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Pitfalls In Oral History Programs

Oral History is the systematic recording and compilation of interviews, chiefly by means of tape recording, with persons who have something of historical significance to tell us. It is a technique, not a new kind of history, and it has its proper uses and improper abuses, just like any other technique. Improperly used it can be a horrendous waste of time and money, an activity that allows one to look like he's doing something when really he isn't. All too often what can happen is that someone, who doesn't really know what it is he wants to find out, takes a tape recorder he doesn't really know how to operate and interviews someone who has nothing to say, or rather he probably *has* something to say but the interviewer is too hasty or unskillful to get him to say it. The results are then put on a shelf or in a drawer with no more than a sketchy label (Talk with Mrs. Langdon about old times), where it remains until it rots. Now that's coming on pretty strong, I'll admit, putting all the worst features in one example, but often it isn't all that far from wrong. Oral history has been looked on by too many people as an easy way out. All you gotta do is poke a tape recorder in someone's face, get him talking, and there you are: instant history! Let me begin, then, with four warnings: First, oral history is time-consuming; second, it is

apt to be expensive; third, it is often wildly inefficient when compared to other techniques. On the positive side, of course, the data from a properly conducted oral history project can be unique and invaluable, and that is ample justification for it.

My title is "PITFALLS IN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMS." Let's move ahead then to pitfall number one: REDUPLICATION or "DIGGING A HOLE TWICE IN THE SAME SPOT." If printed or published material is already available, it should be consulted first. If the person to be interviewed has already written an account of some event, as a rule he should not be asked to cover the same ground again. There are special times when such re-eliciting is useful, but usually it is the result of carelessness or laziness, or the result of thinking that there is something magic about an oral account "in the person's own words." All available material should be consulted first. If the person has written an account, that can be used as the *basis* for an oral interview. If someone else has already interviewed the person, that interview should be carefully consulted first before the new interview is carried out. If there are newspaper accounts, diaries, letters, they should all be consulted first to get a background for the oral interview to form the basis for questions like, "The newspaper said Is that the way you remember it?" or "In your letter to Governor Reed, you said ' . . . ' I don't quite understand what you meant by *parity* there. Could you comment on that?" Considering the expense of the oral history approach, anything less than consulting all other sources first is just plain profligacy. Considering the usefulness of it, such an approach can pay off in pure gold.

Pitfall number two: THE ANTIQUARIAN FALLACY or "THE METHUSELAH COMPLEX." That is, what one does in oral history is talk to old people about the past. Granted that's a useful thing to do, and it is what I have done most of the time, but it is not the only useful application of oral historical techniques. Whether we like it or not, history is on-going, and the present we look at so disdainfully is actually the future plunging into the past at an alarming rate. Let me give you a hypothetical example: when our country just about came apart over the outrage of Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and the concomitant horror of Kent State, when the "young" and not-so-young showed their anger by marching and demonstrating, many colleges even went so far as to shut down, who among us thought to break out the tape recorder and make accurate records of what some of these people thought and felt in the heat of it all? Yet some day historians (if they are worthy of their calling) will be looking for just that kind of material, and unless I miss my guess "oral historians" will be interviewing aged men and women who were "there" and can recall what happened. Would not on-the-spot records of the sort I suggested have been pure gold for the future historian? We should look more and more to the recording of "history" while it is happening. One student of mine had a series of interviews with an elderly farm wife about "what it was like." How about a series of interviews with suburban housewives in which they describe not a "typical" day so much as several specific days and their reactions to them?

Pitfall number three: ELITISM or "IT'S GOTTA BE SOMEBODY IMPORTANT". Too many people have been interviewed strictly because they were pres-

ent at some “great event” or because they knew John Kennedy. The Columbia University Oral History Project is a great one, and its emphasis has been unabashed elitist, but there is no reason why all projects must follow that lead. Recently I was looking through a catalog of oral interviews on Marine Corps history. Of the better than ninety interviews listed, there was only three with enlisted men and all three of these were six-stripe sergeants; the rest were with generals (and one colonel). Now most of us would say, “Of course . . . What’s wrong with that? That’s the way it’s always been, History is made by the few; the rest follow.” But is it the lives of the great only that should be recorded for posterity? Any man or woman sees the world from a unique point of view. Each is a world, and the record of that world should be of value and interest to us. No better technique than oral history has ever been given us for reaching out into the vast silences and making them articulate. Don’t interview the mayor; interview the street cleaner. No, that’s not fair. Interview the mayor by all means, but don’t neglect the janitor. And don’t just interview the janitor for what he can tell us about the mayor; get him to tell what the world looks like from his angle and what it is like to be him. That’s a kind of tough order. We’re just not used to thinking that way, but maybe we’d better learn.

