

---

## Oral History

NORMAN HOYLE

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR., has commented on one of the fundamental paradoxes facing the writer of contemporary history. "In the last three quarters of a century," he says, "the rise of the typewriter has vastly increased the flow of paper, while the rise of the telephone has vastly reduced its importance. Far more documents have been produced, and there is far less in them. If a contemporary statesman has something of significance to communicate, if speed and secrecy are of the essence, he will confide his message, not to a letter, but to the telephone." And the growing insistence by historians and the public alike that official papers should, as a matter of right, be immediately opened to scholars leads to what Schlesinger calls a "dilution and distortion" of the record. "Public officials, fearing next decade's graduate students, become reluctant to put in writing the real reasons behind some of their actions."<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the disclosures made in the "Pentagon Papers" and the "Anderson Papers," James Reston suggests that this fear may be more immediate. Because of the widespread presence of the Xerox machine in Washington, "the elements of accident and disclosure are obviously far greater than ever in the past."<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, Reston believes, quick, modern, electrostatic copying has had a much greater influence on security and diplomacy than is generally realized:

For example, ambassadors or Foreign Service officers of the United States abroad, who used to be able to send their dissents privately to the State Department or the President, now have to calculate that their dissents will be copied and circulated, so they tend to be cautious.

Always, now, they have that Xerox machine in mind. Will they really be able to speak their minds privately, or will their views be circulated all over Washington and hurt their careers? . . .

No doubt some of them still keep writing what they believe, even if they think the White House will not like their dissents, but a lot of them,

---

Norman Hoyle is Associate Professor, School of Library and Information Science, State University of New York at Albany.

## *Oral History*

maybe most of them, hold back for fear of how their judgments will look after they are copied and circulated.<sup>2</sup>

The need thus arises for the documentary record to be supplemented and rounded out if we are to recover what Schlesinger calls "the full historical transaction."<sup>1</sup> It is to this end, the production of new documentation for the historian of the future, that oral history is dedicated. It is an attempt, in an age when few people have the time or the inclination to keep a diary or engage in the kind of leisurely, confidential correspondence that historians have traditionally relied on, to recover at least a few of those "transactions" that would otherwise have gone unrecorded. Allan Nevins has called it "an essential defense against oblivion in history."<sup>3</sup>

As a stay against oblivion, an oral history program will conduct interviews with persons—statesmen and ordinary citizens alike—who are presumed to have something of lasting interest to say about the times through which they have lived, the work they have done, the decisions they have made, and the people they have known. Typically, the interview is recorded on tape, with an edited transcript of the tape subsequently made available (at a time specified by the interviewee) to qualified researchers. It is important to emphasize, particularly in a publication devoted to sound archives, that oral history, as the term has come to be used, is the creation of new historical documentation, not the recording or preserving of documentation—even oral documentation—that already exists. Its purpose is not, like that of the National Voice Library at Michigan State University, to preserve the recordings of fireside chats or presidential declarations of war or James Whitcomb Riley reciting "Little Orphan Annie." These are surely oral and just as surely the stuff of history; but they are not oral history. For this there must be the creation of a new historical document by means of a personal interview.

Oral history as a field can be said to date from 1948, when Allan Nevins established the Oral History Research Office in the basement of Butler Library at Columbia University. Late in his life Nevins recalled how as a young newspaperman in New York it had pained him to see the obituary pages of the *New York Times*, "published in the center of American life, the great metropolis, the focus of business and literary activity, of drama, of music, and to a great extent of political activity." New York had drawn to it an unmatched array of famous personages, and "Year by year, they died, and I said to myself as I saw the obituary columns, 'What memories that man carries with him into total oblivion,

and how completely they are lost.' Shakespeare says, 'Time hath a monstrous wallet at his back in which he putteth alms for oblivion.' We can agree with Shakespeare that it's monstrous, indeed."<sup>4</sup> And so it was that the idea of oral history was born.

While Nevins is always credited with establishing oral history as a field—no one seems as yet to have called it a discipline—the literature is replete with attempts to identify practitioners of oral history who antedate those at Columbia, sometimes by centuries. Thucydides and Herodotus, it is pointed out, both relied on the personal interview to gain material for their histories. Hubert Howe Bancroft, with personal financial resources that most institutional oral history programs today might envy, employed a whole cadre of interviewers to capture first hand the stories of California pioneers. Lyman Copeland Draper, dubbed by one writer as the "Father of American Oral History,"<sup>5</sup> was a nineteenth century collector and would-be historian who conducted numerous interviews with "aged Western Pioneers" in whose memories he believed "very much precious historical incident must still be treasured up . . . which would perish with them if not quickly rescued."<sup>6</sup> During World War II the U.S. Army sent teams of combat historians to interview officers and men, sometimes in foxholes, about their battle experiences.

In an emerging field like oral history, definitions are hazardous and always subject to change. It would seem, though, that the time has come to make a clear-cut distinction between the kind of interviewing done by Thucydides, Herodotus, Draper, and the Army historians and that done in a present-day oral history program. In the former, interviews were conducted, primarily at least, for the purpose of gaining information for one's own writings or for the preparation of a particular work of history. The purpose of the oral history interview, by contrast, is to create new archival material for other writers to use. Interviewing alone does not constitute oral history; if it did, virtually all writing on contemporary history, to say nothing of newspaper reporting and much sociological investigation, would come under its aegis. Because of its emphasis on meeting the information needs of the scholar of the future, oral history implies further the archival preservation of the document resulting from the interview and its eventual if not immediate availability to the scholarly community.

