Oral History from Four Perspectives

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(continued from last issue)

IV
SPECIAL CHALLENGES IN ORAL HISTORY

In the life of an individual, forty signals the age of approaching wisdom. However, the same landmark date does not hold true for oral history. Although major project centers define their standards and procedures, problems still remain to plague many of the activities of groups intent on gathering the memoirs of persons important to history, whether local or national. These problems seem to touch every aspect of the process from researching through preservation of the primary source material.

These areas, so vital to an integrated oral history program, are beset by various demons that challenge the patience and ingenuity of the interviewer, the program director, or other staff members. The exposition of four such areas and presentation of methods used by various oral history centers in their attempts to counteract such problems may allow fledgling oral history programs to be forewarned and perhaps forearmed.

A: NARRATOR: ROMANTICIZER OR HISTORIAN

Sometimes the narrator may be unsure of his role in the entire oral history project.

Since the interview should produce information of maximum historical importance, the narrator should be clearly informed of the value of his contributions to the project and to its patrons. Several approaches can be taken to ensure this awareness. One way

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would be to invite prospective narrators to the project’s planning sessions so they can see their own part within a larger context and also gain awareness of the seriousness of the total project.52 Another method, used by the Bancroft Library at UCLA, is to explain the entire program during the pre-interview, then follow that with a letter restating the plan. The narrator would then be asked to sign and return a copy of that letter if the purpose of the interview is clear to him and he is willing to participate.53 A third approach would be to send the interview outline to the narrator in advance so that the topics for discussion would be clarified for him.

As the narrator is made acquainted with the tape recording methods before the taping session begins and shown that it will be assisting but not dominating the interview itself, the narrator may feel more at home, speaking naturally and freely.54 The legal contract provides another means of encouraging his unadulterated recall. The possibility of closing some of his remarks for a time could prove reassuring to him as he tells all, not just the parts that might cast him in a good light.55 And this opening-up process is vital to the historical accuracy of the end product.

Before the actual first taping, a call to remind the narrator of date and time would be thoughtful and would reemphasize the importance of the interview. Then, at the taping session itself, the interviewer’s taking time to record such biographical data as narrator’s parents’ names and backgrounds, his own birthplace, education, travels, and occupation may prove to be valuable warm-up activities as well as a useful time to gather information later to be inserted into the introductory section of the tape and transcript.56 With these continual methods of focusing on the narrator and his importance, his own role should become clearer to him. Total context is the key to his awareness.

Occasionally the narrator’s information may differ from that given in various other sources.

When this happens, certain criteria provide touchstones against which objective judgments can be made. Since the event itself is actually part of a larger context either in the community or in a larger environment, the interviewer should investigate
further to establish the facts. Three criteria can also measure the narrator’s ability to document an event: his closeness in time and space to the event; his competence to understand and to describe the situation; and his impartiality, in the sense of his being unlikely to gain from a distortion of the facts.57

In addition, the type of interview may affect the reliability of the interview. In the anecdotal interview, the type of information given may be historically less accurate than would be that gained in the research interview.58 However, the ways of aiding narrators in either of these situations would be, as much as possible, to provide visual recall and associative means to elicit their honest response. With several narrators providing information on a certain time period or topic, their responses will likely provide enough cross referencing to allow the researcher ultimately to determine the validity and reliability of each narrator’s remarks. The way each person recalls the past, even if the whole truth is questionable, does provide certain new dimensions and insights into the situation.

*Occasionally the narrator will make sweeping generalizations.*

Often the initial meeting will reveal the narrator’s tendencies towards such generalities. If this possibility exists, then the interviewer may need to research more thoroughly the topics for discussion, or must try to narrow the range of topics or periods of time to be discussed by the narrator.59 In this way, more direct and effective questions will probe more deeply and will result in better factual recall.

In addition, one may need to determine whether or not the person actually witnessed the event, experienced it himself, or obtained his information by hearsay.60 In any case, a serious effort should be made to encourage the person to look for and clarify relationships among all persons involved in the events. Once established, perhaps discussing reasons for those actions would be the next step towards transforming such generalized remarks into specific statements.

*On some details the narrator’s memory may seem faulty.*

During the pre-interview, the narrator and interviewer should
try to examine some of the documents of the account the person intends to narrate on tape. Since pictures seem to reconstruct memory even faster than words, their use—maps, items of memorabilia, newspaper clippings, yearbooks, etc.—should all help to elicit those moments in which the experience was originally encoded. Memory seems to be highly related to its original encoding. Distortions take place as they enter the system, not really later. Studies tend to show that short term memory seems to diminish with age but that long term memory seems to be highly reliable over a long period of time. Consequently, the picture or artifact used to reconstruct the time registered in the long term memory may spark a flow of remembrances extremely vital to the project.61

_Eliciting valid responses can be a very complex matter._

The approach taken by the interviewer is an important determinant in assessing the validity of the interview. By framing questions in a clear language that points towards an historically valid response, he can elicit important information. At the same time, the interviewer should take notes and make a word list during the interview itself which later may be corrected by the narrator and then turned over to the transcriber and the indexer.62 When the oral narrator later edits the transcript, he is then able to alter any of the discrepancies that can creep inadvertently into an oral narrative. He can also add details that lend corroboration to the topic if the interviewer had not done that through skillful questioning. And, let it be remembered that not everyone makes a good interviewer. The compulsive talker may be used better for publicizing the oral history project. The compulsive director may be better used to raise money or organize programs to put the oral history materials to effective use.63

