

OVERVIEWS OF ORAL HISTORY

Panelists

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"Oral History and the Electronic Age"
by Peter Stursberg

Although Oral History is as old as history itself, as an organized activity, as a popular movement, or pastime, it is a child of the electronic age. That child grew up at the same speed as the recording equipment grew smaller until it has become the giant that it is today.

I suppose the first oral history recordings of the electronic age were the war reports of the CBC war correspondents, the piles of aluminum backed platters which cluttered up the newsroom of the corporation after VE Day. One of the first jobs that Norman DePoe had was to make a selection of these war reports, which were meant for the CBC archives and have since been turned over to the Public Archives of Canada. I understand from Ernie Dick, that they have the full war report now in the Public Archives of Canada. I forget how many of the war reports were in the Norman DePoe Collection, but it would have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of 30 or 40 hours. The full Collection, as I understand, runs from 600 hours and that is uncatalogued.

We war correspondents had a recording device, a disc recorder which came in

two large boxes weighing some 80 pounds. They were the finest hi-fidelity equipment of the times, the latest of the 'state of art' and they were described as portable. They were portable in the sense that they could be carried around on a jeep. This was in the dark ages before the transistor and before high-tech and miniaturization. The first time that I worked with tape - the tape as we know it now, the electronic tape - was in the early '50s at the United Nations. I remember it well because when I was recording my reports and commentaries in the '50s I used to say, "I'll pause five seconds for spiralling." And I no longer had to say that now that we had a tape recorder, but I went on saying it

The first portable tape recorder was the Webcore, which was a bulky object and seemed heavy although it probably weighed about 25 pounds, a third of the weight of our old wartime equipment. Imagine Please, the latest of the Sound Heritage Series [has] a picture of an early portable tape recorder around 1947 threaded with a reel of paper-based recording tape. This wasn't the tape that we know now. I never worked with paper tape. I wonder whether it worked. I know this, that they had a magnetic wire recorder which we used at the end of the war, and it was just hopeless. The fidelity on it was very low and also it was impossible to edit.

It took sometime before we had truly portable tape recorders, which could be carried over your shoulder or put in your pocket. And by the time that occurred which was in the '70s the newspaper reporters threw away their note books and took to recording press conferences and statements and that's why there is a forest of mikes before every talking politician.

I did my first oral history interviews in the early '60s - that was for the CBC. The CBC was really the initiator of oral history in Canada. Although of course we didn't call it that at that time. The term oral history is only a little more than 10 years old. When I did those first interviews they were done specifically for the [CBC] Archives although they were to be used in the case of the demise of the person that was being interviewed. They did feel that programs could be made of them so that they weren't just oral history interviews. They were going to be used as programs. When I did those first interviews I had an engineer with an Ampex or a Uher. I remember when I went down to Dartmouth College to interview Vilhjalmur Stefansson, CBC got the local radio station man to make the record at his cottage on the campus. That interview illustrates an important point with regard to oral history, which is the obvious limitation of death. Stefansson, who seemed so full of life at the time, died within 10 days of that interview. When we set up the joint oral history project of the Public Archives and Parliamentary Library to record the memoirs of federal politicians our priority was age and health. Another is that you can't get anyone to say anything that he doesn't want to say. Certainly not politicians or public figures. And that's aside from whether you should or should not do that.

In the Prologue to Diefenbaker: Leadership Lost I wrote that after interviews with hundreds of people it has been my experience that a person who is not a professional writer is likely to be much more frank and interesting when

talking than when writing. There's something about the act of putting pen to paper that makes for caution, dullness and officialese. Now, some people wonder why this should be. I know that Norman DePoe who was a correspondent in the parliamentary press gallery, at the same time that I was, was quite astonished at some of the revelations in my books on Diefenbaker. I think the reason is that the average person is more comfortable in conversation, as he or she does make most arrangements, does most of the business on the telephone, particularly here in Canada where we are the greatest telephone callers in the world. We are growing up in the electronic age and there's less and less writing of letters and few people keep diary's now. As a result Dalton Camp was to suggest in reviewing my first oral history book, Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained, that oral history may be our only political history.

Up to now I've been talking mainly about a particular kind of oral history, which is the kind that I practise, political oral history. It's the kind that Columbia University goes for, that is recording the memoirs of VIPs, of persons significant in American life, or what Paul Thompson refers to as the "great man project."

There is the ordinary person kind, or as Louis Starr has called it, "history from the bottom up." And that has proved to be immensely popular when undertaken by journalists and broadcasters, such as Barry Broadfoot and Studs Turkel. I might say that such books as Ten Lost Years and Hard Times and the others are not appreciated by the academic historians. But then they don't like any kind of oral history really, at least the Canadian historians. The American historians on the other hand seem to be a little more with the electronic times. In some ways the ordinary person interview is more difficult to do and requires patience and skill on the part of the interviewer to make a person who's not used to speaking tell his story. It's the type of interview which

is used in the sorts of social and community history's which Paul Thompson favours, or projects like the one at Duke University on how black disenfranchisement came about in the southern states of the turn of the century. And that's an ongoing project. This project at Duke University is being funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. There are many other oral history projects at American universities which are also supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

There are differences between the way oral history is supported in this country and across the border. The modern movement began at Columbia University and spread to other universities across the United States. Although the Americans complain about oral history being under-funded it is supported by foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and other private sources.

