

Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives

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Abstract: Few manuscript collections contain thorough documentation of all phases of the subject's life, especially of those important phases during which his impact was most clearly evident. Even those periods of a donor's life that appear best documented will usually be found wanting; the documents seldom adequately reflect the considerations that contributed to key decisions and very rarely betray the donor's candid opinion of events and people with whom he interacted. Collections of personal papers are especially weak in the information they provide on the formative years of their donors—years that often hold the keys to perceptions that influenced their subsequent actions. Even correspondence does not always betray the author's inner thoughts, and it may, depending upon the intent behind it, be quite misleading to the researcher.

In these and related instances oral history seems a necessity rather than the luxury it often appears to be. Without properly conducted interviews, the papers of a politician or businessman may lack highly significant perspectives that do not appear on paper. Oral history interviews can document current events in a manner that traditional archival collecting cannot. Interviews can most definitely help deal with the modern paper mountain and its paucity of hard data.

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THE WATERGATE TAPES have highlighted for this generation—and, one hopes, for those to come—the value of the recorded as well as the written word. The two are inextricably linked. It is time to provide opportunities to realize this linkage in fact.

In the decades since Allen Nevins gave it credence, oral history has become an accepted, if not always respected, tool in historical research. It gained acceptance as the twentieth century progressed and traditional forms of documentation proved less and less adequate to the task of recording information about events and the people who move them. Although great gains have been made through improved methodology, the product of oral history still lacks the full-fledged respect accorded the written record.

Oral history remains a bit suspect because human memory is suspect, and because the letters, diaries, and other records created while events were unfolding generally have greater credibility. It is also suspect because the enthusiasm of some of its practitioners has resulted in the creation of oral history resources of questionable value to historical research. One of the severest comments on oral history was delivered by Barbara Tuchman, who said: "The chief difficulty in contemporary history is over-documentation, or what has been called, less charitably, the multiplication of rubbish . . . With the appearance of the tape recorder, a monster with the appetite of a tapeworm, we now have, through its creature Oral History, an artificial survival of trivia of appalling proportions . . . with all sorts of people being invited merely to open their mouths, and ramble effortlessly and endlessly into a tape recorder, prodded

daily by an acolyte of Oral History, a few veins of gold and a vast mass of trash are being preserved which would otherwise have gone to dust. We are drowning ourselves in unneeded information."¹ Tuchman's remarks have frequently been misquoted, but in any version they deliver a sharp warning to both the creators and the users of oral history. Perhaps the sting of her words seem greatest to oral historians, the best of whom recognize the legitimate criticism of a form of documentation that has been both overused and underdone by many of its followers.

Criticism of oral history's base—in the suspect memories of its narrators—seems to ignore the basis for the diaries, letters, and memoirs that appear to enjoy much greater credibility. Viewed objectively, those written words may be only slightly more credible than oral history. Memoirs, for instance, frequently portray the author as he wishes to be seen, with often quite conscious alteration of facts, circumstances, and even dates. Diaries, too, may reflect a conscious or subconscious coloring of events and personalities, while correspondence is also subject to modification of reality by an author for an audience. Oral history does, indeed, offer slanted views of events and people; but so do paper records. The latter are as susceptible to manipulation as any medium, and, even if quite candid, may undergo the pre-donation selection that is the nightmare of any archivist. As Charles Morrissey has noted,

Recorded memoirs can test the authenticity of the "official" history embodied in self-serving records created possibly to obscure the realities of decision making in the past. If files appear to have

¹Barbara Tuchman, "Research in Contemporary Events for the Writing of History," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institution of Arts and Letters*, Second Series, no. 22 (New York, 1972), p. 62.

been "weeded" in order to remove items that displeased people involved in past decisions, an oral historian can inquire about the removal. If files suggest that other papers exist elsewhere, an oral historian can try to locate them or at least to ask about them . . . So, too, a historian trying to separate the actuality of past events from the mythology that subsequently may have encased them can tell interviewees what the records contain and ask them to elaborate on the interpretation that emerges from archival research.²

The blending of archival research with oral history may thus be crucial to complete understanding of information in the papers and is the only way to add information that the papers do not contain.

