On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction

Ronald J. Grele

Most oral histories have been used and will continue to be used to gather information: data about the events of the past. But they can also be used to discover unfolding consciousness, to document the varieties of ideology, the creation of meaning, and the more subjective aspects of historical experience. A good interview allows the memorist enough room to construct a story, to express his or her feelings about a recalled event and its meaning, and to speculate on the consequences of the event being recalled; it is an interview that allows the person being interviewed great range in deciding the agenda.

Like any other document, an oral history must be used with a critical eye. Written correspondence, photographs, films, statistical records—all have their own methods of creation, histories, and conventions that must be considered when evaluating their use. Just as we would not use a letter found in a personal correspondence file without some judgment about the person to whom it is addressed, the relationship between that person and the person writing the letter, and their varying perspectives on the world, we should not use an interview without the same awareness of how the interviewer and the memorist pictured their audience, posterity, and future readers. Much of what we are taught as graduate students concerns itself with such questions about the creation and context of sources. As new methodologies using new types of sources, such as numbers and things, have emerged new concerns have emerged about the way to use them. Such is the case with oral histories, and this short introduction attempts to respond to those concerns.

Evaluating Interviews

Interviews are conversations; perhaps not in the form we usually associate with the term—an equal give and take—but in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, what we record and present to the researcher is a conversation. Thus the interview will roam; pieces of a story will appear in many different places in the conversation, the same story will be used to illustrate more than one point, and the organization of the conversation will be determined as much by the social situation

Ronald J. Grele is director of the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University.
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or the feelings evoked as by the logic of the narrative, or the historical evidence being discussed and evaluated. The rhetorical necessity of the moment, the fancy of the memoirist, the imaginations of both interviewer and interviewee will often determine what is and what is not discussed at any given moment, or the connections made between one event and another. The interview will not be presented to the researcher as a well-honed article, logical in its argument and buttressed by the usual historical evidentiary apparatus. In that sense it is unedited. There will be interruptions, false starts, gropings for interpretations, grappling for precise wording, confusions, corrections. The tape and transcript, if well done, will contain all the flavor and spontaneity of conversation, but at the cost of a tight historical or literary logic.

Of course, the interviewer did not ask exactly the right question at the moment and in the form demanded by the needs of any one researcher using the oral history. Each interview situation is different, each interviewer's logic different. But if the interviewer had undertaken his or her research preparation with care and diligence and was skilled at asking questions, then somewhere in the interview should be the discussion sought by the researcher. The historian using an oral history must come to it with an open mind. He or she will find questions he or she would never have asked; some will be off the point, others will open new ways to view the events and experiences under investigation or will offer a new insight. But there will not be an exact fit between the historian's research needs and the document. The researcher will not always find the perfectly apt quote or anecdote, all polished and ready for citation. Oral histories are cumulative in their effect. They give a heightened sense of the times under discussion, illuminating personalities and capturing the sense of what it was like to live through certain experiences or historical moments.

Oral histories must be evaluated with care. It is important to have as much information as possible about the creation of the interview: when and where it was conducted, the circumstances of the meeting, the prior arrangements made to govern the situation, who else was there, who the interviewer was, how well prepared he or she was. Since oral histories are joint creations, knowledge of the interviewer is as critical to an evaluation of the source as knowledge of the interviewee. Unfortunately, most oral history programs do not collect and keep detailed interviewers' notes like those kept by folklorists, anthropologists, or linguists, although some do compile interview histories, two-to-three paragraph descriptions of the circumstances of the interview. Thus, it is often difficult to uncover information about the interview or the background research and thinking of the interviewer. Usually, however, in any particular program, the interviews in any one field (i.e., medicine, architecture) have been conducted by one person. By reading the full series of interviews one can gain a sense of the interviewer's training, background, preparation, biases, or quality of mind. In all probability, any researcher using an interview has investigated the life of the memoirist. It is equally important to be aware of the interviewer.

Oral histories are products of the time of their creation. Interviews about New Dealers' experiences in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s conducted in the 1950s are documents of that later decade, not of the 1930s. They reflect the state of the bibli-
ography and the concerns of the field in the 1950s. Oral historians do try to predict the interest of future historians, but this is educated guessing at best. Who, interviewing in the 1950s, could have predicted the interest in the history of women that has emerged in the last two decades or the questions that historians of women now want answered? Sometimes it is possible to reinterview and ask new questions of the same person, but usually not. Thus, in fundamental ways, interviews remain time-bound, as do other documents. A skillful interviewer and a good storyteller can, in tandem, recreate the sense of the past, but it is always done in the present.

