an earlier day. While still in Texas the family car broke down and three successive garages could not repair it. The result: "The

¹⁸ Such amateur photographs are not found in many archives these days. For the persistence of Italian cultural attitudes in America, see Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, "A Flexible Tradition: South Italian Immigrants Confront a New Work Experience," *Journal of Social History* 7 (June 1974):429-45.

¹⁹ I asked the girl to include photocopies of the original letters in her report, a copy of which is in the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Louisiana State University.

²⁰ Scarpaci, "Italian Immigrants" (p. iv), reports a similar phenomenon: "In order to avoid the treatment meted out to Blacks, Italians shed their original attitude of tolerance or indifference and adopted the racial attitudes of the native control group."

garageman is taking the motor out and will send it tomorrow to El Paso to have it fixed because he don't have the stuff here to do it."²¹ The motor did not come back for three days. The diary does not say a word about what the Grand Canyon looked like, but it includes route numbers, towns, hours of departure and arrival, and descriptions of overnight accommodations (several nights the family slept in the car). The diary says a great deal about the perils of vacationing by automobile in the 1920s.

The bewildering variety of topics covered in the family history projects I receive might seem to some to be a defect. Students are not required to answer any specific questions and do not have to relate their material to some larger question about the development of American society.²² Such freedom has its compensations. Students are able to report on what interests them most, or what their family particularly wants to talk about. And, in the end, most of the projects do touch on larger issues because I talk about the projects with the students while they are collecting material and I try to suggest what the material might be interpreted to mean. Some of the most interesting information is that which I would never have thought to ask for. I also get material which nobody would want to ask for.

Let me conclude by making three requests. It is extremely important that all of the good oral history and family history projects being produced these days end up, whenever possible, as permanent additions to an archives.²³ Those who know of such projects should contact the person in charge to be sure that what is produced is saved, when the material is of value. Particularly in classroom projects, it is quite possible that those receiving the reports may not think about making copies available to an archivist—or out of misguided professional pride may only let the most outstanding projects be seen. And

²¹ The complete diary (on microfilm) and a family history project which describes the relationship of the diarist to his family is in the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Louisiana State University.

²² Here I think many disagree with me. Historians fear that unless the student relates his project to some larger theme the result will be a selection of random facts. My fear is that demanding the project relate to some larger theme may encourage the student to leave out of his report precisely those things which he finds most interesting and is therefore most likely to want to discuss. The answer is to talk individually with each student about the material he has uncovered so he can see how what he has found out relates to larger issues in American society. This can be tricky. I find that the overwhelming majority of my students, both male and female, assume that the role of the mother in a family is inherently less interesting than that of the father. It does not matter that I specifically tell them otherwise repeatedly. Only if a woman had a career are students interested in explaining the actions of a female relative in detail. On the other hand, I am certainly not opposed to projects with a particular focus. In the fall of 1975, for a seminar entitled "The Mass Media and American Society, 1938 to Present," I will have students write projects specifically concerning the influence of television on their own families—such as what is remembered of television's impact on family life in Louisiana.

²³ See, for example, Beatrice Spade, "Americans in Vietnam: An Oral History Project," *The History Teacher* 8 (February 1975):183-92.

be sure that literary rights are properly assigned—this an historian might forget to have his students do.

Second, be sure that materials are indexed so that they can be used easily by researchers. One simple way is to have each project include a set of forms devised by Tamara Hareven and Richard Brown. These forms make it possible to survey large numbers of family reports quickly, and in time may aid those interested in quantifying data from such projects.²⁴

Third, ask those who complete projects to bring in their primary material. Students often are unaware of the existence of a university archives; they never guess that what they have at home might be of historical significance. M. Stone Miller, head of the Department of Archives and Manuscripts at Louisiana State University, has talked with me about kinds of primary materials rarely donated to any library. People are much more likely to bring letters and business ledgers than school copy books, collections of recipes, or photographs. But records of everyday life can suggest more about family life than do most letters. In the classroom I tell my students what kinds of material Stone Miller is looking for—including town directories and high school yearbooks—and as a result have not only received family history projects but a substantial amount of primary material for the library. I predict that in the next decade many who use archives will be interested in community life and the structure of the family. If you actively seek such material now and give thought to organizing what you receive, you will be ready to welcome researchers who share those interests.

²⁴ I have expanded these forms and will be happy to send a set to anyone who writes me at Department of History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803.