

- . *Elitlore*. Los Angeles: University of California, Latin American Center, 1973.
- Wyatt, William. "Researching the South Dakota Frontier." *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 52 (October–December 1966), pp. 151–56.
- Zachert, Martha Jane. "Implications of Oral history for Librarians." *College Research Libraries* 20 (March 1968), pp. 101–103. (See chapter 35 of the present volume).
- . "The Second Oral History Colloquium." *Journal of Library History* 3 (April 1968), pp. 173–78.
- . "Oral History Interviews." *Journal of Library History* 5 (January 1970), pp. 80–87.

2

Oral History: How and Why It Was Born The Uses of Oral History

Allan Nevins

In 1938, Allan Nevins—biographer, historian, journalist—suggested two innovations, both of which came to pass. One was the popularization of history for the multitude, an idea soon realized in the publication *American Heritage* and subsequently in the many regional and topical lay history books and journals. The other was "oral history," as it came to be called. In his introduction to *The Gateway to History*, Nevins suggested establishing "some organization which made a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the last sixty years." Ten years later, in 1948, Nevins presided at the opening of the country's first oral history project at Columbia University, which he labored to establish.

In the following two selections, Nevins outlines early milestones in the growth of the field of oral history. Because Nevins was an outspoken advocate of oral interviews as a base for "oral autobiographies," his comments on the varieties of autobiographical narratives are particularly important. Nevins's frank discussions of the difficulties of financing and providing interviewer comments on interviews reflect the combination of pragmatism and personal vision which made him the world-renowned "father of oral history."

Allan Nevins's career started in journalism: he wrote and edited for the *New York Evening Post*, the *New York Sun*, and the *New York World*. He worked as a professor at Cornell and Columbia universities and in the course of a brilliant career wrote or edited more than sixty volumes, including an eight-volume history of the Civil War and seven biographies. His writing was twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize in biography and the Bancroft Prize in History.

"Oral History: How and Why It Was Born" originally appeared in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 40 (March 1966), pp. 600–601. Nevins's remarks

in "The Uses of Oral History" were made at Lake Arrowhead, California, at the First Colloquium of the Oral History Association in 1966.

Oral History: How and Why It Was Born

"A CURIOUS THOUGHT has just occurred to me," Dr. Johnson once remarked. "In the grave we shall receive no letters." Despite such volumes as *Letters to Dead Authors*, that is indubitably true. It is equally true that from the grave no letters are sent out to the most anxious inquirers into old history or old mysteries. We can take a few precautions to prevent Time from putting too much as alms for oblivion into the monstrous wallet on his back; that is all. Oral history is one of the latest and most promising of these precautions, and already it has saved from death's dateless (and undatable) night much that the future will rejoice over and cherish.

In hardly less degree than space exploration, oral history was born of modern invention and technology. "Miss Secretary," says the President, "take a letter to the Prime Minister of——. No, stop! I'll just telephone him; quicker, easier, and above all safer. We know he has no recording device." What might have been a priceless document for the historian goes into the irrecoverable ether. The head of the great Detroit corporation, who wishes to get information on finance from several bankers, and important scientific facts from several laboratory experts, catches a plane to New York. The graphic letter that the student of social progress would prize is cut short—a telegram will do. The news-behind-the-news that a Wickham Steed once sent *The (London) Times* from Berlin or Bucharest does not even go on teletype; it is put on a confidential telephone wire.

All the while the hurry and complexity of modern politics, modern financial and business affairs, and even modern literary and artistic life slice away the time that men need for methodical, reflective writing. What wonderful letters Theodore Roosevelt gave the world, so full of his endless zest for life, his incredible energy, his enthusiasms and his hatreds. To go further back, what a shelf of delightful comment on a thousand subjects from the Western mastodons to the iniquities of European diplomacy, from decimal coinage to Watt's new steam engine, from slave management to Ossian's poetry, we find in the massive volumes of Jefferson's writings. No doubt great letter writers still exist. But their numbers are fewer, and the spirit of the times is hostile to them.

It was something more than a sense of these considerations that in-

spired the planners of oral history. It was natural that they should be rooted in the history department of the greatest university in the largest and busiest city of the continent. It was right that they should have some knowledge of what the California publisher H. H. Bancroft had done to preserve a picture of the life, lore, and legends of the youthful years of the Golden State by interviewing scores of pioneers, and getting their dictated reminiscences down on paper. The planners had a connection with journalism, and saw in the daily obituary columns proof that knowledge valuable to the historian, novelist, sociologist, and economist was daily perishing; memories perishing forever without yielding any part of their riches. They had enthusiasm, these planners. It was partly the enthusiasm of ignorance; the undertaking looked deceptively easy.

Anyway, they set to work, at first with pencil and pad, later with wire recorders, later still with early tape-recording machines. They found that the task needed a great deal of money, and money was hard to get. It needed system, planning, conscientiousness, the skill that comes with experience, and above all integrity. It was more complicated and laborious than they had dreamed. The results were sometimes poor, but hard effort sometimes made them dazzling.

