

*Using
interviews
to uncover
the past and
preserve it
for the
future*

Doing Oral History

A Practical Guide



Donald A. Ritchie

Doing
Oral
History

SECOND EDITION

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To Anne Ritchie

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Most human affairs happen without leaving vestiges or records of any kind behind them. The past, having happened, has perished with only occasional traces. To begin with, although the absolute number of historical writings is staggering, only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed. . . . And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to historians' attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian.

Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (1950)

the digital revolution was the creation of the H-Net lists, in which specialists in many fields communicate with each other via an e-mailed list service. I owe much gratitude to all those oral historians who contributed to the H-Oralhist list, sending in questions, suggestions, announcements, warnings, and solutions, with much pragmatic advice drawn from their own experiences that I have incorporated into *Doing Oral History*.

The Internet has been both a godsend and a vexation for oral historians. After struggling to find ways to bring their interviews to the attention of more researchers and to the general public, oral historians found the Internet ideally suited for disseminating collection catalogs, interview transcripts and sound recordings, along with related illustrations and memorabilia. Researchers now pay virtual visits to far-flung archives and read entire transcripts online or do word searches for specific topics. Students have particularly made use of the new medium, and the number of “hits” that interviews receive on the Internet far exceed the traffic that they sustained in traditional archives. But the Internet also generated new ethical and legal issues and new debates among oral historians about the appropriate way to proceed. Both the rewards and the pitfalls of putting oral histories online became recurring themes of the new edition.

Beyond digital technology, a growing interest in memory has placed the work of oral historians and public historians more squarely within the mainstream historical scholarship. Grappling with issues of public memory—from official histories, parades and reenactments to public monuments and designated landmarks—historians have examined how people have constructed the past to make it useful to them in the present. As they gradually recognized how collective memory can preserve or distort a community’s past, scholars grew more appreciative of oral history. How, what, and why people remember and narrate the past is, after all, the primary business of the oral historian. This convergence of interests is reflected in the number of oral history programs that have added memory to their titles, from the Oral History and Community Memory Institute and Archive at Monterey Bay, California, and the Center for the Study of History and Memory in Bloomington, Indiana, to the Centre for Popular Memory in Cape Town, South Africa.

The appearance of Institutional Review Boards on college campuses has also significantly affected oral historians. Established to review medical and psychological research on human subjects, the boards have spread into the social sciences and humanities, often misapplying criteria designed for questionnaire-based, quantitative methodologies to oral historians’ open-ended qualitative interviewing. It is a troubling issue with which the Oral History Association and the American Association of University Professors have grappled to devise means of preserving academic freedom in oral history research.

A more positive trend has been the globalization of oral history. Whereas past centers of oral history lay primarily in North America and Western Europe, the digital revolution together with sudden political and social changes have shifted much of the dynamic of oral history around the world to include the former Soviet bloc, Asia, Africa, South America and the South Pacific. The inadequacy of written documentation from previous regimes and colonial powers has accelerated the need—and even the demand—for oral history. From the local to the national level, governments have come to see the value of oral history and have mandated and funded specific projects. At the same time, the democratic impulse of oral history has convinced many practitioners that it is “time to hand the mike to the people.” Oral historians are increasingly training students and community members to collect interviews themselves. Since the first appearance of *Doing Oral History*, the International Oral History Association has held meetings in Sweden, Brazil, Turkey and South Africa, each meeting producing multiple volumes of conference proceedings. Much of the new material in the book reflects projects under way around the world. Despite differences in the subjects being studied in their diverse places, oral historians share many commonalities in methods and techniques. Universally, they have encountered the tendency of oral history to confound rather than to confirm their assumptions, confronting them with often conflicting viewpoints. Oral history derives its value not from resisting the unexpected, but from relishing it. By adding an ever wider range of voices to the story, oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex—and more interesting.

“Oh, you do that vocal history,” someone once said, trying to fathom oral history. That identification was half-right, since oral history thrives on talking, largely by the interviewee. The interviewer’s task is to do thorough research beforehand, then ask meaningful questions, suppressing the urge to talk and listening instead. Yet it always seems amusing that oral historians, who have disciplined themselves to be silent during interviews, behave so loquaciously when they gather at professional conferences. The truth is that oral historians love to talk. As the only historians who deal exclusively with the living, they have to be convivial enough to establish rapport with interviewees, to put them at ease and encourage candor. Practitioners of the craft of posing questions, oral historians also find themselves constantly questioning their own concepts, methods, and applications of new technology. Those who collect the voices of history make their own voices heard on how to do and use oral history.

