

Oral History

AN INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

by
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When, in talk with a friend, you tell him or hear from him, details of childhood, those details are perhaps even more real to you than in your solitary memory; and they are real and exciting to both of you in a way no form of art can be, or anyhow is. He is accepting what you say as truth, not fiction. You in turn, and the truth you are telling, are conditioned in some degree by his personality—you are in part, and he knows you are in part, selecting or inventing toward his color—but your whole effort, at which you both may be willing and interested to spend a great deal of time, is to reduce these half-inventions more and more towards the truth. The centrally exciting and important fact, from which ramify the thousand others which otherwise would have no clear and valid existence, is: that was the way it was. What could be more moving, significant or true: every force and hidden chance in the universe has so combined that a certain thing was the way it was.

James Agee,
Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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History and Oral History

Too often we forget that history is, among other things, an exercise of the imagination. History, like life, is a test of our ability imaginatively to place ourselves in the positions of other people, so that we can understand the reasons for their actions. Through research and study we learn facts about those other people. But we can never know everything about anyone, living or dead. The historical record is always incomplete. Imagination must fill in the gaps in our knowledge, though of course our imaginings must derive from facts and be consistent with them. Dependence on imagination is characteristic of all study of human behavior, including, for example, psychology or sociology. But in history there is the added problem that the people we hope to understand lived in other times and may therefore be more remote from us than people in foreign lands today. Only through superior acts of the imagination can we hope to understand people so removed from ourselves.

Because history is an act of our minds, historical knowledge can lead to self-knowledge. To test or verify historical thought we must check not only the data or facts but also our thinking itself. We therefore learn not only about history

but about the quality of our minds. This process is no different from that followed in the exact sciences, except that the qualities revealed in historical thinking include those of human and imaginative sympathy. Biases, prejudices, predispositions, all manner of attitudes and likes and dislikes, which we may not even have known we had, are revealed when we study a discipline like history, with its human content. History should be one of the most interesting, personally challenging, of all disciplines.

Yet students have been voting with their feet in recent years, and enrollment in history courses has declined sharply. Partly, this decline may be the result of economic circumstances and the need students feel for practical, useful knowledge that will help them start careers. But partly, too, it may be the result of history's having become a much more technical discipline than it once was: for students, technics may have obscured history's human content. Historians have been exploring numerous kinds of new techniques and theories, but the danger of sacrificing the end for the means is perhaps especially great with the quantitative methods that now interest many, though still a minority, of them. Most quantitative historians have surely not forgotten that we not only must know the facts but also must imagine what the facts meant to the human beings who lived them. But the length, sometimes tedious nature of quantitative research points up the need for all teachers of history to remember that, for you who are students, history must be a means to a human end now, not years from now when your course work is far behind you.

If what is interesting in historical work is its personal, human challenge, one way to keep it interesting is to focus directly on human beings. This book's purpose is to acquaint

you with a method of historical research—oral history—that is necessarily a human challenge, because it involves direct personal contact with other people. Such research is a test of other people, of the accuracy of their memories, of their ability to assess their own lives realistically, and of their ability to profit from experience. In a sense it is a test of other people as historians, a test of how well they can deal with their personal histories. But oral history research is also a test of ourselves, of our ability to deserve and win the confidence of other people, of our ability to deal sympathetically but honestly and imaginatively with their memories, and of our ability to deal honestly with ourselves. All these tests are involved also, if not always so obviously, in more traditional historical research. Oral history is therefore good training for other kinds of history and may be a path to a greater understanding of ourselves and others, including not only those alive now but also those who have ceased to live except in our imaginations.

Things that have survived from the past, called documents, are the basis of historical knowledge. Most historians rely on written documents, such as books, letters, diaries, deeds, census and tax records, church registers, bills of lading, and so on. But houses, coins, tools, gravestones, furniture, and folklore or legends handed down from generation to generation are also documents and can tell us much about the people who created them. This last sort of document, folklore or legend, differs from the others in that it has its origins in speech. Oral history is based on documents that are spoken, and folklore and legend are only one kind of spoken document. Songs, speeches, interviews, and formal and informal conversation are all oral documents, useful for history.