And the work was adventurously entertaining. At every turn they met a new experience, a fresh view of history, a larger knowledge of human personality. They would never forget the eminent New York attorney who had once collected a million dollars in a single fee, and who interrupted the story of his career to exclaim, "This is the most delightful experience I have ever had, this reminiscing." They would always remember the labor leader who in the course of an engrossing story suddenly laid his head on the desk and burst into tears; he had come to the point where he had been sent to prison for alleged racketeering. They would always keep a picture of Norman Thomas singing a pathetic song composed by the harried tenant farmers of the Southwest, and of Charles C. Burlingham, still active at almost a hundred, recalling how as a mere urchin he had seen a Negro hanged in front of his father's parsonage in downtown Manhattan during the raging of the Draft Riots.

The original ventures had been modest, but they rapidly expanded into large national undertakings. With elation the managers watched Henry Wallace record for posterity about two thousand typed pages of reminiscences, with large diary excerpts to illustrate them; with elation they heard Mrs. Frances Perkins, who possessed an approach to total recall, record what (with additional matter she contributed) came to a memoir of five thousand typed pages. Governors, cabinet officers past and present, industrialists, and distinguished authors and editors lent themselves to the enterprise. Many of them had been badgered for years by their families to set down recollections that history would need; not in-

frequently they had long felt a desire to furnish their own account of an important transaction or controversial period, but had lacked time and opportunity until suddenly seated before a tape recorder with a well-equipped interviewer before them. This interviewer, upon whom half the value of the work depended, had prepared himself by reading files of newspapers, going through official reports, begging wives for old letters or diary notes, and talking with associates. Sometimes a subject possessed a fresh and copious memory, as did Secretary Stimson; sometimes his memory had merely to be jogged, as that of Governor Rockefeller; sometimes it had to be helped by extended work, as that of former Governor Herbert H. Lehman.

Now and then, too, the work originally done had to be revised and redone. This was true of the memoir prepared by that distinguished jurist and unforgettable personality, Learned Hand. His outspoken comment, his salty wit, made his original recollections remarkable. One or two sentences may be recalled. He commented on the reverence he felt for Brandeis: "I often scolded myself, when I was a young man. You eat too much, I told myself. You drink too much. Your thoughts about women are not of the most elevated character. Why can't you be like that great man Brandeis, who does nothing but read Interstate Commerce Reports?" Judge Hand's first version, however, lacked the depth and expertness supplied when a professor of law who had once been his clerk was induced to serve as a new interviewer.

Some of the anticipated obstacles never appeared. Even busy, important, and excessively modest men proved in many instances accessible; they entered into the spirit of the work. The mass of invaluable memoir material mounted. It proved possible to protect the reminiscences against intrusion; the integrity of oral history never came under suspicion, much less attack. Better and better equipment was purchased, better and better systems of interviewing, typing, and indexing were developed. About half of the memoirs were thrown open to students at once, the other half being kept under time restrictions. And the students appeared, first in scores, well accredited and watched; then in hundreds; then in more than a thousand, not a few of them writing important books.

One difficulty, however, always persisted: the difficulty of finance. It proved impossible to operate even a sternly economical but efficient office for less than \$40,000 a year, and costs rose. Work had begun on funds supplied from a happy bequest to Columbia University by Frederic Bancroft of Washington, a bequest upon which the head of oral history had a special claim; and the University itself contributed quarters and money. As the project grew, certain foundations gave generous help. Other corporations made use of its skills, giving oral history not only valuable bodies of reminiscences, but a fee in addition.

Thus the material accumulated by oral history grew year by year, both in bulk and in quality. Thus the work it accomplished attracted wider and wider attention, raising up imitative agencies in various parts of the United States, and even abroad. Because New York City is an unapproachably effective seat for such work, because the office spent the utmost pains upon its methods, and because its personnel counted brilliant young men (some of whom have now made their mark elsewhere), the heads of the office on Morningside Heights believe that their accomplishment has not been equaled elsewhere. They are glad, however, to see the type of activity they began in the preservation of priceless memories for the instruction of posterity copied elsewhere, and the tree they planted, like a banyan, creating sister trees in surrounding ground. May the work flourish and spread!

The Uses of Oral History

LET US begin by disposing of the myth that I had anything to do with the founding of oral history. It founded itself. It had become a patent necessity, and would have sprung into life in a dozen places, under any circumstances. I'm in the position of a guide in Switzerland. A valley in the Alps that had previously been barren was filled by an avalanche with a great body of soil and became quite tillable. A poor guide in the village had stumbled over a rock as he came down the mountain, one wintry day, and had started this avalanche that filled the valley. People pointed to him and said, "There's Jacques, he made the valley fruitful!" Well, I stumbled over a rock [laughter] and the avalanche came. It would have come anyway.

I listened this morning to the various discourses with the greatest interest. They seemed to me admirable. What I propose to do is to offer some general considerations, and to close with as spirited a defense of oral history as I can possibly present.

It struck me as curious this morning that nothing was said about what one would have ordinarily have expected a *great deal* to be said: The finances of oral history. We begin with finances and sometimes we end without finances. [Laughter] At any rate, we try to go on with finances.