Despite the criticism it sometimes generates, oral history is arguably a necessity in any program that hopes to document facets of twentieth-century history. Indeed, the modes of record-keeping in the latter half of this century threaten to make oral history an imperative. Archivists in particular must be concerned by the rising flood of paper records and the rapidly decreasing level of substantive information they contain. The development of technology for the automatic transmission of letters, reports, statistics, and related items generally considered archival places an enormous burden upon institutions whose business is the accumulation of historical data.

Appraisal, always an essential but time-consuming process, assumes vast proportions for an archivist confronted by a mass of paper records from which must be extracted only those central files that most clearly document the donor's activities. Sifting through the available records is a formidable task, as is the

charge of selecting which to retain and which to discard. Of the records of a large corporation or a long-time politician, for instance, as little as five percent may be transferred to an archives for preservation. The limitation of funds to accession, process, describe, and store the collections, and the realities of time available for research, make such decisions necessary. Adding to the difficulties in dealing with the modern multiplication of paper is the far more complex task of assessing and retrieving information from the various forms of electronic data bases. Gaining access to this information is difficult; selecting information for permanent retention and managing to receive that selected information in usable, preservable form is an even greater challenge. Added to the problems of dealing with high technology is the certainty that most people no longer keep detail-filled diaries of their daily lives, and that the telephone has replaced long, news-filled letters as a means of communication. Coupled with advancing technology is the fact that the increasingly litigious society in which we live has engendered in business, government, and individuals a desire to record as little information as possible that might be used against them.

It is thus not surprising to note that most, if not all, archives collections contain gaps—periods of time or events, for instance, that affected, or were affected by, the donor's activities, but about which the collection contains little information. Motivation is frequently not documented in papers; and it may, as when studying the reasons for a momentous Senate vote or a sweeping change in corporate policy, be of central importance to research. Without an accurate reading of those unrecorded motivations, the conclusions of the researcher

²Charles T. Morrissey, "Public Historians and Oral History: Problems of Concept and Methods," *The Public Historian* 2 (Winter 1980): 23.

can only be reached through an elaborate guessing game. It may be termed deductive reasoning; but the actual reasons behind important decisions may bear startlingly little relation to the apparent facts, as any historian who has interviewed the subject of his research can attest.

Given the difficulties in dealing with many collections of modern manuscripts and records and the constraints of time under which appraisal can most often be accomplished, the existence of gaps is not speculation; it is virtually certain. Whether created by donors or the appraiser, the gaps exist and affect research use of the collections to some extent. Given current severe shortages of storage space and staff and the idiosyncrasies of individual donors, the gaps in many collections are likely to be both apparent and important to the researcher.

Gaps have always existed in collections of personal papers and organizational records; it is highly unlikely that any individual, for instance, will leave a complete record of the thoughts and motivations that surrounded his actions. Once the archivist has been assured that all of the relevant papers are in custody, however, the gap is usually accepted as inevitable.

All of these factors conspire to limit the research value of many modern archival collections and to heighten the need for auxiliary documentation of their donors. Oral history stands out quite clearly as the most feasible and potentially useful tool for this task.

Since the cost of oral history precludes its use to fill every gap, however, one must define criteria to determine which collections most need additional documentation.

There will exist within the collection of any reasonably large archives a large field of individual and organizational donors, all of them potential subjects for oral history. One must assume that the archivists responsible for acquiring the collections have exerted every effort to locate and preserve materials that fully document each donor's life or operations. Careful selection will ensure few gaps and better resource material for the researcher attempting to prepare for oral history.³

The field of potential narrators will already have been narrowed somewhat by the constraints of collecting policy or geographic region imposed by or upon the archives. Usually there will be several levels of criteria, beginning perhaps with geographic collecting area and proceeding through selected subject area emphases. If a repository has built substantial collections of the papers of politicians or businessmen, for instance, those collections may form the primary basis for oral history projects. Similarly, though somewhat less precisely, collections of organizational records will provide a framework for oral history that expands the documentation of those entities.

