

THE ROLE OF ORAL HISTORY IN MUSEUMS

In the past, the oral history interview has been restricted to the mass media, radio, television, newspapers and magazines, but within the last few years interest in oral history has led to its increasing use by others including museums, historical societies, and the educational systems. If the definition of a museum is a public institution which not only preserves visually for us the past, but also is intended to educate us about that past, then oral history should be seriously considered by museum curators and researchers as one vehicle towards that goal of public education.

The question that arises among historical researchers in museums, archives, universities, etc. is whether oral history is merely a 'fad' or whether it is a legitimate method of historical research. Traditional research methods have withstood the test of time but oral history as a relatively new innovation has been refused recognition by the more conservative academics. This attitude is unfortunate; oral history as used by scholars fills in the gaps in their research and/or corroborates facts. Oral history is a supplement to and does not compete with other historical methodologies. It is the human element, devoid in other forms of research, which not only makes oral history different but is the essence of the tape-recorded interview. Unfortunately, some of the reservations expressed by historical researchers about oral history are well founded. Lack of ground-work, control of the interview has led to a number of low quality tapes, which in turn has resulted in the refusal of recognition of oral history as a methodology by professional researchers and research institutions. This taint of non-professionalism has evolved through self-made amateur historians taping indiscriminately and without help or direction. On the other hand, education in the techniques of interviewing and an awareness of the potential of oral history as a valid method of conducting historical research will improve standards.

There are, therefore, certain ground rules to be followed by the oral historian in order to produce a good quality tape. Too many 'life-story' tapes of pioneers and older residents do not delve deeply into any one area to be of much research value. Those interviews conducted to glean certain facts about a specific topic are much more valuable. As with any research project, intensive research into the usual library and archival sources is necessary to gain a knowledge of the basic historical facts. It is information from these traditional sources which determines largely the questions and areas probed during the taped interview. Before the actual interview the researcher has other work to do. A list of possible contacts, or interviewees has to be drawn up and pre-interview sessions with each arranged. The pre-interview is as important as the taped session, for it is the first physical contact between the interviewer and interviewee. A half an hour is usually adequate time for the researcher to assess the individual and the information he possesses. The taped session follows a few days later; this time lapse allows the researcher to draw up a list of questions and the subject to recall names, places and events. There are occasions when a pre-interview is impossible to conduct. Fifteen, twenty minutes are then put aside prior to the taping to talk with the interviewee.

The interviewer must remember that microphones are very sensitive and are able to pick up all sounds; therefore, the taped interview must be conducted in a quiet room with no outside interferences such as radio, television, or other members of the family. To help relax the subject, identifying data, name, place and date of birth, education and occupation, should be given by the interviewee

at the beginning of the tape. This information is also useful to anyone listening to the tape in the future. The interviewer should ask questions in chronological order. Dates help set events in proper perspective and should be given by the subject as often as possible. If the interviewee confuses dates and names, the researcher should be able to make a mental note of these mistakes. The opinions of the interviewer and corrections of historical facts usually have no place during the taped session. How a person perceives events may be historically incorrect, but his interpretation of the facts may be more important. Most oral historians agree that a maximum of two hours is adequate time for an interview. Few interviews require a longer period to recount the required information; also, the interviewee, especially if an older person, tends to tire when the session lasts several hours. Some form of finding aid, an outline or transcription, must be done upon the conclusion of the interview as the tape is next to useless otherwise. Tapes are numbered by accession and stored in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room. The only upkeep required is rewinding of the tapes at least once a year to eliminate static build-up and the threat of print-through.

Interviewing by both professionals and non-professionals is fun and interesting, but the quality of the tape and perhaps the future of oral history depend on the ability of the practitioner of oral history to overcome the special problems and pitfalls which face him. Control of the interview is probably the most important aspect and in some cases the most difficult problem faced by the interviewer. The researcher must never allow the central theme to become obliterated by secondary and perhaps useless information. To retain tight control of the interview, tact and perceptiveness are needed. Some of the potential difficulties appear during the pre-interview, allowing the interviewer time to structure the session accordingly. Demanding, pointed questions are often required for those interviewees who tend to ramble, whereas for others, the questions should be posed so as to elicit a more complete answer. Forgetfulness or confusion of facts is another annoying aspect when interviewing; the interviewee often gives misinformation and it is part of the job of the interviewer to determine whether this lapse of memory is honest or whether it is more a matter of selective recall. This latter problem arises more frequently when interviewing politicians or someone about political events. Public figures are especially aware of their image and to protect and/or promulgate it, certain facts or a particular slant to events will be given by the interviewee. Depending on the purpose of the interview, the researcher can choose to ignore this or to challenge the validity of the statements.

Of course, not all oral history tapes are acquired through gallery research projects. A tape library can be accumulated in different ways. For example, the Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature has acquired most of its tape collection through special grants for oral history projects. L.I.P., O.F.Y., and S.T.E.P. grants over the last three or four years have contributed hundreds of tapes to the library, with topics ranging from Hong Kong war veterans, Ontario-British pioneers, Jewish Historical Society pioneer tapes to Ukrainian pioneers and dying crafts. Then, last year the Manitoba Museum applied for and received a grant under the National Museums Policy for a one year project called Heritage Inventory. This program was not interested in the acquisition of tapes but in the status of oral history in the province. Since the Museum has the largest single collection of tapes, the first three months were spent to organize and put in order the seven hundred oral history tapes housed in the Museum's library. Later questionnaires were mailed to all school superintendants, small museums, recreational directors, libraries, arts department of the universities and private individuals. From the response, we were able to determine an approximate number of tapes and where they were housed. Another form was later mailed out to those individuals or institutions that had tapes to discover the nature of the collection. At the

present, work is being done to compile an inventory of this information. Many replies to the first questionnaire indicated an interest in oral history and a workshop. Therefore, during the summer and autumn a number of workshops on the techniques of interviewing were held throughout the province. General interest in oral history prompted us to write a small booklet, Oral History: Basic Techniques, to help the amateur oral historian produce a better quality interview than might otherwise be the case.

A number of the smaller museums in Manitoba have begun collecting oral history tapes, usually as a means to reconstruct local or period history. There are, though, two museums in Manitoba which are using oral history for a different purpose. The curators of both the Killarney and Churchill museums are elderly and attempts are being made to have the history and information of the artifacts recorded by them for the future. In the Eskimo Museum in Churchill this information will be available in the exhibit area at the touch of a button for the interested visitor.

This example of the use to which oral history tapes can be put in gallery displays and travelling exhibits holds a lesson for all museums. Incorporated into the museum proper, these tapes can help bring not only the history of the artifacts, but also a broader understanding of the history and culture behind the artifact, 'alive' for the public. When one remembers the lack of comprehension and the failure, on the part of the museum visitor, to absorb a great deal of the label copy and story-line used in the galleries, the potential of the oral history tape is made more evident. In both the large and smaller museums, oral history tapes can be used in educational kits or packages to add another dimension to the learning process of students. Hearing a voice describing an event from the past helps to make history more meaningful to students who usually find it easier to relate to people than to impersonal facts. Any tape collection is useless unless utilized in one way or another. The larger museums must begin to give some thought to the direction it will take once the gallery work is completed. If these museums are to become resource centres to be open to schools and outside researchers, a tape library can be an important asset.

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