

# Articles

## BUDGETARY RESTRAINT AND ORAL HISTORY

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**RÉSUMÉ:** Les restrictions budgétaires constituent une menace sérieuse à la croissance et la qualité des projets d'histoire orale. Bien que les administrateurs reconnaissent spontanément l'importance des sources de documentation orales, peu semblent conscients des étapes nécessaires pour mener à bien de façon satisfaisante un projet. Cette ignorance tire son origine du manque de connaissances des pré-requis de la méthodologie de l'histoire orale, et des difficultés de discerner un projet valable d'un projet médiocre. Ceci donne lieu à un jugement faussé qui porte les administrateurs à opter pour la quantité plutôt que pour la qualité. L'avènement des restrictions budgétaires impose également une contrainte sur le temps consacré à la recherche avant et après l'interview, démarche indispensable pour vérifier la véracité de la documentation orale. Cette situation a des répercussions sérieuses car la valeur d'une évidence historique est reliée à sa véracité.

Pour rendre justice à l'informateur et valoriser le matériel récolté, mais surtout le produit final, il faut assurer au projet le temps nécessaire. A cette fin, des lignes directrices doivent être élaborées pour les administrateurs de projets d'histoire orale et pour les chercheurs qui y oeuvrent.

Throughout the country the value of oral history as one component of research programmes for museum and historic park interpretation programmes has been recognized and acknowledged. However, the ever-growing demand for fiscal restraint in public expenditures poses a serious threat to the continued growth and development of oral history programmes.

As dollars dry up more must be done with less, a positive move in some cases, but for oral history projects financed by the public purse real problems exist. Especially for those projects supervised by administrators anxious for a product as soon as possible.

As far as materials go, oral history is not that much more expensive than many programmes. But what costs so much is the amount of time required to adequately carry out a project. Let me illustrate with some of the problems I encountered in a recent contract.

I was allocated seven weeks, later extended by an additional four, to prepare an historical survey on the "human history" of an area that was being developed as a recreational park system. There was a directive that oral history be used in the collection of the material for the identification of potential interpretation themes. Although the project was primarily a survey, the eleven weeks did not leave a great deal of time to adequately carry out both the archival and field research.

That time reference - 'human history' - was one limitation, since it could extend the time period back at least 4,000 years. In addition, the area under study comprised over ten villages, each with its own history and patterns of relationships. Similarly, there were a number of different economic pursuits that could be isolated and studied in detail - shipbuilding, fishing, coasting, lumbering, and farming. And, just to add a further difficulty, little has been published on the area of study, so

much of the material necessary for background research remained in a raw state at the provincial archives. There were serious problems facing me in becoming familiar with the local history and economic landscapes of the villages to prepare a sufficiently comprehensive set of interview questions or topics.

There was one other complicating factor, one which made the job somewhat easier but did present additional problems. An active and enthusiastic citizens' committee had developed to participate in the park planning process. Each member of this group was able to suggest four or five potential informants, thus providing me with a list of almost 50 names - 50 people to meet, visit and perhaps interview on tape within a matter of three or four weeks!

Time did not permit a pre-interview with each informant. In fact, the limitations meant that only a portion of the informants were contacted, and then a fraction of them recorded. In addition to having sufficient time to pre-interview and evaluate the potential information, I needed time to listen to the tape, to summarize and perhaps transcribe key sections, to evaluate the data collected, as well to write the final report.

The real crunch, comes with the quality of material that is collected. In the excitement of the moment important questions were left unasked, and occasionally unanswered. Also, there were responses full of interesting, but unproven data. For example, the following is an excerpt about the migration of one family into a shore community:

"I could hardly tell you the date but I could tell you how they came to come here. He was the son of W.R. who was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and his uncle J., was a weaver in Belfast, Ireland. Well,.. the Crimean War had started, and it continued on for a good while. One day, a British man'o'war(?) anchored in the harbour. That night they slipped aboard, and joined up...and sailed for the Crimean... He was four years in the British Navy."

According to oral tradition, they arrived in Crimea just at the end of the war, but they continued in the service. Then, after sailing to Halifax, the grandfather was pressganged into service once again, and stayed another four years, before he jumped ship and made his way down the coast.

A fascinating and colourful tale. But, according to documentation research, the informant's relative had received a land grant in the province in 1826, and was also to be found in the Nova Scotia census of 1838 and 1861. The pressgang incident after the Crimean War is suspect but, it does point a direction for further questioning. It seems quite possible that it was during the Napoleonic Wars, not the Crimean War, when the informant's predecessors joined the British Navy.

The above illustrates the importance of adequate time to thoroughly evaluate the material collected, and then to go back and follow up some of the inconsistencies. The clues given in this case perhaps are sufficient to see the possibility of confusion with wars. No doubt, there are other excerpts that require a thorough knowledge of the local history to adequately evaluate the "historical truth" of the reminiscences.

Fiscal restraint will therefore pose serious problems to those engaged in oral history - especially if it restricts the time available for background research and pre- and post-interviews. These complications will be further compounded if

administrators and supervisors are unaware of some of the limitations of material collected in such a manner. For example, the interest level of the above passage might make it an ideal candidate for a slide-tape presentation even though its historical accuracy is suspect in its original format.

Perhaps what is needed at this point in time is a set of guidelines both for researchers engaged in contract research and administrators designing oral history projects to insure that there is sufficient time available to do justice to the informants, the oral material collected, as well as the final product.