An oral history, above all, is the product of the person interviewed and of his or her commitment to the collective historical project. Most people do not lie purposely, and when someone does, a prepared interviewer can usually detect and counter it. "Isn't that interesting, Senator. I have a copy of a letter you wrote at the time. When did you change your mind on that issue?" The way in which an event is remembered, however, its importance, and the significance of the role the individual talking played in that event are subject to a variety of interpretations. The discussion is always filtered through memory and ideology: its nature is influenced by the language ability of the person talking, the social situation, the presentation of self, and the person's vision of himself or herself in history. Whenever possible, through the use of documents, photographs, and references to secondary works or to other interviews, the interviewer will try to jog the memory and focus the discussion. At times, however, nothing works to generate recall or to halt the self-serving interpretation. Some people simply do not remember some events, or more likely, they do not think the event significant enough to recall. Others have vested their stories with certain meanings and have told the stories in patterned ways many times during their lives. They are not to be dissuaded in the storytelling session. In addition, there is the natural tendency in an oral history interview, and perhaps in all biography or autobiography, to move the narrator to stage center, to accent their roles in events. In other situations memory will distort, nostalgia will take over. As the bad times fade away the good times are recalled with brilliance. History becomes the unfolding of one success story after another as the dominant progressive ideology conquers all.

The failures of memory are often more complex than simple failure of recall. Recently the teenaged son of an old friend asked me to tell him about the musical tastes of my generation when we were in our teens. I talked about our love affair with jazz, and I told him of coming into New York City in the 1950s and of the various clubs we went to. When I finished my story, his father, my friend, pointed out to me that I must be mistaken. One of the clubs I mentioned had not been in existence then. He knew because he lived close to it. After checking various sources such as newspaper advertisements, performance reviews, and journals, I found that I was wrong. Yet, I could recall with clear detail the tables at which we had sat, the groups we had seen or listened to, the conversations we had, who was there, the seasons. I was obviously recalling a different time or a different place. But in another sense, my answer to the original question was not wrong. Our musical tastes did center on jazz, we did come to clubs in New York City, the groups dis-
cussed were groups of that time. That mangled memory is still, in some sense, a
valid document of that experience.

The researcher will find two major types of interviews in an oral history collection:
life histories, which may run to hundreds of hours, and briefer interviews organized
around one experience or the history of one institution. Both types of interviews
should be used with the qualifications already noted. Longer interviews, however,
because they offer an opportunity for a fuller exposition of a person's historical view,
combining biographical or personal detail and historical observation, present par-
ticular problems.

In all interviews there is a tendency to impose an order on the events discussed.
That is what we do as historians. In that sense, when we ask our memorists to recall
events, we are asking them to be their own historians, to impose an order, an in-
terpretation. It may or may not resemble that of the historian. One interpretation
comes from living through an experience, the other from studying it. Neither is
privileged over the other. They are simply different and should be understood as
different. When a historian uses an interview, the conflict over meaning, the
struggle to come to grips with the linked but separate interpretations, must be kept
in mind. It is the organizing element of the interview. It determines what is dis-
cussed, how it is discussed, and what it means. Sometimes an interviewer, or an in-
terviewee, is quite creative in imposing that order; at other times, neither is. A good
storyteller very often totally dominates an interview, sweeping the interviewer along
in the flow of language, image, and emotion. In such cases we have to remind our-
theselves that the best story is not always the most historically useful. Sometimes the
poorly told story, the least quotable quote offers a better insight into what actually
happened than the sweeping epic interpretation. Through all of this, however, there
will be a pattern that reveals the mind in action and the imagination at work.

If the creation of oral history interviews is so encrusted with subjectivity, what
is their use beyond the obvious—as repositories for facts not available elsewhere?
Their very subjectivity offers us new and different information. If the interviewer
has responded with insight and sensitivity, an interview reveals the unfolding of a
life in the same way that a finely crafted autobiography does. Interviews give us the
slant, the stance, the views of the participants. Thereby, in social history projects—
such as the Southern Oral History Collection at the University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill; or the Rosie the Riveter Revisited Project at California State Univer-
sity at Long Beach—they give us a slant or view that has not been documented with
regularity elsewhere, enlarge the historical universe, and cause us to ask new ques-
tions about what actually happened in the past and how people live through history.

Using Oral History Collections

There is no one listing of all interviews held in every collection in the United States.
But several reference works will aid in locating interviews, gauging their extent, and
learning of their accessibility. Consulting these sources can reduce the time and
money spent on fruitless research trips and can help the researcher judge how much
time to spend at what locations.

