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Oral History: Provenance and Intellectual Access

David S. Miller

In the second half of the twentieth century, researchers in all fields of study have become more sensitive to documentary gaps, especially the paucity of materials by and about social non-elites. With increasing frequency, oral history projects have been carried out to add these forgotten voices to the historical record and thereby create what may be termed new historical evidence. In the words of one public historian, "a new and integrative paradigm" is crafted out of such initiatives, whereby the oral testimonies of the heretofore ignored are synthesized with the documentation of the powerful. The result is, at least in theory, a more balanced and faithful view of society and history.¹ Such a self-conscious effort to reshape history is troubling to many researchers, those who must interpret

¹ Jo Blatti, "Public History and Oral History," *Journal of American History* 80 (September 1993): 615.

these new records as well as those whose job it is to expose and render their context. Nevertheless, despite its critics, oral history has become a popular method of inquiry and has earned a degree of historiographical significance.

As the concept has evolved over the last few decades, oral history has developed into one of the primary strategies to document social, economic, and racial non-elites.² For an archival institution wishing to enhance a particular aspect of its collection, investing in this (relatively) new historical method is tempting. However, as James Fogerty notes, it is so costly a process to perform well that a lack of funding can greatly undermine its value.³ This value, both evidential and informational, will be discussed in greater depth below.

The form, function, and worth of oral history are contentious issues not only for practitioners, but also for the archivists who must provide intellectual access to these sources. There is discussion within the profession — part of a greater debate over its present and future role — whether it is the archivist's duty to create oral history. Beyond this, there is the practical matter of accurately and responsibly arranging and describing the oral record once it is acquired. Because of the wide variance in practice and use, and because many are still unsure what oral sources

² Though, of course, it is not limited to the margins of society. Witness the massive mainstream undertakings centered around the fiftieth anniversary of the D day invasion.

³ James Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," *American Archivist* 46 (1983): 154.

are exactly documenting, describing oral history is problematic.

This essay will focus on the nature of oral history as a documentary form, its potential meanings, and some fundamental issues involved in its description and arrangement. Along the way, some strategies for providing intellectual access to oral history sources, or as some call them, "sound archives,"⁴ will be discussed. The manner of evidence these oral sources engender, along with their place within the universe of documentation traditionally maintained in archives, will also be considered.

Records — written and unwritten — are nearly always created with one eye toward their outside use. Stories are legion of government offices distributing one memo "for the files" and designating other sensitive communications — perhaps more honest and revealing ones — for destruction. For example, the "FBI files" case revealed that documents within that agency were color-coded according to their sensitivity. Those which showed evidence of illegal operations and other shady practices were never to become part of the permanent record. Only the most harmless and, by extension, historically useless documents came to constitute the bureau's record of itself.

A common criticism of oral history, that it merely reframes history according to the recollections of those with

⁴ See, for example, Frederick J. Stielow, *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); and David Roberts, "Archives and Sound Archives — What's the Difference," *Archives and Manuscripts* 12 (November 1984).

an axe to grind, can also be leveled against the traditional universe of documentation. In fact, an examination of traditional records reveals that they too rely on oral accounts, but that the orality is simply filtered through a chain of command, or an administrative structure, on its way into the written record. Some researchers seem to feel that an indirect oral account "becomes" the objective truth when written down. Stielow argues that print dependence "somehow supposes that the human behind the written record is more prone to 'truth' than the same individual in speaking."⁵ The powerful few document themselves and their actions in this way; the many powerless and disfranchised do not and cannot. So goes a common argument for the need to create oral history. If performed correctly, its attempts to document society "from the bottom up" may begin to correct the institutional and elitist bias of written history.