Documents are only useful for history if they are in some

way preserved. Material documents, such as houses, letters, and coins, would seem more likely to be preserved than intangible speech, which vanishes into the air. But some kinds of speech, including folklore, legend, and song, are preserved by memory and later spoken again to the next generation. In illiterate societies there are often found more or less professional storytellers (or historians) whose task is to learn the story of the past from elders and then pass it on to the next generation. Such oral documents are the basis of much of *Roots*, the famous book in which Alex Haley traces his slave ancestors back to Africa. Though there is controversy about the accuracy of Haley's oral research in Africa, such documents can be accurate and useful and are in any case the only verbal sources about the history of many peoples.

"Oral tradition" is the usual name for these verbal stories passed on from one generation to the next. It is commonly accepted that in literate societies like the United States oral tradition is not as reliable as in illiterate societies, where people are well practiced in remembering stories, where story telling is highly ritualized, and where the teller may even be punished for changing the story's form or content.¹ Yet in the United States, research in oral tradition may be useful in dealing with particular or local cultures, such as those of native and black Americans, who may not be literate or may have been denied a written history because of political oppression. It is a powerful testimony to the usefulness of oral tradition in black history that Alex Haley's grandmother taught him both the name of his great-great-great-grandfather, who first came to America as a slave, and also the name of that slave ancestor's first master. It is a

powerful testimony also to the possible accuracy of oral tradition, because both names were later verified by research in written documents.² Anyone wishing to do research in oral tradition should consult the best book on the subject, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, by Jan Vansina.

But the focus here, in this book, is on "oral history" in a much more restricted sense, a sense that is more useful in a generally literate country without a strong oral tradition. Rather than the collecting of stories handed down from generation to generation, "oral history" will here refer to the collecting of any individual's spoken memories of his life, of people he has known, and events he has witnessed or participated in. Collecting even these personal, firsthand, fairly immediate memories and checking their accuracy require great care in a society that depends on written records and does not much exercise its memory.

Furthermore, because of the invention of electronic sound-recording equipment, memory in literate societies is exercised even less frequently than only a few years ago. Before the invention of sound recording, the preservation of spoken words depended mainly on memory, which might later have been preserved in writing. This was sometimes true even of important public addresses, such as Abraham Lincoln's famous "Lost Speech," supposedly so great that every reporter present forgot to take notes and instead listened raptly. One of Lincoln's biographers, Ida Tarbell, recovered a sketchy account of the speech forty years later from a member of Lincoln's audience still living then. But in recent years the tape recorder has reduced the degree to which we must rely

2. Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy," p. 24.

1. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 6, 15.

on memory to preserve not only speeches but also, sometimes unfortunately, conversations. Surely the most famous tape-recorded conversations in history are those between ex-President Nixon and his aides. They are certain to be of great interest and novelty to historians, who have usually had to rely on less direct evidence to learn what goes on in the White House.

Oral history's first interviews were recorded manually, but without the invention of the tape recorder, oral history might not have become the veritable movement that it is today. Some oral historians, a minority, would even limit the use of the term "oral history" to documents collected by tape recorder.³ Nevertheless, we will keep our definition centered on the oral nature of the document rather than on the technique used to record it. If you do not have access to a tape recorder, this book will suggest a way to do oral history by taking written notes.

Oral documents are also used by social scientists in "participant observation" studies, in which the social scientist is on the scene, participating in the action he records, rather than asking someone else to recall it later. An example is Thomas J. Cottle's fine book, *Busing*, about school desegregation in Boston. Although Cottle does not ignore the past, his principal objective is to understand what people are feeling now. Such studies are often called "oral history," and the designation makes sense; they are oral and will probably be useful documents for future historians. But the distinction between recording "on the scene" and recording spoken

3. Gould P. Colman, "Oral History—An Appeal for More Systematic Procedures," p. 80. For useful comments on the disadvantages of the tape recorder for the oral historian, see Saul Benison, "Oral History."

memories ought to be kept clear.⁴ Participant observation is outside the scope of this book. "Oral history" will here refer to spoken memories. The major difference between the two types of research is that the participating observer has the advantage of being at (or in) the scene his subjects speak about. The oral historian cannot visit the scene the interviewee remembers, at least not until the time machine is perfected. To overcome this disadvantage, the oral historian must do careful background research, which is the subject of chapter 7.