The closest thing to a national listing of interviews appears in the National Union
Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC). Although NUCMC ought to be the
start of one's search, the listing is incomplete. In general, projects listed in NUCMC
are those that transcribe and those containing ten or more memoirs, except for
smaller collections of wide historical interest. Since listings depend on the initiative
of program directors or staff, they are often incomplete or out-of-date. General
listings of projects or interview series are far more complete than listings of in-
dividual or biographical interviews and are described in greater detail.

Two published directories of oral history programs give the researcher some sense
of the areas in which individual programs focus their collecting: Oral History Collec-
tions, by Alan M. Meckler and Ruth McMullin, and Directory of Oral History Pro-
grams, edited by Patsy Cook. The first lists some collections down to the interview
level and includes some non–United States collections. The second lists more
projects and is more up-to-date. A new directory is currently being compiled by
Allen Smith of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons
College. This project plans both a publication and an on-line electronic data base
to provide current information on oral history collections between editions of the
directory.

Some state and regional listings are available, such as the Directory for New Jersey
projects published by the New Jersey Historical Commission and the recently com-
piled directory covering Arizona and Southern California published by the South-
west Oral History Association (SOHA). The Directory of the Oral History Associa-
tion lists all state and regional groups and their addresses. These groups can be
consulted to discover whether local or regional directories of oral history programs
are available.

All the directories mentioned contain information on the general areas of interest
of various programs, the size of collections, availability of tapes and/or transcripts,
hours of operation, and names of contact persons. They do not list individual inter-
views, although some regional groups plan to create computer listings of memoirs.
At this time, however, the researcher must rely on the published catalogs of in-
dividual programs, many of which can be found in the reference rooms of most re-
search libraries. University collections, such as the Columbia University Oral History
Research Office, the University of California Regional Oral History Office, the Baylor

3 For information, contact: Allen Smith, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston, MA 02115.
Using Oral History

University Institute for Oral History, or the University of California, Los Angeles, Oral History Program have widely available published catalogs, although some, like that of the Columbia collection, are in need of updating. Some nonuniversity projects, such as those of the Lutheran Church Archives, the American Jewish Committee, and the Minnesota Historical Society, also publish catalogs or listings of interviews, but more modest or financially restricted programs do not. In such cases if a listing of available interviews exists, it is located at the repository itself, usually as a shelflist. A phone call can often secure a copy of such a list, but sometimes the only way to find out what is available is to visit the collection. As a side effect, some wonderful interviews held by local libraries, historical societies, and community history projects are not consulted and remain, for all intents and purposes, unavailable.

Several oral history programs now make their interviews, or some of them, available for purchase in microform reproduction. Three firms have been active in such efforts: Meckler Publishing, Scholarly Resources (SR), and Chadwyck-Healey. The Meckler listing is the largest, but both SR and Chadwyck-Healey have published interviews done by federal government oral history programs. All will provide information about their publications on request. Since most major research libraries have purchased those interviews, or will do so if requested by interested faculty, particular interviews may be available locally. It is also possible to secure certain interviews through inter-library loan, although most larger programs do not participate, or to obtain copies of transcripts, although most programs impose some limits.

Another source of information about oral histories, which will become more important in the future, are major reference data bases such as the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) or the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). RLIN, which links most research libraries, has developed an archives format, Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) used to list oral histories. The Oral History of the American Left at New York University has listed its interviews in RLIN, and Columbia is now in the process of listing every one of its over five thousand interviews, each with its own description, in RLIN. As more programs join the network, it will be possible for individual researchers to secure a listing of available and relevant oral histories through the use of Library of Congress subject headings. The listings will describe in detail the individual interview, its extent, the interviewer, and any restrictions.

Once a researcher has located the interviews to be consulted, and the programs

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4Information and catalogs can be obtained at the following addresses: Meckler Publishing, 11 Ferry Lane West, Westport, CT 06880; Scholarly Resources, 104 Greenhill Ave., Wilmington, DE 19805; Chadwyck-Healey, 1101 King St., Alexandria, VA 22314.
to be visited, other steps can save time and effort. The introductory pages of program catalogs usually describe how to use the collection, and what, if any, restrictions apply. Usually, oral history programs have small staffs, who may be available only at certain times or on certain days. Reading the catalog carefully will send the researcher to the proper office and save time for actual research.