It is impossible to pinpoint a place on the globe where people are not now doing oral history. Since the appearance of the first recording devices, from wax cylinder to wire recorder to reel-to-reel, cassette, videocassette, and digital

audio tape, and mini-disk recorders, interviewers have questioned politicians and protestors, indigenous peoples and immigrants, artists and artisans, soldiers and civilians, the sacred and the secular. Oral historians have recorded the reminiscences of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, the Japanese-American internment, and the Soviet Gulags. Interviews have also captured the everyday experiences of families and communities, whether in inner cities, satellite suburbs, or remote villages. When historians came to realize that women and racial and ethnic minorities were missing from the pages of most history texts, oral historians recorded their voices to construct a more diverse and accurate portrait of the past.

Archives of oral history interviews exist throughout the world and in every state and territory of the United States, ranging from a few tapes housed in the local history collection of a neighborhood public library to thousands of transcripts preserved at major university libraries. Inside the federal government, oral historians have collected testimony about national parks and historical sites, diplomatic maneuvering, military strategies, intelligence activities, space flights, and social security and welfare programs. Over time, this information has been returned to the public in countless books and articles, museum exhibits, folk-life festivals, radio programs, documentary films, and web sites—indeed, the development of the Internet has permitted the worldwide dissemination of oral history transcripts and sound recordings.

The real impact of the oral history movement may not be fully realized until well into the future. Although the earliest recorded memories date back into the nineteenth century—one transcript at the Columbia Oral History Research Office contains firsthand recollections of the bloody New York City draft riots of 1863—most of the collected interviews have been with contemporary figures discussing recent events. Individual researchers do not always need to wait for archival oral history collections to release interviews; armed with their own tape recorders, they can go forth themselves to question whoever is willing to answer. But as generations pass and participants in historic events are no longer living, future researchers will have to depend on what earlier interviews collected, processed, and deposited in archives. How will these future researchers judge our work? How much of today's oral history will be considered an important supplement to the written documentation of our time, or dismissed as superficial and superfluous? How much of what we do will be preserved, and how much will be lost? Oral historians need to look beyond their own immediate needs to consider the corpus of work they will leave for the future.

Doing Oral History raises many questions and provides answers that address the range of current practices and considerations. Its question-and-answer

format is intended not as a catechism of the true faith but as a dialogue between the reader and the author, similar to that of an oral history interview. Questions ranging from the open-ended (“What is oral history?”) to the specific (“Should transcripts reproduce accents and dialects?”) are intended for those conducting group projects, working as individual researchers, establishing oral history archives, videotaping, teaching, and seeking to make use of oral histories in various forms of public presentation. These questions have repeatedly been asked at oral history workshops, particularly by those just entering into oral history. The answers offer realistic and practical advice while maintaining the standards that oral historians have collectively devised and promoted. Some questions come from more established practitioners who are reevaluating their methods and missions midway through their projects. The answers seek to be as serviceable to veterans as to novices.

Early in the oral history movement, the director of Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office, Louis Starr, lamented the absence of manuals for interviewers but wondered how useful any single book would be, since every interviewer would have a different personality and style and every subject would have its distinctive requirements. Subsequently, manuals and fieldwork guides have appeared in profusion, reflecting the many disciples that employ the interview technique and differing according to the standards, practices, and technology at the time they were written and the backgrounds and interests of their authors. Historians, archivists, librarians, folklorists, anthropologists, educators, journalists, linguists, and gerontologists have contributed to the burgeoning literature. This book draws from that body of scholarship as well as from my personal experience: as a historian, I use interviews as part of my research, and I conduct an archival oral history program for the U.S. Senate Historical Office. Although my work has been largely in political and public history, my contacts with the many state, regional, national, and international oral history associations have given me opportunities to view the far reaches and creative diversity of the field.

From 1988 to 1991, I coordinated the efforts of the Oral History Association (OHA) to revise and improve its professional code of principles and standards and its evaluation guidelines. In such a fluid and dynamic field, these fundamentals plainly needed reexamination after a generation in use. Several appointed committees addressed interviewing, processing, videotaping, teaching oral history, the roles of independent researchers, and ethical issues. The committees discussed and debated every conceivable aspect of oral history and presented their findings at two consecutive OHA meetings, where the members further debated, amended, and eventually adopted the new guidelines.

Numerous disagreements occurred during this process, raising eyebrows and voices over this or that practice, because oral historians represent many fields that often have different objectives and terminology. But a consensus finally emerged from this process, the findings of which are incorporated throughout this book (and are reprinted in appendix 1).

Not every oral historian will agree with every point made here, since there is no uniform way of doing oral history, and unconventional approaches may sometimes work well. The principles and standards were established for good reasons, but for every rule there has been an exception that works. Oral historians welcome innovation and imagination. Rather than seek to make all interviewers march like soldiers in cadence, this book aims to help them first think carefully about what they are doing and to be aware of potential consequences.

The questions and answers that follow deal with so many principles and potential pitfalls that they may intimidate some beginning oral historians. But awareness of the issues should not paralyze the process. Oral history interviewing may not be easy, but it can be enormously satisfying and rewarding to meet and engage in dialogue with memorable individuals and to make sure that otherwise neglected aspects of the past will be preserved for the future.