It is often asserted that recording spoken memories has become especially important because of the communications revolution in this century. According to this line of reasoning, people living now, whether statesmen or ordinary citizens, are much less likely than their forebears of a hundred years ago to leave historians written documents, at least of an intimate sort. Where people once wrote to friends or business associates and saved the answering letters to read a second time, they now talk on the telephone, and no written record survives. Diaries have suffered a fate similar to that of letters, perhaps not only because television and other distractions of modern life allow less time for them, but also because people who no longer have to write so much do not write so well or eagerly as they once did. Yet thanks to the tape recorder, people who once would have left letters and diaries behind them can now leave spoken autobiographies. Thus, what the communications revolution has taken away it has also restored, in the form of tape-recorded interviews.

This generally correct line of reasoning should not become

4. As a rule, the recording of an occurrence will be found in a "sound archive," whereas recordings of spoken memories are filed in "oral history collections."

a rationale for not doing research in written records, which are definitely not falling into short supply. Writers, politicians, entertainers, and public figures of all kinds are donating their papers and memorabilia to libraries at an unprecedented rate. Sometimes a person has hardly emerged into prominence before a library tries to acquire his present and future papers. Under this sort of arrangement, when a person does not have to save his papers himself but can simply pass them on to a library for filing, the number of papers saved is likely to be greater than ever before. And the computerization of record keeping by business and government suggests that written or, rather, magnetically recorded statistical information about great numbers of people may be available in overwhelming proportions to future social historians. Yet although care is necessary in generalizing about the decline of written documents, it is probably true that some of this massive amount of material will be less revealing and useful to historians than previous written records.

This lack, unfortunately, cannot be completely made up by tape-recording spoken memories. No retrospective interview will ever recover what might have gone into an intimate letter or diary if the telephone or television had not prevented it from being written. Furthermore, anyone who has not only collected oral materials but worked them into a finished historical account will attest that oral history is most useful when written records are also available. Checking one sort of information against the other is an excellent method of verification. (But when there is a conflict between written and oral documents, it is not always the oral testimony that is unreliable. Occasionally, oral history will cast a new light on written records and prove them false or at least show that they must be interpreted in a new way.)

Although oral history cannot fully compensate for the loss of intimate written documents, it can sometimes supply information that might otherwise never have been saved. In Latin America, for instance, there is an aversion to autobiography, apparently based on the belief that it is undignified and egotistical to take the initiative in talking about oneself. The initiative must come from someone else, and as a result oral historians have become instrumental in saving the personal accounts of national leaders there.⁵ Illicit and illegal behavior in any society is seldom recorded in writing, and as sociologists have long known, interviewing is one of the best ways of learning about it. Thus, oral history research has shown that birth control may have been far more widely practiced in the early years of this century than was once thought.⁶ The often covert and extralegal tactics of racial and political oppressions, such as those to which American blacks have been subjected, make oral history a good technique for researching such subjects. One of the greatest writers in the world today, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, might fairly be called an oral historian, because *The Gulag Archipelago*, his trilogy on the Soviet Union's forced labor camps, is based on the spoken accounts of his fellow prisoners, who could not safely have written their stories. Even the politics of relatively open societies, though a traditional historical topic, are never completely documented in writing. T. Harry Williams, who used oral history extensively in his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Huey Long*, found that "the politicians were astonishingly frank in detailing their dealings, and often completely realistic in viewing themselves. But they had not

5. James W. Wilkie, *Elitefare*, p. 55.

6. Sherma Gluck, ed., *From Parlor to Prison*, p. 15.

trusted a word of these dealings to paper. . . . Anybody who heard them would have to conclude that the full and inside story of politics is not in *any* age committed to the [written] documents."⁷ The point, then, is that oral history is not a substitute for written records but a complement to them.

The greatest advantage of oral over written documents is that the historian actively participates, as interviewer, in creating the oral document, and therefore he can try to get the information he needs. This active role for the historian can also be a great disadvantage, because if he does not guard against his biases, he may consciously or unconsciously fabricate the document and make it say what he wants it to say. But the very desirable goal of impartiality should never be confused with passivity. The best oral historians actively apply the criterion of usefulness in choosing interviewees and the subjects about which they are to be questioned. It might be argued that "usefulness" can mask many biases, but it can and should also stand for the use of intelligence to recognize those biases and reduce their influences as much as possible. It might also be argued against the oral historian's active role that no one knows what the viewpoint of future scholars will be and that information which now appears *useless* to us may be valuable someday. But information which now appears *useful* to us may also be valuable someday. Given that not everything can be preserved and that no one knows what the needs of the future will be, the best criterion of what should be saved is what we think should be saved. If future scholars use the information in ways unexpected to us, that is their affair. Meanwhile, we have not only the right but the obligation to use our minds and to maintain the active role that is the chief advantage of oral history.