The terminology of oral history continues to be unsettled. The person interviewed is variously called the interviewee, the respondent, the memoirist, the subject, the narrator—even the victim. Luther Evans, a former Librarian of Congress, has urged the use of "oral author" be-

## Oral History

cause of its implications for copyright protection,<sup>7</sup> but there is little evidence that the term has been widely adopted. And what is an oral historian? Is he the interviewer, the director of an oral history program, or the historian who draws on oral history interviews in his writing of history? Although an oral historian is now generally thought to be the interviewer, the confusion has been such that the term seems to be used less than it once was, even consciously avoided by some. Actually, it does not apply very satisfactorily to any of the three: not to the interviewer, because a historian is usually thought to be responsible more for interpreting his source material than for creating it; not to the program director, because non-historians can and do assume such positions; and not to the user of oral history interviews, because it would be the unusual historian indeed who relied exclusively on these at the expense of newspapers, diaries, and other printed source material.

Despite the problems which afflict any new field, oral history has grown impressively, gained a degree of academic respectability and assumed all the appurtenances which such respectability seems to demand. There is now an Oral History Association, with more than 700 personal and institutional members, an *Oral History Newsletter*, and an annual National Colloquium on Oral History. A recently published bibliography<sup>8</sup> lists more than 200 books and articles dealing with oral history. And the new *Directory* compiled for the Association by Gary Shumway<sup>9</sup> lists 230 established programs (as compared with only 89 programs as recently as 1965) and 93 additional programs in the planning stages. More than 23,000 persons have been interviewed, producing some 700,000 pages of transcript, up from 400,000 pages in 1965.<sup>10</sup> If, as Schlesinger believes, the typewriter and the telephone have "eroded the value of the document,"<sup>11</sup> oral history programs around the country would seem to be engaged in a reclamation project of considerable proportions.

Rather surprisingly, a tabulation of the oral history programs reported to the new *Directory* shows that only slightly more than half of these (104 of 203) are affiliated with academic institutions. (This does not include those programs listed in appendix A of the *Directory* which are intended primarily for internal use.) Other groups or institutions sponsoring, or at least tolerating, oral history programs are historical societies (21), public libraries (13), ethnic societies or organizations (8), state libraries (6), hospitals (5), and museums (5). In addition there is a miscellany of programs sponsored by alumni organizations, private corporations (Ford and IBM), government agencies (NASA

and the National Park Service), and special interest groups (American Society of Civil Engineers and the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Society).

What makes the growth of oral history programs all the more remarkable is that they have been funded for the most part at little more than subsistence levels. Occasionally an outside grant will be received for a particular project, and sometimes a few of the larger programs like those at Columbia University or the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, will do projects on contract for other agencies. In general, however, funds for oral history are squeezed out of already squeezed institutional budgets, and so the programs lead a rather tenuous existence.

There are three types of projects which oral history programs, whatever their institutional affiliation, have generally undertaken. In the first, pioneered at Columbia in 1948, the emphasis is autobiographical. An attempt is made to secure the reminiscences or life story of a person of presumed historical interest who does not plan to write his memoirs. With the help of the interviewer he is encouraged to recite his memoirs. This seems to have been, at last until recent years, the most common type of oral history project. Columbia alone reports some 600 "autobiographical memoirs." The memoirist—and here the appellation seems entirely proper—is likely to have been an "important" personage, a leader in politics (most frequently), business, labor unions, the military, the professions, or occasionally the arts. Usually he will be approached for a memoir in his later years, when he can afford to be both more candid and more reflective. There is a danger in waiting too long, however; if the stories exchanged at the National Colloquia on Oral History (hereafter referred to as the national colloquia) are any indication there is an unusually high rate of attrition among prospective memoirists. Some of the smaller programs, particularly those associated with public libraries and state and local historical societies, may favor a less exalted memoirist. If the program is in luck, he will be a pioneer of the region; if not, he will be the descendant of a pioneer or at least a long-time resident. His reminiscences will be sought for what they can reveal about day-to-day life in an earlier time.

The emphasis in the second type of project is biographical rather than autobiographical. The aim is to collect interviews relating to a single person. Here the interviewee provides information not so much about himself (he may sometimes have to be reminded of this) as about his dealings and associations with a major historical figure. He is

## *Oral History*

not a memoirist giving his life story but a respondent telling what he knows about a specific person or time in history. Presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon have all been the subjects of oral history efforts. Not all of these, however, are associated with presidential libraries: the Herbert Hoover Oral History Program in Washington, D.C., is independent of the Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa; most of the work on President Roosevelt has been done at Columbia; and the two small programs dealing with President Nixon are to be found at Whittier College and California State College at Fullerton. Whole programs have developed around John Foster Dulles at Princeton, Christian Herter at Harvard, Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, and George C. Marshall at the George C. Marshall Research Library in Lexington, Virginia.

The third type of project is essentially similar to the biographical project except that it secures material relating to a given subject, topic, or event rather than a given person. Columbia has clusters of interviews, or special projects, relating to the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Campus Crisis at Columbia, the Occupation of Japan, Oil Wildcatting in Texas, the Chinese Republic, 1911-49, and Social Security: Origins through Medicare. Ford, IBM, and NASA all trace their organizational and technological development through large-scale oral history projects. There is an Archives of New Orleans Jazz at Tulane University, a Civil Rights Documentation Project in Washington, D.C., a McCarthy Historical Project (the primary campaign of 1968) at Georgetown University, as well as projects dealing with the Texas oil industry at the University of Texas, labor history at Pennsylvania State University, unionization of the auto industry at Wayne State University, food and drug regulation at Emory University, California wine history and water resources at the University of California (Berkeley), the citrus industry at the Claremont Graduate School, the motion picture industry at the Hollywood Center for the Audio-Visual Arts, and land development in Southern California at Immaculate Heart College.