Definition of the relative importance of gaps in various collections depends upon careful analysis of an institution's holdings. This exercise should be under-

³Let me betray one prejudice I have regarding terminology. Archivists, it is recognized, have a great preoccupation with terminology; witness the recurring and to-date unsuccessful attempts to define such terms as processing, cataloging, inventory, and the like. With reference to oral history, the term "collect" is frequently employed—as in "We're collecting oral history." Still worse is the term "gather"—as in "We're gathering oral history to supplement our collections." Both terms, but particularly the often-used "collect," are inaccurate when applied to oral history. "Collect" implies that oral history, like a manuscript collection, exists and is only waiting to be found and acquired. While the data that becomes oral history is present in the minds of potential narrators, it does not exist in any organized, collectible form. It must, rather, be created—and not alone, but through the interaction of an interviewer with the narrator. Existing resources are thus used to create, not collect, a new resource.

taken even if oral history is not contemplated, for manuscript collections tend to grow like Topsy, without regard for the best laid plans of their collectors. An analysis of collections may reveal actual subject strengths and weaknesses that are not perceived, since archivists often refer to collecting policies (where they exist) rather than to the collections themselves in assessing institutional strengths. The analysis may also discover that the gaps occur in quite different areas than had been expected.

Having completed a survey of actual collection strengths, categories of emphasis may be defined with a conscious decision to use slender resources for oral history to document one area in depth, while leaving others for whatever later attention may be possible. Such decisions are difficult to make, for they demand resolution and a willingness to define priorities. Such decisiveness may contribute to administrative discomfort, for it does tend to brush away the haze that surrounds many archival collecting programs. For the discomfort, one is rewarded with clarity of collection policy as well as with improved resource allocation and staff morale. The Minnesota Historical Society, for example, has a written collecting policy that outlines general collecting emphases, supplemented by short-term (two-year) and long-term (five-year) plans that provide definite objectives and the names of specific donors targeted for approach. The plans are updated every year and adjusted every other year to reflect either the accomplishment or substitution of objectives. This sort of plan, with its specific list of potential donors, makes possible the planning of oral history as well as records collection.

The analysis of an individual collection should be made at the time it is processed, since the processor has, at that moment, the best idea of its strengths and shortcomings. At the time a final in-

ventory is prepared, the processor might note areas in which oral history could contribute important additional information. Fresh from analysis of collection content, the processor will be able to suggest the need for certain areas of additional documentation, such as background on decisionmaking and the interplay of specific personalities.

While appropriate to current accessions, that strategy does not address gaps in collections acquired in previous years. For many of those collections, of course, additional documentation through oral history is out of the question; the donors and those associated with them will be deceased. For many others, however, opportunities will still exist provided that they are addressed with some dispatch. Inventories to collections processed in previous years should offer clues to the gaps they contain; but in most instances processing will have taken place years before, making considerable research necessary to conduct useful, gap-filling oral history. The difficulties encountered in such cases seems ample argument for strong attempts to interview donors within as short a time as possible after receipt of their papers. Perhaps the best answer, when assigning priority to the filling of gaps in collections acquired earlier, is to blend those projects with others created by newly-received collections.

Few manuscript collections contain thorough documentation of all phases of the subject's life, especially of those important phases during which his impact was most clearly evident. Even those periods of a donor's life that appear best documented will usually be found wanting; the documents seldom adequately reflect the considerations that contributed to key decisions and very rarely betray the donor's candid opinion of events and people with whom he interacted. Collections of personal papers are especially weak in the information they

provide on the formative years of their donors—years that often hold the keys to perceptions that influenced their subsequent actions. Even correspondence does not always betray the author's inner thoughts, and it may, depending upon the intent behind it, be quite misleading to the researcher.