Another way in which oral history can complement written documents is by encouraging and enabling the ordinary as well as the famous citizen to leave an autobiographical account of his life. Oral records can be similarly useful for prominent people who are too busy to write or whose talents lie along other lines. Probably none of the musicians whose narratives are printed in Art Hodes and Chadwick Hansen's *Selections from the Gutter: Portraits from the Jazz Record* would have written autobiographies, yet their stories are important. Oral histories of either ordinary persons or unlabeled celebrities also show that, contrary to the gloomy prognostications of cultural critics, English is still expressively and vigorously spoken by at least some people.

Because oral history can be used to study ordinary people as well as the elite, it is sometimes asserted that it is an especially democratic form of research. There is something in this idea, but, again, qualification is necessary. Keeping in mind that oral history works best as a complement to written documents, it is obvious that it will be easiest to use to research people—usually the elite—about whom written records are preserved. Oral history can be used to study ordinary people, and that is a great virtue; but in the absence of written records it will require much more work, probably in the form of more numerous, lengthy, and detailed interviews, to place the oral accounts in a meaningful cultural and social context. Without that extra work, such interviews are likely to have little historical significance.

The need for context can easily be seen in *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, by the most popular oral historian, Studs Terkel. Actually, there is a certain unfairness in thinking of Terkel as an oral *historian* and judging his work by historical standards. He is a journalist working in the

documentary tradition, and in *Hard Times* he was at least as much interested in the spirit with which people spoke at the time he did his interviewing as he was in the depression. That is a fine interest but that it is not history must be clear to any critical reader of the book. Except for the information in the more than one hundred interviews themselves and the order in which Terkel arranges them, no attempt is made to relate the individual experiences of either famous or ordinary interviewees to the experience of anyone else. Few immediate contexts are established, only the enormous and already given context of the depression. The result is that despite the often interesting and pungent words of the interviewees, we do not learn much more about the depression than we already knew from the popular images of soup lines and hobo villages. In a subsequent and much better book, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, Terkel's interviews, again, lack context. But the often bitter narratives in this later book have a clearer, more powerful meaning simply because there is no mistaking that they are about the present. Despite the risk of unfairness to Terkel, comparing *Hard Times* to *Working* illustrates the important point that interviewing, used alone, is more enlightening about the present than the past. The oral historian must not only engage in interviewing but must also do other sorts of research in order to imaginatively recreate the historical context to which the interview refers and without which it will not often have much meaning.

Terkel, a Chicago radio talk show host, has also been criticized by academic oral historians because of his interviewing and editing techniques.⁸ Academics say that he interviews to

8. Some of Terkel's critics are quoted succinctly by Joseph Roddy in "Oral History," pp. 2, 4.

get the information he wants and lets his biases and preconceptions interfere with the results. It is not clear how they draw this conclusion from his published work, because his questions printed there seem neutral enough. But one reads very few of his questions, for Terkel considerably edits and shortens the transcripts, usually omitting his own words. Some view this practice as a heresy and call it "Terkelism." It is certainly to be hoped that Terkel has saved his tapes and transcripts, so that the question of how well his edited selections represent entire interviews can be settled. But quoting selected passages to make a point is standard practice by historians, and Terkel's critics might be on solid ground if they lamented his apparent lack of interest in written documents and in establishing the cultural and social context without which his interviews often lack historical significance.

In addition to the question of meaningful context, oral historians must also deal with the problem that memory, on which they so heavily depend, is human and fallible. All historical documents, including both oral and written, reflect the particular subjective minds of their creators. Yet written records that date from the time of an event, though not less subjective, are at least less distorted by memory and therefore, some historians have argued, a better source of "facts" than oral documents. What oral history does best, according to this line of thought, is give a "feel" for the "facts" that "can be provided only by one who lived with them . . ."⁹ But feelings are also facts, at least in the historical sense, and the lapse of time can and does obscure a person's memory of what he felt in the past. There have been a number of psychological experiments suggesting that feelings (or inner facts)

9. John Rae, "Commentary," p. 175.

are less likely to be remembered accurately than external facts.¹⁰ Common sense psychology supports this conclusion, because our feelings, even more than our outer behavior, are extremely personal facts, potentially most damaging to our egos when confronted honestly.