Of course, oral history (or, rather, its practitioners) has its own biases. Its approach has tended in recent years to record and celebrate the more palatable voices of "ordinary people." University of Kentucky sociologist Kathleen Blee notes in her study of the Ku Klux Klan that the oral historian's emphasis on "egalitarianism, reciprocity, and authenticity" when dealing with non-elites is "difficult to defend when studying ordinary people who are active in the

⁵ Stielow, *Management of Oral History Sound Archives*, 23.

politics of intolerance, bigotry, or hatred."⁶ Obviously, the strategy is questionable when dubious informants are used to fill gaps in the documentation of transient issues. Oral history must always strive to transcend its medium and its self-consciousness. By exploiting individual speech and memory to create a new documentary form, oral historians must remain vigilant not to repeat individual bias into the record.⁷

Oral history has become all but essential to understanding the more traditional records maintained in archives.⁸ Indeed, many researchers of recent events have even noted that the nature of modern record keeping makes some form of it "an imperative."⁹ Because of the rapid proliferation of records and the attendant subtle decrease in their historical value, oral histories can provide, in the words of Donald Ritchie, "oral road maps through the

⁶ Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *Journal of American History* 80 (September 1993): 597.

⁷ This, perhaps, holds oral history to a higher standard than other record systems. More than anything else, it is a plea for creators to do a better job of explaining themselves and their motives. Of course, government agencies and businesses — whose records are maintained in archives with little reservation — also have motives other than truth, history, and beneficence. The competent researcher is a cynic who can ignore ostensible content while divining context and deeper motive.

⁸ Bruce H. Bruemmer, "Access to Oral History: A National Agenda," *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 496.

⁹ Fogerty, "Filling the Gap," 150.

documentary thicket" and clarify the written record as it is now constituted.¹⁰

Some argue that oral "texts" are not significantly different from certain written ones already acquired by archives and heavily used by researchers. First-hand accounts of any kind, even those set to paper, are considered oral history in some quarters. One historian speaks of wanting to study the past through existing documentation:

To go back...and still retain the flavor of first-person recollections, I had to look to other sources of first-hand, off-the-cuff, unrehearsed information. So I chose to regard letters, diaries, and testimony at trials, royal commissions, and inquests as oral history.¹¹

Such a liberal definition — sometimes expanded even to encompass legal affidavits and depositions — largely ignores the role of the interviewer in the creation of the oral record. Unlike oral history, none of the above were expressly created to "be" history; all were created in service of other, presumably more pressing, concerns. These are records in the traditional sense; they are consequences of an event. But, Morrissey argues that while

¹⁰ Donald A. Ritchie, "Oral Histories May Help Scholars Plow Through the Rapidly Accumulating Mass of Federal Paper," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 35 (2 November 1988): A44.

¹¹ Lynne Bowen quoted in Charles T. Morrissey, "Beyond Oral Evidence: Speaking (Con)Strictly About Oral History," *Archival Issues* 17 (1992): 90.

such records are no doubt historically valuable, "because oral historians as interviewers exert no performatory role in the co-creation, they cannot be termed oral histories."¹²

To analyze what is finally produced by an oral history project, the archivist must concentrate primarily on provenance and the conditions of creation. Just as to handle any other record means delving into the institutional or biographical pasts of the creator, so must the description and arrangement of oral history focus on the creative process more than the final document itself — whatever that may be in the case of an oral source. Decontextualized oral sources are but curiosities. They may hold some interest to a repository or a researcher, but much less than if they had a documented reason to exist, a clear provenance. This fundamental archival principle must be applied as rigorously to these deliberate creations as it is to those organic records which are by-products of some sort of transaction.

Above all, oral history is evidence of itself and its own creation. The action from which it results is the rather synthetic situation of an interview, or in a larger sense, the initiative of the oral history project creator. This essentially inorganic nature makes for difficult application of archival principles. Arrangement and description are problematic for other equally daunting reasons. For example, as for form, what is the final product of an oral history project and how do archivists describe it for research access? Does an oral history consist of the mutually edited transcript of an

¹² Morrissey, "Beyond Oral Evidence," 92.

interview, or is it the "raw" recording of it, warts and all? Or is it all of the above, and the interviewer's notes as well? Can oral history be described with any degree of certainty without its attendant documentation?