In Canada it is a government archives and agency's which are the main component of oral history. Now take my own case as an example, I could not have done the four books on Diefenbaker and Pearson without the help of the Public Archives of Canada. Dr. Wilfred Smith, the Dominion Archivist, is a creative archivist and a keen supporter of oral history. I worked closely with Leo Laclare who was your first president and latterly with Ernie Dick who is here now, and for who's encouragement and assistance I shall always be grateful.

Last but not least there is the British Columbia Archives and the extraordinary Sound Heritage Series that they have been producing for several years, in fact since before this organization was started, since 1973, a unique undertaking. I am sure that I have left out some government agencies, and some provincial archives which are doing good work in oral history. And there is the odd foundation which is also supporting it such as the Glenbow Foundation.

As I say, I'm speaking in general terms, and in general terms it is the university supported by private enterprise which are the main proponents of

oral history in United States whereas it is the government and government agencies in Canada. And that I suppose is the story of most endeavours in our two countries.

"Directions in Oral History in Canada"

by Richard Lohead

This is my first time in Vancouver and indeed my first time in British Columbia, and therefore I was not present at the founding conference of the COHA in 1974 at Simon Fraser. However, this meeting is quite significant because it provides an opportunity to review the progress of oral history and the Canadian Oral History Association over the last decade. And also to discuss the role the Association should play in the development of oral history in the next decade. It is also significant that after holding conferences across the country in the last nine years that COHA has returned to its place of origin. For in assessing oral history in Canada since 1974 perhaps the first fact that would become evident is the leading contribution made by the Province of British Columbia to its growth and development. This contribution is well known and in fact is evidenced by the presence of many of you here. Oral history activity in British Columbia surpasses that of every other province in Canada - a fact that can be quickly ascertained by a visit to the Provincial Archives. For it is this organization, as Peter Stursberg mentioned, that is largely responsible for B.C.'s outstanding accomplishments in oral history and providing a model for the rest of us to follow. As many of you may know B.C.'s oral history program centers around Sound Heritage, which serves not only as a valuable acquisition device for the B.C. Archives, but also as a means of bringing the history of B.C. to the people of B.C. As such,

in turn, it has encouraged more people to be aware of their past and has led to more local activity in oral history itself. This oral history presence generated by Derek Reimer, Allen Specht, and others at the B.C. Archives has also led in part, or gradually, to recognition by the academic world. At present B.C. now offers I believe, two university courses in oral history, an oral history and genealogy course at UBC and the other given, of course, by Peter Stursberg at S.F.U.

Oral history has evolved in British Columbia, I believe to a stage where it represents a strong working alliance between those who create it, those who collect it, and those who interpret it. Though B.C. has perhaps set the pace does not mean that the rest of Canada has not been active in the creation of oral history documents. There have been conferences recently in St. John's Newfoundland, at Memorial University, and also the creation of the Atlantic Oral History Association. Newfoundland, with its folklore element at Memorial, and Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have evolved their own separate organization and hold their own regional meetings.

Moving on, in Quebec, the one area that seems to be mainstream for them is the recording of life histories. Folklore and sociology disciplines have attracted approaches most closely to European in their use of the life history. Recently a contest was sponsored for the best life history in Quebec by the Department of Sociology at Laval. That is one way which they are building up their history collection on Quebec people, through oral history.

Recently the Ontario History Society has developed a number of work shops to be held three or four times a year depending on the demand for them. This is all the past two years. They've held four so far, and each one of them has been well received. Also, a few years back the Multi-Cultural History Society of Ontario was established which documented the immigrants' experience, those people who have come to Ontario after

United Empire Loyalists and the French.

Moving further west I guess we should also mention that two years ago the Saskatchewan Archives Board held a conference on oral history which had a very good turn out and published its proceedings. I will probably say, second to British Columbia, Saskatchewan has the most active oral history program. Finally, in Alberta although some people in Alberta are not as enthusiastic about oral history as others, the Provincial Archives there has produced the first directory of oral history. They have come out with the first provincial directory in oral history so users can actually know what's available and for those who are thinking of undertaking oral history to know what's already been done.

The Canadian Oral History Association has been active throughout Canada in a more formal way through its own conferences such as this one, and through the publication of the conference proceedings in our Association journal. I'm pleased to report that the Association is nearing completion of one of its original objectives, that is the publication of a national inventory of oral history collections in Canada. Work on this directory in particular, as well as my work on oral history at the Public Archives and through the Canadian Oral History Association, has afforded me a vantage point perhaps to view the evolution in direction of oral history in Canada over the past few years.