Historians, however, should be accustomed to using imperfect sources. Arriving at a general conclusion about what oral history does best is not as important as understanding how to minimize its defects in the various situations where it might contribute to knowledge. Where written documents are a good source of external facts but weak on feelings, the astute oral historian does more than merely use background research to test the accuracy of the interviewee's memory. In that case he uses research in written records in order to aid and cooperate in accurately recreating the past, to help the interviewee better remember both the facts and how he felt about them. Where there are few written documents or none at all, critical techniques must be devised for getting external facts from oral accounts. In *The Saga of Coe Ridge*, an oral history of a gory feud between blacks and whites in the hill country of southern Kentucky, William Lynwood Montell has convincingly argued for and demonstrated the possibility of writing local history on the basis of oral documents. Though details of an event are often reported incorrectly, says Montell, it is still possible, by collecting and collating numerous accounts, to get at the core of truth in all of them.¹¹

A good example of these points can be found in one of the historically stronger sections of Terkel's *Hard Times*, which contains interviews of several people from the vicinity of Le

10. William W. Cutler III, "Accuracy in Oral Interviewing," p. 2.

11. Pp. 194-95.

Mars, Iowa, where a judge was threatened with lynching because of his quickness to foreclose farm mortgages. The details differed according to who was telling the story. Did members of the crowd, as one man said, only shake a rope in front of the judge's face, or did they, as others said, put a noose around his neck? Was it on the courthouse steps, or did they drag him off to the fairgrounds? Did they tar and feather him? Though one cannot answer these questions of detail, it is clear that the judge was threatened. And all the accounts make clear the feeling, the frustration, that led to such drastic action.

This evidence supports business historian John Rae's idea that oral history *can* help provide knowledge of the inner feelings that "are precisely what the historian must have to explain the 'why' as well as the 'how' . . . "12 Subjectivity, which, if distorted by memory, is a potential weakness of the oral document, can also be its strength. If the historian uses oral memoirs with at least as much care as he would a written autobiography, he can get about the same quality of information or perhaps better in some respects. We are likely to be more spontaneous in talking about our feelings than in writing about them, and many people speak to the oral historian with great candor and courage. These spoken memories and ruminations are the essential human stuff of our time, for they reveal inner sources and motives.

In order to preserve as many such documents as possible, oral historians have focused on the important task of collecting tape-recorded interviews, often conducted with old people before their memories are permanently lost. State and local history societies, universities, foundations, museums,

12. Rae, "Commentary," p. 175.

and businesses have organized, at last count, more than four hundred oral history projects involving literally thousands of staff members and tens of thousands of interviews. But there is more to oral history than the collection of raw interviews for the use of future scholars. As with all other documents, recorded interviews are not history until they have been interpreted by the historical imagination. It is our job as historians to take advantage of all sources available now, and the purpose of this book is to suggest ways not only of collecting oral documents but also of using them.

Using such documents is excellent training for living intelligently in contemporary society and culture, for documented nonfiction based on interviews has become a vital form of our literature. Such journalism as Tom Wicker's story of the Attica prison uprising in *A Time to Die*, such sociological studies as Michael MacCoby's analysis of the modern corporate executive in *The Gamesman*, and such detailed biographies of figures as diverse as Lennie Bruce and Eleanor Roosevelt all aim at presenting not only the external facts but also the inner feelings of their subjects. Nonfiction seems to be replacing the novel as our main resource for understanding human behavior, character, and personality.

Oral history in its more popular forms is part of this surge of interest in humanly interesting, documentary accounts of real people's lives. Many books of oral history have been published in recent years, and some of them have been best sellers—Terkel's *Hard Times*, for instance, and also Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers*, in which a solitary black Alabama tenant farmer wonderfully recounts his trials and triumphs.

