

The Family in the Fifties: Hope, Fear, and Rock 'n Roll

History is a composite of people's lives, experiences, and memories. Students—who have written off history as a boring collection of facts—can be “turned on” by finding out about the real lives of people who participated in events as they unfurled. Oral history gathers together these pieces of lives recollected through tape recorded interviews. Often the experiences are ordinary, just the everyday life of everyday people. But when seen as a whole, these recollections can form a mosaic of a period in history.

“The Family In the Fifties: Hope, Fear, and Rock 'n Roll” was such a project. On the surface, the focus of the project and the decade appeared mundane to students. “Nothing much happened in the fifties,” was a common assessment. But as the fifteen students in a second semester tenth grade English class soon discovered, the decade was anything but ordinary. Although the students recorded the voices and experiences of everyday life and everyday people, the portrait of the decade which emerged was one filled with tension, providing the seeds of tumultuous change.

The project was an undertaking by students and staff at South Kingstown High School in Wakefield, Rhode Island. Rural and agricultural until after World War II, the South Kingstown community is now suburban. It is the home of many small businesses and a few industries, as well as the University of Rhode Island.

The school received a \$14,000 grant from the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities. In my role as library media specialist and oral history advisor, I joined with the students and their English teacher, Judi Scott, as we explored the historical, political, and social themes of the fifties. We were assisted by two scholars, Dr. Sharon Strom and Dr. James Findlay, from the University of Rhode Island history department.

Oral history became part of the tenth grade “Introduction to Literature” English class. Scott, who had worked with me on several other oral history projects, integrated oral history into the English class with the permission of the head of the department, as well as the principal, superintendent, and even the school committee!

The students worked hard. They read *On the Road*, *Catcher In the Rye*, *The Crucible*, and beat poetry. They viewed several films and television programs from the period, heard a series of guest lectures on the cold war, civil rights, McCarthyism, rock 'n roll, jazz, fashion, film, and family and researched the history in the library

media center. Even parents became involved when we invited them to an evening get-together to explain what we were planning to do.

As the list of potential narrators grew, we tried to keep it balanced by gender, race, religion, ethnicity, employment, and age. We were able to select the narrators from a long list of “volunteers.” One very helpful volunteer interviewed by the students was the local managing editor of the *Providence Journal*, Gerry Goldstein, who then wrote two columns promoting the project. In his first column, “‘Fossils’ Of the ‘50s To Have Their Stories Recorded,” he wrote, “Much as it hurts to say so, I’m eminently eligible (Hope High, ‘57) to be interviewed. And I’m not ashamed to admit that I was among the first in line a few weeks ago to buy a sheet of Elvis stamps.”

The students, with the advice of the oral historian and scholars, prepared several sets of questions: one for narrators in their teens during the fifties, and one for men and another for women who were not teens in the fifties. Within those categories, there were also some sub-categories, such as women who worked outside the home and women who were housewives. Some sample questions:

- Describe a typical weekday as a busy housewife, or young mother.
- Some women said they felt trapped at home raising kids, even if they thought staying home was best. What did you think? What did you do to “get away” from that feeling?
- When did you learn to drive a car? Did you have a car during the day? What kinds of things did you and your family do with the car?
- Did you feel there was a strong pressure to conform in the fifties? Can you tell me about some of those things?
- Would you contrast your life to that of your mother’s (father’s) generation?
- Is there anything you would like to forget about the fifties?

Each student was required to conduct two tape recorded interviews, the first one in the company of a partner who offered support and help if needed. The students in this project were courageous. It takes a lot of courage to approach a stranger with a list of questions probing his or her personal experiences and memories.

We shared four inexpensive Sony tape recorders, with excellent Sony remote microphones, attached by a Y-jack into the recorder.

Along with good quality cassettes (such as BASF, Maxell, or Sony), this technique insures excellent quality sound at a reasonable cost. Because of time constraints, the first interviews were professionally transcribed by TapeScribe located at the University of Connecticut, and we had the transcripts back within ten days. The two scholars read the transcripts and then met with each student to discuss the "historical significance" found in the interview. Both student interviewers wrote the narrators' stories from the transcript. The teacher and I selected the one to be included in the publication.

The student's second interview was a solo flight. Many student interviewers chose to transcribe their own second interview, and we paid them half of what we had budgeted for TapeScribe. Again they met with the scholars and wrote the narrators' stories based on the transcripts.


Since the students were all about fifteen years old, none of them had a driver's license. Transportation to the interviews was arranged by the students and their parents or neighbors. If it was convenient for the narrator, he or she would come to the high school for the interview, which was usually

scheduled after school to avoid the ringing of bells and other interruptions. These interviews would be videotaped by another student in the class.