_Painfilled or controversial topics may compromise the historical value of the interview._

Hesitancy on the part of the oral author may signal either a faulty memory or the presence of memories too delicate for comfortable narration. One approach would be to assure the narrator of the confidentiality afforded him through placing restrictions on certain parts of the transcript for a specified period of time. This
restriction of material is, however, a controversial issue since too many restrictions on too many transcripts would make the collection crippled in its effectiveness. The interviewer might try to overcome any reticence by overly aggressive questioning; in so doing, however, he risks weakening the rapport which must exist between the two of them if the interview is to bear important results.\(^{64}\) Thus, the initial interview might be the best place to lay out the full dimension of the interview to the narrator and then to do everything possible, through memory aids, to sift through the facets that could be answered openly. The concentration could then be directed to them. Another course of action that may prove valuable would be to make the questions more open-ended so that the narrator himself can lay out his own options for response.\(^{65}\)

**B: INTERVIEWER: ORCHESTRATOR OR BUNGLER**

*Poor interviewing techniques can affect the validity and reliability of the information given by the narrator.*

The necessity of adequately training the interviewer cannot be stressed enough. Several commandments for effective interviewing could be succinctly stated. Present only one lead comment or question at a time. Keep attention solely on the narrator. Allow silences, even digressions, since valuable material may emerge from them. Don’t overlook the obvious. Use props or visuals to stimulate detail. Remember the five questions of journalism when exploring unfamiliar topics. Allow non-structured additions at the end of the interview which might elicit the richest comments of the interview.\(^{66}\) Gauge the length of time by the stamina of the oral author and the clarity of his answers. And, continuously project personal interest in his memoirs and deep respect for his participation in them.\(^{67}\)

*Listening with the third ear is a demanding task for the interviewer.*

Demanding, yes, but also vital. Prepared questions lend anticipated structure to the interview, but serendipity must have space to happen. The interviewer’s intuitive listening will reveal obstacles, frustrations, and also the positive dynamics of the
narrator's world. Watching for them and comparing them with similarity of details obtained from other interviews or from research sources may stimulate probings into areas for which the narrator is especially valuable as a secondary historical source.

*The atmosphere during the interview can greatly affect the outcome.*

A relaxed atmosphere is vital, whether the narrator is an eminent statesman or a housekeeper in the household of the Roosevelts. The interviewer should be constantly alert to the messages implied through the body language of the narrator. Such observations might be written for possible interpretive inclusion into the transcript. Often the memory aids used during the first meeting can provide not only the basis for some pointed questions during the interview but also a security-blanket feeling for the narrator. The important truth is, of course, to set the stage for taping the best person that can be summoned forth in those moments of sharing.

*The age and education of the interviewer and the quality of the interview are not necessarily correlative.*

The terms *elite* and *non-elite* in interviewing may lend a direction when responding to this problem. The more technical or historically important the topic, the more mature must be the interviewer. For such a program, the ideal interviewer would be a graduate student with an expertise in the area of history or another field associated with the topical focus of the interview. But many interviews are non-elite, directed towards gathering memoirs of local citizens for the benefit of a small community. In such a case, the amateur may be a greater asset; one not extremely knowledgeable in a particular field may tend to ask more questions which will elicit greater depth of responses from the narrator.

Whichever the type of interview, however, age is no factor since interviewers tend to bring many common characteristics to the meeting. He must have a vision of the oral author as a person who has meaning in his life that should be shared and preserved. As Eliot Wiggenton observed: "a sense of place, a sense of compassion emerges, a sense that there is some value in the notion of community and interdependence in it." In this spirit the inter-
viewer, with an insatiable curiosity driving him to obtain as accurate information as possible, will not attempt to correct, degrade, or educate his narrator. Instead he will keep control of the central topic while, at the same time, listening carefully to determine if more probing may or need not be done.

In summary, the gemueltlichkeit attitude is the key characteristic of any successful interviewer, and that quality is not determined by age or education. The basic intelligence, articulateness, intuitive listening, and the ability to prepare so that sensitive questioning or topics may bring out the best information and sense of honesty in his narrator, can be carried out by the scholar or the adolescent. Each can work independently and with sufficient initiative to sustain the interview towards a successful conclusion.

Truth vs. the right to privacy presents difficult paradoxes.

Truth is the composite of many facets of reality. The interviewer tries to capture fleeting memories in an attempt to record truth while remembering that “historical research is a quality, not a quantity.” Thus his first duty as an interviewer is to establish what happened. He must keep his mind open “by a curiosity to understand rather than closed by a passion to prove.”

Therefore, the interviewer must be careful not to exploit his narrator. To slant questions, to intrude on the narrator’s flow of memories, to move into insignificant directions would be to ignore the most important question that must guide the entire process: What is the most important thing I want to learn from this person?

At the same time, we acknowledge that one of the paradoxes of oral history is its insistence on high ethical standards and its correlative that invasion of privacy must also be avoided. And in a small community, the hurt feelings that can flow from the truth spoken by the narrator may infringe on the privacy of another. Perhaps if the interviewer keeps always in mind that the interview must produce a “synthesis of careful inquiry and thoughtful response” through free association, the Scylla and Charybdis of this problem might be avoided.
C: DECISIONS: TO USE OR NOT TO USE

Printed sources occasionally differ on dates or details of events not accurately recalled by the oral author.