First, the collections listed in the directory are indicative of major oral history interest. And the most popular oral history subject in Canada is bush pilots. We have had more interviews on that subject than any other one subject. I'll leave that for your own explanation with respect to aviation, with respect to the country, respect to the romance of the occupation. But be as it may it has attracted more attention according to the directory.

One of the other areas of concern is mapping out pioneer settlement in the west. Another is local histories. La-

bour, women and immigration are major areas which have been the concern of social historians who, in the last decade, have become a much greater force among history departments. For as you know the archives of these areas in the past have been neglected and therefore, written material not being available, many scholars seeking to interpret their record have had to resort to oral history methods.

Perhaps before all who have been active in the field of oral history was the folklorists. The National Museums of Canada as early as 1911 used even more cumbersome equipment than the CBC provided to Peter Stursberg to record the folk tales and the folk legends of Canada's native peoples. This interest in life history has also been carried on through sociological studies during the '30s, '40s.

Another major and more popular area is the field of public figures, and particularly politicians. Peter Stursberg has addressed you on that subject. But this is a contribution more of journalists.

Perhaps second, as an individual area which has been covered, oddly enough is the history of World War I. The CBC did a very big project on that, 600 hours in addition to the World War II reports. Various individuals have taken it on. It is an area which has been in terms of oral history quite well covered and it is one that I think in the future will be more consulted than the ones that are better known.

And of course the history of individual professions and individual biography's. In terms of the professions one area that seems to be covered the most at present is the medical area. There seems to be a lot of oral history initiative in that area as opposed to say, engineering or social sciences.

When one switches to the management of oral history collections, one notices immediately, as Mr. Stursberg mentioned, that development of oral history in Canada has been heavily influenced from

the outset by our governmental institutions. One of the dominant areas that defines the Canadian traditions has been the archives. Perhaps the reasons for the archival involvement has been the fact that simply the archives in Canada tend to be more centrally organized, and larger than perhaps they are in Britain or the United States. Also the idea of "total archives," which means that oral history is collected as tape not as transcript and therefore is collected with other historical sound recordings. And also the roles mentioned by Peter Stursberg of the CBC which created perhaps, after World War II, a lot of programs in its cultural mandate to try to seek out and find the Canadian identity and express it wherever it was found since it was publicly funded and the mandate was a cultural rather than a commercial one--this was not the case in the United States. Hence broadcasting occupied a much larger role in Canada than it did in the United States. In fact, it's somewhat ironic when you look at the evolution of oral history--at least this was my experience when I first came to it--I ran into Barry Broadfoot's book which was certainly an excellent book. I couldn't help but feel that it was sort of a follow-up and a Canadian equivalent of the Studs Terkel book. And Canada once again was following the lead of the United States. This opinion was actually easily formed and that was the view of people in United States when I went to a few conferences from there, who also could not understand why Canadians in oral history collected on tape rather than transcript. They either thought we were a bit lazy I think, or perhaps we just couldn't afford it. But they never understood and I think they do now, that the reason why was the large role of CBC. Therefore oral history, in terms of using oral history techniques in the modern sense, is a longer one than in the United States. I often think for many of those who heard the first time the word oral history in terms of Barry

Broadfoot while listening to "Voice of the Pioneer," on CBC, might have had a little feeling of déjà vu since the "Voice of the Pioneer" preceded Barry Broadfoot's by at least 10 years.

Because the CBC collects its material on tape rather than transcripts and because these tapes were deposited in archives explains, perhaps, the role of archives in an oral history association such as ours. Perhaps the biggest explanation and most simple explanation for why archivists have been involved in oral history and in the Association is that oral history is simply a part of our job description.

The term oral historian, or the fact of oral history is a debate in itself. Many people feel that there is no such thing as an oral historian. I personally feel that - if I can add my position here - oral history is created by many disciplines and it should be judged by the discipline which created it. However, regardless of the outcome of all the disciplines which are now active in the creation of oral history for their own purposes, there's one discipline that is responsible for all of it and that's the archival. For in the process of creating their oral history for their particular discipline, they are in the process often of making significant additions to the historical record. And it is our job as archivists to bring

order into this rather untidy reality that is presented to us.

I should say at this moment that the heavy involvement of archivists in oral history should not be interpreted as a unanimity of archival opinion. Some are enthusiastic, others skeptical of its value. This has often led to debate of whether archivists should create or collect the record. If I may venture and steal a page from Derek Reimer's paper which states "The important task of archivists perhaps is to present as balanced and representative record of our past as possible. And perhaps in this sense oral history should be viewed as a new and challenging method of selecting historical documentation. It does not become as questionable perhaps if you assume that the historical record does exist within the mind and memory of an individual, it's a function of the interviewer to select what is important out of that record."

Oral history, as an extension of the traditional archival role of selection, is a means of strengthening a record which is now diffuse because of technological advances in other areas. Many historians have commented that there is much more of the record but less in it. Hopefully oral history by a judicious use of the archival selection, in cooperation with the academics, can focus in on what is important and therefore strengthen the record.