

Oral History on the Local Level: Personal Reflections

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I did not enter the historical profession to become involved in oral history. Nor did I begin with an interest in local history. Indeed, local chronicles bored me and written history based on interviews and recollections seemed suspect at best. During my first ten years as a professional, I used the traditional sources—manuscript collections, public records, newspapers. My dissertation, and the research that represented its continuation, concerned municipal reform in Denver during the Progressive Era. I was careful to insist that I was writing, not local but urban, history, a perfectly respectable pursuit.

But even then I had become aware of the enormous information gaps left by reliance on traditional sources. The events and actors I studied were of local (that word would not go away), rather than national, significance. And the people involved saw each other often, or talked on the telephone; the only time letters appeared was when someone was out of town for an extended time. Moreover, local actors were not so impressed by their self-importance that they kept every scrap of writing; hence, few left manuscript collections, and those few were not always helpful. Clearly, good histories of local movements would have to get information from other sources.

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I became involved in oral history as a result of a particular project. From urban (local?) history I developed an interest and expertise in black history. Thus I was approached in 1971 to write a history of the black community of Muncie. It seemed a fascinating topic, so I agreed. I had very little idea of what would follow, or even of how I would proceed. Actually I learned about oral history the most expensive way, by experience, which means trial and error—much of both.

I had a partner who was the real spearhead of this project. Hurley Goodall was a Muncie native who had become the first black fireman (in 1957) and the first black elected to the school board (1970). He was a community leader whose activities during the turbulent 1960s had convinced him that the story of black Munsonians, hitherto unrecorded, needed to be told. Whites and blacks alike needed to realize that blacks had helped build the city, had carved out a life for themselves, had persevered in spite of the obstacles posed by prejudice and discrimination. Goodall had convinced the Muncie Human Rights Commission to support the writing of such a history. The HRC accordingly contributed start-up funds, enough to free a little of my time from teaching and to buy a tape recorder and tapes. The Ball State History Department contributed student secretarial assistance to type up the tapes. Those little financial boosts were, of course, big stimulants and got the whole project started.

Goodall and I plunged in, and in our enthusiasm we probably committed every blunder and violated every rule. One of his major concerns was that the sources of the story we wanted to tell were fast drying up; several old people who had spent their lives in Muncie had died and others were in failing health. We therefore had a sense of urgency and could not waste time learning everything. (This was a valid concern: we interviewed 36 elderly people during the next three years; five years after the project's start 25 percent of them were deceased, and two others passed away before we were able to meet with them.) I read a few articles about oral history but found them irrelevant for our project; they emphasized the careful preparation for an interview—studying the events to be covered, getting all the facts straight, carefully reviewing the interviewee's career and public statements, and the like. This would have been fine had we been preparing for talks with Lyndon Johnson or ex-Governor Roger Brannigan. But we were about to talk with plain ordinary folks. There did not seem to be any background to study.

I will mention just a few of our early mistakes, because they are avoidable and readers may learn from them. First, I chose a particular cassette tape recorder because the salesman recommended

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its faithful sound reproduction and because it was on sale. Its sound was good, but it was cumbersome and complex; thus, it was obtrusive during the interview and on several early occasions I lost most of the interview because I had failed to push that last button. Moreover, it had been on sale because the line was being discontinued; when something broke later, I could not get it repaired and had to coax it along.

Goodall thought it would be great to catch a number of our senior citizens at once, so he set up a group session at a retirement home. What a disaster! Confronted with a microphone and an audience, these elderly folks abandoned reticence in favor of attempts to top one another's stories. They all talked at once and incessantly, correcting, contradicting, and cackling. The tape was, of course, worthless, and in all the hubbub Goodall had been unable to take any coherent notes. He could not even return to interview individuals one by one because they seemed to have exhausted their words on the subjects.

We also committed our share of technical gaffes. We learned to put the recorder on a soft surface, to speak clearly ourselves, to ask our subjects to repeat words and phrases that were unclear. We learned to ask elderly ladies to turn off their day-time soap operas and not to have soothing background music playing. We learned to stop our own, and our subjects', nervous habits such as drumming fingers or clicking pens.