Since accuracy is important in the work of an historian, care should be taken in checking major dates offered by the oral author. One fact to remember is that a single library may be unable to supply the resources necessary for reconciling the inaccuracies of dates. Therefore, using several libraries and checking bibliographies, guides, and indexes may provide solutions to the problem. Sources such as the Harvard Guide to American History, chapters 4-8, should offer wider dimension to the context of a local event. The various index materials to quarterly journals may uncover additional information devoted to state history.

Then again, the oral author may remember an exact day but not the year. In this case, materials such as the World Almanac, the World Book, and various other calendar publications should be of assistance. The later addition of these materials into the typescript should be bracketed since this is the interviewer's clarification of the printed interview.

The interview should never be halted while the narrator gropes for a date. The interviewer should instead take note of the omission and then quietly urge the narrator to keep on talking. Sustaining the mood of the interview is more important: Discrepancies can be cleared after the interview or through later research into any of the materials previously mentioned.

Surprisingly, some sources seem to be as unreliable as the short term memory of many narrators.

This should not be a surprise if we consider the context for these sources. Most newspapers are directed towards a certain type of readership. Unless the community is very catholic in viewpoint and activity, the newspaper will be a reflection of the community and its attitudes. Another important consideration is the nature of the advertisers that support the paper. Unless they have unique tolerance, the items in the paper itself will tend to reflect the viewpoints and biases of the advertisers as well.

Maps may also be inaccurate. The earlier the map, the more likely it is to be a sketch of the area. Cartographers tended to sup-
press or distort the unknown or the uninteresting so that an uneven accuracy mars the maps. In addition, scale and simplicity, hallmarks of good map making, may be lacking in some early maps.\textsuperscript{79}

Most records are necessarily incomplete. The writer projects a certain viewpoint. Material not serving his view may be purposely deleted by the writer. Human error also can alter the historical record. All primary historical data are subject to such shortcomings.\textsuperscript{80}

With the non-elite group who questions the value of their ordinary life for the annals of history and the scrutiny of future researchers, the interviewer may do well to go to such places as community centers, news files, and community churches to gather the information and pictures that will help to stimulate more reliable information from such narrators.\textsuperscript{81}

\textit{The creation of the ideal transcript seems almost impossible.}

The adjective \textit{ideal} is an ambiguous term. It may deal with the adherence to the guidelines set up by the Oral History Association, or it may mean adherence to the essential message and tone of the oral interviewee. Perhaps the combination of these two poles might be more close to the truth. The typescript should preserve as much as possible the quality of the interview as well as the distinct character of the speaker. It should also be easy to read and to understand by anyone using it for scholarly purposes. But translating the oral message itself presents a challenge since the perfect interview is equally rare.

A good interview, by general consensus, would require a person who could speak concisely and articulately about a subject he knew well, and also say something that was not found more easily, and used more conveniently, in published form.\textsuperscript{82}

The crucial demand upon the interviewer, then, would be one of balancing and discriminating between fact and opinion.\textsuperscript{83} In some instances, the typescript of the interview may preserve information that may do more to offer reliable views on certain events than do some printed sources. For example, discrepancies
exist between oral accounts and printed information in books and
ewspapers regarding the famous Wounded Knee incident. None
of the documents is ideal, but a sifting and combining of all the
facts may draw the researcher closer to truth and historical ac-
curacy. 84

Legal considerations both protect and plague the oral history
process.

Slander, libel, and copyright infringements comprise the legal
considerations associated with oral history. The importance of the
legal release form becomes imperative in dealing with any slandering
material that may be on the tape but has not become
restricted in the transcript. This material should not be used
without legal advice. 85 Libel is a second consideration, even
though the courts claim that the dead cannot be libeled. They
define libel as a defamation by publication of falsity exposing an
individual to ridicule. 86 Libelous defamation must include actual
malice and must be a blatant disregard for truth. Such falsity may
be difficult to prove.

Regarding copyright, new laws establish legal rights from a
taped interview to both the interviewer and the interviewee. The
interviewer is considered the co-author of both the tapes and the
transcript. A federal statute establishes this legal right from the
very moment of creation of the interview rather than from the
time of publication, as previously determined. 87 The value of such
rights must therefore be signed over prior to the actual recording.
Terms of the copyright should be clear to both parties. Distinc-
tion, however, should be made between the ownership of the tape
and the words on the transcript. Both parties, therefore, should sign
the legal release which then transfers the rights accruing from the
material directly to the oral history center. However, the previously
unpublished works such as letters, diaries, and other written ma-
terials used to stimulate the memory of the narrator—perhaps
becoming donated materials correlative to the interview—would
remain the property of the author of the works and his heirs. 88

Transcription of the interview is so expensive that making
only the tape available to the patron may seem the wiser course.
Seem is the key word here.
A total of forty hours is generally needed to transcribe one tape. Often projects do not have an adequate staff for this task. Tapes themselves are really the primary documents from the interview. They re-create the ambiance surrounding the interview, show the narrator’s speech patterns which projected his thoughts, give verbal signs of his clarity or possible senility, and often prove vital to such disciplines as that of the linguist. All such factors make the retention and use of the tape an important consideration.