As this quick survey suggests, an oral history program may engage in one kind of project, as at the presidential libraries or the Archives of New Orleans Jazz, in two, or all three, as at Columbia and Berkeley. Although it cannot be known for sure, the discussions at the national colloquia suggest that special projects—both biographical and topical—are increasingly emphasized. Certainly they have numerous advantages: they give a program a greater sense of direction; they simplify

the selection of interviewees; they provide a larger and better integrated collection of source material for the researcher; they can be developed so as to complement an already strong collection of archival material; they provide a greater opportunity for cross-checking information and capturing the same event from different points of view; and they are far more efficient in terms of the training and preparation of interviewers.

Because the interview plays such a dominant role in oral history, it is not surprising that the literature of the field deals extensively with the techniques and procedures of interviewing. The presentation here will follow a similar emphasis.

To a considerable degree, people in oral history have been historians, librarians, and others without prior training or experience in interviewing. By comparison with political scientists, sociologists, psychotherapists, and journalists, they have been amateurs. Consequently they have been somewhat uncertain about how they should go about their business; at the national colloquia there seems to be an almost compulsive need to exchange tricks of the interviewing trade. And so by trial and error, by the example of Columbia and a few of the other major programs, and by sharing of experiences, some rules of thumb have developed for oral history interviewing. While techniques and procedures now seem fairly standard around the country, little has been done to put these in a more generalized framework. As yet there is nothing approaching a theory of oral history interviewing. Indeed, there seems to be little familiarity with the literature of interviewing as it has developed in other fields.

Although the term seems not to be used by people in oral history, the kind of interviewing they most frequently practice is what political scientists and sociologists call elite or specialized interviewing. In a recent and important book on the subject Lewis Dexter defines an elite interview as one with *any* interviewee "who in terms of the current purposes of the interviewer is given special, non-standardized treatment." Special, non-standardized treatment involves:

1. Stressing the interviewee's definition of the situation,
2. encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation,
3. letting the interviewee introduce to a considerable extent (an extent which will of course vary from project to project and interviewer to interviewer) his notions of what he regards as relevant, instead of relying upon the investigator's notions of relevance.<sup>12</sup>

## *Oral History*

In the survey interview, or standardized interview, the investigator "defines the question and the problem; he is only looking for answers within the bounds set by his presuppositions." In the elite interview, however, the "investigator is willing, and often eager to let the interviewee teach him what the problem, the question, the situation, is—to the limits, of course, of the interviewer's ability to perceive relationships to his basic problems, whatever these may be."<sup>13</sup>

Dexter points out that this approach to interviewing has been adopted more with the influential, the prominent, and the well informed than with the rank and file of a population. "For one thing," he says, "a good many well-informed or influential people are unwilling to accept the assumptions with which the investigator starts; they insist on explaining to him how they see the situation, what the real problems are as they view the matter. Moreover, the interviewer confronted with genuinely prominent people or the prestigious well-informed is unlikely to feel that he can insist on their hewing to a standardized line of discussion."<sup>14</sup>

Although it has seldom been so precisely formulated, most oral history interviewing—whether for autobiographical memoirs or for special projects—would seem to fall within this general framework. An interviewee will not be asked a series of standardized questions or be presented with an interview schedule, although he or she may be given an indication beforehand what general topics might be raised. He may even be asked to go through his personal papers to refresh his memory. Still, the point to be made is that the interviewee will be given broad leeway, as Dexter puts it, to structure his recollections of the situation and to record what he regards as relevant.<sup>15</sup>

If the purpose of oral history is to fill gaps in the historical record, this would suggest that the gaps should be defined with care and that the interviewer should formulate with some precision what it is that he is after. If this is not done, oral history could be looked on as little more than an expensive fishing expedition. One practitioner asserts that the oral historian cannot properly do his work "without knowing what he is trying to find out, any more than any other researcher can. He must, in fact, be able to formulate research aims with far more insight and foresight than the average researcher because he is providing source material for scholars to use many years hence."<sup>16</sup> And yet it must be asked how precisely research aims can be formulated when one has only the vaguest idea how and when and by whom the information obtained in the interview will be used. And further, how precisely can

these aims be formulated when it is known in advance that the interviewee will be given broad leeway to structure the interview himself, to determine what is and what is not relevant, and to teach his questioner what the important questions are? The contrary pulls between the directive and the nondirective, between the precise and the exploratory, between closure and expansiveness, make for a difficult conceptual problem in oral history which to this point has not been much explored.

In oral history interviewing, as in elite interviewing of any kind, the interviewer tends to be a rather colorless, shadowy figure. He is admonished to focus all attention on the speaker, not to inject his own personality or beliefs into the record, not to pass judgment on what is said. One handbook on the subject says that he "must be sympathetic and noncommittal at the same time. He must not reflect approval or disapproval. He should not be shocked by the informant's revelations or amused by a display of humor."<sup>17</sup> In a set of proposed standards for the manufacture of reminiscences with a recording device, the interviewer is urged to be a "friendly, but an almost 'faceless' person," because the information obtained will be more accurate and reliable "when the interviewee knows little more about the life, thoughts, desires, and prejudices of the historian-interviewer *after* the interview than he did before it began. The pattern of his ideas will then be more likely to be his own."<sup>18</sup>

If the objective of an elite interview is to encourage the interviewee to structure the account of the situation in his own way, then questions must be put with great care; otherwise the account will be incomplete or distorted. Questions which can be answered with a simple yes-no, which suggest their own answers (leading questions, in the legal sense), or which are long, complex, and filled with academic jargon are generally avoided. Open-ended or "multi-interprettable" questions are favored instead. Dexter says that "it is important to start off with comments or ask questions where the key words are quite vague and ambiguous, so the interviewee can interpret them in his own terms, and out of his own experience. . . . A question which sharply defines a particular area for discussion is far more likely to result in omission of some vital data which you, the interviewer, have not even thought of. Of course, by this process, your answers are not strictly comparable with one another in terms of a narrow conception of what is factual; but you discover how your interviewees . . . see the issues."<sup>19</sup> Along this same line, Tyrrell urges the use of variations of such simple questions as

