Oral History: An Appreciation

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IN THE GENERATION SINCE Allan Nevins demonstrated the great potential of personal narratives as sources for writing history, much time and effort have been spent, and much money, in the activity that has come to be called "oral history." But the product of all this effort and expense remains largely untested in terms of its promise. Broad and undiscriminating charges of wasteful triviality or of biased and self-serving narrations do little to improve or clarify the situation. Nor do naive and enthusiastic praises of its potential serve to prove its worth. Even the occasional use of oral history information by biographers does not establish its validity as an important source. The promise remains impressive in the abstract, but the product is still untested. Yet, if oral history is to be a reliable research tool, if it is to be respected historical evidence, and if it is to justify a national association in its name, then those who produce oral history, the scholars that use its product, and the institutions that finance its projects must have some means of understanding its proper role and of evaluating what is being done in the field. We need to know more about the place of oral history in the system of historical analysis, and we need to understand better the contribution that oral history can make to the writing of history. Clues are scattered in the literature on oral history. This essay attempts to bring them together and to place oral history in its proper context, to give it a proper value as historical evidence, and to offer some ideas for critical testing in order that the product may justify the promise.

THE EVIDENTIARY VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

To understand its proper place in the system of historical analysis, we must examine oral history in relation to other kinds of historical evidence. For purposes of this thesis it is suggested that there are five types, or levels, of source material that go into the writing of history: transactional records, selective records, recollections, reflections, and the analyses that are written by one's predecessors.

From the usual meanings of these five terms we can recognize an ascending scale of sophistication and abstraction. There is also a counter-scale of evidentiary value. As abstraction increases and we get farther away from the immediate reality, the evidentiary value of the information decreases. The simple thesis that evidence and abstraction are in an inverse relation to one another often is forgotten because it is so elementary; but it is crucial to an understanding of the value of oral history.

The historian is engaged in the task of mastering the past. The discipline of history is a means by which we may keep from kidding ourselves about what has happened. It is axiomatic that such discipline is essential to coping with the present and planning for the future. If the discipline of history in general and the tool of oral

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history in particular are to be employed successfully, then we must have some systematic means of relating evidentiary and abstract values and of distinguishing them from each other. An examination of the five levels of sources is necessary to achieve this understanding.

Transactional Records. Transactional records are not so much abstractions of human actions and interactions as they are the actions themselves. They may be abstract in the sense that they are symbolic representations of agreements or communications, but the documents produced are the transactions as well as their records or reports. Any document that embodies in its text the sum and substance of the action it represents is a transactional record and is the authoritative basis for any action arising from or dependent upon the transaction recorded. Constitutions, laws, contracts, deeds, wills, treaties, diplomas, certificates, licenses, patents, proclamations, orders, instructions, advertisements, and similar documents are transactional records. They are primary evidence. An order never obeyed and an advertisement never responded to are nevertheless actions that occurred. Unless they are forged, we may accept the documents at face value, as primary evidence. There is no interpretive or selective process between the document and the reality it represents, beyond that inherent to the transaction itself. No interpretive element intrudes between the document and the observer other than the observer's own bias and perception.

Selective Records. Selective records are attempts to preserve and to communicate to others descriptions of what is happening at a given time. Concurrency is important in order to distinguish this level of evidence from recollections, discussed below. Audio, video, or cinematic recordings of actions as they unfold, stenographic notes of conversations as they are taking place, still photographs, and even recorded running descriptions (such as that of a sports broadcaster) may be included in the category of selective records. They are selective in that there is a selective or interpretive process between the reality and the record. We are so accustomed to accepting electronic or film recordings as substitutes for reality that we tend to confuse them with reality. In fact, the technical limitations of the camera and tape recorder are not unlike those of human perception. The human observer records in his memory not exactly what is happening, but rather what his predisposition toward people and events make him capable of recording. The mechanical or photographic or electronic device records only so much as its technical range and capacity will allow. There is not a truly one-to-one relationship between the reality and the record. Some interpretation through selection, decision, or translation is unavoidable.