On the other hand, transcription offers its own values. Columbia reports that one thousand transcripts are requested for every one tape requested. Transcripts are easier for the researcher to use. The information previously corrected by the narrator is more likely to be authentic. Printed matter is also easier to scan than are tapes. Edited copy supplies rearrangements of information, necessary punctuation, prefaces, tables of content, collateral material, and deletion of false starts, all factors so essential to one’s ease in using the materials in the shortest time and for optimum results. These considerations may help a project center determine whether or not to include transcription of materials in its budget. Yet ever present is the enigmatic issue: who IS the best interpreter of the interview, the scholar who knows his own specific needs or the transcriber who tries to interpret the over-all values of the interview? The answer given to that question will help to determine the project center’s decision on whether or not to transcribe the tape.

Storage of materials can present unusual problems.
Several basic approaches can overcome some of the difficulties. For safety, the materials should be housed away from browsing or heavily trafficked areas. Close that storage area if the staff is not available to handle requests. Access to the stored oral history materials, whether tape or transcript, should be made on a special request form. If the interviewer agrees, however, duplicate copies of the transcript may be placed on shelves for easy access; perhaps even a duplicate tape for check-out can be made available if funds and permission allow.

Keeping all materials in optimum condition is vital. To do this, store rare papers in acid-free folders or boxes. Play the
tapes at least once a year to maintain the reproduction quality. Tapes that insure such quality maintenance would be Scotch, Hitachi, and Maxel which is self-cleaning. The box housing such tapes should indicate the name of the narrator and the interviewer, the date of interview, and the length of the recording. Those tapes should then be stored in a wooden cabinet since metal cabinets are electrical conductors which could accidentally effect erasure of the tapes stored in them.

On the transcripts, never write in ink since it tends to run. Never use staples or paper clips for they eventually rust. Never use rubber cement or tape which will stain in time. And, whenever possible, microfilm rare documents. Preservation and relative ease of access to all these materials make their systems of storage a priority consideration of the oral history center.

**D: GROWTH OF ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMS: MILLSTONES OR MILESTONES**

*Even interviews that are extremely valuable may be under-utilized.*

This problems relates closely with the problems of access and control discussed in section three. Certain factors may be responsible for this lack of use. Distance between the researcher and the collection may be a serious factor. Then again, non-circulated material must often be transcribed by hand, a truly time-consuming task for the researcher. And thirdly, photocopying may be limited or even not available. To the scholar these are serious problems, to the patron of local history an inconvenience as well. But the greatest problem is keeping the patrons in ignorance of the existence of the material. Oral history columns in the local paper, displays in the library, bookmark type memos in one's own and in neighboring libraries may stimulate interested response. And for the elite collections, inclusions of collection information in the various sources discussed in part three insure lifelines to researchers probing for specific information. Whatever the scope and purpose of their collection, all project centers need funds. They have strong chances of being funded upon request if they can prove that their collections are being used.

*From interview to patron is such a complex process that*
some important areas may not be handled properly.

A variety of functions does confront the persons involved in such an oral history program. Additional persons must become responsible for organizing, indexing, and providing reference services to the patron. Acquiring the materials is a priority activity. The intricacy of the succeeding processes necessitates a flow chart which would show both the various stages of progress for each interview and the persons involved in each phase. Since oral history materials pass through many hands—interviewer, narrator, transcriber, -indexer, to name a few—the exact nature of each one’s work is well worth specific definition. Depending on the phase of the work involved, a person participating may well need to function as a psychologist, a biographer, a business specialist, an economist, and an historian.

Volunteers are difficult to use successfully in this program.

It goes without saying that the larger the collection, the more persons are needed to maintain it. Since budgets for oral history programs are seldom sufficient for the needs, volunteers are a vital part of the project. The volunteer interviewer can be a valuable asset to the program if he is included in the planning sessions. Then sufficient guidelines for interviewing and researching should lend assurance that the taped session will have value to the total enterprise.

Volunteers can be found through a variety of sources: the local historical society, senior citizen clubs, civic organizations, the friends of the library, and high schools and colleges. And once solicited, several additional rules might provide for the training of any person who will function as a volunteer transcriber. Simple rules such as correcting errors and not permitting strikeovers, accuracy with spelling, use of the question-answer format, and the proper format for the page itself provide simple guidelines. But ultimately, the value of the volunteer to the program will be in the enthusiasm and the sense of historical purpose that the volunteer brings to his work. The administrator of the program should remember the value of praise, of positive strokes for keeping workers motivated and happy.
Maintaining strong, positive public relations can be forgotten in the process of attending to the other complexities of the program.

A few simple approaches can alleviate this problem. The public is both a potential narrator as well as the potential patron. A simple questionnaire available to interested contributors may allow later sifting for actual narrators. For that contact, letterhead stationery and calling cards suggest authenticity and seriousness of purpose to the receiver.96 The contributions of all persons involved—from narrator to patron—should be acknowledged. For the narrator, a duplicate tape presented as a gift for his time and contributions will demonstrate the respect and appreciation the project has for his memoirs. And making them available to many patrons may be facilitated by making separate cards on the tapes and distributing them to surrounding or interested media centers.97 Such interchanges will humanize the program and also encourage potential participants to use the materials, contribute correlative information, and perhaps finance part of the program.