In these and related instances, oral history seems a necessity rather than the luxury it often appears to be. Without properly conducted interviews, the papers of a politician or businessman may lack highly significant perspectives that do not appear on paper. Indeed, this is nearly certain to be the case, since few people take time to write careful analyses of their decisions and actions, few keep diaries, and even fewer have papers that document the years of their youth and the influences of family, education, and society that helped shape their personal views of the world.

The problems of complete and accurate documentation are especially acute when dealing with the records of organizations of any kind. Organizations, by their very nature, reflect a composite of the thoughts and decisions of more than one person; and documenting the reasons for their actions is correspondingly difficult. Within a business archives, for instance, it may be difficult to gauge the relative decision-influencing power of corporate executives, the board of directors, stockholders, and outside groups. Executives may, in fact, exercise nearly complete domination of the decisionmaking apparatus, or conversely, may simply confirm decisions actually reached by others of lower rank within the corporation. Similarly, a family-controlled business may be heavily influenced by the decisions of the controlling group of stockholders, or may have been virtually handed over to a team of professional, non-family managers.

The beneficial relationship of oral history to collections of personal papers is even more pertinent to organizational records. Here, the perspectives of individual movers and shakers may well be submerged within the corporate identity. In order to sort out actual corporate operating structure and to define the relative and shifting patterns of influence and power, it is essential to develop an oral history project. Without that tool and the added information it provides, the user of the records will be forever guessing, presuming solutions that may be quite wide of the mark. A well-structured oral history project will yield information far beyond the basics; it should reveal attitudes and opinions on such diverse topics as corporate financing techniques, stockholder relations, industry-government interaction, corporate management philosophy, social concerns, employee relations, and marketing strategies. The threads of complementary and often conflicting commentary on these and other topics will inevitably create a total fabric that brings the records to life and reveals the organization for what it is: a collection of real people with aspirations, motives, ideals, and beliefs that may differ markedly but that contributed to the development of the organization's structure and identity.

Filling the gap in archival collections through use of oral history is, of course, more easily said than done. Oral history is an expensive enterprise, and archives are seldom possessed of extensive resources to fund it. The attitude of most archivists toward oral history is, understandably, that it is at best a secondary method of documentation to be undertaken only when it will not consume resources needed to acquire, process, and service archival collections. Since few archives have staff and facilities commensurate with their needs,

oral history is placed at the bottom of the priority list, if it is placed there at all.

The virtual absence of funding for oral history within archives is, unfortunately, only one symptom of a problem that faces oral history in nearly every setting. Oral history is simply underfunded, and its gains in popularity and use have not been matched by offsetting gains in the funding allocated for its development and execution. This fact is undoubtedly responsible, in part, for the problems of quality control that beset oral history and have, on occasion, damaged its reputation as a reliable source of historical data. It is somewhat startling to note that few if any of the nation's premier oral history programs have a substantial funding base. Even the most prestigious programs, such as those operated by Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley, rely upon continuous fund raising to support even basic operations. Because of funding constraints, few oral history operations have more than one or two permanent employees; and even they may have other responsibilities within the sponsoring institution. Few are able to devote their time exclusively to oral history.

One might argue, of course, that a shifting personnel base and a shortage of full-time oral historians is enriching, in that it permits involvement by a wide variety of people with different interests and expertise in the creation of oral history. In reality, however, the relative dearth of oral history practitioners with substantial, cumulative experience is a severe drawback and contributes to an apparent professional disorganization that has confused, frustrated, and even angered major grant-making agencies. More importantly, the difficulties in funding substantial oral history operations make it unlikely that archivists will

have reliable oral history expertise readily available when they need it.

The reliability of oral history is a key issue and one that places its relationship to archives in sharp relief. Oral history—worthwhile oral history, that is—cannot be done with a tape recorder alone. It demands extensive research, and it is during this all-important preparatory phase that the proximity of the archives is of particular importance. The papers of individuals, or the records of organizations, must be available for study prior to undertaking an oral history project. Morrissey has stated that “even the most ardent advocate of oral history cannot argue persuasively that interviewing is worthwhile if conducted independently of prior research in surviving written materials.”⁴ It is simply not possible to conduct a consistently intelligent interview without having prepared for it through the use of existing records collections. The more complete the paper record, the better the interview will tend to be.