Pitfall number four: ANTI-ELITISM or “HELL, I’M ONLY GONNA BE TALKING TO OLD CHARLIE.” Vaccinate myself heavily as I will against the elitist virus, I keep saying things like “You should choose your interviewees carefully” or “Not just anybody will do.” It’s a question of time. We simply can’t interview everyone. Granted, even to the dedicated non-elitist, it will be the “interesting” or “unusual”

person who is most immediately attractive and who seems the most worthy of interview, the “character”, the “good talker.” Fine, interview such people, but we should also interview some people simply because they were *not* special. Or perhaps we should cultivate the habit of finding some people special because they are so common, so un-special. But in the end, we will find that no man is common. And that is something at that.

But interviews with (I keep searching for a word) “everyday” people must be prepared for just as carefully as interviews with the great. In fact, they should be prepared for even more carefully. The great usually know what they want to talk about, and they usually know how to talk. The non-great often are not so blessed. It may be hard enough simply to convince, say, a common woodsman that you are really interested in *him*; then, once you’ve gotten that across, the interviewer may have to work hard to help him get his story told. But God forbid that we leave history to the great. And God also please forbid that we leave the non-elitist story to be told by the glib only.

Pitfall number five: INADEQUATE TECHNICAL PREPARATION or “I WONDER WHAT THIS BUTTON’S FOR.” No one should venture into the field until they are thoroughly familiar with the machine they will be using. How do I start and stop it? What does that little needle indicate? How long will the tape last? How do I turn it over? How good are my batteries? The interviewer should use the machine with complete confidence during the interview in order that it should obtrude as little as possible. The “Ohdearme, I don’t know much about these gadgets” approach, no matter how cutely and winningly applied, will hardly convince the interviewee that he is

spending his time wisely.

Included also under the rubric is the admonition that the interviewer should have a decent knowledge of where to place a microphone to get the best recording. A few hours, or even a half-hour's practice at home is all that is required, and it can make the difference between a useable recording and a useless one.

Pitfall number six: INTERVIEWING FRIENDS or "YOU TALK TO HIM: HE'S *YOUR* UNCLE." As suggested under "pitfall number one," the interviewer should prepare himself by knowing all he can ahead of time about the person he will be interviewing. But it does not necessarily follow from this that a close friend makes the best interviewer. He may, of course, but then again he just may not. For one thing, the interviewee may make a good many assumptions about what it is his old buddy, the interviewer, already knows (and these assumptions will likely be tacitly accepted by the interviewer, hence reinforced). That means that a lot of things will get skipped over that should be talked out. A well informed outsider may get information that a near neighbor won't get. I believe sociologists speak of this as "stranger value," but whoever calls it that, it's worth remembering.

Pitfall number seven: NOT KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT or "YOU HIT HIM WITH A WHAT?" The interviewer should also know something about what it is he will be discussing with the interviewee. Not that he has to be an expert, but take my class in "Field Work" as an example. Each of the students has to hold a series of interviews with people who worked in the lumberwoods or on the river drives before the First World War. Therefore I

spend the first three weeks of the course filling them in on the lumberman's life in general so that they will know the basic organization of it, so they will understand what a man means when he says he was in the same *camp* with a man but never in the same *crew*, or when he talks of a peavey or a parbuckle. That doesn't mean that they'll let a man simply mention a parbuckle and pass on; they'll know in general what it is and be able to elicit from the man (hopefully) a better description of it than if they didn't know a parbuckle from a shear boom. And I would hate to have to spend an hour or ten hours talking to someone about quarrying, let's say, if I didn't already have at least an outline of the process in my head. To sum up, the interviewer should be well informed on what it is he is going to be conducting interviews on, but he should be careful to use his knowledge not for display but to help draw out what he knows is important.

Pitfall number eight: HYPERINFORMALITY or "WE'RE JUST HAVING A NICE LITTLE CHAT." It is nice to be informal and all that, but it should never be forgotten that what is going on is an interview to gather material that will go into an archives where it will be looked at by others. That means making sure you get clear opening and closing announcements on the tape telling who you are, who you're talking to, where, and when. It means making sure the interviewee understands that the tape and their transcripts will be preserved in an archive where people will have access to them under certain specified conditions. It may also mean checking after the interview is under way to make sure that the recording is going to be all right. And it means obtaining releases from the interviewee after the interviews are completed. These for-

malities can be handled graciously; they need not “spoil” the easy back-and-forth. But if they do spoil it, well, that’s too bad, but it really can’t be helped. You’re not having a chat, you’re conducting an interview.

Pitfall number nine: INADEQUATE ACCESSIONING TECHNIQUE or “WHERE DO WE PUT THESE?” I don’t see myself lecturing a group of librarians on this matter, but it does become a problem for non-librarians. Since it all gets rather technical and dry, I won’t go on beyond saying work out a system that allows you to keep track of both the tape and the transcript and that will serve as a rational basis for indexing work later on. We have our own system at the Northeast Archives, of course, which we will be glad to explain in detail. But not here.