Adequate funding seems to plague every oral history program.

Any project can be started with a limited budget but cannot be maintained if the collection is to have any reasonable scope. Items of expense generally follow two categories, equipment and salaries. The best equipment should be reliable and simple. It should be chosen on the basis of its purposes, the people using it, and the places it will be used.98 Besides the need for tape recorders, such items as paper, labels, storage cabinets, publication guides, videotaping machines, duplication machines, and supplies should be included in the budgeting. Salary considerations should include all who have not volunteered their services to the project: transcribers, indexers, and consulted attorneys, to name a few.

Sources of funding often need to be sought. In the initial planning sessions, potential funders might be asked to participate. Their listening to tapes which show effective interviewing may stimulate their interest in funding the project partially or completely. Besides these private sources, other areas might also be asked for funds. Sources such as the Annual Register, the Foundation Directory, and the Foundation Grants Index may provide in-
formation on sources as well as upon conditions placed upon requests. State programs in the Humanities are other potential areas. However, state funding is not a panacea. Political trends change and monies from this source may be ended without warning. Projects may alter as they grow while state funding may bind them to the initial proposal. And, finally, salaries from such funding are seldom adequate. Therefore, it is best to remember that the home institution is the place to start when planning the scope of the program and the funds necessary to make it a viable program.

Objective evaluation of the oral history project's procedures and objectives can be too time-consuming.

Evaluation is a necessary component of any successful program. Planning went into the genesis of the program; evaluation should guide its development. A starting point might be with a boner's session. Through analyzing tapes, project personnel might be able to sharpen interviewing techniques, and transcripts would consequently be made more professional. Role definition should also be reassessed in order to lessen the time needed to make material available to the patron. If the planning stage of the project was written, its scope and purpose would already have been defined. Degrees of fulfillment of those objectives may indicate directions for the future. Topics for cross-referencing may also emerge and be strengthened. Since no project is a duplicate of any other, the time spent in evaluation will provide more time for future successes in each stage of the process. Above all, the time spent measuring progress must never exceed the time spent gathering the interviews. The product, the tape, and the transcription must remain at the core of the ever-expanding cycle of oral history programs.

A JANUS-VIEW

Throughout its years of growth and expansion, oral history has indicated strong signs of both consistency and diversity. Consistently we find trends and problems that have either blessed or plagued most centers as they initiate and develop their respective
programs. Perhaps the fact that oral history embraces all the disciplines creates the diversities. Yet, the pendulum is not allowed to swing too far to either tendency. Over the years certain developments have also offered a balance to those polarities. In the light of these three tendencies—consistency, diversity, and balance—even the future of oral history may be tentatively predicted.

Consistent viewpoints are noticeable in many definitions of oral history: the preservation of the past; the memoirs of persons who can supply information or viewpoints; materials not preserved in any other way. And since those memoirs will offer significant material for researchers, each interviewer tries to make the taping session historically important for all who are involved in gathering or using the material. Common standards and ethics guide the interviewer—as later the transcriber and editor—in his respecting the material offered by the narrator, probing for fuller dimensions of the topic without slanting them into the interviewer’s viewpoint. Keeping the needs of future users always in mind is important as they solicit each response. But, easy as such remarks are in summary, the actual situation is so demanding that the program could possibly fall short of those common standards so important to producing significant oral history programs.

A key to consistency seems to reside with the initiators of all programs, the interviewer and the narrator. The interviewer must have an insatiable thirst for truth coupled with a sensitive respect for the dignity and the value of the narrator towards his subject and towards the total oral history program. At the same time, the narrator must be chosen carefully for his particular role in the documentation of the past events. Depending on the scope of the program, that narrator should be able to add significant details to some situation — politics in the forties, coal mining in Appalachia, jazz artists in New Orleans, or Indian tribes in northern Minnesota. From that, a total picture should emerge that, without the interview, would be lost to future researchers.

Another consistent aspect besides the devotion to historical truth is the need for adequate funding both to ensure the present and to promise the continuance of the oral history program. Centers today should take heart from the fact that Allan Nevins himself had confronted the trials of having his faith in his own
vision for oral history met by disbelief from significant persons who delayed but could not squelch his dream. Perhaps his seeing in the Bancroft fund a greater potential than the donor himself may have ever envisioned is a hint to all who seek funds but fear they may not find them. Imagination can build sand castles, but creative imagination may refashion a present problem into a better, richer reality. Of one thing can we be certain: no matter how vital the program, no matter how many willing narrators we may find, the work cannot proceed without adequate funding. True, slow starts do provide time for building stronger foundations, but in oral history the potential narrator's health may diminish. His memories may become faulty even though his role in former times would have suggested him as a valuable link with the past. The pressure of time urges all centers to plan for and then gather those interviews for optimum, immediate results. That part of the oral history process must receive priority attention in the formulation of the budget.

Many of the expenses of an oral history program stem from the very technology that has been the continuous helpmate of all interviewers. Whether it be the wire recorder and dictating machine with which Nevins began his work, or the tape recorder and video tapes that capture today's interviews, machines are a necessary item in the budget. Some form of technology captures the voice, the aura surrounding the moments of recall, or the crafts, settings, possessions of the narrator which grant vital dimensions to his words. Only the first interview with George McAneny was gathered by a shorthand method. All others, whether at Columbia or in any other center, have relied upon some form of machine. The art of interviewing for the truth has been, in all cases, wedded to the science provided through costly but necessary technology.