First of all, what is oral history? Or, as Teresa Barnett of the University of California-Los Angeles appropriately asks, "How does an oral history mean?"¹³ There are as many definitions as practitioners. Most conventionally define it in a mouthful, like one director of a university oral history program, as "a process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past which are of historical significance."¹⁴ Oral history pioneer Willa Baum, herself the author of two oral history manuals, has developed five characteristics of a source that define it as oral history. Broadly, her conception of oral history consists of

- 1) a tape-recorded interview, or interviews, in question-and-answer format,

- 2) conducted by an interviewer who has some, and preferably the more the better, knowledge of the subject to be discussed,

¹³ Teresa Barnett, "Analyzing Oral Texts, or, How Does an Oral History Mean?," *Oral History Review* 18 (Fall 1990): 109.

¹⁴ Alice Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History," *Today's Speech* 22 (Winter 1974): 23.

3) with a knowledgeable interviewee, someone who knows whereof he or she speaks from personal participation or observation (sometimes we allow a second-hand account),

4) on subjects of historical interest (one researcher's history could be someone else's trivia),

5) accessible, eventually, in tapes and/or transcripts to a broad spectrum of researchers.¹⁵

This conception differentiates between oral performances, unwitting recordings which may find their way into a repository, and the fruits of deliberate projects. The rigorous process Baum outlines, in contrast to much which is marketed as oral history, is well thought out, extremely self-conscious, and relatively sure of its direction. A good project must be in its focus neither too broad (without objectives) nor too strict (and closed to revelatory but parenthetical testimony).¹⁶ It is not just a matter of sitting down with a tape recorder and having a conversation about whatever comes up. Indeed, the more complete the interviewer's preparation, the better the evidence generated by oral testimony.

¹⁵ Willa Baum, "The Expanding Role of the Librarian in Oral History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds. (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 389-90.

¹⁶ James B. Lane, "Oral History and Industrial Heritage Museums," *Journal of American History* 80 (September 1993): 617.

The Watergate tapes — though certainly demonstrating the value of the recorded as well as the written word — are prime examples of oral documents which are not oral histories. Although they are oral, and most definitely a part of history, they fail in what Baum terms "the most basic tenet of oral history."¹⁷ That is, not all of the parties involved were aware of the recording, and not all agreed to make the information conveyed available for researchers. The very quality which makes them so interesting to researchers hoping to reconstruct the events of the scandal — a surreptitious air which seems to put the listener in the position of Oval Office eavesdropper — makes them invalid as pure oral history. The tapes belong to the broader category of "oral source", but do not conform to the fundamental guidelines of oral history which have achieved some measure of consensus.

William Moss laid out three classes of oral documentation.¹⁸ The first is the recording of a scripted performance, such as a speech or a dramatic monologue. The second class, to which Nixon's Oval Office tapes belong, is the recording (not necessarily surreptitious) of unrehearsed conversations which are spontaneous and generally concerned with the immediate present. The final category is what is normally considered oral history, following the precepts of Baum and others.

¹⁷ Baum, "The Library in Oral History": 389.

¹⁸ William Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation," *American Archivist* 40 (October 1977): 435.

But what do oral histories mean, practically? To anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin, the construction of oral history is a "profoundly social process." The structuring of individual perception and recall cannot be divorced from its social, historical, and traditional roots.¹⁹ Because of the lack of sources that document, however incompletely, the social construction of memory, a well-done oral history can serve as a valuable research tool in this arena.

History is not simply created by compiling the facts and adding them together according to a formula to reflect the past. The documents within which history is formed are not and cannot be objective. Says Barnett,

[There] are not events and then, incidentally, texts: human reality does not exist outside of the modes in which it is encoded.... In that sense, the event is created only in its recording — in the perception of it, in the memory of it, in the speaking of it, in the writing of it.²⁰

An oral history project is a prime opportunity to examine the ways in which people encode events and create their own history. In this realm, it is not so much the factual validity of

¹⁹ Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4, 10. See also Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²⁰ Barnett, "Analyzing Oral Texts," 109.

testimony that matters, but rather the individual perception of the social factual landscape.

