

Oral History



The interpersonal nature of oral history comes through loud and clear, even in print form.

Cliff Kuhn
Marjorie L. McLellan

Cliff Kuhn is assistant professor of history at Georgia State University. He is president of the Southern Oral History Organization and a member of the Council of the Oral History Association, in which he serves as liaison to the Education Committee. Marjorie L. McLellan is an associate professor of history at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. She chairs the Oral History Association's Education Committee.

Read, or listen if you will, to the following excerpt from an interview conducted in 1984 for the “Working Lives” radio series sponsored by the University of Alabama’s Archive of American Minority Cultures. It is with Louise Burns, an African-American woman and the wife of a retired coal miner in Jasper, Alabama. She is responding to a question about cleaning and repairing her husband’s work clothes:

Oh, my lord, that was terrible! We called them ‘muckers.’ Have anybody else ever told you about those muckers? And we didn’t have baths, there wasn’t any such thing as a bath house at the mines. He had to come home and bring them things home. Well, he’d wear ‘em more than one day. And in the winter time, we’d have to hang them up by the heaters and let them dry, because he’d be perspired in them and everything. And coal dust and all that stuff all ground in there together! You never saw such a mess! We’d have to just put ‘em in water and just, you know, get them rinsed off real good and then put them in a pot of sudsy water, and boil ‘em! Try to get all that out. And we didn’t have washing machines, we had rub boards and tubs. And that was my job, washing those muckers [laughs], sure did. And they wore out a-many of them, because he wore knee pads in the mines, because they had to wear them, he’d be on his knees working a lot. And that wore out them. I’ve sat up a-many a night patching muckers, patching them [laughs], putting patches on them to make so he could have them, you know, mending the holes and things where he’d worn them out on his knees and stuff. We didn’t throw out no overall material ‘cause we used it for patches. Sure did.

Even this brief selection illustrates many of the distinctive aspects of oral history, as well as many of the issues in which oral historians are currently interested. Louise Burns extends our knowledge by depicting an aspect of everyday life which for the most part has not appeared in written sources or the historical literature. She personalizes the complex process of industrialization, a process which is rapidly fading from public consciousness. More specifically,

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she points to the critical role in that process of women—who have too often been excluded from conventional historical accounts.

But, that is not all. In addition to the *content* of what Louise Burns recalls, this excerpt also reveals a great deal about *how* she remembers. The interpersonal nature of oral history comes through loud and clear, even in print form. If we actually heard the selection, we would recognize many of the special attributes of the spoken word: its vitality and expressive range of speech; its dynamism and emotional quality.

That oral history is at once oral and historical is only one of the ways in which oral history is distinctive. Oral history inherently entails both process and product, a body of knowledge and a method, history and memory, information about and interpretations of the past. Unlike any other historical source, an oral history interview is collaboratively generated and created deliberately for historical purposes.

Far from being a detached, neutral observer, the historian-interviewer takes an active part in the process. To a large degree, an oral history interview depends on what the interviewer puts into it, in terms of preparation, questions, and personal relationship with the narrator. An interview is a joint creation of two parties who often come into the interview from diverse backgrounds, agendas, and forms of linguistic and cultural expression and etiquette; together they create a synthesis from this diversity. Oral history stems from the constantly evolving relationship between the interviewer and the narrator.

But, this interpersonal quality is only part of oral history's essential subjectivity. In its narrative form and expressiveness, oral history is by its very nature deeply personal, deeply emotional, deeply individualistic, deeply qualitative, and deeply human. Oral history enables people to express themselves personally in history, to reveal their passions, their interpretations, their concerns about the past, present, and even the future. While some people might point to this subjectivity—to selective, embellished or faulty memory, for instance—as a weakness, it is, in fact, one of oral history's great strengths. For oral sources reveal an important lesson—*how* people remember has a significance along with *what* they recall.

Yet another characteristic of oral history is its adaptability to a wide range of media, especially with the increased availability of high quality sound recording equipment. Oral history interviews have been used in historical museums and sites; radio, television, video, and film; exhibits; magazines, books, and other publications; plays; the first interactive, multi-media history textbook; CD-ROMs; and in cyberspace. Closely related to oral history's versatility is its accessibility. Community groups, local historical societies, libraries, and numerous other groups and institutions have sponsored successful oral history projects. These projects have codified local memories, affirmed the significance of everyday life and traditional cultures, and fostered an appreciation that ordinary people are themselves historical actors.

All of which suggests a particularly close fit between oral history and the classroom. The past thirty years have seen a veritable explosion of student oral history initiatives, in all sections of the country and beyond, from elementary school through college, in a variety of media, and, to be honest, with decidedly uneven results. Pioneering the way was the Foxfire program, originated in 1966 by Eliot Wigginton and his students in Rabun Gap, Georgia. Over the years, Foxfire students have documented through their interviews a rich world of traditional Appalachian practices and folklore, and presented this material in a celebrated series of magazines and books. In turn, Foxfire has spawned a teaching philosophy that has encouraged teachers and their students to build inter-generational bridges and to forge meaningful connections between schools and the wider public that they serve. It has also directly led to numerous other school-based oral history projects across the country, indeed around the world, although, to be sure, not all school-based projects are the offspring of Foxfire. In 1985, Wigginton summarized the Foxfire approach in a book directed toward his fellow teachers entitled *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience*.

