

Oral History at the University of California, Berkeley

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THE REGIONAL ORAL HISTORY OFFICE (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley, was founded in 1954. It is the second oldest university-based oral history program in the United States. In 1970, ROHO became a division of the Bancroft Library, which is the home to university's special collections. In the nearly fifty years since its founding, ROHO has conducted slightly over 2000 interviews with men and women who have been prominent in some way in the life of California or the U.S. Far West. Approximately 100 to 150 new interviews are conducted each year.

Interviews at ROHO are typically ten to twenty hours long, though some are considerably longer. Interviews are almost always life-history format, though there are series examining specific historical topics such as the formation of the environmental group, the Sierra Club, or the history of student protest movements on campus. Interview topics cover a broad range of topics, providing detailed eye-witness accounts of business and politics, art and literature, science and technology, labor and civil rights movements, and a broad variety of community histories. The collection contains one of the most important collection of memoirs by participants in the women's suffrage

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movement in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as large numbers of interviews dealing with more current topics such as the emergence of the biotechnology industry.

The challenge for oral history at Berkeley is to balance research, teaching, and archiving into a coherent program. Oral history is very popular in the United States. Oral history however has not yet changed how Americans view the history of their country. The volume of interviewing conducted at all levels of society today challenges oral history programs based in research universities such as Berkeley to reflect more deeply on the contribution oral sources can make to research and teaching, as well as to public culture.

Ronald Grele has stated that a defining feature of oral history has been the dialogue it can create between popular conceptions of the past and academic scholarship. That it can, but that presupposes a clear understanding of the unity of research and teaching in the university. The term “oral history” dates from 1943, but the scholarly practice of creating original historical sources through interviewing goes back to at least to the first half of the nineteenth century. Since I am a historian, I want to glance at the past before addressing the future.

Historical Sketch

In the 1830s, Jules Michelet, the most prominent French historian of his lifetime, began interviewing several thousand participants in key events of the French Revolution. Since fifty years had passed, the men and women his research team interviewed were by and large not leaders. They had been young, often enthusiastic foot soldiers in movements that had shaped their identities and their personal fates. The records he preserved of their memories allowed for a fuller narrative than the fragmentary, pillaged, and censored archives could have possibly permitted. He and his team struggled with how to interpret testimony marked by deep biases and the frailties of memory. At one of the founding sites of oral documentation, issues that occupy contemporary professional journals were already expressed in clear and direct form. Michelet developed evidentiary standards to extract from often confused and conflicting individual accounts collective experience of

both events and longer-term processes. He was convinced of the value of oral sources, and so were many other scholars of the nineteenth century.

Hubert Howe Bancroft's interviews for his series of books on the history of western North America are one of the foundations of the Bancroft Library. Recent work of scholars such as Rosaura Sánchez and Génaro Padilla prove that these interviews and testimonies remain rich sources of information more than a hundred years after they were compiled. Jules Huret's interviews from 1891 with virtually every person of consequence in France's literary world provided an indispensable source for my book on French symbolism, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (1999). The interviews allowed me to reread other sources and question interpretations based on later documents.

These were not unusual projects. Oral documentation was integral to the development of modern scholarship and modern journalism in many countries. Some scholars, like Michelet, Bancroft, or Elsie Clews Parsons, relied on oral documentation in work that virtually defined their fields. The majority of scholars and journalists who turned to oral sources did not have such deep influence, but their documentation efforts nonetheless remain available beckoning us to return to them as we continue to rethink the shape of the past.

The introduction of tape recorders in the mid-twentieth century allowed for more intimate, more informal, and less expensive encounters between scholar and narrator. In the last fifty years, the number of interviews and interview projects has expanded into literally the hundreds of thousands. It was at this point that oral history became a tool in a popular surge to reclaim the past. When I was executive secretary of the Oral History Association, Chadwyck Healey, a firm that reproduces archival resources, told me that they estimated there were over *a million* oral history interviews in U.S. libraries and archives. They were trying to figure out how to make these resources more available, but the sheer quantity stumped them. That was in 1990. We can be sure that there are many more interviews now, besides which, Chadwyck Healey's estimate did not include tapes still sitting in somebody's study – many of these tapes will eventually be lost but many will one day or another wind up in a repository.

The Problem

The Archives of American Art alone has over 7,000 oral history interviews in its collection. This is the largest repository related to the visual and performing arts, but only one of many. In the arts, the number of interviews available to researchers lies beyond the capacity of anybody to know their contents. Similar situations exist in the study of politics and government, social movements, business history, science history, and to an even greater degree in local and community history. The oral history program at California State University, Fullerton, recorded some 4000 interviews on mining in the intermountain west, as well as some 5000 interviews on the history of Brea, a suburban community founded after 1945. The majority of these interviews are not transcribed and it is fair to question how accessible most interviews are or how much they truly reshape our knowledge of the past. The very success of oral documentation has also been a shortcoming. The more interviews people collect, the less likely the information they contain will be used aside from the immediate goals motivating the researcher. Oral history's ability to shape understanding of the past still seems more potential than realized.