But this popular new form of literature requires intelligent criticism and an alert audience if it is to achieve its best

possible forms and greatest usefulness. And because many of the pertinent questions about books based on interviews are relevant to all oral history research, including yours, some of the discussions and examples in this book are drawn from published oral histories. My hope is that this book is an introduction not only to doing oral history research but also, even if only incidentally, to reading it. Such research and reading should be useful experience for those who wish better to understand themselves and the culture and society in which they live.

from oral history research, might point out that history is an exercise not only of the imagination but also of the intellect. Oral history is so often thought of as merely the tape recording of interviews that it may seem a mindless activity to some. Actually, conducting a good interview requires hard intellectual as well as imaginative effort, just like other kinds of research. Yet an instructor who refuses to accept the raw tape or transcript of an interview is surely as much within his rights as he would be in refusing written research notes in place of a finished term paper. Though you are acting as a historian when doing research, your actions are not very visible. You are most clearly active as a historian when you can be seen thinking, rigorously and imaginatively, about your data. And a written research paper is usually the best way to reveal the quality of both your research and your thinking. This book is therefore designed around the idea that your oral history research will be incorporated into a more or less traditional term paper employing written documents as well.

At present, many students who have the opportunity to try oral history research do so in the context of a group oral history project. At their best, the student interviewers for these projects have a clear intellectual objective and use written documents as background material. The project at Duke University, for example, is focused on black history. Students participating in the project research written documents first and then use that research as a basis for conducting oral interviews, which become part of a permanent collection. In this way they have the satisfaction of knowing that they are contributing to a genuine scholarly purpose. I hope that this book will be useful to students in such projects.

But I have also designed this book for a larger audience

2 Oral History for the Student

Every good history course includes work meant to give you the experience of *doing* history. This is often a research paper, and it should be the most interesting, stimulating aspect of the course. Too often, though, it is tedious, not because it is hard work, but because the challenge to human sympathy and imagination is neglected. In part this may be because students sometimes feel that their efforts are repetitive, that they cannot do original research in documents that other historians and students have already researched. They are wrong to think so, because the test of originality, applied to history, is a test not only of the material's freshness or richness but also of the scholar's creativity. Still, this important point might be learned with more ease and interest if those of you who wished to work with new material could do so. One advantage of oral history interviewing as a teaching and learning technique is that the documents are always new, at least in the sense that no previous historian has examined them.

Some teachers, skeptical of the idea that students can profit

by suggesting that those of you who do not have the opportunity to participate in an oral history project can still use oral history in the term papers often assigned in upper division courses and sometimes in broader surveys as well. Oral history may comprise a large part or only a small portion of your research, depending on its usefulness for your particular topic. It is assumed that you already have some experience in doing library research. If not, you may wish to consult one of the numerous guides to writing term papers. *Researching and Writing in History*, by F. N. McCoy, is especially good on the biggest hurdle for many students—choosing a topic.

The objective of this book is to keep the clear intellectual focus of the best *group* oral history projects but to adjust some of their procedures to the needs of *individual* students and scholars. Students who wish to work with oral as well as written documents can do so (enthusiastically, I have found) in the context of the term paper. At the same time, other students are free to pursue different research interests and techniques. Though some class time may be devoted to oral history, most of the course can still be spent on whatever is supposed to be its subject—the history of business, labor, politics, science, society, and so on. Such freedom and flexibility in accommodating individual interests of both students and teachers are the only conditions under which oral history is likely to find broad acceptance in the classroom, especially the college classroom.

This attention to the needs of the individual researcher is consistent with the fact that this is the first “how to” book on oral history where “you” readers are students rather than teachers or researchers.¹ I follow as well as argue “trans-

1. John A. Neuenschwander, *Oral History as a Teaching Approach*, and Van Hastings Garner, *Oral History*, are addressed to teachers

actional” principles by acknowledging that students sometimes see teachers as destructively cautious in discouraging innovative research. But I also think that teachers are right to be skeptical of devoting an entire history course to *imitating* a group oral history project. It may be an excellent thing if the course is an *actual part* of an ongoing oral history project or if the course has a clear intellectual focus on a specific historical problem, with attention to background research and to preparing the interviews. But without that focus it is surely futile to import the conditions of a group project into the classroom by merely having students tape and transcribe interviews that, if the project is imitative, are unlikely ever to be used by anyone else. Taping and especially transcribing are too laborious to be done to no purpose.² You should be asked to engage in only the aspects of oral history that make sense for genuine historical or learning purposes. Otherwise, you will learn not history but the technique of oral history in a vacuum, and the result will be one more frustratingly sterile schoolroom exercise.