Selective records, because of their contemporary nature, are highly valued as historical evidence, but their evidentiary value must always be somewhat less than that of transactional records. The very interpretive nature of the selective class of records, however, produces commensurate value for the historian. Selective records are, after all, primary evidence of what someone decided to record or was capable of recording. If we further suppose that such recordings are generally more deliberate or purposeful than whimsical or random, then we may infer some contemporary value to what is recorded. What is recorded is what someone contemporary to the events believed to be important or worth recording. The first step away from primary evidence and into abstraction has been taken. Selective records are abstracts of reality. In the next category we take a much larger step away from reality and into abstraction.

Recollections. If the human memory is a selective record, then recollections are still further selective and selection is compounded to a second degree. It might be fairer to subdivide recollections into those emerging soon after the events recalled, and those emerging later. The distinction is one of degree rather than kind, and it begs the question of where to draw the line between sooner and later. Nor is it important to this thesis. Into the category of recollections we may place any accounts that are first-hand and yet are not concurrent to the subject or event described. Recollections include diaries, information solicited from eye witnesses by investigators, tales told by grandfathers to little children, and information supplied by oral history narrators.

Recollections are clearly another step removed from reality into abstraction. As evidence they must be considered less reliable than either transactional or selective records. They may perhaps be all a historian has, and therefore a *sine qua non* to his research; but this value must not be confused with the relative evidentiary value. Far too often a recollection is used as the basis for a historical thesis simply because it is the only evidence available. Because it is the only evidence available does not mean that we may rely on it as we would a transactional record or a selective record. The distinction is an important one in terms of mastering the past, and the values are far too often confused.

Several factors contribute to the decreased evidentiary value of recollections vis-à-vis transactional or selective records. Recollections may, and often do, include secondhand accounts and hearsay, or will at least be colored by the impact of such information on the witness/narrator recounting a description from memory. Furthermore, intervening events in the experience of the witness/narrator, or his prior receptivity to certain ideas and not to others, may induce him to diminish the importance of some evidence and perhaps to enhance beyond proper proportion the importance of other evidence. We also have in the process of recollection an intrusion of purposes that may affect the evidence: to inform a group; to secure one's own dignified position in history; to prosecute or defend a case; to sell a newspaper or book; to instruct a grandchild; or even to enhance the collection of a library. All are purposes that may overtly or subtly affect the character and nature of the evidence presented.

Historians clearly must be careful about using recollections as evidence. They must understand that a recollection is itself a complex piece of evidence. Three levels are included. There is the initial event or reality, there is the memory which is a selective record at least one step removed from reality, and there is the further selective and interpretive account recalled from memory by the witness/narrator. Furthermore, when an interviewer deliberately questions a person to solicit information as evidence, a fourth level of selection and potential for intrusion enters the process. The questions that an interviewer asks and the apparent purpose of his interviewing have a direct bearing on what is being called up from memory, and why.

Crucial to a sound understanding of oral history is that the record produced by an interview should never be confused with the original event, nor even with the memory of that event. The record is a selective one that itself selects information from the selective record of the witness/narrator's memory of past events and subjects. Whatever other values oral history may have for journalists, novelists, dramatists, educators, and propagandists (and these values may be many), the historian must understand and respect the evidentiary limitations of recollections if he is to use them honestly in his attempts to master the past. He must understand that the

evidence has been refracted several times before he confronts it in an oral history recording.

Yet, even as we move further from reality, recollections provide the historian with a corresponding abstractive value of fascinating richness. We may infer from what is recalled what it is that people believe to be significant enough to remember and to recount about the past. One of the historian's tasks in analysis is to assess the importance of past events in terms of subsequent developments. The selective recollections of others may contribute insight and understanding to the task. Even when erroneous or misguided, recollections may in their very errors provoke understanding and insight. Furthermore, the aggregate recollections of many people can provide a rough means for approximating historical truth where no transactional records or selective records exist. But it requires many accounts from a good cross-section sample of witnesses to endow this kind of evidence with a reliability even approaching that of transactional or selective records.