Finally, it took us both a long time to develop effective interviewing techniques. Goodall, who knew a lot about local events, tended to ask leading questions to which he got yes or no answers, to guide his interviewee to expected answers, or to focus on a few events he remembered at the expense of letting the interviewee select the subjects. Mitchell, who knew virtually nothing about local events, tended to run out of steam and questions once the basic biographical information was done. There are some long pauses in my early tapes. Eventually I learned to listen very carefully, and always anticipate a question flowing from what was being said. I learned to have a prior flexible list of questions which built on earlier interviews. Somewhat surprisingly, I discovered that a 1-2 hour interview was really exhausting for me, because it demanded such constant mental alertness.

But beyond our early pratfalls I think we learned some lessons which may be of value to others involved in similar projects. Thus, I would like to share some more general observations and insights. Chiefly I will note the contrast between interviewing "significant" figures and "insignificant" figures. I will also note the difference between a project that is intended to create transcripts for a collection and one that is intended to produce a written history or study based on oral history.

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One stream of oral history deals with prominent individuals. The Columbia Oral History Collection includes former Presidents, governors, actors, authors, labor leaders, ambassadors, and the like. Even on the local level we are concerned with preserving the recollections of leading citizens: a longtime mayor, the founder of a local manufactory, a favorite school teacher, and so on. The interviewer often is looking for a particular angle on information already known and can be prepared from other sources to question and even politely persist in extracting an accurate response. Most importantly, such figures are accustomed to speaking and very likely they are even used to being interviewed. They are able to review their own records and prepare themselves for the interview. They will not be awed by a microphone, nor will reviewing a typescript, that is, reading their own words, be a novel experience for them. They might be cautious about signing a release, but this should pose no major obstacle. If there is a great deal of material to be covered it is often wise to schedule several sessions. In that way the interviewer can focus each session of a few issues or events, or on a single time period. Subsequent interviews may then build on the relationship and materials in earlier interviews, and the researcher may wish to clarify points and verify details. The transcript from such an interview or series of interviews may then stand on its own, an individual record of considerable value.

Another stream of oral history deals with individuals of no particular public prominence. The black history project, and others in which I have been involved subsequently, was definitely of this type. Much of what we might try to preserve on the local level is based on the recollections of "just plain folks." In this case, the interviewees were not merely somewhat faceless and nameless but also elderly and Negroes (as they insisted on being called). Did these qualities result in obstacles? Absolutely.

The major obstacle I encountered was suspicion. First, prospective interviewees were suspicious of me. I should point out that I am white. I am also a college professor, and at the time looked even younger than I was. Could I be trusted? And even if I meant well, wouldn't I get us all into trouble by my inexperience and ineptitude? Second, several interviewees were suspicious of the project. To be sure some elderly Negroes thought it about time their story got told. But others could not see why anyone would be interested in them—they had not done anything noteworthy except live for a long time. Who wanted to know all this? And why? Finally, many were suspicious of the physical trappings of oral history. It was bad enough that a young white professor should come to their house and talk and ask questions. But the tape recorder and note pad really put

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them on guard. Several asked that I not record, so I did not. And I quickly knew that if I pulled out a release for them to sign I could kiss the interview goodbye.

Another major obstacle was more substantive. I discovered that elderly people who had lived in one place all or most of their lives often had little sense of time. Without too many major events (e.g., "That must have been in 1947 because we were living in Memphis at the time.") to serve as date pegs they might confuse 1920s, 1940s and 1960s. Refining this sense of time was difficult because I had so few external check points to introduce. Thus, an interview on Negro life in Muncie during the 1930s might turn out to be Muncie in the 1910s.

Confronted by these obstacles we had to define what our project was. Very often an oral history program is intended to produce a collection of tapes and transcripts. These transcripts themselves are the end product. But we had not set out to do that. Rather, we were attempting to reconstruct the framework of a past that had been long submerged and intended to write a collective, community history. Individual stories, while important, were subordinate to the larger tale. We needed to talk with a lot of people, and hadn't the time to cultivate one individual whose natural reticence precluded a complete, or even satisfactory, story. With that approach we made compromises. But we got our interviews and our information.