A basic reason for pre-interview research, of course, is to thoroughly ground the interviewer in a topic about which he may have only superficial knowledge. Beyond that, it serves to acquaint him with specifics of the donor's life or operations and thus to suggest lines of questioning that will put flesh on what may be the bare bones of a manuscript collection.

Pre-interview research may, however, prove a double-edged sword, especially in the hands of an interviewer with less than good judgment. The interviewer, after all, comes to an interview fresh from research in the narrator's papers and is thus fully familiar with dates, names, places, the content of specific pieces of correspondence, and similar facts that the narrator may not have considered for some years. While it may

⁴Morrissey, p. 23.

be argued that the narrator, too, should conduct pre-interview research in his own papers to refresh his memory and become reacquainted with the progression of events, this is not often done. While a few narrators may indeed take time to visit the archives and study their papers, most will have neither the time nor inclination to do so. Consequently, the interviewer must assume the role of pilot, directing the narrator along the path of questioning with careful guidance where necessary.

The problems inherent in this situation arise when an interviewer is, sometimes unconsciously, bent upon displaying his knowledge and succeeds in appearing, at least, to know more about a subject than the narrator. One writer has noted that "especially where the respondent is not an 'expert,' a display of extensive knowledge by the interviewer is very likely to intimidate the respondent in fear of being 'wrong.' This, in turn, leads to inhibition in saying what he or she does know."⁵ In such cases, the interviewer ceases to be a guide and becomes a leader, thus jeopardizing the value of the oral history. The user will never be quite certain whether the narrator's comments represent actual fact, or facts recalled in conformity with the interviewer's supposedly superior knowledge as well as his biases. Discipline, of course, is a linchpin of oral history and should save the interviewer from such mistakes. It may prove an acquired strength, however, which is a further compelling argument for cumulative experience.

A persuasive reason for developing oral history programs within archives may be found in the elitist bias built into most archival collections. The bias is

largely inevitable, for the expanding universe of collection possibilities and the need to garner institutional support and research use usually dictates that only major personalities and organizations are represented in archival holdings. It is true that some institutions, among them the larger state historical societies, hold diaries, correspondence, and an occasional unpublished manuscript written by less than major personalities. Pioneer farm women, minor local politicians, and hopeful businessmen may be represented in such collections; but it is not inappropriate to characterize even these people as members of an elite. They, after all, had the time, education, and inclination to write down their thoughts, impressions, and the conduct of their everyday affairs; and their papers have been preserved by chance, rather than as part of a structured sample of any population. The inarticulate, the uneducated, and those burdened with work beyond their strength are virtually unrepresented; and their stories are lost.

Oral history, of course, has long been touted as a solution to documentation of the inarticulate⁶ and, properly used, it can be. The challenge for archivists, however, is to go beyond their collections to individuals not represented, who have no personal papers or records to donate. This is an unusual activity for an archives but is one way in which the gap between collections and subject areas can be bridged.

Oral history, then, offers the opportunity to balance an archival collection by extending documentation to groups and individuals not normally possessed of papers or who are outside the purview of most collecting agencies. A par-

⁵Rob Rosenthal, "The Interview and Beyond: Some Methodological Questions for Oral Historians," *The Public Historian* 1 (Spring 1979): 64.

⁶Alice Kessler Harris, "Introduction," *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony*, Ronald J. Grele, ed. (Chicago: Precedent, 1975), pp. 2-3.

ticularly good example of such collecting lies in the documentation of current events, especially those involving the community or regional action groups that proliferated in the 1970s. Many of those organizations grew up around single issues, such as power plant construction, community projects, public school education, environmental affairs, and land use. Many assumed political overtones and were amalgamated into larger organizations; others simply disappeared after the success or failure of their campaigns. All are important in casting light on aspects of the changing American psyche and its impact on political and social processes. Few of these ephemeral organizations created or left behind substantial paper records. A few mimeographed newsletters, meeting notices, and some broadsides may encompass the extent to which they are documented in print. A carefully defined oral history project, however, including a sample of those involved on both or all sides of the issues, may offer considerable rewards to the archives brave enough to carry it out.