Reflections. It is necessary to distinguish reflections from both recollections and analysis. Reflections go beyond simple recollections of facts in that they are what an individual person thinks spontaneously about the past, the values and affective impressions with which he characterizes the past and makes it relevant to his own present situation. Although deliberate, reflections are subjective and emotional and are not usually characterized by the thorough and systematic weighing of evidence required by historical analysis.

Reflections are usually recorded along with recollections in an oral history interview or diary; but, like recollections, they must not be confused with the past on which they focus. A reflection is a contemporary event of contemplating and evaluating the past, but it is not the past which is the subject of the evaluation. The historian must use reflections with the same caution that he uses recollections, as clues to the significance and meaning that past events have for people in the present. Reflections are hardly to be classed as evidence about the past at all, and thus they must be separated from recollections as a level of historical evidence. They may certainly provoke insight and understanding, and usually do so more directly than recollections. The significance attributed to past events in reflections does not mean that the events had that particular importance when they occurred, nor does it mean that they necessarily ought to have such meaning for us now or in the future. They are useful to analysis as a record of what people have thought about the past, and they may be the basis for inferences about the meaning of events. As with recollections, isolated reflections make poor foundations for analysis, and an aggregate of many concurring values is necessary before a historian may rely on the interpretation with any confidence.

Analysis. Analysis is the process by which form and order are brought to the chaos of evidence about the past, to bring meaning and understanding not only to the individual historian but to many people with differing subjective views of reality. Analysis requires a rigorous accounting of all the evidence, of all levels and kinds, available to the historian. It requires the making of hypotheses about how and why things happened as they did, and why they occurred in the sequence that they did. Analysis may be good or bad, sound or weak, honest or biased, depending on how good the evidence is, whether or not all the available evidence has been accounted for, whether or not all possible hypotheses have been tested against the evidence,

and whether or not the analyst's own private interests intrude unfairly to distort the evidence and analysis.

Analysis goes far beyond the simple collection, preservation, and retrieval of information. It goes beyond the mere description of events, people, places, and things. Nor is analysis merely the repetition or aggregate of notions that have occurred to others about what might be personally or universally significant about the past. Analysis requires the comparing and testing of different records against each other, weighing the relative values of insight and evidence that they contribute in fair proportion, forming theoretical structures from the information (both evidence and insights), and then testing these new hypotheses against the evidence again and again to see if it can survive critical examination.

Analysis is performed not only by historians but by journalists, writers of government reports, and others. Analysis inevitably has a limited perspective based on the purposes for which the analysis was performed and the subjective interests of those performing the analysis. But analysis can be fair and honest if all the evidence has been accounted for, the hypotheses rigorously tested, and the author's bias well-defined and accounted for in the process. It is true that not only journalists and government report writers but also historians can and have misused analysis to serve subjective prejudices and ideologies. But, when they do, they are no longer masters of the past but rather creators of new mythologies in the present. Such efforts may have value in documenting present prejudices and interpretations, but they cannot properly be called good history that masters the past. Enhancing or suppressing particular bits of evidence not on the basis of relative evidentiary or insight value but rather in the service of a subjective purpose is inimical to mastering the past with the integrity that must be demanded by the discipline of history. Moreover, because of the authoritative pretensions of historical analysis to mastering the past, its conclusions, when erroneous, may compound the illusion every time they are quoted or relied upon uncritically by subsequent scholars. The stronger the analysis and the more it rests on comprehensive accounting of all the evidence and on proper evaluation of evidence and insight, the more likely it is to produce a more reliable and more enduring mastery of the past.