This marriage of the arts and the sciences to create oral history programs has stimulated much of the diversity that has also characterized the opposite swing of the pendulum. No two centers have the same purpose, the same approach, or identical methods of access and control. Such diversity may stem from the very nature of oral history itself. The world is its potential narrator, since each man has his own story and each story lends fuller perspective to a past which reveals its own failures and glories.
Oral History from Four Perspectives

Diversity has counter-balanced consistency throughout the years. So do the two types of interviews, presently labeled *elite* and *non-elite*, offer their own polarizations. For history is not formed only by policy makers; it is fashioned by all whose needs help to mold their culture, whose lives determine and are determined by the economy, and whose frustrations and dreams are synthesized into new laws, new technologies, and new designs for living. Studs Terkel gave voice to the Depression; Jean Linklater recalled significant family and social moments as they were representative of the LaGrange community in the first decade of this century. Each interviewer offers diversity of experience; each enriches all who are willing to respond with sensitivity.

Another aspect of the diversity of such programs lies in the sensitive issue to which narrators address themselves. Truth may expose sensitive issues capable of wounding others through that revelation. For this reason, the restrictions placed on some oral history material offer an important means of obtaining the whole truth for future users of the materials. The value of such restrictions, however, is proportionate to the importance of the issues to which they are addressed. The primary purpose of these materials is to present truth in as full and as objective a manner as possible; the presence of controversial material can, therefore, serve as a catalyst against which to study and evaluate the validity of the memoirs related to a common event or topic. Even though the restrictions stated in the legal agreement can cripple the collection for a time, they may give greater strength for the the future. Diversity in content, from the common experiences to the controversial, must always be regarded as a strength within a collection.

The diversity of approaches to the gathering and dissemination of all oral history materials and the methods for their retrieval has also proved distinctive throughout the years. This diversity in approach seems, in great part, to be determined by the size of the staff, the funding of the program, and the purpose for which the materials are being gathered. Some centers determined that the patron must use the materials on their premises; others offer them through mail requests, either in the form of direct loan or through duplication. Some centers charge for their materials; other do not.
Some centers restrict their interviewing to specific professions or ethnic groups; others gather from all groups and allow the diversity of such gathered materials to form eventually into their own categories and systems of cross referencing. Some centers offer their materials only to select groups of patrons; others transform their materials into microforms that have nationwide dissemination. Many factors influence each center's decisions. At present, no one is in a position to say that one center has made a wiser decision than another.

Consequently, the pendulum swings between diversity and consistency, uniting each oral history program with others through these two polarities. Yet, a pendulum, if it is to work well, must be balanced; its movement should touch both extremes but not linger in either position. Such balance has evolved from the needs and dreams of those intimately connected with the birth and growth of oral history. The formation in 1966 of the Oral History Association has helped to provide strong guidance for programs intent on capturing the riches of the past for the benefit of the future. The standards that the Association has evolved, the directions it has stimulated, and the diversities it has encouraged have all allowed good seed to fall on fertile ground.

State programs have drawn strength from their affiliation with the Oral History Association. Such programs have provided their members with newsletters which point out state and national trends, opportunities to share information, and suggestions for strengthening their respective programs. Illinois has recently joined the many states that presently help to coordinate local programs.

To refine the entire process even further, two distinguished members of the Oral History Association offer opportunities for schooling in the techniques of interviewing. In addition, they help to strengthen all the skills needed for the processing of oral history materials. Amelia Fry and Charles Morrissey, by training a small group of students each summer, are providing the yeast that will gradually influence regional as well as national programs in oral history. Such centers need resource persons to interpret, to guide, to encourage, and then to provide valid methods of evaluation. Fry and Morrissey are helping to strengthen the entire gamut of oral history activities: its consistencies and diversities, which in
turn tend to encourage the formation of new programs.

Their work, as well as the efforts of the Oral History Association, is gradually stimulating persons to make oral documents available in their respective communities or professions. And their awareness of such opportunities is symbolic of the awareness that the public in general must have if the work of oral history is to find its patrons, either as users or financiers. For oral history materials are not gathered for their own sake; they are viewed as important corollaries to history which is already present in print and non-print forms. Their use can be assured only if the patron knows of their existence and is intrigued by their contents. Perhaps one method of stimulating use while respecting a limited budget would be the formation of a partial transcript. Through careful editing and indexing of the tape, the center could extract some core sections of the interview and make them available in transcript form. The transcript itself would indicate the places on the tape where the transcribed memories were offered. Non-transcript material would also be indicated in its respective sequence in the interview; this might be shown by tape numbering and a condensed indication of the contents. In this as well as other ways the balance would again be maintained between diverse materials and their common purposes, diverse methods of retrieval and common approaches to ensuring authenticity and accessibility to historical truth.