## Oral History

*"Why?, How?, Why did you do that?, Why didn't that work?, or What did you do (say) then."*<sup>20</sup>

A certain amount of amateurism in interviewing is to be expected in those joining the ranks of oral history; more controversial has been the degree of amateurism to be tolerated in them as historians. In order to be an effective interviewer, must one be a trained historian. Saul Benison, a leading figure in the field, says that "If you begin with a person of no particular training as a historian, I think you're in trouble. A tape recorder does not make a historian. . . . And so if I were hiring anyone for any particular project, the first question I would ask is, What's your training?"<sup>21</sup> He concedes, though, that it is a "knotty question." Advocates of oral history have insisted all along that their methodologies should be applied to a whole range of fields that are beyond the ken of conventional historians. Most programs simply cannot afford or do not have available to them a sufficient number of trained historians to carry on their work in an orderly, sustained manner. Consequently, more emphasis has been placed on preparation than upon formal academic training. That is, before the interviewer turns on his tape recorder he is expected to have made a thorough search of the existing documentation relating to the person he is interviewing and the subjects they are likely to discuss. While some of the rather vehement insistence on exhaustive preparation may be attributed to an overcompensation for the low esteem in which oral history has been held by some non-oral historians, the predominant view is that thorough preparation results in better interviews. The following comments made from the floor at one of the national colloquia are typical:

My opinion is that it is impossible to prepare too thoroughly for an interview. . . . You can prepare for his [the interviewee's] jargon, his alphabetical arrangement, and to know what he's referring to when he refers to things, so that you don't have to stop him for a, b, c, explanations. You're aware of what he did, and what you're looking for in your interview is to find out more about what he did. So the preparation for the interview has to be thorough. The more thorough the better.<sup>22</sup>

To my way of thinking, barring a recalcitrant respondent, the preparation for an interview is the key to a successful interview. The amount of time spent and the thoroughness of one's research is certainly mirrored in the commentary of the respondent in the transcript. In fact, if I may be so bold, without the Science of Preparation, there is little need for the Art of Interviewing. The most polished, sociable, confidence-inspiring interviewer can certainly get on first base, but without thorough preparation his path will be a straight line to left field rather than second base!<sup>23</sup>

But there are demurrers. Louis Starr, director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia and for many years the chief spokesman for the field, has observed that here, as in every aspect of oral history, some flexibility and judgment are required. In his own interviews with Chester Bowles and Bennett Cerf, for example, Starr says that they told their stories as they wanted to tell them (as elite interviewees will do) and that in either case extensive preparation on his part would have been a waste of effort. Sometimes elaborate preparation on the part of the interviewer will be crucial, he believes, "but continued genuflecting to the God of Preparation, regardless of financial and logistical realities or the nature of the problem at hand . . . [is] a kind of occupational malaise." It is as if "oral history's disciples sought to expiate their sins in this manner, whenever they foregathered."<sup>24</sup>

A Ph.D. in history and thorough preparation will not in themselves make a successful interviewer. These may or may not be necessary, but they certainly are not sufficient. An interview is an interpersonal relationship, a kind of social transaction in which each party has a direct, though perhaps indeterminate, effect upon the other. The whole array of stimuli emitted by the interviewer—his age, his appearance, his manner of speech, his actions, his preparation, his credentials—will determine how he is perceived by the person being interviewed. And the way he is perceived will in certain measure determine the content, style, and quality of the responses he elicits. No matter how colorless or "objective" an interviewer attempts to be, he will be deceived if he thinks that the interviewee is responding only to the questions that are put to him. Dexter suggests that "it is more likely that the *total-situation-as-felt-and-perceived* affects or chiefly determines how a respondent answers a set of questions than that he answers these questions in terms of the defined, manifest, and limited meanings which some interviewers think they have."<sup>25</sup>

The successful interviewer then will be the one who is sensitive to how he is perceived by the person he is interviewing, and who will change his strategy accordingly. Dexter says that "it is important for the interviewer, *during the interview*, to realize what the interviewee is responding to, because on the basis of such realization, he can continuously modify his strategy, formulate his questions, plan his comments. He may even modify his own mannerisms to a limited extent."<sup>26</sup>

Not everyone can make such perceptions. It requires a high degree of empathic understanding, of putting oneself in another's place and feeling and seeing as he does. It requires the ability to step outside

## Oral History

one's own biases and prejudices, to listen (in Theodore Reik's phrase) with the third ear. It demands a willingness to learn from the interviewee and to refrain from fitting what is heard into preconceived patterns and an eagerness, as Sidney and Beatrice Webb have expressed it, "to have the conventional classification upset, and the orthodox categories transcended."<sup>27</sup> What it does not mean is well illustrated by the remarks of an unidentified participant in one of the national colloquia: "Sometimes we use professors for interviewers, and they have difficulty when something comes up that is opposed to their own thesis or to something they know. They may be known figures, and since their names are going to appear in the interview, they cannot let it stand. They have to come on strongly in order to preserve their own reputations."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it should not be so surprising that college undergraduates and even junior high school students have produced some remarkably successful oral history interviews.<sup>29, 30</sup>

Discussions of interviewing always seem to end feebly. After all the advice and the admonitions, one is cautioned not to take it all too seriously. Each interview situation is different; consequently, "it all depends. . . ." The variables can never be fully accounted for, and so even with the most experienced sociologist or psychotherapist, interviewing remains very much an art. It can never reduce neatly to a set of rules or formulae.

It would be difficult to imagine oral history without the tape recorder. The first interviews at Columbia, it is true, were done without benefit of machines, but surely oral history would not have developed into an international movement had it not been for the inexpensive, portable tape recorder.