This avalanche of which I spoke did begin with finances. Some of us at Columbia University were happy to know an old gentleman named Frederic Bancroft. He had been Librarian of the State Department. He had written valuable books of history. He had, more importantly, been the brother of a widower who was *Treasurer* of the International Harvester company, and this brother died while Frederic Bancroft was

still very much alive, leaving his entire estate to Frederic. Frederic Bancroft grew old. He knew many of us at Columbia, for he had taken his doctoral degree there. I used often to go down to see him in Washington. He would talk about what he intended to do with the two million dollars he possessed. In the days of Franklin Roosevelt, he enjoyed pointing to the White House and saying, "My income is larger than *that man's*!" Well, as he talked about what he intended to do with those two millions, we made a few suggestions (which always centered around Columbia University). I would take him to dinner, or go to dinner at his house. He would chill my blood by saying, "I'm thinking now of giving the two million dollars to the Lowell Foundation for the Lowell Lectureships in Boston." With chilled blood, I would then call my friend Henry Commager and say, "Henry, go take Mr. Bancroft out to dinner, and make some suggestions to counter this Lowell Lectureship idea." When I presently went to Washington again, he would say, "I've been thinking more about where I shall leave my money. It occurs to me that Knox College in Illinois [laughter] would be a very good place." My blood would run cold again, until I could get Commager, or someone else, to take him to dinner once more. Well, he finally did die, and we found that the two millions had been left to Columbia University for the advancement of historical studies. I had some ideas about how to use two millions, and one was in instituting our oral history office there. . . .

We always found it necessary to earn our own way, to a great extent. Columbia possessed itself of these two million dollars, but let us have only a tiny fraction of them, and we needed an annual budget of thirty-six thousand or forty thousand dollars a year. . . . We had to scratch for money, and it's no easy task to find it; but this necessity had the virtue of instilling in us a spirit of enterprise, and I think the spirit of enterprise is very important.

It was necessary to institute specific projects which had merit in themselves. For example, we began in a small way with a project in the petroleum industry which took us into Texas and realm of the great "wildcatter," Mike Benedum, just to earn money for oral history, and then we went on to the Book-of-the-Month Club, which had a history of great importance from the literary and cultural point of view; and then we went on to the Ford Motor company, which was, of course, pivotal in the history of the whole automotive industry; and from that we went to the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company; and then we went to tracing certain government enterprises. We would not have gone into these projects if we had not been pricked by sheer necessity. If we had been given a great endowment, a few hundred thousand dollars, we might have been much more inert. . . .

It's hard to define the best interviewer. He must have a combination of

traits of personality and of intellect that is hard to obtain. He must have the the Germans call *gemütlichkeit*, obvious sympathy with the person whom he interviews, friendliness and tact, as well as courage. He must work hard to prepare himself for every interview, and must have a great breadth of interests not often the possession of the candidate for the Ph.D. [laughter], such candidates as appear in our universities.

There must also be an element of integrity in recording as well as in interviewing. We used to agree, and perhaps we still agree in theory, upon the value of accompanying every interview with a set of notes made by the interviewer upon the character of the man interviewed and the circumstances of the interview. These notes would indicate whether the person interviewed has or lacks intellectual power in the judgment of the interviewer. They would include a commentary upon the candor or lack of candor evinced by the man interviewed and comments upon the intensity of feeling exhibited during the interview, whether a man showed strong convictions upon a given subject or absolute fixity of opinions upon a given personality. There should be a pretty clear indication, if possible, of any point at which the interview passes into sarcasm or irony, because a record in cold type does not disclose the sarcasm evident only in an inflection of voice. We can't preserve enough tape to show where sarcasm is employed. For example, John W. Davis gave a very useful set of interviews upon his career, before and after he was nominated for the presidency. It included some comments upon Calvin Coolidge. My impression is that a note of sarcasm crept into some of his comments upon Calvin Coolidge. [laughter] How far have we kept up our record, Louis?

LOUIS STARR (Columbia University): Well, that's a difficult problem for us, because we've always been haunted by the ghosts of the subject coming up and hoping to see and admire his memoir in the oral history collection, only to stumble upon an addendum that says that I don't think this man really leveled with us, or something to that effect—a critical comment; so that, I'm sorry to say, I've never resolved this riddle. We haven't done it as we should have, but it's something, perhaps, we can work out in the future. . . .

PHILIP BROOKS (Harry Truman Library): We have not done this in connection with our interviews. Suppose you interviewed somebody, and you had this set of notes commenting upon his candor, and then in the very near future some researcher comes along and uses that transcript. If he can't see the notes, then he's lost something that another researcher, coming along twenty years from now, may see. Well, what is your idea as to how and when these should be made available?

ALLAN NEVINS: Everything depends upon circumstances. It's an *ad hoc* question that has to be settled on an *ad hoc* basis, I should say.