Also balancing diversity and consistency is the law which protects every person even obliquely connected with oral history materials. The legal release grants each depository institution the right to determine the best use of the materials and access to them. By signing the legal release, both the narrator and the interviewer acknowledge themselves as instruments for the unfolding and preservation of history. The narrator, through his right to place restrictions upon his words, can protect himself; at the same time, he can offer the full truth about the events which he narrates. Those who are discussed on the tape can look to the laws regarding libel and slander to challenge the remarks which interpret their motives or actions. The law, then, is another means of balancing truth with a sensitive regard for another's dignity and role in shaping events.

All these means of balancing the extremes within the oral
history movement aid centers in their attempt to define oral history for themselves. Centers have not accepted a common definition nor have they fashioned their programs identically. Each center has created its own definition by determining its own standards, its scope, its range of technology, and its finances. But as oral history centers seek their own balance between the art of communication and the science of available technology, new and exciting dimensions will evolve. Growth can be assured by their measuring trends from the past as they have evolved into the present, which is a springboard for the future.

As more interviews are gathered, greater needs arise for the control and dissemination of those materials. Publications such as those of Shumway, Waserman, and Meckler and McMullin have provided access to many resources available at the time of the respective publication of those works. But the need for cumulative approaches is essential for keeping all persons cognizant of new centers and materials. The New York Times Project is one such means for accomplishing this. In addition, their microforms offer ease in handling and storage as well as relatively inexpensive material for mailing. Another means of access and control might involve a plan similar to the Farmington Plan used by research libraries in the United States. Specific libraries would become depositories for certain subject-area concentration. In this way information retrieval would be facilitated.

Perhaps the technology of the future will develop micro-materials with built-in sound tracks so that one may simultaneously view the words and listen to significant remarks from the oral author himself. Perhaps annual subscriptions to micro-publications in oral history will become as common as renewals of Time or the Saturday Review. Perhaps cultural centers like the Chicago Public Library will provide special areas set aside for the viewing of oral history video publications where the voice of the narrator is used in tandem with other documentary material already preserved in film, slides, or by professional newsmen.

Yes, if technology has served us in the past, it can continue with new and creative methods to serve us now and for the future. Paper tape evolved into cellophane tape and then into milar tape. What prevents technology from creating a tape as thin as thread
but with reproduction quality far superior to anything we presently use? If the wire recorder was replaced by the tape recorder and now finds its form in pocket-sized cassette recorders, what will stop technology from creating a machine no larger than a small disc which can record with high fidelity and allow storage of its vast collections within a space no larger than a shoe box? If technology can reduce the printed page to microforms that translate entire books onto one sheet of material that can be magnified as needed, what will stop technology from using telephone or short wave transmissions to send the oral author’s voice to whatever part of the world needs to recreate the actual moment of interview? What will stop technology from being activated by a simple punchcard which indicates a topic needed by the researcher? With such activation, resources stored by all participating oral history centers in a central depository could be offered within seconds of the request. Technology has always served the needs of oral history interviewers, allowing them significant means to capture the interview and translate it later into usable forms. Only the limitations which man deliberately places upon his imagination can ever slacken the pace of gathering and disseminating oral history. As Saul Benison aptly stated: "I won’t deny that I am given to dream, but why settle for a foothold on Parnassus when you can lay claim to the whole mountain."

Elizabeth Mason, at the Thirteen Annual Workshop of the Oral History Association in Savannah, categorized the past thirty years of oral history under four headings: technology, balance, universality, and enthusiasm. They also seem to provide directions into which the future can be viewed. The very swing of the pendulum between diversity and consistency in oral history programs offers support to the two of those hallmarks, universality and balance. In addition, oral history must also be evaluated against its purpose and its growth. For every valid criticism new approaches must be sought. Then new methods can be brought into complementary relationship with previously effective procedures. Though difficult, such consistent evaluation must be a necessary rhythm during the growth of each program. Evaluation is a vital link in the preservation of the balance and universality in oral history, the most interdisciplinary of all approaches to the study of mankind.
Growth of oral history has certainly been apparent during the past thirty years. Growth, however, is generally strengthened through pruning. Evaluation serves that purpose for oral history where its universal scope and rapid technological advances challenge each stage of the process. Through analysis we see that under pressure, man best keeps himself in balance by developing a sense of humor. From within himself, he finds the means of maintaining equilibrium while confronting the problems and promises inherent in any change. Perhaps Mrs. Mason’s emphasis on enthusiasm provides an additional insight into the preservation of a balance within oral history as technology thrusts it into the future.

The word enthusiasm comes from the Greek entheos: inspired, divine. The zeal that emanates from inspiration has been a consistent hallmark of the oral history movement. Allan Nevins translated his inspiration into an oral history interview that has been recycled and expanded right to the present moment. The enthusiasm with which various speakers at the Savannah Workshop and Colloquium shared their work, their procedures, and their visions acted as a wellspring of contagious enthusiasm. Even the most conservative planner can be swept up into visions of the potential, the uses, and the values of capturing significant memories and making them available as historical documentation.

And ever-present are those balancing conditions that stimulate enthusiasm but keep it grounded in reality. In technology, new possibilities open but also restrict the user because of the inherent limitations of the materials. The topics of oral history are universal but priorities in gathering them must be established. Enthusiasm may help to translate memories into audible documents, but the very real challenge comes in making them accessible to all who wish to research that time period. Accessibility to all such materials makes bibliographic control both essential and very difficult.