The presence of tape recorders at interviewing sessions has sometimes been criticized. Truman Capote, for example, says that "they completely ruin the quality of the thing being felt or talked about. If you . . . tape what people say, it makes them feel inhibited and self-conscious. It makes them say what they think you *expect* them to say."<sup>31</sup> For an oral history program, however, the alternatives to the tape recorder do not seem very practical. One possibility would be simply for the interviewer to take notes which would later be transcribed. This is the method preferred by many writers of contemporary history who share Capote's distrust of the tape recorder. But is the notebook any less of a barrier to communication than an inconspicuously placed tape recorder? How natural is it to have a conversation with someone who writes down what you are saying? And how effectively can the

interviewer communicate—truly communicate—when he must concentrate on getting down a complete, accurate record for posterity? The “information loss” caused by his omissions and inaccuracies hardly seems acceptable in what is intended, after all, as an important historical document. The tape recorder may intimidate, but it does not make mistakes.

Another possibility would be to hire a professional stenographer, but this would be an expense few programs could bear, and the presence of a third party would no doubt be more intimidating and distracting than a tape recorder. The third possibility would seem to be a possibility only with Truman Capote, who taught himself to be his own tape recorder. For the writing of *In Cold Blood* he claims to have transcribed his interviews from memory with 97 percent accuracy.<sup>31</sup> In any event, the tape recorder has become such a familiar fixture in the twentieth century that the next generation of interviewees, particularly the elite and the influential, will in all likelihood not give its presence a second thought.

The tape recorder is just one of two essential pieces of equipment in an oral history program; the other is the typewriter. Over the years perhaps the major dispute in the field has very nearly come down to which machine should take precedence. That is, which has primacy, the tape or the transcript that is made from it?

Anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and librarians have tended to argue that the tape is the primary document, that a significant information loss occurs when the tape is reduced to a verbatim transcript. They would agree with Ben Jonson, who in “A Language in Oratory” said that “No glass renders a man’s form or likeness so true as his speech.” No transcript can capture the timbre of a man’s voice, his tone, his inflections, the intensity of his expression. These are as much his speech as are the words he utters, and for that likeness one must go directly to the tape. By the same token, of course, the tape recorder misses all of the nonverbal communication—the frown, the shrug, the arched eyebrow. Now that videotaping equipment is very nearly as portable and unobtrusive as the tape recorder, perhaps the time has come to discuss the possibilities of “visual history.”

As much as the linguist or the psychotherapist might advocate the use of the tape rather than the transcript, it is the professional historian who has been the principal user of oral history interviews, and it is to him by and large that oral history programs have been directed. And it is the testimony of the people who run these programs that historians

## Oral History

have displayed an overwhelming lack of interest in the tapes. Columbia, for example, reports that calls for transcripts predominate over calls for tape by a ratio of 1000:1.<sup>32</sup> Historians have been trained in the use of written evidence, they are accustomed to it, and that is what they want. There is no denying, of course, that the transcript can be scanned far more easily for pertinent material than can a reel of tape, even when the tape is indexed by means of a digital counter. Some of the special projects at Columbia run to hundreds of hours of listening time, and in cases like these no one, historian or not, could be expected to forego the transcript.

Because of this lack of interest on the part of historians (and partly for economic reasons too), the tapes have sometimes been erased and then used again for other interviews. This may be good ecology, but many consider it bad oral history and are shocked by it. The anguished cries fortunately have had their effect. Most importantly, Columbia has reversed its former policy and since 1964 has preserved all of its tapes. Of those programs reporting on this point in the new *Directory*, 162 indicate that they now preserve the tapes in their entirety, eight keep just a sample segment, and only six confess to not keeping the tape at all. It should be noted, however, that in many programs the tapes are kept out of necessity; there is simply no money to have them transcribed.

The oral history transcript is a peculiar document. In the major programs, at least, it will usually not be a verbatim rendering of the tape but an edited, somewhat sanitized version of it. The result, then, is a document that is not quite oral and not quite written, but something of a hybrid. The first editing takes place with the typist, who will silently remove the "ers" and "uhs" and excessive "you knows," delete the false starts, provide punctuation and paragraphing, and in general transform a rather amorphous conversation into a smooth-flowing narrative of questions and answers. The interviewer may then further edit the transcript, eliminating some repetitious material altogether, rearranging sections so that topics are better grouped, and sometimes even polishing up a narrator's speaking style. At Berkeley, for example, it is believed that "the interviewer should untangle confusing sentences, cut out total irrelevancies, put an afterthought story back where it belongs, supply parenthetical information, and suggest additional topics."<sup>33</sup>

This doubly edited transcript is then sent to the interviewee, who has *carte blanche* to do with it as he pleases. Most people do not speak in finely turned paragraphs, and so oral authors almost universally are

startled to see how poorly they read in print. There is a tendency, therefore, for the oral author to turn his spoken document into something more resembling a written document. Editing practices will vary from program to program and transcript to transcript, of course, but if this tendency is not resisted all along the line, there is a danger that the tape will be used simply as the rough draft for what becomes essentially a written document.

There are those who insist that any editing is a corruption of the historical document, and some programs will do as little of it as possible. Advocates of the practice, however, argue that there are good practical reasons for the editing done at every stage. That done by the transcriber and the interviewer makes the transcript easier and more convenient for the historian to use, but more important than that it seems to induce some degree of acceptance on the part of the interviewee. If this editing were not done, it is claimed, he would be so horrified by what he reads that he would either make wholesale revisions in the transcript himself or simply refuse to permit its release. This preliminary editing is thus seen as a kind of inoculation; while there may be some unfortunate side effects, the crippling disease is warded off. In any case, the interviewee must always have final editing rights, for without a second chance at everything he says he surely would be more guarded and circumspect during the interview. A second look will also, of course, give him an opportunity to make corrections and additions to the transcript, although in general he will be urged not to tamper with his speaking style, however unliterary it may be.