WILLABAUM (University of California, Berkeley): We write an introduction to each of our interviews, and we try to include a little bit of this, but it helps to make it a positive statement because the interviewee does get a copy and it's available to him and all his friends. So we try to word it in a positive way which the astute user can interpret. [laughter] In other words, we say sometimes that he spoke very frankly. Now if it doesn't say that he spoke very frankly, we may say that he was circumspect about his comments on his close associates, or something which, phrased in a positive way, may alert the user; but we find writing our introductions very hard.

GOULD COLMAN (Cornell University): We have, in some ways, a rather difficult situation at Cornell. We share completely your feeling about the importance of the interviewer's record of process. We want to know whether the man was sober or drunk, senile or whatever. We save all of these statements; we bind them together under the title, "Interviewer Comments." They are available to any researchers who asks for them; however, we don't advertise that we have them. This is not an entirely happy solution but it's about all we have had the courage, thus far, to undertake.

ALLAN NEVINS: That shows you have in mind the absolutely essential importance of integrity in the operation, so far as we can attain it. It must be honest. We at Columbia never felt our integrity threatened, did we, Louis? Once or twice threatened, but it was never infringed, never violated. Nobody ever went to a dinner party. . . .

LOUIS STARR: There are many problems, though, it seems to me, connected with this suggestion, and I don't know what the solution is. I think Mrs. Baum has come about as close as anyone I've heard—to write between the lines. It's sort of like reading the *AAA Guide* and trying to find out which are the places they don't think are quite so good.

ELIZABETH DIXON (University of California, Los Angeles): Maybe we could have a vocabulary which says, "Circumspect means he didn't say anything." [laughter]

PHILIP BROOKS: Professor Nevins, this is a real problem, and maybe I have the wrong impression when I said we didn't do this at the Truman Library. We do keep notes describing the circumstances of the interviews, but I'm not sure, in all cases, we've told how candid we thought that the interviewee was. I have in mind one particular interview that I did with a gentleman from another country on a subject of importance in international relations, and I don't believe what he said. I think he glossed it all over. This is very difficult to put down in writing, and, if you do, you're going to wonder who's to see it. I don't really know the answer.

ALBERT LYONS (Mt. Sinai Hospital, New York): Isn't it also true that those who hear the tapes later, for example, have to form their own conclusions, and their conclusions may be more accurate than the interviewer's because of greater retrospective knowledge, perhaps, or new information?

ALLAN NEVINS: That's certainly true. . . .

All history depends upon the great use of memoirs, autobiographies. Dependence often absolute, yet are they more trustworthy than oral history memoirs? Not a bit! Often much less trustworthy. We have been taught to enjoy Benvenuto Cellini, but do we believe all of Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography? I hope not! [laughter] Or Casanova's? I'd much rather think that a great part of Casanova's was fiction, and I suspect that it was. We've been taught to regard J. J. Rousseau's *Confessions* as one of the frankest of autobiographies. We say, "Here's something in which a man absolutely bares his own soul; tells the full truth about himself." Rousseau himself said, "This is the full truth about me. I've held nothing back." Actually we know, thanks to modern research, that Rousseau's *Confessions* comes close to pure invention. It's, in fact, one of the great works of fiction of that century. [laughter] It's full of suppressions, distortions, evasions, and outright, unblushing lies.

Here is where one advantage of oral history lies. If Cellini and Rousseau had been set down before a keen-minded, well-informed interviewer, who looked these men straight in their eye and put to them one searching question after another, cross-examining as Sam Untermyer used to cross-examine people on the witness stand, they would have stuck closer to the path of truth.

Or take St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a much-admired book. It is one of the immortal books of religious statement, a beautiful piece of art. But does it tell us what we really want to know about St. Augustine, and does St. Augustine, though obviously a man of great rectitude, tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about himself? He relates, at one point, how as a young man he repulsed and abandoned his mistress, keeping for himself, and depriving her, of their child. It was St. Augustine's, it was not hers; and how the poor girl wept bitterly and swore to God that she would never let another man touch her. Well, I should think she might, after that. He gives this occurrence, which was a brief episode to him, but was a terrible disaster to the poor girl, about three lines; that is, he glosses over it. A representative of oral history would have wrung from him a little more of the facts about that occurrence, I should think [laughter]. . . .

It's true that autobiography and history have to be approached with highly critical minds, and that statements of an autobiographical charac-

ter by a group producing a history of some particular development demand even more caution and a keener critical sense. To produce a truthful record of a man's acts, thoughts, and motives, two qualities are obviously essential: self-knowledge and a fair amount of candor. A great many people, however, never attain self-knowledge, but constantly deceive themselves as to their real motives and acts; they constantly dramatize themselves. Others are seriously deficient in candor. They don't like to tell the truth about themselves, sometimes for good reasons [laughter]. . . .

But in the hands of an earnest, courageous interviewer who has mastered a background of facts and who has the nerve to press his scalpel tactfully and with some knowledge of psychology into delicate tissues and even bleeding wounds, deficiencies can be exposed; and oral history can get at more of the truth than a man will present about himself in a written autobiography. . . .

