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Review Essay: Oral History: A Selected Bibliography

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ORAL HISTORY: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Davis Cullom; Back, Kathryn; and MacLean, Kay. Oral History: From Tape to Type. Chicago: American Library Association, 1977.


A comparatively new method of historical research, oral history combines the ancient technique of interviewing with the modern technology of audio and video recording. Its advocates suggest that oral sources are useful to study subjects in which written records are either lacking or too voluminous, to examine social problems, to provide insights into motivations and perceptions of participants in events, and to reconstruct community or personal histories. Its detractors are quick to point out the frailty of the human memory and dismiss much of the result as unreliable. Although practitioners of oral history have failed to reach a consensus of the exact definition and scope of the new field, they have developed professional techniques and ethics. As is the case with many technological changes, the advantages of collecting recorded reminiscences and interviews with witnesses of or participants in historical events are balanced with added responsibilities and legal concerns. Thus, this discussion of oral history literature includes an examination of the following: the various definitions of the new method, the special uses for recorded oral sources, the techniques for producing
oral history interviews and recording reminiscences, the related ethical and legal considerations, and the relationship between the folklorist and the oral historian.

Although various authors propose unique definitions for oral history, most are clustered in two basic categories: oral history as a method of historical research and oral history as a body of knowledge transmitted orally. In her books, Oral History for the Local Historical Society and Transcribing and Editing Oral History, Willa Baum refers to oral history as the preservation of the reminiscences of participants or firsthand observers by the technique of tape recording those reminiscences. In James Hoope's Oral History: An Introduction for Students, oral history is described as collecting the spoken memories of an individual's life. The program manuals, A Guide for Oral History Programs (see Curtiss), History on Tape: A Guide for Oral History in Indiana (see Public Information Office), and William Moss's Oral History Program Manual for the Kennedy Library, speak of oral history as a method of research to collect information from individuals with firsthand knowledge of events under study. Oral History: From Tape to Type (see Davis) also describes oral history as a legitimate branch of research which collects eyewitness accounts of events.

From a different perspective, Barbara Allen and William L. Montell in From Memory to History describe oral history as the body of information comprising individuals' memories which would be lost at death. British archivist David Lance in An Archive Approach to Oral History defines oral history as the information obtained from interviewing individuals and recording their personal reminiscences of events. For a brief overview of the differing opinions about the definition of oral history, see Larry Danielson's article, "The Folklorist, the Oral Historian, and Local History."

Oral history is not advanced as a technique to replace serious research in written documents but rather as a supplement in areas for which written sources are lacking or too voluminous for practical study. The technique has proven useful in the traditionally elitist study of political and economic leaders, the research of the middle and lower social
sectors in recent periods, the collection of folklore and culture, the study of local history, and educational exercises or supplements. In Elite and Specialized Interviewing, Lewis Dexter advises using oral techniques when they will provide more or better data at less cost than other sources. According to Moss's Oral History Program Manual, oral sources provide special insights into the motivations and perceptions of participants or witnesses to events of historical interest that may be missing in written documents.

A second area of interest for oral historians is the study of common people's lives and problems. The shift away from interviews of celebrities to the rank and file, who leave few written records, reflects an increased interest in social history within the historical profession. Walter Rundell, in "Main Trends in U.S. Historiography Since the New Deal," argues that oral historians can collect data about recent events and social problems for use by future historians. For additional arguments for the use of oral techniques in the study of social history consult: Lance, An Archive Approach to Oral History: History on Tape: A Guide for Oral History in Indiana; and James Fogerty, "Filling in the Gap; Oral History in the Archives."

The best argument for the inclusion of folklore studies in oral history programs is related in Richard Dorson's American Folklore and the Historian. Dorson suggests that training in both folklore and American civilization would be beneficial for the oral historian. Furthermore, he states that historians would find oral traditions useful to supply information on attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes; to understand national myths, symbols, and images; to separate facts from embellished narratives; and to provide information on minority groups. Additional sources for the folklore perspective include Danielson's article, "The Folklorist, the Oral Historian, and Local History" and Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History (see Olch).