At the national colloquia some discussion has been given to the advisability of appending to the transcript certain descriptive and evaluative material prepared by the interviewer. The descriptive material would indicate why the person was interviewed, when and where the interview was conducted, whether a third party was present, and perhaps even include a brief biography of the interviewer and a bibliography of sources he consulted in preparation for the interview. These are noncontroversial practices, and many of them have already been widely adopted.

The real question arises with the evaluative comments. Would it be helpful to the future historian if the interviewer were to indicate what state of mind the interviewee was in, whether he was comfortable or nervous, candid or evasive, cooperative or recalcitrant, alert or senile, drunk or sober? Many program directors have thought that indeed it would, but most have held back because of the ethics involved. Pre-

## Oral History

sumably every interviewee has the right of final approval of the transcript, and appending a critical evaluation without his approval or without his knowledge would seem clearly to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of any agreement that had been made. At Berkeley, each transcript is provided with an introduction in which some evaluation is made of the manner in which the interviewee responded to questions. This is a public document, however, always carefully written in a positive manner, and shown to—and approved by—the interviewee. Another major program admits to binding together “Interviewer Comments” which are available to any researcher who asks for them. “However,” the director of the program says, “we don’t advertise that we have them.”<sup>34</sup> In particular, one supposes, to the persons who have been interviewed.

Beyond the ethics involved, the practice of appending evaluative comments by the interviewer is questionable on other grounds. One of the fundamental tasks of the historian is to evaluate and judge documentary evidence. In the case of an oral history transcript he has the whole of the exchange between interviewer and interviewee. The historian should thus be able to determine from the document itself whether the interviewee was being evasive or not. Perhaps he was being evasive because he found the interviewer obnoxious—in which case the interviewer is certainly not the best person to make the evaluation.

As it is with other archival material, accessibility—both physical and bibliographical—to oral history interviews is a vexing problem. The oral author may impose any restrictions on the use of his interview that he deems appropriate, and so many interviews are put under seal, either in whole or in part, for a specified number of years, frequently until the “author’s” death. He may also insist on retaining publication rights or requiring that his permission be obtained before material from his interview is quoted for publication. For interviews that are “open,” physical access can usually be had only by presenting oneself in person at the oral history office. There are encouraging signs, however, that more liberal policies are developing. Twelve programs report to the new *Directory* that they make transcripts available on interlibrary loan, and certain other programs will provide, at the requester’s expense, photocopies of unrestricted transcripts.

Bibliographic access to oral history interviews is for the most part rudimentary and scattered. Of the 203 programs listed in the *Directory*, only 79 indicate that any sort of in-house indexing has been done, virtually all of it biographical. The massive collections at Columbia, for

example, which total nearly 350,000 pages of transcript, can be approached only through a name index. One of the great barriers to the use of oral history interviews is the almost total lack of subject or topical indexing. Because of the great complexity and expense of such indexing, and because of the increased rate at which interviewing is being done, the situation is not likely to improve for many years to come. There are those in oral history who look wistfully to the computer, expecting that somehow it will bring forth a miracle, but its record of bibliographic miracles to date does not give much encouragement.

Another problem with the relatively few oral history indexes which have been developed, as with indexes to manuscript collections, is that usually they exist in a single copy and so are available only for local use. The scholar must first determine—somehow—which oral history programs are likely to have materials that would be of use to him. A few of the programs—Columbia, Claremont, and Nevada, for example—have issued small printed catalogs which describe (but do not index) their collections. The most useful finding tool at present is the *Oral History in the United States: A Directory*, discussed above. For some 203 programs it indicates major purpose, principal topics of interest, number and kinds of people who have been interviewed, and “memoirs deserving special mention.” Since there is an index to the names and topics thus mentioned, it should be the starting point for any search for oral history interviews. If a searcher suspects that a particular program might have material of interest, he or she can then write to the program office for more detailed information.

An important recent development in improved physical and bibliographic access to oral history interviews is the New York Times Oral History Collection on Microfiche. Starting with some 200 oral memoirs (representing 55,000 pages of transcript) from the Oral History Research Office at Columbia, this ongoing series has already made commitments with other oral history programs around the country to publish on microfiche selected portions of their collections. The publishers indicate their intention to issue a multiple-access index by the end of 1972. That is good news indeed, for it will provide for the first time an in-depth subject approach to oral history interviews on a multi-program basis. Not such good news is the tentative price of the index: \$475.

Mention has already been made of the similarity in the bibliographical problems as presented by oral history interviews and manuscript collections. Reports for oral history interviews were included for the first

## Oral History

time in the 1970 volume of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Of necessity, however, only collections may be reported. Since a minimum of ten separate interviews must be included in a single report, these will usually cluster around a single theme, topic, or person. Those programs which have emphasized autobiographical memoirs rather than special projects will probably not be well represented.

One final bibliographic effort very much worthy of mention is the California Bibliographic Center for Oral History, established in 1970 as an additional service of the California Union Catalog housed in the State Library in Sacramento. Libraries, museums, and historical societies from around the state are invited to report their oral history interviews, each on a standard form. The staff of the State Library assigns Library of Congress subject headings. By late 1971, twenty-nine organizations, nineteen libraries, and ten historical societies had submitted reports,<sup>85</sup> a rather considerable achievement inasmuch as only twenty-four oral history programs from California are listed in the *Directory*.