Another kind of candor we found in a man of much less freshness of memory, Herbert Lehman, who was one hundred percent honest. He wouldn't lie to himself, under any circumstances, or lie to anybody else. He couldn't always remember what he should have remembered, but so far as memory went, it was absolutely trustworthy; when he was prompted by a good interviewer his memory went a long way, further than it otherwise might have gone. I think that people who pride themselves upon the accuracy of their recollections almost invariably find, on referring to diaries or other records of long-past occurrences, that their memories are, in essential points, confused or erroneous. . . .

Now for the third requirement. If a man's memory is keen and vivid, and if he does possess fairly full memoranda on his past, the array of facts upon his career is likely to be so immense that he needs a strong faculty of selection. In oral history, he finds useful aids to this process of selection among the multiplicity of facts locked into his past. The autobiographer, of course, possesses an endless array of facts about himself, if he can just remember them, far more than the biographer can ever find out. To use these facts well, to be his own Boswell or Lockhart, the memorist requires an exceedingly just sense of proportion. When acumen of selection is wanting, we get a book as prodigious and as verbose as John Bigelow's five volumes. Volumes which nobody ever opens without a groan.

11

Oral History Project Design

David Lance

The design and evaluation of the research goals of an oral history project are subjects often slighted in how-to manuals. As a result, many beginning interviewers overlook the need for a balanced collection of sources and ignore relevant earlier work in their area, leaping with their microphones before looking at previous collections. The next five articles provide guidance on practical and theoretical considerations in designating (and attaining) realistic project goals.

Archivist David Lance dissects one English oral history project to demonstrate the research which necessarily precedes and informs the interviews. He indicates the necessity for a thoughtful analysis of potential research problems before beginning interviews and provides a matrix design to assure a balanced sample of narrators. Novices to oral history, as Charles Morrissey has written, frequently confuse the tape recorder and the vacuum cleaner. David Lance's article, however, explores an area which even experienced interviewers occasionally neglect. Lance offers compelling suggestions on research procedures and topic selection.

David Lance has been the secretary and the president of the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA). For the last fifteen years he has worked as the keeper of sound records at the Imperial War Museum in London; there he not only established a department of sound records but helped produce documentaries for the British and Canadian Broadcasting Corporations using oral sources. Some of his writings are "Oral History: Legal Considerations" (1976) and "Oral History: Perceptions and Practice" (1980), published in the British journal *Oral History*.

"Oral History Project Design" is an excerpt from *An Archive Approach to Oral History* (London: Imperial War Museum and the International Association of Sound Archives, 1978).

THE ORGANISATIONAL methods on which this section is based have been applied across a wide subject and chronological range. They can be adapted for much oral history research which is concerned with the history of particular social and occupational groups. In order to allow readers to relate the various phases of project management to specific examples it is convenient, however, to concentrate on a single project. The project used for illustrative purposes was concerned with the experiences and conditions of service of sailors who served on the lower deck of the Royal Navy between the years 1910 and 1922.

(1) Preparation

The organisation of any project should be set within realistic research goals. Since oral history recording is dependent for worthwhile results on human memory, this fallible faculty must be accommodated by careful preparation. The planning of the project should, therefore, be based on as thorough understanding of the subject field (and of the availability of informants) as the existing records permit.

It is prudent, first, to fix a research period which is historically identifiable as being self-contained. In the lower deck project, for example, the so-called Fisher Reforms of 1906 altered several important aspects of naval life; the First World War stimulated further changes during the early 1920s; and the Invergordon Mutiny in 1931 was another watershed for Royal Naval seamen. The combination of these three distinct periods in a recording project, would have made it extremely difficult for sailors who served throughout them to avoid confusion on many details of routine life which, for research purposes, might be of critical importance. Three distinct periods of social change within a single career of professional experience are clearly difficult for informants to separate with few points of reference beyond their own memories. By setting the general limits of the lower deck project at 1910 to 1922, a reasonably distinct period of naval life was isolated as appropriate for oral history research.

The research problems which are created by rapid social change can seldom be eliminated entirely from oral history recording. It is for this reason that historically unsophisticated interviewing can result in information of uncertain reliability. Therefore, the project organiser's responsibility is to minimise the dangers implicit in such situations by his own common sense and historical sensitivity, and he should always apply the question 'Is this reasonable?' to the goals which he sets. Some practical examples of the application of this principle in oral history research are given overleaf.

The chronological scope of an oral history project should be fixed be-

fore any recording begins, bearing in mind the age of the likely informants as well as the historical character of the subject field. By the time the lower deck project began in 1975, men who saw service in the Navy as early as 1910 were in their eighties, and thus the opportunities for preceding this date were limited. This basic consideration affects all oral history recording. The informants who are actually available to be interviewed, also predetermine many of the topics which may be sensibly raised. Thus, owing to the slowness of promotion in the Royal Navy there was little point in introducing questions about, for example, conditions in petty officers' messes in 1910. Only informants into their nineties would have had the necessary experiences to be able to answer them. The chances of locating a sufficient number of interviewees of this great age, were sufficiently slight to preclude this—and many similar topics—from being a practical aim within a systematic research project.