One of the goals of archival description is to somehow account for the supposed evidential and informational value of an historical record or record system. In the particular case of oral history, this is difficult because of, in Blatti's words, "its location in an interpretive terrain that must be negotiated by narrator, interviewer, and ultimately user."²¹ The form of the record itself is the first to consider. While some claim the transcript — or even the **edited** transcript — as the primary oral history source, it is the actual recording of the event which is the most honest and accurate rendering of the evidence of a conversation.

The accepted format of oral history is the interview. The individual who acts as the source of insight and historical perspective around whom oral history is created is called, according to various theoreticians, the interviewee, the narrator, the oral author, or the respondent. One particular practice is to have this respondent review the preliminary transcript of the interview for verification, having him or her correct the text for accuracy and clarity while leaving the verbal style as it is. This then becomes the "primary" source. Supporters of this practice, such as Louis Starr, argue that having the respondent edit the text has the value of turning hearsay into "a document that has much of the

²¹ Blatti, "Public History and Oral History," 615.

standing of a legal deposition."²² To these researchers, whatever verbal nuance may be lost through editing and transcription is a small price to pay for the practical benefit of assuring the internal validity of the source.

As a result, many oral historians search for better, more elaborate methods of transcription to capture the oral history encounter. They essentially attempt to remove orality from the oral source, distilling it into the conventional written form. Though researchers generally work from and naturally cite transcripts, Alessandro Portelli argues,

Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention. The same may be true for transcription of oral sources.²³

It has a practical use in research, but to transcribe is to willfully recontextualize the historical record. A transcription, no matter how good, also cannot capture the subtleties of speech which are so very important to an oral account. Accent, tempo, sarcasm, and irony are but a few of the

²² Louis Starr, "Oral History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*: 6-7.

²³ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 47.

innumerable aspects of oral communication which impart meaning to the listener but which are largely lost to the reader of an interview's written text.²⁴ However, these characteristics of oral testimony are precisely what make a source interesting and valuable.

Despite the serious evidential flaws of the oral history transcript, a great number of researchers find it difficult to use the recorded sources upon which the written are based. In our literate society, most everyone is more comfortable using written accounts. The difficulty of physically manipulating individual tapes, as well as the time involved, makes it somewhat prohibitive to search for the material relevant to one's inquiry. The recording may be the primary source material resulting from an oral history initiative, but it is rather common for users not even to consult the actual tape in their research. Citations are made to the transcript, an inexact practice under the best of circumstances. Indeed, a transcript which is edited by the respondent (or in concert with the interviewer) becomes a different source with a slightly different function, and should be viewed in that fashion. Archivists, in our description of the records, must consider the differing meanings of the transcript and the recording.

Tied to the debate over the evidential repercussions of taping over transcription is the question, so important for researchers and archivists, of project methodology. The

²⁴ For example, in *Narrating Our Pasts*, Tonkin discusses paralinguistic features of speech as used to structure narrative in oral history, particularly in the African tradition.

methodology is the message in oral history. Trevor Lummis observes that since "oral history is a methodology, not a historical sub-field," the contribution it can make to history "depends upon the authenticity of the source, and this is best guaranteed by the rigor of the method.... [P]reserving the tapes as the original source is necessary to establish the provenance and authenticity of the evidence."²⁵ Provenance and authenticity are especially important for archivists attempting to describe these oral sources for use outside the immediate circumstances of their creation.

Similar to describing records in other media, the closer the archivist can come to reconstructing the functional structure out of which the records emanate, the more genuinely framed is the evidence contained within them. The archivist must evaluate oral histories according to their internal integrity as records. Of secondary importance is their actual content. In a sense, integrity has to do with the life-cycle of the oral document, from how it came to be created through the interview and subsequent processing until it is deposited in an archives. With the stages of the oral record's life well documented, the responsibility for evaluating its content will rest for the most part with the researcher. Indeed, only when the life cycle is satisfactorily described can the user gain a true picture of the meanings it embodies and the evidence it contains.

An accurate account of an oral history's creative process is the single most important aspect of its description.

²⁵ Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), 23-24.