Recording interviews on audio tape coincided more or less with the establishment of formal oral history programs in universities and other institutions. The formal charge given to ROHO has been "to secure and preserve for history significant accounts of the development of California and the West." The interviews collected at ROHO cover big chunks of that history, though obviously the collection can be neither comprehensive nor complete. Compared to the ever-growing body of interviews available from individual scholars and other institutions, interviews collected by a university research unit cannot provide *the* definitive set of texts documenting the various types of experience formed through the historical development of the state and the region. However, these collections may well be the most reliable, the most accessible, and the most sophisticated body of interviews on their subjects.

The Future

Given the digitalization of all forms of expression and the explosion of electronic communication, documentation of oral expression will likely become even more widespread than it has been. The Talking History web site juxtaposes interviews, memoirs, diaries, letters, surveys, as well as visual materials. A student of mine is conducting interviews with the Vietnamese diaspora in chat rooms. I expect that the relation of interviews to video, email, web pages and other digital forms of communication will become increasingly important. As technologies change, those drawn to oral documentation will feel less and less limited in how to collect testimony and how to present it.

Since the nineteenth century, oral documentation has undergone a consistent, twofold, contradictory trajectory. Oral history practice has expanded exponentially as it has professionalized. University programs have been the linchpin in this process. They have provided a body of practice establishing standards for project design, interviewing, transcription, preservation, and accessibility. Not everyone can or will follow standards set by the oral history programs at Berkeley, UCLA, Columbia University, or the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, but university research programs provide a persistent challenge to think more deeply.

The role of oral history research in a research university is not to duplicate the collecting activities now occurring virtually everywhere. Our special responsibility is to reflect on the process and on how to make oral sources more relevant to research, education, and public culture. Oral documentation has been and should be judged by how it contributes to the interweaving conversations and debates that constitute academic life.

Oral sources have remained a continuous part of scholarly life for the past two hundred years because they have allowed us to see forms of collective life that are difficult (though not impossible) to document in other ways. Today just as in the past, people create and sustain a shared imaginative life wherever they gather and converse, be it at the kitchen table, the tavern counter – or university hallways. These informal collective understandings permeate every decision groups make – no matter how text based the group may be – and they form the back-

ground of every interview. These accounts, at once both personal and social, provide evidence for reconstructing communities, their past concerns and past conflicts. Oral history allows the recuperation of ideas that were important for many communities but which might not be well documented in print or literary sources. Oral sources reveal modes of collective life and consciousness that contrast sharply with the individualizing biases of literature and allow for new interpretations that keep people, their beliefs, their dilemmas, and their choices, as an important part of historical processes without romanticizing the role of individuals.

A Deeper Chronology

I want to move into a more prescriptive mode now. First, on-going oral history work will be strengthened if we take greater advantage of the historical depth oral documentation has. Making previously documented interviews speak more loudly will deepen the historical registers of current interviews.

With nearly fifty years of interviewing and interviews that preserve firsthand testimony of events going back to the last third of the nineteenth century, the ROHO collections allow for longitudinal studies in many topic areas. Our current work on Mexicans in the United States is being designed to build on previous interview projects. In addition to interviews conducted by ROHO over the years, the Bancroft Library also houses the interview notes of Manuel Gamio, the well-known Mexican anthropologist who studied Mexican migration to the United States in the mid-1920s, as well as over eighty interviews and dictations conducted in the 1870s with members of Mexican families that had been prominent in the state prior to the U.S. conquest of 1846. Many questions asked in current interviews have been formulated to facilitate comparison across a number of analytic axes with previous efforts to document the Mexican experience of U.S. society and culture. Similar efforts are being taken in other new interview series where the collection contains earlier documentation related to the same subject.

What these new projects do is to place oral sources into a much deeper chronology than is usually done. They understand the near past

as having roots in deeper historical patterns. New interviews designed within a fuller understanding of the past can help us understand better how we today face changes that are as puzzling and blinding for us as they were for those who here before us.

Accessibility

Making oral sources, both new and old, speak more loudly is paramount if we are to achieve the goal of deepening reflection on who we are and where we come from. ROHO is working to put full text transcripts of the majority of its interviews online, along with audio and video segments. Because most interviews were conducted before the development of the World Wide Web, we have been contacting previous narrators to find out if they have objections to placing their stories in such a public location. Very few past interviewees have declined so far.

