

Oral History: From Sound to Print and Back Again

“There is something about thoughts expressed spontaneously in conversation that is different from the more carefully chosen words put in writing,” according to John Peters, author of *The Oral History of Modern Architecture: Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century* (1994). “Nowhere is this more striking than in listening to recorded conversations with their individual voices, cadences and intonations.” These remarks appear nowhere in Peters’s 320-page volume of interviews with Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, I.M. Pei, and other masters of modern architecture. Instead, his remarks introduce a compact disk that accompanies the book. Although the book reproduces many of the transcripts of his interviews, along with photographs and architectural drawings, Peters viewed the audio recordings as the prime reason for his undertaking. The recordings turn his readers into listeners.

Given oral history’s dependence on the spoken word, it has long seemed paradoxical to devote so much time and effort to converting interviews into print. The first systematic oral history archives, founded at Columbia University nearly half of a century ago, set the model for others by transcribing its tapes. So committed was the Columbia Oral History Research Office to the rewritten word—and so limited was its budget—that for many years it re-recorded over the tapes once they had been transcribed. By contrast, other early oral historians, Canadians most notably, argued for preserving the aural nature of the interview. They condemned transcripts as misleading and prohibitively expensive. Yet even audio purists admitted that recording media (whether wire, belt, reel-to-reel, cassette, or video tape) were fragile and impermanent for archival purposes and not as conducive to research as were transcripts.

Over time, a consensus developed that tape and transcript were both important records of an interview and made for different uses. Transcripts facilitate the writing of books and articles. Easily scanned and photocopied, transcripts have allowed interviews to be cited as background information, paraphrased, quoted, or reproduced in full in a steadily increasing volume of literature. By contrast, audio and video tapes of interviews have been used extensively in museum exhibits, radio broadcasts, and documentary films. Now, new technology promises to reunite sound and print from their divergent paths.

Even without sound, oral history has enjoyed a phenomenal appeal over the past twenty years, in both the classroom and among the general reading public. Back in 1975, the Oral History Association published a thin pamphlet, Manfred T. Wasserman, *Bibliography on Oral History*, that identifies 306 articles and 45 books using or discussing oral history. By 1990, the British Library published Robert Perks’ *Oral History: An Annotated Bibliography*,

which contains 2,132 articles and books on oral history from around the world. In 1996, a search of the Library of Congress card catalog under the entry “oral history” revealed 571 books and journals, ranging from scholarly tomes to a children’s book, *The Berenstain Bears and the Giddy Grandma* (1994), which instructs young readers that history can be found at home, and that oral history can help them discover things they never knew about their own families.

Faced with this mushrooming literature, where should a teacher or student begin? The best starting place is with the Oral History Association’s pamphlet series—concise, inexpensive booklets on specific subjects. They include Barry A. Lanman and George L. Mehaffy, *Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom* (1988); Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, *Using Oral History in Community History Projects* (1992); *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines* (1992); and John A. Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law* (1993) (1).

Journal articles also provide a summary overview of the newest thinking and reviews of the most recent literature in a rapidly changing field. Each September since 1987, the *Journal of American History* has featured an oral history section, edited by Michael Gordon and LuAnn Jones, offering articles on a wide range of current issues. The Oral History Association twice a year publishes the *Oral History Review*; Oxford University Press publishes the *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, whose first three volumes include *Memory and Totalitarianism* (1992), *Between Generations: Family Models, Myths, and Memories* (1993), and *Migration and Identity* (1994). The latest journal entry into the field is the multidisciplinary *Routledge Studies in Memory and Narrative*.

As a sign of the continuing interest in oral history, and of the need to adjust to changes in its technology and techniques, many of the classic handbooks have been reissued in revised and expanded form. Among these are Barbara Allen and William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral History Sources in Local Historical Research* (1991); Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society* (1995); Ronald J. Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (1991); and Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History* (1995). Ives’ manual is also available as a videotape, “An Oral Historian’s Work with Dr. Edward Ives” (1987).

Important new additions to the methodological literature include Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), whose various essays explore the differences in doing and interpreting women’s oral histories. Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, *Archives of Memory: A Soldier Recalls World War II* (1990) offers a unique test

of memory through the collaboration of an oral historian and an experimental psychologist. And, Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (1994) aims to help researchers conduct in-depth interviews.

Particularly provocative is the contribution of Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History* (1990), whose essays promote the notion that both participants in an interview (the interviewer and interviewee) share responsibility for its creation and authorship. *A Shared Authority* launched the SUNY Series in Oral and Public History, which Frisch edits, and whose volumes include Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (1990); Martha K. Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History, and Ethnicity in Monterey, California* (1993); and Shaunna L. Scott, *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky* (1995). Outside of his series, Frisch also contributed the interviews to *Portraits in Steel* (1993) to accompany photographs by Milton Rogovin of men and women laid off from the steel mills of Buffalo, New York, a stunning volume that received the Oral History Association's first book award.