Similarly, the project organiser must take into account the structure of the particular group of people he is concerned with. For example, a battleship of the Dreadnought era—with a complement of some 700 men—might carry one writer (*ie* account's clerk) and one sailmaker. The odds against tracing such rare individuals more than fifty years after the events eliminated some aspects of financial administration and some trade skills aboard ship from the range of what it was likely to be able to achieve.

The selection of and possible bias among informants, are related factors which have to be appreciated. Between 1914 and 1918 the total size of the Navy increased threefold owing to the needs of war. A substantial proportion of those who served for hostilities only may not have accepted the traditional *mores* of regular lower deck life. At the end of a carefully organised and conducted project, the organiser had no clear idea of whether wartime personnel generally adopted the attitudes of those who had been in the service since they were boys, because the original selection of informants simply did not permit systematic investigation of their particular prejudices. An appropriate selection of sailors to be interviewed would have produced a representative sample of these kinds of informants and thereby provided suitable evidence from which conclusions about this particular question could be drawn. This obviously does not devalue the information for the purposes for which it was recorded, but it does eliminate the range of hypotheses to which this body of data is open. Thus, the project organiser must take into account the relationship between the subject matter of the project and his selection of informants and—at one stage yet farther removed from recording—this involves being clear about the kind of research evidence he is actually seeking to collect.

(2) Specification

The list of topics which guided the interviewers' work in the lower deck project is given below, as one example of subject delineation in oral history research. The field of study was first broken down into the following main areas:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| a Background and enlistment | j Traditions and customs |
| b Training | k Foreign service |
| c Dress | l Home ports |
| d Ships | m Pay and benefits |
| e Work | n Naval operations |
| f Mess room life | o Effects of the war |
| g Rations and victualling | p Family life |
| h Discipline | q Post service experience |
| i Religion | |

Each of these topics was examined in some detail, the extent and nature of which may be demonstrated by one example. Thus, in dealing with the subject of 'Discipline', the following questions influenced the interviewers' approach:

- What was the standard and nature of discipline on the lower deck? Who influenced it? Did it vary much?
- What were the most common offences? What were the most extreme? How were they punished?
- Was the discipline fair? Was it possible to appeal effectively against any unfair treatment, if it occurred?
- What was the lower deck's attitude to naval police? How much and what sort of power did they have? Did they ever abuse their authority?
- What were relations like between the lower deck and commissioned officers, 'ranker' officers, NCOs and the Marines?
- Was there any code of informal discipline or constraint on the lower deck? What kind of behaviour was considered unacceptable and how would it be dealt with?
- Who were the most influential members of the lower deck? Was their influence based on any factors other than rank?

(3) Application

While there can be no question that the purposes of oral history research need to be very carefully defined, the way in which project papers

should be used is open to variation. Some important work has been done¹ in which listed questions are much more numerous and refined than in the above example and the resultant paper used in the form of a social research questionnaire. While such methods may serve the purposes of some historians, for the wider aims of collecting centres . . . formal questionnaires have not been found suitable. Partly this is because no questionnaire is sufficiently flexible to accommodate, in itself, the unexpected and valuable twists and turns of an informant's memory; and partly it is due to the fact that a questionnaire can become an obstacle to achieving the natural and spontaneous dialogue that is the aim of most oral historians.

But, short of a questionnaire, lists of topics can provide useful guidelines for interviewers to work to. The more interviewers there are engaged on a particular project, the greater becomes the need to ensure consistency of approach. As a device for obtaining such consistency, topic lists have a practical value throughout a recording project. Even with a project which is in the custody of one historian, the construction of a formal research paper is still valuable for reference purposes, because consistency is no less important and only somewhat more certain with one interviewer than with many, in the course of a recording project of any significant scale.

(4) Monitoring

It is possible, simply by drawing the interviewers together and taking their reactions, to get an impression of the progress that has been achieved at various stages of the recording programme. However, for the effective monitoring of the project more systematic aids should be introduced. These are needed because the creation of oral history recordings usually far outstrips that of processing the recorded interviews. Cataloguing, indexing and transcribing generally lag so far behind recording that the customary aids which give access to the material are not available when they would be most useful for project control.

As an intermediate means of registering the project information as it is being recorded, simple visual aids can be designed which are appropriate to the work which is being carried out. In the case of the lower deck project the chart reproduced opposite was useful as such a tool. When projects are geared to preparatory research papers and control charts of the kind reproduced in figure 11.1 oral history recording can be effectively monitored and sensibly controlled. At the beginning of the project, the research paper represents the academic definition of the project goals. By careful application in the field academic prescription and practical possibility can begin to be reconciled. Thus, in the light of early interviewing

