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THE APPALACHIAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: THEN AND NOW

John R. Williams and Katherine R. Martin

Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization. Stories are able to adapt themselves to any local and social climate. They are old and venerable, but they are also new and up to date.¹

The Appalachian Oral History Project (AOHP) is a product of its time, resulting from the social unrest during the Vietnam war, the Kennedy-Johnson war on poverty, and the growing awareness of grass roots history. History from the mouths of the people, as academicians and laymen alike were becoming aware, detailed events and perspectives different from those generally found in history textbooks. Political and economic events on a national or international scale often assumed an insignificant status in people's everyday lives. It was the personal event or achievement which held true meaning and historical impact for those who cared to recall. Perhaps a feeling of defensive pride also underlay the desire to begin a project of this kind, since the war on poverty had neglected the more positive aspects of Appalachian culture. So in 1970, the project began with a small staff and the help of students at Alice Lloyd College, Emory and Henry College, Lees Junior College, and Appalachian State University as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation. The project was designed to collect and preserve some of the region's personal histories and memories and to encourage students to appreciate and
promote the rich history and folklore of the Appalachian people.

When William John Thomas coined the term folklore in 1846, after years of studying popular antiquities, he never dreamed that someday scores of students brandishing tape recorders would sally forth up the hollers of Appalachian Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina in search of the folk. Thomas and the early folklorists witnessed the vast societal changes affected by the Industrial Revolution and sought to collect the oral traditions of an agricultural society which was rapidly being rendered obsolete. To the earliest folklorists, including such notables as the brothers Grimm, not everyone was a part of the folk. Indeed, only the peasants were considered bearers of oral traditions, and folklore was viewed as a mysterious remnant of quaint and curious pagan rituals.

This elitist view of the folk, based on a faulty syllogism, established a dichotomy which influenced the definition of folklore for at least a century. The syllogism goes something like this: Only folk possess folklore; the folk is peasantry; and therefore, only the peasantry possess folklore. Today, many folklorists consider almost any group as the folk and their expressive culture as lore. Thus, folklore is a dynamic part of all people's lives. It is generated, preserved, and changed through the communicative process. As social institutions change, folklore changes, and in areas where traditional institutions remain relatively unaltered, so does folklore.

The basic institutions of Appalachia had certainly experienced alterations by 1970 when the Appalachian Oral History Project began. The agrarian society rooted in a barter economy had rapidly given way to industry. Logging, mining, tourism and other industries had replaced farming as the economic mainstay of the region. Family farm traditions were no longer functional in industrialized Appalachia. New cultural patterns were replacing the old. Nevertheless, the generation which remembered the
self-sufficient agricultural traditions was still alive and had important stories to tell.

Since the major focus of the AOHP was to educate students, primarily students from Appalachia, about the cultural diversity of the region and to instill in them an appreciation for Appalachian culture, each student designed his own interviewing project. Often they chose to interview grandparents, relatives or friends from their own communities. Thus, many of the interviews in the collection are general in nature, made up primarily of personal narratives concerning work experiences and social customs in the mountains.

The second goal of the project was to use the collected material in a published social history of Appalachia, thereby providing a framework for the project. The book, Our Appalachia: An Oral History, was published in 1977 and contains portions of forty-seven interviews. It is divided into three sections. Part one, "A Simpler Time," relates the stories about Appalachia before the major industrial changes. Part two, "A Culture Under Attack," takes the people from the farms to the coal camps. Part three, "Digging In," raises questions about the future of Appalachian culture.

Each section required a different set of questionnaires, and the content of each section dictated the scope of the interviews. Section one relied upon general, rather straightforward questions about various family and social customs. However, sections two and three required a more complicated line of questioning. Some of these more complex social issues were better handled by staff members than undergraduates, and the more difficult interviews had to be carried out by staff members.

Whether by students or staff, the interview itself was always a complicated process. Murphy's law generally applied, that is, anything that can go wrong will! Usually an informant, who had been notified well in advance, was prepared for the interview, but it was the interviewer's responsibility to set up the interview, to put an
informant at ease about the interview and to eliminate background noise if possible. The tape recorder had to be properly set up, using a/c current and an exterior microphone. The best interviewers asked pertinent questions and allowed the informant time to respond completely, without interruptions.