Most oral historians learn by doing, and our understanding of the theories of interviewing and our interpretation have more often followed than preceded our interviewing. *Doing Oral History* seeks to provide practical advice and reasonable explanations for those planning to conduct and collect oral history interviews. Its emphasis is on doing; planning is essential for the success of an oral history project, but I have seen project directors fret for years without actually conducting any interviews. They worried about raising money, about what types of questions would be legitimate, about whom to interview, and additional problems that other projects were capable of solving. My recommendation is always to stop worrying and actually do some interviews. Projects can begin small and grow as funds become available and personnel gain experience. Finishing just one interview gives a project something tangible to show for its efforts, something to present to funders and to use as a mode for volunteer interviewers. Even a poor interview offers mistakes from which a project can learn. Lengthy deliberations and delays run the risk that desired interviewees will die before they can be interviewed, for oral historians are in a perpetual contest with the actuarial realities.

Because the costs of doing oral history vary widely and the technology associated with it changes rapidly, this book does not give estimates for operating budgets, such as the cost per hour for interviewing or transcribing, nor does it endorse particular equipment. Anything so specific would become out-of-date

almost upon publication. Readers planning to launch an oral history project would be better advised to contact other projects in their locality for cost estimates and equipment recommendations. There are also no mechanical descriptions here of how tape recorders or video cameras work, since the author boasts no mechanical skill other than being able to turn on a tape recorder and check periodically to make sure it is functioning properly. Nor should this book be taken for a cookbook of recipes that specify the precise measurements of ingredients and instructions to guarantee satisfying results. Instead, it offers a wide-ranging discussion of the methods of oral history, with notes and a bibliography that can lead those with specific queries to more specialized sources.

Each chapter presents a different role related to oral history: starting a project, doing interviews, processing interviews, using interviews in independent research, videotaping, preserving interviews in libraries and archives, teaching, and presenting the material to various publics. Few oral historians are involved in all of those phases, and most will specialize only in a few aspects. But rather than confine themselves to a single niche, readers should examine the complexity of oral history. Interviewers need to understand thoroughly what archivists want from the process, and vice versa. Teachers and students should consider aspects of public presentation, and audio interviewers should have at least some curiosity about videotaping. The various chapters offer glimpses of each area and suggest further reading.

More useful than any written sources, however, were the many oral historians with whom I have talked and compared experiences over the years. I owe special thanks to Terry Birdwhistell, who prompted me to write this book and whose advice and editorial judgment I depended on throughout its writing. Martha Ross introduced me to oral history as a research tool and to the network of oral history associations. Richard Baker gave me the opportunity to create an oral history project at the U.S. Senate and the exceptional experience of uncovering the Senate's history through the observations of senators and career staff.

Oral History Association presidents Ronald Marcello and Lila Goff commissioned and supported the revisions of the OHA's principles and standards and evaluation guidelines. In coordinating those efforts, I received extraordinary assistance from committee chairs Sherna Gluck, Linda Shopes, Pamela Henson, Barry Lanman, George Mehaffy, and Terry Birdwhistell, and from all the other committee members. The exchange of memoranda, draft reports, and conference calls and the face-to-face meetings that went into the project constituted my complete reeducation as an oral historian.

Many colleagues and friends have generously read and wisely commented on various portions of this book, among them Frank Clearfield, Maygene Daniels,

Barry Lanman, David Mould, John Neuenschwander, Mary Kay Quinlan, Terri Schorzman, Brien Williams, and Mark Zadrozny. Charles T. Morrissey, a prolific writer on oral history methods and proficient trainer of interviewers, submitted his helpful editorial impressions on tape. Cullom Davis, Michael Devine, Ronald Marcello and John Neuenschwander provided welcome breaks during spring-training baseball seasons, where oral history was discussed between innings. My able editor at Oxford, Nancy Toff, conducts her own oral histories with flutists. This book is dedicated to my wife, Anne Ritchie, who does oral history interviewing for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and whose companionship, advice, and keen memory I rely upon daily.

An Oral History of Our Time

What is oral history?

Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet. Oral history does not include random taping, such as President Richard Nixon's surreptitious recording of his White House conversations, nor does it refer to recorded speeches, wiretapping, personal diaries on tape, or other sound recordings that lack the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.¹

To avoid repeating common mistakes, oral historians have created standards for doing interviews, and established principles for dealing ethically with their interviewees. But oral history is too dynamic and creative a field to be entirely captured by any single definition. For every rule, an exception has worked. Imaginative interviewers are constantly developing and sharing new methods and uses of oral history. Any definition of the oral history process, or any method of interviewing, must reflect the goals of the specific project, the resources available, and other practical considerations.²

When did people begin collecting oral history?

As distinct from oral traditions—stories that societies have passed along in spoken form from generation to generation—oral history *interviewing* has been occurring since history was first recorded. Three thousand years ago, scribes of the Zhou dynasty in China collected the sayings of the people for the use of court