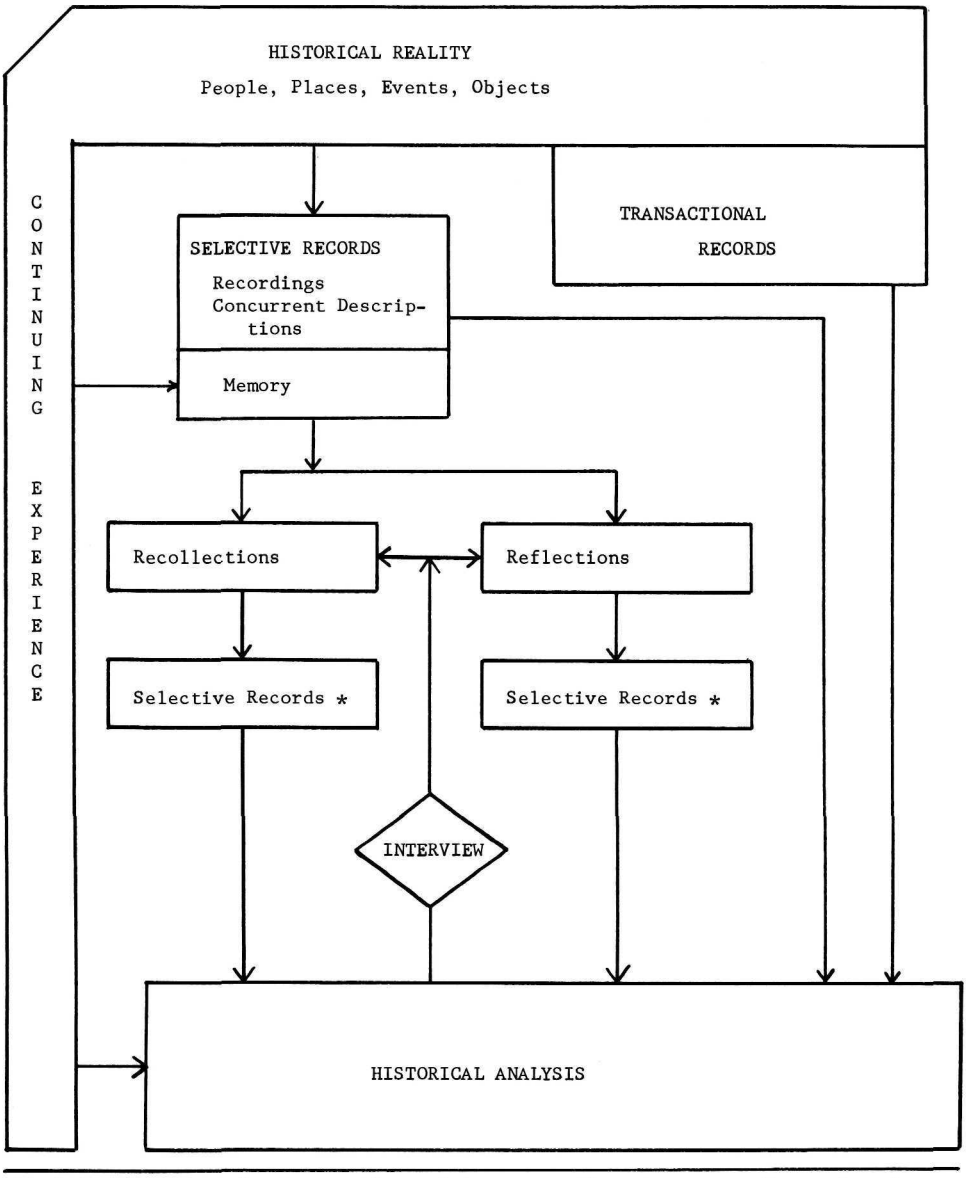
The Lesson for Oral History

Oral history has a proper place in the system of evidence, experience, and analysis that produces good history, and properly used it can make an important contribution. Improperly used it can be mischievous and destructive. Oral history, to be most effective, must itself be well-grounded in sound analysis and in a thorough knowledge and understanding of all the other available and pertinent sources, if it is to produce the best and most reliable oral documentation. The diagram that follows (see p. 434) illustrates the place of the oral history interview in the system and its relationship to the other component elements. Each arrow in the diagram indicates not only the direction of influence and effect, but also the intrusion of a selective or interpretive factor between reality and analysis.