Assessment of the value of any scholarly activity is difficult; it is particularly so with oral history because the final results in many cases will not be known until the next century. Still, the value of oral history has been questioned. Doubts have been expressed in particular about the accuracy and "objective validity" of the oral history memoir.<sup>86</sup> It is obvious to all that, human nature being what it is, the memoirist will present himself in the best possible light, that he will twist and shape things to suit his own self-image, that he will magnify his own importance in the sweep of human events. Walter Lord, commenting on the interviews he did for his book on the sinking of the "Titanic," says: "I sometimes feel that I've never talked to a lady who escaped from the ship who didn't insist that she was in the very last lifeboat. They just haven't built the lifeboat that can hold all these ladies."<sup>87</sup> So it is a question of what kind of truth emerges from an oral history interview. It is a question, though, that applies to all autobiographical accounts which are intended for public dissemination, not only those produced orally. It is always *caveat emptor* for the historian. He must apply the same tests of evidence to an oral history memoir as he does to the written memoirs of a Casanova, a Rousseau, a St. Augustine, or a Lyndon B. Johnson. The temptations to distorting and self-serving are as great in print as they are on tape. Sean O'Faolain has said that the literary memoirist worries "only how far he dare play about with the facts, distort, dramatize, rearrange, emphasize, enlarge, underwrite, select, even

suppress them, in search of his own imagination of himself."<sup>88</sup> At least in oral history there is the possibility that a good interviewer can keep the memoirist more or less in line; in any event, the memoirist's reactions to the questions that are put to him should provide the historian with abundant clues to his veracity that would be lacking in a written account.

As compared to written memoirs, oral history memoirs are likely to be rambling, poorly organized, and difficult to use. They are also likely to be done pretty much off the top of the memoirist's head, without benefit of long reflection or the extensive checking of documents. This means that factual inaccuracies will likely be more numerous, chronology will be reversed, names and events will be confused; the human memory is an imperfect instrument. But does this mean that the written memoir is more "truthful"? Again, an interviewer who has established good rapport with a memoirist may bring more of the truth from him than he would have dared commit to paper. What is lost by a lack of reflection may be more than made up by a gain in spontaneity. The very casualness and naturalness of the conversational setting may encourage the memoirist to be far more candid than he would ever be in his writings. John Kenneth Galbraith, in refuting those critics who said that nothing new was to be found in Lyndon B. Johnson's *The Vantage Point*, remarks: "It is not so. New to all of us who have known, listened to and (more often than not) rejoiced in L.B.J.'s polemical skills over the years is the soft-spoken kindness of the volume. He is simply not sore at anyone; he treats everyone (almost everyone) with a kind of avuncular magnanimity which is almost without parallel in political memoirs and totally without precedent in his own past practice. Only the most careful reader will get a whiff of the vintage Johnson."<sup>89</sup>

Can anyone imagine a series of oral history interviews with the former President producing so little of the "vintage Johnson"? Even with the researchers and the mass of documents and the editorial assistance he had at his disposal, can anyone be very confident that *The Vantage Point* is more truthful or more informative than a series of oral history interviews would have been?

When the comparison is made not to the written memoir but to other forms of documentary evidence, the value of oral history is more questionable. One cautious advocate has said that oral history "cannot rank with an authentic diary, with a contemporary stock report, or with an eyewitness account transcribed on the day of the event. But it is proba-

## *Oral History*

bly to be ranked above contemporary hearsay evidence."<sup>40</sup> Faint praise, perhaps, but the fact remains that even its strongest advocates have not established very clearly what kinds of information oral history is best at supplying and the ways in which this information can be used by the historian. Frequently it is asserted that oral history is most helpful in providing the picturesque detail, the interesting anecdote that will add a piquant touch to the historian's narrative. But surely so large an interprise as oral history has now become cannot be justified on this ground alone. Other uses of oral history have been suggested, and a sampling of these follows:

Oral history is worth doing. The value to the researcher is not usually in the detailed new knowledge he will obtain but rather in having some of the intangibles of a past era revealed. Interviews are particularly useful in getting at "emphasis" and "atmosphere."<sup>41</sup>

Insights into a man's character, explanations of his behavior, opinions about him based on close association, this is the essence of oral history. Not the proven fact, but the informed guess is its finest product. Oral history will seldom furnish the last word on any subject; it will, however, often produce the first.<sup>42</sup>

What oral history memoirs can provide are clues as to why or how something happened, motivations of the prime actors, who talked to whom informally and what the gist of their verbal agreements was. They can flesh out the bare bones of official documents and minutes of meetings, much as the private letters and diaries of notables did in bygone ages when personal writing was in vogue.<sup>43</sup>

What we got specifically is pretty much what others have already discovered—much on the why and the how, particularly on making decisions or non-decisions. The feelings and attitudes and thinking, the character and psychology of the individuals interviewed, what they thought of others, of facts and events, what they thought of themselves. The interviews revealed crucial linkages and interactions, the intangibles among economic, political, social and, particularly, personal relationships. They pointed up the relative importance of various issues.<sup>44</sup>

A certain softness is to be noted in the rhetoric here: emphasis, atmosphere, insights, informed guesses, clues, motivations, gists, feelings, intangibles. While the critics of oral history call for tests of its accuracy and objective validity, many of its proponents argue that what oral history does best is something more subtle and less tangible than anything its critics may have in mind to test. In any case, after the thousands of interviews that have been done and the hundreds of thousands of pages of transcript that have been produced, it is still far from certain what it is that oral history does best and to what ends it can most effec-

tively be employed. What kinds of gaps in the historical record should it seek to fill? What kinds should it not seek to fill? Should it be employed only when the written record is sadly lacking? Or can the written record almost always be usefully supplemented by an oral account? What does oral history give best: facts, atmosphere, clues, insights, sequence of events, causality? How many and what kinds of interviewees should be selected? Should the emphasis be placed upon the "great man" or the "typical man"? How in fact do historians make use of oral history interviews? Do they quote from them, do they cite them in their footnotes? Do they use them as guides, as background material, as corroborative evidence?