Addressing the needs of individual students engaged in individual projects is also consistent with an additional objective of this book—to address the problem of integrating oral history with other kinds of research and knowledge. Able students can and should make significant contributions to oral history, and I hope that this book, which I view as a

and follow the group approach. Cullom Davis et al., *Oral History*, though designed for possible use as a textbook, is not written especially for students.

2. Thomas Charlton reports, on the basis of a survey of college teachers, that “almost all universities face problems in motivating students to transcribe the results of their interviews” (“Oral History in Graduate Instruction,” p. 66). In some cases the reluctance may be for good reason.

contribution to greater rigor and sophistication in the field of oral history, will help them to do so. My own qualifications for writing the book do not include experience as a professional oral historian, collecting for a group project. But I have used oral history techniques in my own research and am one of the numerous but nonetheless isolated teachers who have experimented with oral history in the classroom. Perhaps these are just the right qualifications for the author of a book addressed to the needs of individuals and to the question of how oral history can be related to other kinds of history.

Judging by much of the "how-to" literature, the field of oral history is at present relatively unsophisticated, not only in the obviously crucial area of interviewing, but perhaps more importantly in its relations with other types of historical research.³ If oral history becomes an isolated field, more interested in the oral than the historical, it will not fulfill its potential for humanistic research. One professional oral historian has warned of "danger signs" that "A quasi-professional group called 'oral historians' might well emerge who become method-mad pedagogues, claiming authority on every facet of oral history. . . . Oral historians must be historians first."⁴ The purpose of Part Two of this book is to suggest not only kinds of oral history research that you might do but even more importantly the need to give your research the broadest possible historical significance by placing it in cultural and social context.

3. Charlton found that integrating oral history with written sources was one of the most common difficulties reported by instructors using oral history as a teaching technique ("Oral History," p. 66).

4. Ramon I. Harris et al., *The Practice of Oral History*, pp. 76-77.

Concern for theoretical rigor should be an aid to doing research, not an excuse for delaying it. I have therefore tried to help get you involved in your own research as quickly as possible by writing the four parts of this book so that they can be read not only quickly but also independently of one another. If time presses and interviewing must begin soon, it should be possible to skip Part Two (not permanently, I hope) and go immediately to Part Three, where I have summarized some of the ideas of sociologists and communications specialists who have been most thoughtful about the problematic nature of information acquired by interview. Their approach, if not their language, is often consistent with the imaginative, humanistic direction urged in this book.

Also, in order to speed your involvement, I have not offered extensive examples of successful oral history. To have done so would have greatly lengthened the book, for good oral history is full of detail and cannot be succinctly quoted. Rather than lengthily quoting some of the best oral histories, I have briefly but critically discussed them in a way that, I hope, will encourage you to turn soon or someday to the books themselves. This approach offers you greater intellectual challenge and responsibility. And, after all, the reading of this book is meant less as a learning experience itself than as an introduction to another experience—the *activity* of oral history research. The most significant integration will be achieved not by this book but by you.

Oral history will obviously be most likely to be useful to you in recent and contemporary history courses. Your instructors in such courses will probably agree to oral history as part of your research efforts, provided that you can convince them that the oral research has historical significance. This requirement may seem a large obstacle, because of our almost

automatic assumption that significant information can only be acquired from "important"—and therefore difficult to interview—people. Obviously, an ex-president or senator, famous philosopher, author, actor, military leader, industrialist, business person, or some other VIP can tell us things about important events, events of national significance. But is it possible to interview such people? Yes, it is, though it may require hard work, persistence, and luck. Peter Joseph, a Princeton undergraduate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, showed exemplary initiative in interviewing hundreds of people, many of them famous, for his senior thesis, which was later published under the title *Good Times: An Oral History of America in the 1960's*.⁵ But most students will not interview nationally prominent figures, which is why Part Two of this book is meant to aid you in giving the interview significance by placing it in cultural and social context. Also, it is well to remember that "historical significance" is a relative term. Persons who are not nationally prominent may count for much on the regional, state, or local scene. Doctors, lawyers, judges, clergy, politicians, and newspaper editors may be excellent and important sources within a local context.