The shining moments brought about by oral history can occur when students more deeply appreciate their own heritage, as with this student from Toby Daspi's African American Studies Class at New Iberia Senior High School in Iberia Parish, Louisiana. She describes her interview with her grandmother:

Growing up back then was a struggle, but a close family kept (my grandmother's family) together. She talked about how they had to grow the majority of their food and long hours working in the field. As the interview went on I found myself getting to know what type of person my grandmother was and what type of people she came from. After the interview I found myself with a feeling of pride to know that my family not only had a strong will to survive but a strong will to love. And I am happy that I am a descendant of (this family).

Shining moments occur when students light up with excitement upon realizing that local voices and familiar places are connected with currents in American history previously only read about in textbooks. And, they occur when students see the pleasure and excitement that their elders take in a magazine article, exhibit, performance, or Web site that they have crafted

from their own original oral history research.

Oral history not only energizes teaching, but it also meets curricular mandates in a wide range of subject areas. Through oral history projects, students and teachers engage in an undertaking that reveals what historians do in their own work. Oral history interviews enable students to uncover new information about the past and bring that expertise into class discussions. Students are more committed to a course when they feel a sense of ownership in and competence over the subject matter. As students compare interviews, they engage in critical thinking and learn to contextualize information. Through the assignments, students strengthen social awareness, as well as active listening and questioning skills, while they learn from first-hand experience about historical research and resources.

Students use a variety of technical skills to complete projects: word processing, layout, design, oral communications, budgeting, managing, and record-keeping. Producing oral history interview transcripts and summaries pushes students to solve writing and editing problems. Publishing student work in the form of local history exhibits, a school publication, or a World Wide Web site provides both recognition and a reason for writing; the students' work does contribute to our knowledge of history.

Oral history is inherently interdisciplinary; as students move from planning and field research to public presentation, projects break down the traditional compartmentalization between history, writing, reading, graphic arts, and theater. Student interviews can illuminate course content in potentially any discipline or across disciplines; for example, a history of science project might involve interviews with an industrial chemist, an inventor, or an entomologist at a local university. Oral history similarly breaks down the barriers between the classroom and the community, while forging stronger ties across generations.

Much of the burgeoning literature in oral history was written specifically for teachers and students, including James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (1979); John Neuenschwander, *Oral History as a Teaching Approach* (1976); and Rebecca Oxford, *Language Learning Strategies: Conversation Skills through Oral Histories* (1989). In Great Britain, the Oral History Society has recently published *Talking in Class: Oral History and the National Curriculum* by Allan Redfern. In addition, the Oral History Association, the national professional organization in the field, has steadily extended efforts to enhance the visibility of oral history in education and to encourage the adoption of responsible, successful teaching approaches. These efforts include a guide, *Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom* by Barry A. Lanman and George L. Mehaffy (1988), awards for oral history in both pre-collegiate and post-secondary education, a day-long teacher workshop offered at the OHA's annual meeting, a sponsored workshop on oral history in the classroom at the 1997 American Historical Association meeting, and the production of this issue of the *OAH Magazine of History*.

Fittingly, we begin the issue with an essay by Donald Ritchie, a past president of the Oral History Association (OHA), the editor

of Twayne's oral history series, and author of the recent book *Doing Oral History* (1994). Ritchie surveys many of the key works and developments in oral history over the past twenty years or so, in particular noting the renewed interest in sound itself within the field ("aural" history?).

Each of the next three articles offers a case study of the use of oral history; these studies address topics teachers and students might and often do explore: migration, the Vietnam War, and community history. Beverly Bunch-Lyons uses her scholarship on the migration of African-American women to Cincinnati to show how the use of oral history can help reconfigure our understanding about the migration process more generally. William Brinker surveys some of the key works on oral history and the Vietnam War while drawing upon his own work in Putnam County, Tennessee. He provides two important reminders: that military developments were always intrinsically linked to events off the battlefield; and that one must examine the Vietnam experience in its specificity. Helen Lewis illustrates how oral history became a crucial part of community renewal and a catalyst for adult education in the aftermath of de-industrialization in one Appalachian town. She also points out some of the potential tensions in doing participatory research and community history.

True to the genre of oral history, we next present an edited transcript of a teachers' roundtable held at the 1996 spring meeting of the Southern Oral History Organization, one of the OHA's state and regional affiliates. Teachers Toby Daspit, Susan Moon, and Rich Nixon, from Louisiana, Georgia, and North Carolina, respectively, describe some of the challenges and rewards they've experienced doing oral history in the classroom.

A pair of highly successful school-based efforts are spotlighted in the next two articles. Michael Brooks, a teacher at Suva Intermediate School in Bell Gardens, California, and winner of the OHA's first award for pre-collegiate teaching, describes the evolution of the "Long, Long Ago Oral History Project" which he has administered for over twenty years. Linda Wood details the "Hope, Fear and Rock 'n Roll: The Family in the Fifties" project done by students in South Kingston, Rhode Island on the 1950s, yet another topic of interest to many teachers and students. Wood and her colleagues have also been trail blazers in the use of high technology by student-based oral history projects, launching the "What Did You Do in the War, Grandma?" website (http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/).

While most of the pedagogical pieces in this issue emphasize oral history interviews generated by students, Judith Helfand provides one example of how teachers and students can effectively utilize already existing oral history sources, in this case the award-winning documentary film "The Uprising of '34" directed by Helfand and George Stoney. Finally, Paula Paul, a curriculum specialist in the Philadelphia Public Schools, supplies a series of classroom exercises she has designed to improve interviewing skills before students go out in the field. We hope that this issue assists teachers and students alike as they themselves contribute to the history of oral history. □