Legal restrictions on use, imposed by interviewees, may place unique barriers between the researcher and the interviews. Most oral history programs transcribe their interviews, return the transcripts to the persons interviewed for correction and review, and ask them to sign a legal release making the interview available to scholars. Oral historians have traditionally taken the view that all rights to the conversation are held by the memoirist until they have been transferred to the sponsoring institution. In most cases an attempt is made to secure all rights so that the interview can be opened as soon as possible. But in many cases rights are retained by the interviewee or her heirs. While most people do little editing and open their interviews immediately, some do extensive editing or place restrictions on use. Oral history programs have been willing to accept such restrictions in return for candor on the assumption that, in the long run, a franker recollection is more useful. Restrictions generally fall into three categories. Some people close all or portions of the interview for a specified period of time. Other interviewees require anyone seeking to read an interview, or to listen to the tapes, to secure written permission from them to do so. (Such permission must, of course, be secured beforehand.) Some interviewees require the researcher to gain permission from the person interviewed, or from a representative of the repository, to cite or quote from the interview. This last restriction is similar to that governing use of private correspondence in manuscript collections. When permission must be obtained from the oral history program, a staff member is usually assigned the task of checking and verifying the citation. Most researchers consider this a valuable service since annoying errors are often caught before publication. In some cases a program will charge for this service. Most restrictions are noted in program catalogs. If a catalog is not available it is probably wise to telephone in advance to ascertain what, if any, restrictions may apply to an interview one wishes to consult.

Access to the tape is in some cases restricted by the agreement with the memoirist. In other cases, heavy editing has altered the document so completely that the tape and transcript bear little resemblance to one another. In such situations the transcript is the agreed-upon document of record, not the tape. Usually, however, because the editing is limited, tapes may also be used; the choice being left to the researcher. Here, one’s decision is often limited by time available, and facilities provided. Most programs do transcribe and also preserve tapes, although at one time many did not. Smaller programs with limited finances may not transcribe, but they will usually be able to provide brief summaries indicating what was discussed on each side or on each tape. Some few will have no summary or tape index and the researcher will be required to listen through the full interview to find specific sections. Some Canadian programs, and at least one in the United States—that of the
State Historical Society of Wisconsin—have devised relatively sophisticated systems of tape indexing based on sound signals spaced at five to ten minute intervals.

Most archivists and many oral historians consider the tape to be the original document, and they urge researchers to consult it rather than a transcript. They argue that by imposing a written form on spoken dialogue the transcript distorts meaning, inevitably contains errors, and conveys none of the meanings imparted through inflection, cadence, tone, or volume. Even notes in the transcript such as ‘irony,’ ‘sarcasm,’ or ‘laughter’ do not fully imply a given verbal gesture. Others argue that the transcript establishes a norm for citation that will not vary from usage to usage, that notes or corrections made on reflection add to the interview and make it more reliable, and that an insistence on the taped conversation as the only document fetishizes the moment and downgrades the substance of the conversation.

For some types of research, such as investigations into forms of expression, or for performance studies, the tape must be used. In others, the transcript will suffice. Ideally both should be consulted. Very often, however, the decision is made on the basis of time available. It is much quicker to read a transcript than to listen to the tape. Researchers with limited amounts of time will resist using the tapes despite pleas by program staff. Oral historians usually argue that only one of every thousand patrons asks to use the tapes, which corresponds to our experience at Columbia. With increased requests for tapes for radio programming (rather than transcripts for citation in publications), better sound quality, and better systems of indexing, that ratio will change. Many programs that have traditionally relied almost totally on transcript use are responding to those changes by making tapes available, setting aside the necessary space, and purchasing the necessary equipment.

Neither tapes nor transcripts are perfect sources. Fieldwork conditions are not always the best. In some places the sound quality may be very poor, the voices garbled or almost inaudible. In other sections there may be cross talk, ticking clocks, or animals. A transcript is a mediated document—mediated by the transcriber who formed the sentences, by our traditional orthography, by the staff member who reviewed and corrected the original transcript, by the interviewee’s editorial review. In minor or important ways, each mediation has altered the interpretation advanced in the original conversation.

Each interview will be judged in the light of the questions brought to it by the researcher. Most program directors can recall instances where one historian has been critical of a particular interview while another has found it to be the most useful in the collection. Even very poorly conducted interviews can take on new meanings when placed in the context of a body of other materials, or other interviews. Most programs will appreciate the researcher’s comments on or criticisms of any particular interview, corrections of errors, or warnings to other readers.

As one becomes more accustomed to using oral histories one becomes less prone to criticize them, perhaps because one ceases to attempt to find the last answer, the final conclusion, or the perfect quote. Oral histories are but one form of documentation. In some cases they are not the best form; in others they are the only form.
When used with care and modesty they increase our understanding of our past and reveal hidden levels of discourse. By understanding the basic rules of their creation, collection, and presentation, by treating oral histories as what they are, historians can use them creatively and imaginatively. It is our hope that this introduction can aid in that mission.