The students interviewed twenty-five Rhode Islanders and wrote stories based on the transcribed interviews they conducted. The teachers and scholars worked with the students to edit the essays for a 60-page publication which was distributed by the Rhode Island Historical Society. These personal accounts of the fifties, a decade labeled "the crucial decade," are testimony of life in Rhode Island (and, by inference, life in the United States) during a time of prosperity and relative peace.

"The Family in the Fifties: Hope, Fear, and Rock 'n Roll" captured this decade from the perspective of forty years later. The narrators looked back on the fifties with nostalgia, describing it as both a beginning—and an end—of innocence. The seeds for sweeping social change were being planted as the post-war baby boomer generation was

coming of age. The students learned many lessons in this oral history—about racism, Communism, conformity, and family life. Some of the lessons were learned the hard way, confronting narrators



PUBLIC FORUM

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Moderator: Kate Dunnigan

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who had both experienced both the pain and dealt it out.

"He was prejudiced!" exclaimed one female student who had interviewed a popular disc jockey from the fifties. She had eagerly asked to interview him after he had come to the class to talk about his days as the self-proclaimed "Emperor of the Airwaves." Later, during the interview, he recalled hosting the Friday night dances at a popular amusement park which almost 2,000 young people attended regularly. "Primarily white kids came to the dances, even though I was playing black records on the air," he said. "Once a black girl called me and asked, 'Chuck, can black girls come to that dance?'" He told her she'd probably be the only one there. In an interview with *Modern Screen* in August 1975, he said, "When I do my show I'm in complete control. I'm completely uninhibited. I'll do anything for attention." One of the things he revealed in his interview at South Kingstown High School was his anti-Presley stance. "Elvis wasn't the type of person to be a leader of family values," he said, "so I never played his records to the end, and I'd run sound effects like trains and howling dogs in the background." His "I'm in control" attitude bothered the student interviewer; she saw it as a suppression of freedom and individual rights. If there was an incident at a dance, he said, "I would go up to the microphone and put up my arm like this (like Hitler) and say, 'I am your supreme ruler. Stop. If there is one more incident, the dance is over. And one more thing, I've already got your money.'"

An example like this points out the dichotomy of oral history interviews: there are always two perspectives, the one from the context of the period of the narrator, the other from the perspective of the young person living in a different time. What the DJ said about the fifties, taken in context, was typical of the attitudes expressed in those "good old days." To a young woman of the 1990s, his words came through loud and clear as those of someone who was prejudiced and whom kids today call a "control freak."

A similar incident occurred during another oral history project, "What Did You Do In the War, Grandma?" The student was interviewing an Army nurse who had worked in a field hospital in the Philippines. The woman described the "smell" of Japanese soldiers. "You could always tell when they were around because you could smell them," she said, with clear loathing. The young student was outraged, and when she wrote the narrator's story she inserted her own feelings about the woman's "bigotry" and "racism." However, the woman's words reflected commonly shared attitudes inflamed by the hostile rhetoric of the war.

But most of the students' interpersonal experiences were positive. For example, one student interviewed a woman who said she was a "typical fifties mother. I washed on Monday and ironed on Tuesday." She raised seven children, and described her family as a "poorer version of 'Leave It to Beaver.'" She talked about the fifties as being a man's world. "It was his home, they were his children, and you were his wife. If you got a divorce there was no way you could get help. There was no welfare. Because of this, many women stayed in unhappy relationships. I did for 25 years." The student who interviewed this woman was very impressed with her. "She really broke out of the stereotypical image of the 1950s. She really led the way for a lot of women, and I'm really glad I met her."

As the semester drew to a close, students were eager to share their feelings about the experience, often linking the past to the present. One student said that in her mind the fifties were not simply great, but "totally unbelievable." She saw the era as one in which the groundwork was being laid for later social upheavals, including civil rights and environmental awareness.

One of the narrators described his own experience. "I watched a videotape the other day in which a middle-aged man described the 1950s from the perspective of a teenager, which he was at the time. Some of what he said surprised me, and that in itself was surprising—because the person on the tape was me."

A young male student, when asked whether he would prefer to be living as a teenager now or in the fifties, chose the fifties. "We barely knew anything about the '50s, except the bits and pieces we got from history class. I didn't realize the underlying tensions."

Another said, "I'd really like to have been a beatnik. I would love to have hitchhiked around the country, but I don't think you can do that today. People aren't hospitable to strangers today." "I don't think old people and young people mingle enough," said one. "I don't think many kids even talk to their own parents a lot." The oral history interviews stood out in contrast.

A young female student explained, "I realize the '50s are more similar to now. I always thought it was all perfect with poodle skirts and rock 'n roll. It's kind of repeating itself right now." □

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