The risks and costs of such a project are considerable, since neither the interviewer nor the sponsoring institution is insulated by time from the progression of events and the anger and frustration they may raise. On the other hand, the actual motivations of those involved may be more clearly evident at the time of crisis than when viewed in retrospect across a gulf of years. Two such real-life projects furnish useful examples: the 1973 St. Louis Teacher's Strike Project at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Minnesota Powerline Construction Oral History Project at the Minnesota Historical Society. Both involved the collection of whatever manuscript material was available but relied most heavily upon a series of oral histories with representatives of the major opposing sides. Each project captured the

essence of the moment, as narrators defined the reasons for their actions and reactions as well as the issues as they saw them. Without doubt, those oral histories reflect few attempts by the narrators to stand back from the issues at hand, and thus little of the clear-eyed analysis that time may bring. They are, however, also free from the too-careful interpretation of events that reflects more of second thoughts than actual motivation.

Such oral histories may represent the only legitimate means of documenting current events for future reference and, as such, deserve the same careful preparation and administrative commitment given any retrospective project. The preparation is hardly easy under the pressure of events and the emotions surrounding them, and the interviewers are faced with more potential difficulty than in most other oral history projects. While the risks and costs of such an enterprise exist, they seem outweighed by the benefits of documenting an event that might otherwise go unrecorded.

Who should undertake these oral histories—both retrospective and of current events? Should it be the archivist, familiar with the records from involvement in their collection and processing? Should it be an oral historian hired specifically for that purpose? Or should it be a researcher, that scholar whose use of the collection uncovers gaps and whose research demands that an attempt be made to fill them?

Not surprisingly, but perhaps unfortunately, the latter is most likely. It is unfortunate because the scholar's interview may in fact reflect little more than recorded note taking, geared to the narrow interests of his research and oblivious to the wider potential at hand. Most regrettably, such interviews are seldom deposited in an archives and thus are unavailable for research use by others.

The best, but certainly most expensive, solution is to design oral history projects that require the services of a full-time oral historian with the ability and time to implement broad-based interviews that provide information pertinent to the interests of many researchers. This approach will undoubtedly demand some outside funding. A coherent, ongoing program will find this easier to obtain as completed projects and their value are realized and appreciated.

In the best of all worlds, perhaps, the archives itself would fund a permanent oral history office as an adjunct to its operations staffed by professionals independent of, but allied with, the archives staff. Barring this logical but unlikely occurrence, archivists themselves will have to confront the possibility of becoming oral historians. With their knowledge of the collections and probable ability to view these without a researcher's narrow, personal requirements, archivists could be (and some are) successful with such projects.

In defense of this practical if unorthodox solution, archivists are certainly an intelligent group with demonstrated abilities to deal effectively with a wide variety of donors. There is no apparent reason they could not become useful oral historians. With a necessary cognizance of the diversity of their

clientele, their oral histories would likely be drawn with an eye to providing information of use to many potential researchers, thus enhancing the total value of both the archival and oral history collections.

Time and funding, of course, will often militate against such a solution, as will the probable disinclination of many archivists. Those who are inclined, however, will surely take the time to learn what oral history really is, and thus will prove capable of producing a product worthwhile by any judgment. That such oral history will not serve all purposes is certain. I have never heard of any interview or manuscript collection, for that matter, that was found to be tailor-made to the purposes of every user. The possibilities of archivist-conducted oral history, however, seem promising enough to hope that more than a few will be undertaken.

The argument for basing at least some oral history in the archives seems compelling. Oral history is necessary to fill the gaps in key archival collections and creates a resource of escalating value with the passing years. It can document current events in a manner that traditional archival collecting cannot, and it most definitely can help deal with the modern paper mountain and its paucity of hard data.