Systematic Evaluation of Oral History

In order to evaluate oral history properly we must first distinguish it from other forms of oral documentation. Essentially, there are three classes of oral

DIAGRAM: COMPONENTS OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS - Levels of Evidence and the Place of Oral History Interviewing in the Process



*Includes diaries and retrospective writings as well as tape recordings of oral history interviews.

documentation. The first is the recording of performances in which the participants are following a prepared script (which provides additional documentation about the event). Performances include political speeches as well as dramatic presentations. The second class of oral documentation is the recording, sometimes surreptitiously, of unrehearsed events in which the speaking of the participants is spontaneous and dynamic and entirely concerned with immediate purposes or plans. Finally, there is the oral documentation that has come to be called oral history: the recording of a special kind of event, the interview, in which historical information, insight, and opinion are sought deliberately and are deliberately preserved as a historical source. The third category must be evaluated somewhat differently from the other two.

There are two steps in the evaluation of any record: determining its genuineness, authenticity, and integrity as a record; and determining the value of its content information against known and previously established facts.

Evaluation of the record itself is the same for all three categories of oral documentation. The historian needs to know a number of things to establish that the recording is just what it purports to be, is complete, and has not been altered or changed. He must know when the recording was made, and under what circumstances. He should know why it was made. He should know, if possible, what kind of equipment was used to make the recording. If the tape or film of an event is a second, third, or fourth generation copy of the original recording, then the historian should know something of the equipment, procedures, and conditions involved in making the copies. The historian needs to know if the voices on the tape are indeed those of the people they are represented to be. (We may find a growing role for the electronic voice-analysis devices for authenticating oral documents.) In order for the historian to have full confidence in the recording being offered as evidence, he must have a full and authenticated record of its creation, preservation, processing, and custody. He needs assurances that the recording was not tampered with, falsified, or edited—or if it was, then by whom, under what circumstances, to what extent, and why? In this the tape recording is no different from traditional written documents, for which the historian needs similar kinds of information and assurances about its provenance. In many cases a full record of provenance is not available, and the historian must perforce rely on the reputation of the producing or custodial institution for integrity.

Once the integrity and authenticity of the recording have been established, the historian's evaluation turns to the contents. Once a performance has been identified as a performance, the historian's task is a relatively simple one. The value is clearly that of a contemporary selective record and ranks very high on the scale of evidence. With the unrehearsed event, the historian does have a very important first question to ask. Even if the record is fully authenticated, is this truly an unrehearsed event and not a performance? In our current age of dramatized history and electronic simulations on television, the historian must truly ask himself if the creation of the recording was not somehow deliberately manipulated to leave a biased record. He must find reassurances that the participants were indeed acting spontaneously and not with half a mind on the tape recorder. He must find reassurances that the whole thing was not prepared in advance and stage managed for the sake of producing a distorted historical record. But, the same can be said for written minutes of meetings, on which historians have traditionally relied, so there is really nothing new here.

The oral document produced by an oral history interview, however, presents the historian with a far more complex problem of evaluation. Its effective and proper use in historical analysis requires special understanding and a lot of hard work. It cannot be accepted quite as readily as the first two categories of oral documentation. Interviews depend on memories, and we know memories to be tricky with respect to reality. The historian, faced with the information content of a recorded interview, really has no way of knowing, from the record itself, whether the record is faulty or true, distorted or accurate, deliberately falsified or spontaneously candid. The historian is at the mercy of the witness who is testifying, and the historian does not have the opportunity to stop the testimony to cross-examine. He must rely on the interviewer to do that for him.