We are also beginning work on producing CDs and CD-ROMS to take better advantage of the multimedia aspects of oral documentation work while allowing users to explore connections between interviews and related resources in their own way.

Research and Teaching

I want to stress the importance of drawing students into oral history research. The future of oral history lies in work that has yet to be done. We in this room for the most part were formed in another era. The ideas and practices of the mid- to late twentieth century are rapidly fading away and becoming almost as archaic as those of the Victorian era. Our duty is to instill a need for intellectual inquiry and to secure institutional foundations that facilitate new inquiry in dialogue with but not determined by what preceded it. I am of the firm belief that no activity in the university should be divorced from teaching. The classroom and mentoring situations push us to share our ideas in forms that an educated public can understand. Oral history has three immediate practical benefits for students. First, oral sources can give students an

understanding of the connections between everyday life and larger social processes of transformation and conservation. Second, it provides a practical hands-on methodology that authorizes students to create original historical sources. That process teaches them that scholarship is never a question of going to the library and summarizing what you find there. It always includes that, but too often students don't get past that beginning point until very late if ever. Finally, oral history speaks to one of the biggest challenges to education by encouraging students to think creatively about how to integrate their own backgrounds, interests, and experiences into what they are learning about the world at large. In "Invisibility in Academe," Adrienne Rich wrote:

"When someone with the authority of a teacher...describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."

It is an experience I am sure that all of us know in one form or another. Patterns of invisibility are complex and ever-present. Oral documentation challenges students to design a research project that describes the world as they have understood it but then to relate what they learn to the larger image of the globe that the university has been so good at developing. Separation between teaching and research undermines the basic mission of the university and diminishes both activities. Working closely with students will benefit oral history research because it will open up new research topics, it will lead to resources that more comprehensively address the history of our society, all while providing students with practical research experience that will be valuable to them after they graduate. The most important questions facing everyone in education today are grounded in the everyday practices of oral history: How do we teach students to read sources for their biases, in particular to be aware of what has been silenced? How do we teach students to think through the foundations of arguments they encounter and to assess how logic, evidence, and emotion have combined into a conviction? How does one develop common languages for areas of shared need and interest without losing sight of continuing differences in experience and standpoint? What is the relation of knowledge and conviction, and how does education shape our understanding of public life and our responsibilities for the state of the world? These are questions that oral history research forces into consideration.

Oral history in the United States has too often focused simply on the tasks of collecting and archiving interviews. Not enough attention has been given to what interviews say and how they might transform our understanding of the past. University-based programs have provided the kind of intellectual and reflexive leadership that one might expect of them. In large part, this has been due to their being largely conceived on library rather than academic programs. At Berkeley we have tried to remedy this by more consciously integrating graduate and undergraduate education into our activities and by design multi-interview research projects that take into account previous interview series. We believe that a focus on research and teaching will help develop more rigorous standards for assessing oral history work and will help the many thousands of enthusiasts who continue to document the history of their communities, as well as the work of library archivists who develop oral sources as a complement to more traditional collecting efforts.

We can say with assurance that there will be a greater variety of oral history activity in the century ahead than there has been in the past one hundred years. Changing technology has come to mean that there is no comfortable resting point in sight. The scope of possible *choices* will enlarge. What we will do will really be a question of what we *want* to do within an evaluation of how best to use resources that are always finite. Innovation in any event will occur as a palimpsest upon practices with long histories. University-based oral history research programs have a lot to contribute to the common task of thinking more critically about who we are, where we come from, what we want, and how we choose between possible futures.

Abstract: The paper describes the activities of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley, the second oldest university-based oral history program in the United States. In the nearly fifty years since its founding, ROHO has conducted slightly over 2000 interviews with men and women who have been prominent in some way in the life of California or the U.S. Far West. Approximately 100 to 150 new interviews are conducted each year. The challenge for oral history at Berkeley is to balance research, teaching, and archiving into a coherent program.

Key words: oral history; archives; oral sources.

HISTÓRIA ORAL NA UNIVERSIDADE DE BERKELEY, CALIFÓRNIA

Resumo: O artigo descreve as atividades do Regional Oral History Office (ROHO), na Universidade de Berkeley, Califórnia (EUA), o segundo mais antigo programa universitário de história oral nos Estados Unidos. Nos seus quase 50 anos de funcionamento, o ROHO conduziu mais de 2.000 entrevistas com homens e mulheres que foram de alguma forma proeminentes a vida da Califórnia ou do *Far West* dos Estados Unidos. Aproximadamente 100 a 150 entrevistas são realizadas a cada ano. O desafio para a história oral em Berkeley é balancear a pesquisa, o ensino e o arquivamento em um programa coerente.

Palavras-chave: história oral; arquivos; fontes orais.