One of the project's major problems was legal release agreements (figure 1). Although it is best to have the release signed immediately after the interview, in many instances this aspect of the interview was neglected, and in at least one case, project staff later had to obtain agreements from the surviving relatives of an informant who unfortunately died shortly after the interview.

The mechanics of preserving the materials became more complicated as the number of taped interviews grew. Each tape had to be labeled, copied, outlined, indexed, and transcribed. Since every hour of tape requires five hours or more to transcribe, a large backlog of tapes developed, and project staff had to resort to a rating system. Tapes which were to be published in the book or tapes of very articulate speakers received top priority and were transcribed first.

The question of how to go about transcribing is an important one. How do you indicate body language? What about laughter or other sounds (children, chain saws, barking dogs)? What constitutes a sentence, a paragraph? When portions are not transcribed, how can omissions be noted? Is the transcript of a conversation an integrated whole or a series of segments which can be cut and pasted or word processed to fit particular needs?

Accurate phonetic transcriptions were almost impossible without using a detailed phonetic alphabet and indicating various suprasegmentals such as pitch, stress and juncture. This process requires a great deal of training, and few researchers would be able to use the finished product. We discussed a modified phonetic transcription such as that used by novelist Harriet Arnow, but several of the staff members were concerned that this transcription would reinforce the
negative Appalachian stereotype. So, the staff opted to use standard spelling and make selective grammatical changes in the published edition of the transcripts.

By 1984 the project (now housed at Alice Lloyd College) held close to two thousand taped interviews, six hundred of which had been transcribed. Most were conducted in the eight counties surrounding Knott County in eastern Kentucky. The collection covers a wide range of subjects--family and county histories, the Great Depression, farming methods, early education, home remedies, politics, and others. The greatest amount of material is on the subject that has served as the area's financial underpinning--coal. The older miners' recollections of the early days of mining are particularly poignant.

Today the status of the project office at Alice Lloyd College is more that of an archive rather than an active collecting agency, and only three part-time students and a part-time director are currently employed. This staff collects between five and ten new interviews a year and publishes an annual edition of Mountain Memories, which includes edited versions of some of the project interviews along with appropriate photographs. The journal is the staff's top priority, and many of the office's operations center around each succeeding issue. The project's second priority is cataloging its collection. Cataloging has gained precedence over gathering new interviews because of the imbalance between the time required to transcribe, edit, and type each interview and the limited research use of the collection. Scholars and students using oral history materials often face an insurmountable task when trying to locate data. Many interviews are cataloged only by interviewee and have no subject access to their content. Immediate comprehensive cataloging of each interview by interviewee, interviewer, location, tape number and, most importantly, subject has become the only answer. This is time-consuming, particularly when cataloging
is done from a tape rather than a transcript, but it is a crucial task nevertheless.

When a taped interview is accessioned, it is immediately given a consecutive number which is written on the cassette cover before storage. A card with this accession number is typed and placed in the shelf list file. The next step, depending on the potential value of the interview to researchers, is either to transcribe the interview as soon as possible and then catalog from the transcript, or to catalog immediately from the tape and save transcription for a later time. Very often, because of the large number of interviews, a tape is transcribed only when a researcher requests a transcript.

Since the project office has a fairly rapid turnover of student help, standardized forms control cataloging. Whether working with a tape or a transcript, students use an "Information for Catalog Cards" sheet on which they record all data (figure 2). This sheet is then used to type index cards (figures 3, 4, and 5). All information sheets are kept as a record of the subject headings used for each interview. The project office plans to computerize its cataloging system, thereby increasing its ability to assist researchers.

Fourteen years after its creation, the Appalachian Oral History Project is a small one, with limited growth in the number of interviews done each year. But during those fourteen years, the value of the project to students has been immense. Transcribing exercises enabled students to envision the difference between written and spoken English, and this understanding led to valuable discussions about the social significance of Appalachian dialect and mainstream English. Discussions about Appalachian cultural change, based on the collected stories about past and present customs, led to an understanding of the relationship between language and culture.