Faced with such risky evidence, the historian must approach oral history documentation warily and with great skepticism. He must find means to determine if the witnesses are reliable. A particular problem with the modern process of recording oral testimony for historical use is that so many of the narrators are unknown, are of unproven reliability, and there exists little with which to test their evidence. So much of the evidence is personal and unique that there is not a body of data against which to cross-check the information. In some published works relying on personal interviews the contributing witnesses are anonymous. Nor, in his assessment, should the historian neglect the need to evaluate the interviewer. Although the interviewer may seek to be objective and unobtrusive, he must inevitably play a dynamic role in the creation of the interview record, and the way he plays his role often determines not only the tone and character of the record produced but also the substance of the record content. Narrators frequently respond with what they think the interviewer wants to hear. The apparent aims and objectives of the interview may have much to do with the way the interviewee perceives his role and therefore with the way he responds to the interview as a whole and to individual questions in particular.

Further, the historian must compare the content information, both questions and answers, with other sources on the same subjects to see if both participants know what they are talking about. He must not impute authority to a statement or an assertion in an interviewer's question (even if the respondent does) simply on the assumption that the interviewer must know what he is talking about. Interviewers often test hearsay, and its repetition in a question should not be construed as corroboration unless it is supported by adequate responses from the interviewee. Interviewers, too, like interviewees, may on occasion be whimsical or frivolous. The historian must discover discrepancies in the accounts presented and must try to account for them or (perhaps reluctantly) discard those accounts. He must identify unique information and attempt to obtain corroboration from additional sources. Ultimately, in the case of truly unique information, he may have to make a leap of faith; but it should be an informed leap, based on an accumulated sense of the reliability of the witnesses as proven by their testimony on other and related subjects.

In order for the historian to develop such confidence about any given interview or any collection as may permit him to make these leaps of faith in the absence of corroborating evidence, we require a regular and continuing process of systematic and critical evaluation and review of the oral history documentation that is being produced; not only of published books directly or loosely based on interviews, but of interviews themselves, of collections of interviews, and of the projects that produce the interviews. Since it is the deliberate interview that makes oral history unique as a historical source, it is proper that critical examination should focus primarily on

the content and conduct of the interview. There are a series of questions that can be asked and must be answered in any thorough evaluation of the content or conduct of an oral history interview.

Evaluating Content. Evaluating content focuses on three groups of questions familiar to most historians. These questions may be applied either to a single interview or to a group of interviews dealing with a common theme.

1. How sound is the evidence presented? Are several sources in corroboration? Is the evidence presented at variance with previous evidence, and if so, why? Does the testimony ring true not only in the subjective judgment of the reviewer but also with the whole pattern of evidence? Does the testimony seem contrary and out of place, and if so, why? To what extent are the facts presented credible in the light of the known consequences of the actions and events recounted? In the light of subsequent events, does the story make sense?

2. Is the interview a thorough one? Does it cover all possible relevant themes? Are all topics probed in depth for detail, amplification, and appreciation? Do both interviewer and interviewee seem to be aware of gaps in recorded history and conventional wisdom? Do they deal with the topics and the omissions candidly? What has been omitted from the interview that ought to have been included, and why was it left out? Does the interview work on both the rational or logical level of facts and conclusions and also on the affective, emotional level of opinions, with clear indications of the value of each?

3. Is the information provided really needed, or is it superfluous and redundant? In what ways does the interview provide a unique contribution to history? Is there unique information? Is there a unique perspective on the past? Does the interview provide the historian with a unique arrangement or concentration of information that is enlightening or at least helpful? Does the interview provide corroboration or challenges to previously held notions, and how should these be valued? Does the interview contribute richness of detail and description, or perhaps a richness of affective response and commentary that aids insight?

Evaluating Conduct. The interview is not a passive document that merely accepts evidence. It is a dynamic process in which the observer-collector (interviewer) has a marked effect on what the witness-narrator (interviewee) produces in the way of information and opinion. The historian must ask a number of questions about the way in which any given interview or any given group of interviews was conducted, and the first of these questions shakes the practice of oral history to its very roots.

1. Is an interview, after all, the best means of acquiring the evidence produced? Is it, perhaps, the only means? If not, what other means exist and have they been used? If not, why not?