Until such a balanced control is realized, oral historians must creatively decipher the potentials of technology. Through it the fuller dimensions of the past are made available to us, as someday our own lives, decisions, and actions will be significantly made present to future generations. Oral history helps to capture truth in order to release it as needed. As Ron Grele reminds us:
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The past comes to us encumbered with feelings and perceptions that derive from an individual's cultural experience as well as from his unique engagement. Sometimes consciousness of cultural experience is articulated. More often it lies buried deep within the stream of words and their accompanying gestures. As a result oral history presents some pitfalls and a set of theoretical problems to those who would successfully engage in it. It also offers enormous and exciting possibilities.¹⁰²

Those possibilities become realities for the researcher if the oral presentation has truly captured the truths of history.

References
10. Allan Nevins, The Gateway to History, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1962) was the seedbed for the idea of oral history. There Nevins stated that he envisioned a "systemmatic attempt to obtain, from the lives and papers of living Americans who led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the past sixty years."
12. Ibid., p. 280.
13. "History Captured on Tape," from The Changing Challenge, a reprint
from General Motors. This article recalls Nevins's work in the oral history project for that company. "And I can remember the frustration of having spent an hour or two interviewing somebody and coming back only to have the wire spool snap and snarl like a fish reel. The only thing I could do was to go back and do the whole interview over again."


16. Summaries of these projects are part of the oral history file at the Chicago Historical Society. They are also available at the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University.


20. Further information on this Project can be obtained from James W. Hammad, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky 42071.


26. The *Columbia Directory* was used for the mailing list for this organizational meeting of the Oral History Association.


29. These generalizations are based upon tabulation of all topics stressed in the thirteen years of annual meetings, then noting frequencies and cycles of those topics.

30. Although the focus of this paper is on United States programs, the ever-
widening circle of influence shows an increasing global impact of oral history procedures and programs. Starr, The First Thirty Years, also develops this focus.


39. The cited information does not include the Columbia University collection. The statistics given here are based on the tallies made during this research on all centers included in Meckler and McMillan.


42. Louis M. Starr, Oral History: The First Thirty Years, loc. cit., p. 4.


48. To retain the authenticity of the entire interview as closely as possible. Columbia makes an original and three carbons of the transcript. The last is a working copy. When the narrator has returned it as the corrected copy, along with the legal release, the Columbia office transfers by hand the oral author's corrections to the other copies. Two are then deposited in the library, one returned to the oral author, and one sent to the sponsoring institution, if there is one. This last is an effective public relations gesture which is used also by many other oral history centers.


50. Ibid.


54. Cullum Davis and others, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

55. James Hammack, *op. cit.*


58. At the Oral History Association Conference in Savannah in 1978, Willa Baum moderated a small group sharing session which sparked lively discussion on these points. Varying points of view were freely offered.


The value of this approach was seen during my studying the transcript "Civil Rights Movement in Tuscaloosa, Alabama" where several inaudible areas were later corrected by the narrator or bracketed by the interviewer.


65. Charles Morrissey, "Elite and Non-Elite Interviewing," Address present-
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ed to the Oral History Association (Savannah, 1978).
66. Ibid.
67. Without notable exception, each author or center that has published
guides to interviewing has stressed the importance of conveying respect
to the narrator. Randall Jarrell in her address to OHA 1978 on “Non-
Elite Interviewing,” spoke of this as a “reawakening of a pride and a
democratization of our sources.”
69. Alice Hoffman, “Some Final Thoughts on Oral History,” Address
presented to the Oral History Association (Savannah, 1978).
70. Eliot Wiggenton, “The Foxfire Approach,” Education Digest 43 (Jan-
uary 1978): 44.
71. Cullom Davis and others, op. cit., p. 29.
72. George Mazuzan and Gerald Twomey, “Oral History in the Classroom,”
73. Charles Morrissey, op. cit.
74. Thomas E. Felt, op. cit., p. 3.
75. Ibid., p. 11.
76. Charles Morrissey, op. cit.
77. Cullom Davis and others, op. cit., p. 2.
78. George Mazuzan and Gerald Twomey, op. cit.; p. 16.
81. Randall Jarrell, “Elite and Non-Elite Interviewing,” Address presented
to the Oral History Association (Savannah, 1978).
548.
83. A. B. Rollins, Jr. The Oral History Project of the John F. Kennedy
84. Cullom Davis and other, op. cit., p. 8-9.
85. Jane Faux Ratner, “Local History Collections: The Practical Pro-
blems,” Library Journal 101 (1 November 1976): 2231-35; and Gerald
Wolff, “Administering An Oral History Program,” Address presented
to the Oral History Association (Savannah, 1978).
86. Willa K. Baum, op. cit., p. 48-49.
90. Cullom Davis and others, op. cit., p. 53-72.
92 Willa K. Baum, op. cit., p. 22; Cullom Davis, “Processing Oral History
Tapes," Address presented to the Oral History Association (Savannah 1978).
95. James Hammack, *op. cit.*
96. Willa K. Baum, *op. cit.*
97. Cullom Davis, *op. cit.*
99. The first interview for the LaGrange Oral History Project developed through the LaGrange Library was with Mrs. Jean Linklater, a lawyer and life-long resident of LaGrange. She has been active in many phases of civic affairs, as were her husband and her father. The second interview with Mrs. Linklater included additional information given by Mrs. Louise Peck, her sister.