In 1988, Twayne Publishers asked me to edit their new oral history series. Previously, Twayne had published Sherna B. Gluck's *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (1987), the success of which provided the inspiration to launch a series that would encompass a wide-range of subjects drawn primarily from oral history interviews. We began with the assumption that many meaningful interviews had been conducted for archival collections where they remained, underused and gathering dust. Volumes in the Twayne series would sample the best of these interviews and advertise the research potentials of the larger collections. First to appear in the series was Rhoda G. Lewin's *Witnesses to the Holocaust: An Oral History* (1990), based on interviews she had conducted with those who had been confined in concentration camps, those who had successfully eluded capture, and those who had helped to liberate the camps at the end of World War II. Recognizing the educational value of these interviews, her book includes a teachers' guide and sample questions that students might use to collect other Holocaust testimony.

Launched by *Rosie the Riveter*, several other books in the series also take World War II themes. Stephen C. Fox's *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II* (1990) investigates the long-forgotten government efforts to remove Italian non-citizens from the California coastal areas during the war. Richard M. Stannard's *Infantry: An Oral History of a World War II American Infantry Battalion* (1993) tells the brutal story of one battalion's experiences during the last year of the war in Europe. Heather T. Frazer and John O'Sullivan's *"We Have Just Begun to Not Fight": An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service During World War II* (1996), Katrina R. Mason's *Children of Los Alamos: An Oral History of the Town Where the Atomic Age Began* (1995), and Ruth E. Wolman's *Crossing Over: An Oral History of Refugees from Hitler's Reich*

(1996) present compelling eye-witness testimony from those who fought in the war as well as those who fought against it, and from those whose lives the war disrupted and changed forever.

Since much of oral history has aimed to record events "from the bottom up," a large share of the Twayne series has dealt with women and minorities. Diane Manning's *Hill Country Teacher: Oral Histories from the One-Room School and Beyond* (1990) records women school teachers on the evolution of modern schools. Corinne Azen Krause's *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters: Oral Histories of Three Generations of Ethnic American Women* (1991) traces the vastly different experiences of three generations of ethnic women in Pittsburgh. Jewell Fenzi and Carl Nelson's *Married to the Foreign Service: An Oral History of the American Diplomatic Spouse* (1994), and Ann Miller Morin's *Her Excellency: An Oral History of American Women Ambassadors* (1995) reveal women's contributions to American diplomacy. Marat Moore's *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work* (1996) looks at the most untraditional work in which women have engaged: coal mining. Gabrielle Morris's *Head of the Class: An Oral History of African-American Achievement in Higher Education and Beyond* (1995) compiles testimony of the first black graduates of the University of California-Berkeley.

Books such as Andrew J. Dunar and Dennis McBride, *Building Hoover Dam: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1993), Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland, *From the Old Country: An Oral History of European Migration to America* (1994), and David D. Perata, *Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African-American Railroad Attendant* (1996) each contain personal insights that transform impersonal economic and social issues into human terms that will enlighten and inspire students. There is room in these accounts for the humor and pathos so conspicuously absent from scholarly historical literature.

My own contribution to the Twayne series, *Doing Oral History* (1995), is a guidebook for students, teachers, researchers, and project managers on how to conduct, process, and preserve oral history interviews and turn them into public presentations. Written in question-and-answer format, not unlike an interview transcript, the book offers practical advice for the variety of situations oral historians are likely to encounter. A chapter on "Teaching Oral History" outlines the use of oral history in the classroom, from elementary school to graduate school, and discusses what oral history teaches students, not only about the subjects under study, but also about historical research in general.

As I surveyed recent developments in the field while writing the book, one trend that became apparent was that oral historians have shifted away from their initial concentration on conducting and preserving interviews to broader considerations of how their interviews might be used. Although still concerned with creating archival collections for researchers, oral historians have increasingly felt the need to return their interviews to the communities where they collected them, and to attract audiences that might not read scholarly works. An oral history project begun in 1978 recorded the life stories of residents of the oldest neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland. These interviews formed the basis for a play, "Baltimore Voices"

(1981), which was performed around the city and videotaped as a documentary. Similar oral history-based plays featured community histories of Cleveland, Ohio, and St. Paul, Minnesota. Interviews from the critically-acclaimed book by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987), were arranged into a play by the same name and performed in mill towns around North and South Carolina. Even the celebrated playwright Arthur Miller turned to oral history when he used interviews from Studs Terkel's *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1974) for his stage play, "The American Clock" (1982).