2. Does the interview get the most possible out of the interviewee; or does much appear to have been held back, omitted, suppressed, or distorted? How effectively did the interviewer exercise the opportunity for critical challenge within the interview?

3. Do both interviewer and interviewee appear to understand, to be committed to, and to be able to pursue the inquiry for the sake of historical integrity and truth, or are other purposes being served? Why? To what effect? How does history suffer or benefit from either?

4. Do both interviewer and interviewee appear to be knowledgeable about the subject under discussion? Are they in command of the information? If they are guessing, then to what effect?

5. Do both interviewer and interviewee use a variety of approaches to the subjects and bring to bear a variety of perspectives, or do they seem to be limited to rigid, one-dimensional discussions? Do they both seize upon and appreciate the clues provided by associating ideas? Do they pursue trains of thought thoroughly, or is the inquiry essentially a lazy one?

6. Does the narrator seem to have been an appropriate one for the subjects discussed? What were his strengths and weaknesses? What about the interviewer with respect to the same questions?

7. Do the interviewer and interviewee seem to be well-matched so that they excite each other to produce the best and most complete possible record? Do they bring to bear the most productive combination of empathy and critical judgment?

8. Is either participant really a disinterested party? If not, what personal interests or biases are apparent and why? What effect do they produce and how must the historian handle it?

Evaluating Projects. Of less immediate concern to the historian's research topic but nonetheless important is the evaluation of and the confidence the historian may have in the project that produced the interviews. A rather different approach must be taken to evaluating projects. Even when the individual interviews and the aggregate collection can pass critical inspection, there are still additional questions about the project that the historian must find satisfactory answers to before he can have full faith and confidence in the material.

1. Does the project have a well-defined set of purposes and objectives? What are they? Are they compatible with and do they contribute to honest historical inquiry or are they distorted by bias? What are the real objectives of collecting the information and how do they affect the information collected? What other influences may tend to tilt the information produced toward a particular attitude or character over the whole aggregate collection?

2. Are the interviews and interviewers that have been chosen to produce the records appropriate to the purposes of the collecting agency? Are they the best available, or were compromises made and, if so, why? Where could the choices have been improved? Which significant narrator-witnesses were omitted, and why?

3. Are the policies and procedures of the program consistent with providing accurate information on the provenance of the material produced? Are the procedures designed to produce the most accurate and undistorted record of the interviews for use by the historian? If not, to what effect, for the purposes of historical analysis were the procedures designed?

4. What is the availability of the interviews collected, and what restrictions on access (if any) are there? How do these affect the aggregate picture presented by the material that *is* available? Who may use the material? Is the researcher population limited? By what criteria? What effect does the limitation have on the critical reception of the material to date? How have the interviews been used by researchers, and what contributions have they made thus far to historical writing?

5. What kinds of finding aids are provided to the researcher? Are these adequate to the purposes of most researchers or only to a few? How could they be improved and why?

6. What other kinds of information resources does the collecting agency or institution provide that the researcher can use to test and corroborate or refute the information found in the oral history interviews?

7. Does the project provide information about both the interviewees and the interviewers in sufficient detail to help the researcher make judgments about reliability?

Summary and Conclusion

Oral history interviewing and the documentation that it produces are a logical part of the system and process by which we transform the evidence of reality into the composition of history that masters the past. As evidence, oral history is less than transactional or selective records; but it makes a significant contribution to insight and understanding, and in the absence of primary evidence an aggregate of testimony may serve to approximate historical certainty. To be effective, oral history interviewing must proceed from a base of primary evidence and sound analysis. Producers and users of oral history must be critical when they deal with this source. Only when they can provide or obtain the answers to a large number of questions about the character of the material can the kind of confidence in it needed for good history be developed.

A continual and regular process of critical review, not only by institutions that sponsor oral history projects but also by the historians who use the material, is essential to the continued improvement of oral history sources. Oral history can be done well, and it can make an important contribution to history; but in order to do so it must be properly understood and rigorously tested, and those who produce it must measure their efforts against, and strive to meet, the highest standards of evidentiary value.