The problem of suspicion remains acute during any project that encompasses many interviews with ordinary people. In this particular project two factors helped overcome suspicion. First was the personal participation by Goodall. This was crucial, for I could not have gained entry on my own. All our interviewees knew him, either personally or by reputation, and they trusted him. Often we went together, especially for the earlier interviews. When I went alone it was after he had arranged the interview. But even he could not always allay suspicion. Goodall interviewed by himself one of the more prominent Negro citizens, potentially a rich source; this man was so cautious that even in the last weeks of his life he refused to allow a tape recorder and revealed almost nothing. A second factor was that as time passed word of our project spread. Later interviewees had heard about us and apparently what they had heard was good—we had no axe to grind, had kept information confidential, and could be trusted. As I became more comfortable and my own acquaintances widened, I obtained further leads from other blacks, not just Goodall. This broadening was crucial to this kind of study. Still, I was not approaching anyone unless I had a strong personal contact with the prospective interviewee.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of having this

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strong, credible personal contact. The researcher must know the individual or must have a good intermediary. To illustrate, in another later project I made an appointment with a blue collar worker whose salient characteristic for my purposes was that he had worked in a local wire mill for over 25 years. He was guardedly friendly when I arrived and certainly hospitable. But as I began the questions his suspicions grew. Without really answering any questions he excused himself. I could not help overhearing as he dialed his telephone and queried, "Are you sure he's all right, Bud?" Apparently Bud allayed his worst fears, because he returned and the interview that ensued was first-rate. However, I did not feel sufficiently approved to unleash the tape recorder, so I had to be content with written notes. Again, there was no transcript but my larger research project was immeasurably enriched. Had I been interested in collecting a transcript itself I might have returned, but there remains the chance that this man's suspicions, temporarily overcome during an hour of rapport, would have returned and he might even have regretted his openness with a stranger. My experience dealing with "little people" taught me to play an interview by ear and to get everything I could without pushing a reluctant subject too far.

As may already be evident, suspicions about the tape recorder persisted. There is no single best answer to the dilemma thus posed: if one insists on using a tape recorder some people will not consent to be interviewed, and even if they do they probably won't say much; but, if one does not use it one loses a lot of good material. Again, if the project is to result in complete transcripts, documents for subsequent users, one reluctantly abandons the subject who objects to being recorded. But if the final product is a written history the oral historian simply becomes a researcher asking questions and trying to broaden the base of knowledge as much as possible; one stays, takes good notes, and then immediately writes up a report of the interview. "Little people" are not the only ones who shy away from having their words on tape. After all, who among us wants to see our private opinions and insights in writing, directly (and unassailably accurately) quoted? Every oral historian has had a subject say, "Turn that thing off and I'll tell you how it really happened." We turn it off and find out. Our interviewees trust us to incorporate that little unrecorded insight as "background" without directly attributing it to them. Sometimes we have to treat an entire interview that way.

One final problem we did not resolve was the release of the transcript. If the project is intended to produce a transcript or transcript collection, then obtaining a release is vital. Without permission to use the results we are left with a secret archive, unusable by later scholars. The process of carefully nurturing the subject must include

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discussion about the need for a release. By the time the transcript has been prepared a signature should be forthcoming.

If the project is intended to produce a lot of information and its own written study, however, getting a signed release is of secondary importance. On occasion the oral historian dealing with "little people" knows not to mention a release—the last thing in the world to lay before a suspicious interviewee is a form requiring a signature. And, since the transcript itself is not crucial to the current project, the temptation is strong not to press the issue. This may be a mistake. Indeed, if there is one thing I could do over in this particular project it would be to obtain a release for every transcript. But this could only be obtained after the interviewer had earned the trust of the people interviewed.

Those who set out on oral history projects should be clear about what they are doing. Are they creating a transcript collection as an end in itself, or are they merely using oral history as an instrument to obtain material for a study which is the end product? They should also understand the very difficult requirements for interviewing "significant" figures and the "little people" for whom this may be a novel experience.