Informant	Clarke	Ashley	Holt	Boin	Maloney	Burke	Boughton	Clarkson	Basford	Ford	Pullen	Heron	Lazenby	Hutchings	Cox	Leary	Halter	Masters	Adshedd	Roberts
Port division	A	B	C	A	A	B	C	B	C	B	A	A	B	B	A	A	C	C	B	C
Branch	B	E	A	C	E	D	C	C	E	F	B	A	B	E	D	A	D	C	F	B
Service: from	19	09	13	17	16	08	17	15	08	11	11	18	17	13	18	13	11	12	03	13
to	19	25	19	30	20	19	10	32	37	23	24	40	31	22	33	19	24	36	26	25
Interview period	B-C	A-C	B-C	A-B	A-C	C	B-C	B-C	C	B-C	A-C	A-C	B-C	A-C	A-A	B-C	A-C	A-C	C	A-B
Motivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Boy training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Man training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dress	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Work	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mess room life	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Food	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Discipline	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Religion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Traditions and customs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foreign stations	AD	AC	CE	AD	A	AC	C	CE	AC	B	C	AD	CE	DE	A	C	AC	D	A	AD
Home ports	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Operations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Effects of war	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pay	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family life	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Post service experience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

1. Port division	2. Branch	3. Interview	period	4. Foreign stations	
Portsmouth	A	Signals	A	China	A
Devonport	B	Torpedo	B	Cape	B
Chatham	C	Engine room	C	Mediterranean	C
		Gunnery	D	N. America	D
		Artisan	E	S.E. America	E
		Other	F		

Figure 11.1. Sample control chart

experience, the list can be altered after some initial application. Certain questions may be modified, some removed or new questions may be introduced into the initial scheme, until a more refined and useful document emerges. Sensible alterations to the scope of a project cannot be made without a systematic approach of the kind that is implied in the formulation of a project paper.

As recording progresses, a chart of the information being collected permits the monitoring of the project's interim results. The value of the original topics—and their various divisions—should not be treated as inviolate until the work has run its full course. A common experience is that the collection of information in some subject areas reaches a point of saturation before many of the others. Such lines of questioning may be

discontinued when there is reasonable certainty that their continuation would be unlikely to add significantly to the information that has already been recorded. The converse is also facilitated by a framework which permits the interim analysis of results. That is to say, areas in which the collection of information has proceeded less satisfactorily can more easily be singled out for greater attention.

Devices of the kind described above are usually essential in the effective management of oral history research. Unless the resources of the collecting centre are untypically lavish, there is usually no other means by which it can be established that the interviewing and recording is achieving the results which were originally sought. It is obviously necessary, through such methods, to be able to control the course of the project and to judge when it may be terminated.

(5) Documentation

For the proper assessment and use of oral evidence, the collecting centre should systematically record the project methodology. Without this background information the scholar may not be able to use appropriately the information which has been recorded. What were the aims of the project organiser? By what means were informants selected for interview? What was their individual background? How were the interviews conducted? How was the work as a whole controlled? The more information there is available to answer such questions as these, the more valuable oral history materials will be to the researcher and the more securely he can make use of them in his work.

A formal paper, of the kind recommended earlier, can tell the user a great deal about how the project was structured. A working file will be even more useful, if it reveals the way in which the work evolved (recording what changes were introduced at what stage in the development of the project). Such files should be maintained and regarded as an integral part of the research materials which may be needed by historians.

Individual informant files should also be accessible for research. They should contain biographical details of the informant and also be organised in such a way that the user can correlate tapes or transcripts with places and dates which are covered by the interview. In this respect, interviewers are in a uniquely valuable position to secure a documentary basis of the information they record. Often the informant's memory, photographic and documentary materials in his possession, reference sources and the interviewer's own subject expertise, can be combined to formulate quite a detailed chronology. This will support and give background to the recorded interview.

Similarly, the interview itself should be used as a means of establishing

the kind of background information that will give additional significance to the information the informant provides. Thus, in addition to the specific project information the interviewer is seeking, he can with advantage also record details of the informant's place of birth and upbringing, his family background, economic circumstances, educational attainments, occupational experiences and so on.

Much that an informant says during the course of an interview he may wish to correct, amend or amplify subsequently. No documentation system would be complete without providing him with the means so to do. The opportunity to listen to or read the completed interview often provides the informant with a considerable stimulus to add to the information which has already been recorded. Once committed to an oral history interview, most informants feel the need for historical exactitude. Collecting centres can maintain their transcripts in pristine condition, whilst also giving informants full opportunity to supplement with written notes the information they have already given, and filing such notes along with the final tapes and transcript.

Note

1. The outstanding British example of this kind of approach is Dr. Paul Thompson's (University of Essex) study of family life and social history in Edwardian Britain.

ORAL HISTORY

*An Interdisciplinary
Anthology*

Edited by

David K. Dunaway
and
Willa K. Baum

*American Association for State and Local History
in cooperation with
the Oral History Association*

Copyright © 1984 by the American Association for State and Local History.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except for brief quotations used in critical articles or reviews, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner. For information, write to the American Association for State and Local History, 708 Berry Road, Nashville, Tennessee 37204.

Publication of this book was made possible in part by funds from the sale of the Bicentennial State Histories, which were supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Designed by Gary Gore

"Radio and the Public Use of Oral History" by David K. Dunaway copyright © 1984 by David K. Dunaway

"The Expanding Role of the Librarian in Oral History" by Willa K. Baum copyright © 1984 by Willa K. Baum

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Oral history.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Oral history—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Dunaway, David King. II. Baum, Willa K.