Most important has been the impact of the project on the self-esteem and cultural awareness of
the students who participate in the project. Hester Mullins, an early student interviewer at Alice Lloyd College, says in her critique of her experiences:

When I started working for oral history, I began to appreciate the qualities the people did have, their fellowship, their rapport. I couldn't believe so many people could open their hearts to me.... I was ashamed of the fact that Grandpa had made moonshine, but when I started interviewing Grandma I found out he once had been a magistrate, he ran a store, he had been a schoolteacher, he could repair all kinds of tools, he built barns for people, cleaned ground. I realized he was the type of man who did what he had to do to make a living. In his boots I would have done the same thing.

Then I began to feel glad because I felt I can be proud of my heritage because they fought to survive.
APPALACHIAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE'S DEED OF GIFT AGREEMENT

I, __________________________, hereby give my oral history interview with ________________________, which was conducted on ________________, to the Appalachian Oral History Project.

It is hereby agreed between myself and the Appalachian Oral History Project that all rights, title, and interest in the tape recording or transcript (verbatim and edited) belong to the Appalachian Oral History Project.

The following restrictions are to be placed upon and will govern the use of the interview:

In full accord with the provisions of this Deed of Gift, I Hereunto set my hand.

_________________________  _______________________
Donor                     Date

Figure 1
INFORMATION FOR CATALOG CARDS

Narrator's Name:

Birth and death dates

Occupation

Location (State, County, City):

Address (Box no., etc if different from above):

Tape number:

Subject headings (List a heading only if real information is included):

Abstract (Limit to 26 words or less. Full sentences are not necessary):

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Tape length:

Pages (To be listed only after final transcript is typed):

Legal Agreement: Yes_____ No_____
MARRIAGE AND COURTSHIP - WEDDING

1779 MARTIN, ELVA (12/16/16- ) Housewife

Parents' names, birthdates, occupation;
April 7, 1941--met husband; finished school in 1932; presents and decorations at Christmas; black children; black miners; facial make-up.

See Shelf List Card

EDUCATION - Schools and Schooling

1779 MARTIN, ELVA (12/16/16- ) Housewife

Parents' names, birthdates, occupations;
April 7, 1941--met husband; finished school in 1932; presents and decorations at Christmas; black children; black miners; facial make-up.

See Shelf List Card

PARENTS

1779 MARTIN, ELVA (12/16/16- ) Housewife

Parent's names, birthdates, occupations;
April 7, 1941--met husband; finished school in 1932; presents and decorations at Christmas; black children; black miners; facial make-up.

See Shelf List Card

Figure 3
MARTIN, ELVA (12/16/16- 1779 ) Housewife

Parents' names, birthdates, occupations;
April 7, 1941--met husband; finished school in 1932;
presents and decorations at Christmas; black
children;
black miners; facial make-up.

Address: Box 24; Hueysville, Ky. 41640
Date of Interview: July 5, 1979
Interviewer: Susan Patton
Tape Length: 30 minutes
Pages: Legal Agreement Yes No

1779 MARTIN, ELVA (12/16/16- ) Housewife

Parents' names, birthdates, occupations;
April 7, 1941--met husband; finished school in 1932;
presents and decorations at Christmas; black
children; black miners; facial make-up.

Address: Box 24; Hueysville, Ky. 41640
Date of Interview: July 5, 1979
Interviewer: Susan Patton
Tape Length: 30 minutes
Pages: Legal Agreement Yes No

Figure 4
LOCATION CARD

Kentucky - Floyd County - Hueysville

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1779</td>
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<td>Housewife</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Merchant</td>
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<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>GEARHEART, FRONA (11/2/01- )</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5
NOTES


2Other activities which grew out of the project include Recollections, a journal of selected interviews and photographs, a slide/tape presentation documenting the project, and a catalog of the better transcriptions.

3On the average, the project has had no more than ten requests for material per year.

4Subject headings have been listed in Appalachian Oral History Project Union Catalog published in 1977.

5Another member of the Appalachian Oral History Project, Lees Junior College, has already begun to put its interviews on computer, including interviewee's name, the subject, abstract, interviewer, tape number, length, date, quality, and legal status. Mary McLaren, Lees' librarian, used Peach Text 5000 by Peachtree Software which allows three hundred interviews to be put on a single text. Alice Lloyd College is also considering Superfile by FYI, Inc., which would enable staff to write abstracts of interviews in conjunction with a word processing program and then index the interviews by a series of key words. Choice of a program will depend on ease of use for both the technician entering the data and the researcher retrieving it.