These are not easy questions, certainly, but they are not new questions, either. As a field, oral history has been so preoccupied with techniques and procedures that such questions have largely gone unanswered. Practitioners of oral history may have formed some impressions and made some educated guesses, but almost no research has been done on the field of oral history itself. Content analyses have not been performed on oral history interviews; hardly any tests have been undertaken to determine the accuracy or reliability of the information obtained from them vis-à-vis that obtained from other sources;<sup>45</sup> broad scale studies have not been made of their actual and potential uses. Nor has there been any real attempt to supply the field with a theoretical base, to tackle the tough conceptual problems, to focus on ends rather than means. Thus far oral history programs seem to have accepted pretty much on faith that what they are doing will be useful to someone, in some way, at some time in the future.

Oral history is fast approaching the end of its first quarter century. If it is to achieve maturity as a scholarly field in the next twenty-five years, its measure of achievement will not be the number of hours of tape that have been recorded. That will take care of itself. Achievement will be measured more in terms of the quality of what has been recorded and its usefulness to scholars. This assumes, of course, that by then measures of quality and usefulness will have been developed and widely applied and that they show conclusively that oral history has been worth the very great effort expended in its behalf.

### *References*

1. Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr. "On the Writing of Contemporary History," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 219:71, March 1967.

## Oral History

2. Reston, James. "Why So Many 'Leaks'?" *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 1972, p. 33, col. 2.
3. Nevins, Allan. "The Uses of Oral History." In *Oral History at Arrowhead: The Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History*, 1966. Elizabeth I. Dixon and James V. Mink, eds. Los Angeles, The Oral History Association, 1967, pp. 35-52.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
5. Conway, Charles William. "Lyman Copeland Draper, 'Father of American Oral History,'" *Journal of Library History*, 1:234-41+, Oct. 1966.
6. Quoted in: Hesselstine, William B. *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman Copeland Draper*. Madison, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1954, p. 27.
7. Evans, Luther H. "In Sum: Impressions of a Librarian and Memoirist." In *The Second National Colloquium on Oral History*, 1967. Louis M. Starr, ed. New York, The Oral History Association, 1968, pp. 95-108.
8. Wasserman, Manfred J. *Bibliography on Oral History*. New York, The Oral History Association, 1971.
9. Shumway, Gary L., comp. *Oral History in the United States: A Directory*. New York, The Oral History Association, 1971.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
11. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
12. Dexter, Lewis Anthony. *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*. Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
16. Gilb, Corinne Lathrop. "Tape-Recorded Interviewing: Some Thoughts from California," *The American Archivist*, 20:337, Oct. 1957.
17. Tyrrell, William G. "Tape Recording Local History" (American Association for State and Local History Technical Leaflet, 35), *History News*, 21:92, May 1966.
18. Bornet, Vaughn Davis. "Oral History Can be Worthwhile," *American Archivist*, 18:250, July 1955.
19. Dexter, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
20. Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
21. Benison, Saul. Quoted in: Colman, Gould P. "The Art of Interviewing." In *The Third National Colloquium on Oral History*, 1968. Gould P. Colman, ed. New York, the Oral History Association, 1969, p. 133.
22. Hall, John. Quoted in: Lyons, Albert S. "The Art of Interviewing." In *The Third National Colloquium*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
23. Olch, Peter. Quoted in: Colman, Gould P. "The Art of Interviewing." In *The Third National Colloquium*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
24. Starr, Louis. "Basic Problems in Oral History." In *The Fourth National Colloquium on Oral History*, 1969. Gould P. Colman, ed. New York, The Oral History Association, 1970, p. 101.
25. Dexter, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
27. Webb, Sidney, and Webb, Beatrice. *Methods of Social Study*. London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1932, p. 34.

NORMAN HOYLE

28. Quoted in: Colman, Gould P. "The Art of Interviewing," In *The Third National Colloquium, op. cit.*, p. 156.
29. See, for example, Mellon, Knox. "Oral History in the Liberal Arts and State Colleges," *The Third National Colloquium, op. cit.*, pp. 73-88.
30. For a junior high program, see Kursh, Harry. Quoted in: Morrissey, Charles. "Oral History in the Classroom." In *The Third National Colloquium, op. cit.*, pp. 54-60.
31. As quoted in: Howard, Jane. "A Six-Year Literary Vigil," *Life*, 60:71, Jan. 7, 1966.
32. Starr, Louis M. "Oral History: Problems and Prospects," *Advances in Librarianship*, Vol. 2. Melvin J. Voigt, ed. New York, Seminar Press, 1971, p. 285.
33. Gilb, *op. cit.*, p. 343.
34. Colman, Gould. In *Oral History at Arrowhead . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
35. Dalton, Phyllis I. Letter dated Dec. 20, 1971.
36. See, for example, Reingold, Nathan. "A Critic Looks at Oral History," *Fourth National Colloquium, op. cit.*, pp. 213-27.
37. Lord, Walter. "Oral History and the Modern Historian," *Third National Colloquium, op. cit.*, p. 15.
38. O'Faolain, Sean. "The Art of Autobiography," *The Listener and BBC Television Review*, 75:720, May 19, 1966.
39. Galbraith, John Kenneth. "Seeing Things Through for JFK," *Saturday Review*, 54:37, Nov. 6, 1971.
40. Borner, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
41. Swain, Donald. "Problems for Practitioners of Oral History," *American Archivist*, 28:68, Jan. 1965.
42. Crowl, Philip A. "The Dulles Oral History Project: Mission Accomplished," *AHA Newsletter*, 5:10, Feb. 1967.
43. Baum, Willa Klug. "Oral History: A Revived Tradition at the Bancroft Library," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 58:62, April 1967.
44. Bortz, Abe. Quoted in: Pogue, Forrest C. "Oral History in the Washington Environs." In *Fourth National Colloquium, op. cit.*, p. 6.
45. A notable exception is Schruben, Francis W. "An Even Stranger Death of President Harding," *Southern California Quarterly*, 48:57-84, March 1966.