As a method of research, oral history is especially useful in the study of local history; and as a body of information, recorded oral sources provide educators with an excellent teaching aid. For the local historical society, an oral history project can
prove rewarding by personalizing the study of the area's history when written sources are often limited. For information on the uses of oral interviews in the study of local history see Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society; and Allen and Montell, From Memory to History. Recorded reminiscences are also a helpful aid to teachers in the classroom and to curators as explanations of displays. Two very different examinations of oral history projects as a teaching method can be found in James Hoopes, Oral History: An Introduction for Students; and Eliot Wigginton, Moments: The Foxfire Experience.

Although the definition and scope of oral history may vary from author to author, the techniques are similar. The most common technique used ultimately involves three phases: researching the background of the subject, conducting the interview, and processing the result. There are several basic manuals which discuss the techniques of interviewing, equipment, legal agreements, and ethical concerns in oral history projects. Two of the best reference manuals are Baum's Oral History for the Local Historical Society and California State University's A Guide for Oral History Program. Three additional guides, History on Tape: A Guide for Oral History History in Indiana, Moss's Oral History Program Manual, and Gary Shumway's and William Hartley's An Oral History Primer, provide brief but adequate treatment of the basic procedures. For specific information on transcribing tapes see Baum's Transcribing and Editing Oral History. The best information on storing and providing access to the completed tapes is found in Lance, An Archive Approach to Oral History. Intended as a guide for small oral history projects or as a textbook for instruction in oral history techniques, Oral History: From Tape to Type emphasizes the importance of producing finding aids for the tape collections and publicizing the availability of the products of oral history projects.

Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques (see Bartis) and A Guide for Collectors of Oral Traditions and Folk Cultural Material in Pennsylvania (see Leach) discuss the techniques from a folklorist's perspective. Most of these manuals also provide samples of forms and
agreements used in each project.

As a professional, the oral historian is responsible for not only mastering the techniques of his trade but for balancing the often conflicting obligations of obtaining a candid interview and of making it available for research. The interviewer is obligated to advise the interviewee on the purposes of the project and his legal rights and is also required to provide the potential researcher a truthful account of events. All of the basic manuals include discussions of the ethics and legal problems of oral history, but three articles provide an overview of certain aspects of the subject. "Oral History Evaluation Guidelines: The Wingspread Conference" defines the guidelines for the interviewee, the interviewer, and the sponsoring organization in an oral history project. Throughout these guidelines are warnings for all to be aware of mutual rights and abide by prior agreements. William W. Moss's presidential message to the Oral History Association, "In Search of Values," suggests that the endurance of the oral historian's work will depend upon the reliability of the product, the comprehensive research and methods of inquiry, the care taken in processing, the availability of the product for others, the manner it is used, and the consideration exhibited for the privacy and interest of the sources. For a purely legal examination of how the courts have ruled in cases concerning copyright, libel, and right of privacy consult Truman W. Eustis, III, "Get It in Writing: Oral History and the Law." His advice for anyone conducting an oral history project is implicit in the title with an added warning to consult a legal specialist in the area should a serious question arise.

Articles relating to oral history are found in many archival, historical, and folklore journals; but one journal, The Oral History Review, which is published by the Oral History Association, concentrates on the concerns of oral historians and recent developments in the field. This journal was preceded from 1967 to 1972 by the published proceedings of the Oral History Association's first six national colloquia on oral history. Both publications are good sources for articles on the various aspects of oral history.

With the fast pace of modern society and the
increased reliance on such conveniences as the telephone, fewer people have time to write the letters or diaries on which historians traditionally have depended to reconstruct the past. Recorded interviews offer a means to compensate for the lack of written documents of this nature and also an opportunity to study groups such as the rural and urban poor which have traditionally created few written records. Oral history has developed into a respectable profession with much to offer in the study of recent topics in the fields of social and community history. The factual events of history must be studied with an understanding of the civilization in which they occur; therefore, much can be said for the inclusion of folk culture as a field of study for oral history projects. Oral history offers a very human perspective to history in this modern age of computer technology.