Furthermore, the best interviewee is quite likely to be someone who has never been interviewed before. Famous people are so experienced at separating public life from private that they may find it difficult to be not only honestly retrospective but also introspective in an interview. Tending to omit specific, personal details, they also leave out the "feel" for the facts. Jean Stein, in conducting interviews for *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, found that "the freshest, most informative material seemed to come less from the pub-

5. Unfortunately, Joseph's book suffers from the same weakness as Terkel's *Hard Times*: no interest in written documents or in establishing significant historical contexts.

lic figures than from those for whom being interviewed must have been a novelty, the women particularly. . . ."⁶ The wives had the vantage point of their famous husbands, but not being celebrities, they were not jaded interviewees.

It should also be possible to find ordinary people who have something to tell us about an important event. For example, in a course on the history of American labor you might decide that you want to write a paper on a strike that occurred in the last thirty or forty years. Many people involved in the strike, whether workers or managers, are likely to be still alive. Interviews with them could be an important supplement to information you would find in old newspapers, company and union records, and previously published studies. From interviews you might find out additional facts not only about what things happened but also about why they happened. The emotions that went into obstructing a public highway or hiring strikebreakers are the least likely things to be preserved in official records. Someone present at a union or company meeting is much more likely to be informative on emotions than a secretary's minutes. And you should consider the inner, human significance of the strike. How did it affect the people who lived through it? Did management harden or soften? Were workers more or less militant as a result of the strike? Were there any shifts in cultural values, say in the concept of the rights of private property?

But this last sort of research, on a cultural value, is the kind most likely to be resisted by your teacher, who may think that the question is vague and that you cannot make any significant generalizations on the basis of an interview or two. Actually, the representativeness of a small number of interviewees can be high, especially if they are articulate, intro-

spective people.⁷ If representativeness is a goal, try to balance your sample by interviewing, say, a worker and a manager. You should also try to explain that the interviews are to supplement traditional written sources by providing information in depth, information that gets its significance as much from its "thickness" as from its representativeness. None of these tactics availing, you have to decide whether or not to take the course, basing your decision, naturally, on all relevant factors—the quality of the course in other respects, degree requirements, and so on. Your teacher may also doubt that it is feasible or practical to attempt a specific research project, and it may be to your advantage to respect those doubts.

Although oral history usually involves interviewing older people, there is no reason why interviewees cannot be young. If you are writing a paper on some aspect of the Vietnam War, a thirty-year-old person might be a good source. For even more recent events, it is possible that a good interviewee might be in his teens or even younger, if he was in a time and place relevant to your topic.

No matter what topic you decide to work on, asking yourself some critical questions at the beginning can save wasted effort. Will interviewing be genuinely useful? If not, don't interview for the sake of interviewing. If you want the experience of doing oral history, find another topic where it will be useful. Consider practical problems. Will you have time to do the number of interviews you think are necessary? Two or three interviews are almost certainly the maximum you should plan for a term paper; you will find that preparing for, conducting, and using the results of just one interview can be very time-consuming. Also, will you have time and

7. Lewis A. Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*, p. 8.

money enough to travel to the site of the interview? For many students, the ideal interviewee will be someone who lives near school or home.

But oral history research is not necessarily limited to American history courses. Travel overseas for a summer or an entire year is a reasonable hope for many students. If you do plan to visit another country, you may want to consider doing an oral history project there. But you should be aware that in many countries it is much harder than in the United States to get people to talk frankly to strangers.⁸ Discuss the possible problems and complications in such a project with someone, perhaps a college faculty member, who has been to the country in question and knows its culture well. Despite the potential difficulties, oral history research may greatly enhance your understanding of another people. And the contact with local people it requires might be an excellent way to break through cultural and linguistic barriers, making your trip less lonely.

Finally, students who cannot undertake interviews for some reason—the resistance of a teacher, a topic so remote in time that potential interviewees are dead, lack of travel funds or time—may still be able to use oral history material. Many transcripts of interviews on file in oral history collections are available on microfilm or through interlibrary loan. Also, many history books are based in part on interviews. These documents can be useful, provided they are subjected to the same critical questions you should ask of oral documents you have gathered yourself. Therefore, the last chapter of this book discusses how to locate and use oral history documents collected by others.

8. See, for instance, Daniel Lerner, "Interviewing Frenchmen," pp. 187–94.