III. American Association for State and Local History. IV. Oral History Association.

D16.14.073 1984 907'.2 84-372

ISBN 0-910050-70-8

This volume is dedicated to two pathbreakers in oral history:

ALLAN NEVINS

(1890-1971)

At the time he conducted our first interview, Allan Nevins was two days shy of his fifty-eighth birthday and nearing the crest of his remarkable career. The idea "to obtain from the lips and papers of living Americans a fuller record of their participation" had haunted him for a decade and more. Every obituary pricked his conscience: "What memories that man carries to the grave with him!"

—Louis M. Starr on Allan Nevins, 1971

LOUIS M. STARR

(1917-1980)

The Oral History Collection of Columbia University is Louis Starr's enduring monument. No one was more insistent than he on giving credit to Allan Nevins as its founder, but today at Columbia we couple their names. On that foundation Louis Starr built a collection seven times larger than the one he took over. In the process he led and trained a new generation of oral historians, and he voiced ideas and ideals for his successors to explore and expand.

—Elizabeth B. Mason on Louis M. Starr, 1980

CONTENTS

Foreword by <i>Elizabeth Mason</i>	xi
Preface	xiii
Introduction by <i>Charles Morrissey</i>	xix

I. THE GATEWAY TO ORAL HISTORY

1. <i>Louis Starr</i> : Oral History	3
2. <i>Allan Nevins</i> : Oral History: How and Why It Was Born	27
The Uses of Oral History	31
3. <i>Paul Thompson</i> : History and the Community	37
4. <i>Samuel Hand</i> : Some Words on Oral Histories	51

II. INTERPRETING AND DESIGNING ORAL HISTORY

5. <i>Alice Hoffman</i> : Reliability and Validity in Oral History	67
6. <i>Barbara Tuchman</i> : Distinguishing the Significant from the Insignificant	74
7. <i>William Cutler III</i> : Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing	79
8. <i>William Moss</i> : Oral History: An Appreciation	87
9. <i>Jan Vansina</i> : Oral Tradition and Historical Methodology	102
10. <i>Ruth Finnegan</i> : A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence	107
11. <i>David Lance</i> : Oral History Project Design	116
12. <i>Saul Benison</i> : Introduction to <i>Tom Rivers</i>	124
13. <i>Peter Friedlander</i> : Theory, Method, and Oral History	131
14. <i>Charles Morrissey</i> : Oral History and the California Wine Industry	142
15. <i>Amelia Fry</i> : Reflections on Ethics	150

III. ORAL HISTORY APPLIED: LOCAL, ETHNIC, FAMILY, AND WOMEN'S HISTORY

16. <i>Lynwood Montell</i> : Preface to <i>The Saga of Coe Ridge</i>	165
17. <i>Larry Danielson</i> : The Folklorist, the Oral Historian, and Local History	177
18. <i>Jacquelyn Dowd Hall</i> : Documenting Diversity: The Southern Experience	189
19. <i>Gary Okihiro</i> : Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History	195
20. <i>Theodore Rosengarten</i> : Preface to <i>All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw</i>	212
21. <i>Sherma Gluck</i> : What's So Special about Women? Women's Oral History	221
22. <i>Linda Shopes</i> : Using Oral History for a Family History Project	238
23. <i>Tamara Hareven</i> : The Search for Generational Memory	248
24. <i>Alex Haley</i> : Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy	264

IV. ORAL HISTORY AND RELATED DISCIPLINES: FOLKLORE, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND GERONTOLOGY

25. <i>Richard Dorson</i> : The Oral Historian and the Folklorist	291
26. <i>Charles Joyner</i> : Oral History as Communicative Event	300
27. <i>Sidney Mintz</i> : The Anthropological Interview and the Life History	306
28. <i>Marianne Lo Gerfo</i> : Three Ways of Reminiscence in Theory and Practice	314
29. <i>John Neuenschwander</i> : Oral Historians and Long-Term Memory	324
30. <i>David Dunaway</i> : Radio and the Public Use of Oral History	333

V. ORAL HISTORY AND SCHOOLS

31. <i>James Hoopes</i> : Oral History for the Student	349
32. <i>George Mehaffy, Thad Sitton, and O. L. Davis, Jr.</i> : Oral History in the Classroom	356
33. <i>Don Cavallini</i> : Oral/Aural History: In and out of the Classroom	368
34. <i>Eliot Wigginton</i> : Introduction to <i>The Foxfire Book</i>	374

VI. ORAL HISTORY AND LIBRARIES

35. <i>Martha Jane Zachert</i> : The Implications of Oral History for Librarians	38
36. <i>Willa Baum</i> : The Expanding Role of the Librarian in Oral History	38
37. <i>W. J. Langlois</i> : Soundscapes Interview with Imbert Orchard	40

Appendix: Goals, Guidelines, and Evaluation Criteria of the Oral History Association	41
--	----

Acknowledgments	42
-----------------	----

Index	42
-------	----