Pitfall number ten: NOT MAKING TRANSCRIPTIONS or “YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!” All right. Now you’ve got your interview on tape. What then? Here comes the hard work: That tape must be completely and carefully transcribed, and the transcription must be in a form that is usable by researchers. I think a rough catalog of the contents should be made first, and then a complete transcription. The transcript should be *verbatim*, an accurate record of what is on the tape, with explanations of difficulties, noises, lacunae, and the like. Such a transcript will take anywhere from five to twenty hours per hour of recording depending on the quality of the recording and how clearly the interviewee speaks, and the ideal person to do the work is the person who made the interview (and making transcription is just about the ideal way to learn how to do better interviews too!). The transcript should be made as soon after the interview as possible

so that things that may not be clear on the tape will still be clear in the interviewer's mind. It is just plain hard work, but there is no substitute for it.

You may ask, why isn't a complete catalog of the contents almost as good as a transcript? Then the researcher can go to the tape from the catalog and find what he wants. Sounds all right until you try it. It is very difficult to index a tape accurately. Those little counters vary so much from machine to machine as to be a nuisance, and any other method I've seen is so approximate it is all but useless.

Pitfall number eleven: NOT KEEPING THE TAPES or "THAT TOO?" Once we have the transcript made, can we erase the tape? I say *no*, and I say it loud. To me the tape is the primary document, and if there is any question about the accuracy of the transcription, the tape should be available for checking. We keep all tapes and treat them with all the care we give to the transcripts. Some programs like the one at Columbia evidently pay little attention to the tape once it has been transcribed. Nonetheless, I say it should be kept.

Without going into matters of cataloguing and indexing, which are matters librarians are well equipped to handle, I should say, I think it should be clear by now that if oral historical materials are to be handled efficiently, it still requires a fair investment in equipment. Field recording machines, run anywhere from \$100 to \$400 or even more. Special foot-pedal operated machines are going to be required for transcription, and they run about \$400 apiece. Then there's the cost of paying someone to do transcription work, which can run anywhere from ten to forty dollars for each interview hour. Add to that the cost of tape,

travel, etc. and the point is made that oral historical techniques are anything but an easy or cheap way out. Obviously I'm talking about doing the job right. You can save a lot of money by settling for incompetence and amateurishness, by not being fussy about technique, by being nice and enthusiastic and assuming that "isn't-it-all-such-fun" is enough. There's work written all over the job, and nothing but the uniqueness of the material so gathered could possibly justify the kind of effort entailed. And on that I'll take my stand, but since my conviction that the materials so gathered can be extremely valuable should by now be less obvious than my conviction that oral history is hard work if it's done right, I won't labor the point further.

I do have some suggestions, though, that may make the whole business seem less formidable and that makes a whole lot of sense in other ways too. The Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History of which I am the Director, is located at the University of Maine (Orono) and is financed almost entirely by the Department of Anthropology. We have what I consider excellent facilities for copying tapes from either cassette or reel onto a standard polyester tape for storage. We have foot-pedal operated tape decks for transcribing purposes and at each station there is an electric typewriter. We have a "staff" of people available to do transcription work, and a system for archiving both the tapes and their transcriptions. We're ready to help you in any way possible, and here's how it could work.

To begin with, of course, I'd be delighted to consult with anyone on setting up a project. Now let's say you decided to work through our archives. If you are planning to get grant money to carry out your project,

you would want to write in to the proposal a figure that would allow you to pay for the cost of our making transcriptions. That would allow us to put someone right to work as the material came in, but even if you couldn't cover the whole cost—or couldn't cover any of it—we can still talk. There's always a certain amount of "free" work we can do when we have the time and the help. We have some tape recorders we can loan out for field use, though my own students understandably get priority. As interviews are completed and catalogued (following our detailed instructions), you would send us the tapes, catalogs, releases, etc. We would accession the materials, the tape would be copied and we'd make a transcription for you. Your original tape can be returned if it is yours, along with a copy of the transcript, which you then correct and return to us. We make corrections on the original, give it its final pagination, and furnish you with a copy (at a cost we have agreed on ahead of time). You thus have the original tape and a corrected copy of the transcript for your own files, and a dub of the tape and the original transcript (made on parchment-type paper) are on file with us. Agreements can be worked out as to what sort of control you wanted to have over the material.

Let me wind it up this way. Oral history takes dedication, time, money, special facilities, planning, and hard work. If you can come up with the dedication, the time, and something like the money, we'll help with the special facilities and the planning. And if you'll work hard, so will we.

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The above paper resulted from a talk given by Dr. Ives to the first meeting of the Maine Academic and Research Librarians in October, 1973; a meeting jointly sponsored by the Library at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham and the Maine Historical Society.

The editor of the MHS Quarterly felt that the contents of Dr. Ives' remarks at that meeting would prove of great value to readers of the Quarterly since many are members of groups and research institutions presently planning oral history programs under the stimulus of the nation's Bicentennial observance. Dr. Ives graciously consented to making a careful "transcript" available here.