Historical interviews have been proved equally effective when broadcast on radio or shown on television documentaries. Among the more notable oral history-based radio series are Harlon Joye, Bernard West, and Cliff Kuhn's "Living Atlanta" (1979), an urban history of Atlanta, Georgia, and Charles Hardy's "Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration" (1985), concerning African Americans who left the South and moved to Philadelphia. The National Public Radio series, "The Original Down Home Blues Show," combined blues music with oral histories of the musicians. Television documentaries and films that rely on oral histories are almost too numerous to list. Some of the most prominent of this genre include "Vietnam: A Television History" (1983), "Eyes on the Prize" (1987 and 1990), and "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" (1996). Ken Burns, who has employed oral history interviews in his documentaries on twentieth-century subjects from "Huey Long" (1985 and 1986) to "Baseball" (1994), adapted the technique to his enormously popular "Civil War" (1989), not just through interviews with historians, but also through actors reading the first-person letters and diaries of those who had lived through the war. These publicly acclaimed productions have inspired students at all levels. Judges in National History Day competitions often are impressed with the skill and creativity that junior and senior high school students show in their use of oral history in media and live performances.

Many students first encountered oral history through Foxfire programs at their schools. Foxfire started in 1966 when an English teacher at a rural Georgia high school realized that his lectures were not getting through to his students. "How would you like to throw away the text and start a magazine?" he asked. In these magazines, named "Foxfire," students interviewed local people about folklore, arts and crafts, and local history and traditions. They then edited, illustrated, and published their findings. The magazines led to the first *Foxfire Book* (1972), and a popular series followed. They have inspired teachers and students elsewhere to attempt similar projects. Eliot Wigginton recorded Foxfire's history and offered classroom strategies for using oral history in *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (1985). A more skeptical evaluation of the program can be found in John L. Puckett, *Foxfire Reconsidered: A Twenty-Year Experiment in Progressive Education* (1989). Key readings on "Oral History and Schools" are also available in David K. Dunaway and Willa F. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (1996).

Digital and electronic reproduction, the latest wave of technology,

promises to round oral history's circle from sound to print and back again. Archives have begun using computer text-searching programs to retrieve information from their interviews and to make interviews accessible over the Internet. Oral history audio and video tapes, transcripts, and accompanying illustrations have also been recorded on CD-ROM, where users can interact with the material. Roy Rosenzweig, Steve Brier, and Josh Brown weave oral history reminiscences into a CD-ROM "electronic book," *Who Built America?: From the Centennial Celebration of 1876 to the Great War of 1914* (1993). One can see photos of the great pianist Eubie Blake, listen to him talk about his turn-of-the-century boyhood, and hear him play some ragtime. The audio and film clips, six hundred pictures, and five thousand pages of text are combined with computer-based search features to help students see and hear history. "Our larger motivation in experimenting with this new technology has been toward democratizing historical understanding," the authors explain.

Beyond the "electronic book," the National Park Service has underwritten development of "Project Jukebox" at the University of Alaska and installed an experimental work station at the Yukon-Charley National Preserve. Unable to station rangers throughout this remote site, the National Park Service is instead using oral histories on CD-ROM to provide information on the sites in the words of people who lived, fished, hunted, and worked there. English translations are provided for those interviews conducted in Alaskan native languages. The system permits listening to portions of the interviews related to specific subjects and sites. "Clicking on the name of a place highlights the location, and clicking on the location highlights the name," explained project director William Schneider. "Clicking on an audio section will take you eventually to a discussion of the place."

Works from *Who Built America?* to *The Oral History of Modern Architecture* demonstrate publishers' growing appreciation for the "orality" of oral history. As John Peters observed, there is something different about what people say as opposed to what they write, in the types of memories and issues raised, and the way they are expressed. Generally more casual, colorful, and entertaining than formal written language, spoken words project an individuality that personalizes history. Students can more easily imagine the past by hearing it in the voices of those who lived through it. As more books, textbooks, and encyclopedias include sound along with pictures and text, students will encounter oral history more frequently. By reading and listening to interviews, they will have a better sense of how to conduct their own. Doing oral history makes them collectors and interpreters of information—and students always learn best from what they research themselves. □

Endnotes

1. These pamphlets can be purchased through the Oral History Association, P.O. Box 97234, Baylor University, Waco, Tex. 76798-7234.

Donald A. Ritchie, associate historian in the U.S. Senate Historical Office, conducts an oral history program for the Senate staff and is the author of Doing Oral History (1995), and a high school history textbook, History of A Free Nation (1996).