Therefore, the archivist must first determine the authorship of the source at hand. It is here where oral history has an advantage over written (non-manuscript) records. It is nearly impossible to determine who the composer of an organizational document actually is. For example, a letter from the executive office of the president may or may not have been composed by the president, leaving much to speculation. On this count at least, oral history leaves little to interpret but the recorded voices.

But another deeper consideration in the determination of meaningful authorship is the nature of the interview process. The interviewer and respondent (as well as the past event and present recollection) are fundamentally enmeshed. The "shared authority" for oral history is one of its defining characteristics.²⁶ Accordingly, it is said that oral history "begins with two persons meeting on a ground of equality to bring together their different types of knowledge and achieve a new synthesis."²⁷ But relying on a forced contemporary interaction, "a negotiation of the narrator's and the interviewer's frames of reference,"²⁸ to create a new integrated memory about the past makes oral history, seemingly more so than written history, subjective and suspect as a resource.

²⁶ See, for example, Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

²⁷ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, xii.

²⁸ Blatti, "Public History and Oral History," 622.

But this is how oral histories are created. The very element which makes it such an exciting methodology for so many people, its humanity, becomes for some its biggest drawback. To be sure, authority extends beyond mere authorship. In essence, it is credibility that researchers are after. Determining an oral history's credibility as source material is largely the task of the researcher or, at some level, an archival appraisal issue. Portelli maintains that oral sources have a "different credibility" from conventional documents and should be judged accordingly. After factual validity is examined, "the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true,' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts."²⁹ The insight into individual recollection and memory formation as a social function is the primary historical evidence to be gleaned from oral history.

Once an oral history record (or the greater oral history project) is deemed credible enough by the repository and worthy of acquisition, the archivist must make the reasoning behind this determination a focus of the description and arrangement. Of course, whether it is the entire project that is valuable — or simply the particular testimony of one or more participants within the project — determines to what level the description should be carried out. As with all records of enduring value, the reason why they should be maintained is what must be described most of all. Here, appraisal and the other archival functions — arrangement,

²⁹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 51.

description, and reference in particular — must come together to assess oral history records at the project level as much as at the interview level. It is then that users will have true intellectual access to oral history.

Gould Colman's advice for the archival description of oral history projects is a coherent and entirely workable strategy that could apply to much of the universe of self-consciously created documentation:

"Perhaps the best an archivist can do is to record the initial objectives and documentation strategy, keep a running account of adjustments between means and ends, and make this record available to those who use the documentation."³⁰

For the well-thought-out projects from which much oral history is born, this makes sense. But as some are loathe (or do not think) to deposit such background information in archives, it is not always possible for the repository to gain a handle on oral documents acquired long after the creation.

The strategies being developed to deal with electronic records, particularly the injection of archival concerns directly into the record creation machinery, can be applied to oral history as well. Due to the wide employment of the methodology, however, it is not practically possible for the archivist to actually have a direct hand in formulating individual oral history projects. This may be accomplished

³⁰ Gould P. Colman, "Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life," *Midwestern Archivist* 12 (1987): 26.

indirectly by getting the word out through various historical and archival organizations that more rigorous methodological and documentary standards are required to clarify and prove the worth of individual projects. The institutional background of the oral history initiative, the interviewer's notes, the way in which the respondents were chosen, all these and other pieces of the puzzle must become part of the oral record. Serious researchers have always done this. In this way, by better elucidating the structure of its creation, the source can be described more as organic documentation rather than voices without context or perspective.

As standards are developed for this relatively new methodology, archival concerns are beginning to be addressed. Based on consultations with the Oral History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Society of American Archivists, the American Historical Association approved guidelines in 1989 that specifically cover interviewing procedures and protocols. Included is the suggestion that interviewers arrange deposit of their interviews in an archival repository capable of providing general research access, although what that means is not entirely clear.³¹ What is clear is that any attendant documentation which helps to frame the oral record is an essential part of description. This documentation must be accounted for, accessioned, and described along with oral

³¹ Cited in David M. Oshinsky, "Oral History: Playing by the Rules," *Journal of American History* 77 (September 1990): 614.

sources, unless archivists wish to treat oral histories as quaint (and meaningless) artifacts.

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