ORAL HISTORY: A TOOL TO DISCOVER REGIONAL CULTURE

Stanley Garfinkel
Kent State University - Geauga

Oral history will help us to discover the culture of a very complex region called the Western Reserve, a region which is urban and rural, industrial and agricultural, land-based and on the shores of a great lake, with a population from all over the world. Twentieth Century reality in the Western Reserve is infinitely varied. It is this diversity, in its richness and individuality, that oral history can help us to discover. By its very nature, oral history cannot reach beyond the memories of our oldest neighbors, but it can help us to recreate the history of this century, and perhaps a few years of the previous century.

Oral history may be defined in a variety of ways, depending on the oral historian. My own definition is this: Oral history is the collecting of spoken reminiscences, usually by means of a tape recorder, about the personal experiences of men and women with some special knowledge of the past. Historians have been doing oral history of a sort since ancient times, but only since the 1930s, according to some historians, or since the late 1940s, according to others, has the modern use and methodology of oral history been systematically developed and practiced. We associate this pioneering work especially with Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University. The vast and important collection at Columbia is testimony to the success of Nevins, his students and followers. There are more than 3000 tape recorded interviews in the Columbia Oral History archives, many of them interviews about the history of New York City, New York State, or the history of the United States. Adlai Stevenson and Eleanor Roosevelt were two of the individuals interviewed for the Columbia archives and in a sense they are representative of the narrators in that project. Interviewers at Columbia sought out the powerful and prominent to interview, and with good reason. Many such individuals played important roles in the life and history of New York City and the country at large. Their accounts of what they did and of what they saw and felt are vital contributions to history.

Oral history methodology also makes possible a different approach. Historians have almost always tended to write about the few who ruled rather than about the many who were ruled. I think we can say without too much exaggeration that history has been largely the story of elites. This was true in part because most of the written records were created by or about the few who ruled. We know comparatively little about the lives of ordinary men and women, about their communities and about how they lived. During the last twenty or thirty years, historians have begun to pay more attention to the history of everyday, the history of ordinary men and women, those who toil and pay taxes and go to war. In this endeavor, which is sometimes called the New Social History, oral history can be a very useful tool. We can elicit valuable information about the past from people who don’t usually keep diaries, or at least not any more, or who can’t write many letters, who don’t have vast collections of either private or official papers, people who historians have largely ignored, but who have played a major role in the making of history, the foot soldiers as it were, of history. In this way, oral history can complement and supplement the manuscript and printed sources which historians customarily use. I said complement and supplement. Oral history is not a substitute for library or archival research. It is an additional tool available to historians, and if well used, may supply significant data which will corroborate or add to the written sources. Oral history may provide new evidence which will contradict or modify the written record. At times, oral history may be the only documentation for an event or institution or a community.

One of the unique and valuable attributes of oral history is the fact that it can be carried out by non-professional as well as professional historians. Properly trained, a non-professional historian can make a vital contribution to the creation and collection of oral history documents and thus to the sum total of local and regional history.

The varieties of oral history are endless. Thinking in particular of the Western Reserve, we can imagine oral history projects about shipping and fishing on the Lake, about country fairs and amusement parks, about the steel industry and about railroading, about the garment industry and about farming, about urban neighborhoods and small towns, about the Finnish community in Ashtabula or the Hungarian community in Cleveland, about labor unions or women’s clubs or families. We could study the history of a church or a synagogue, or hospital. Or, we could carry out an oral history of social welfare agencies or the creation of a community college. We could interview the survivors of the Holocaust or Vietnam veterans. We might wish to focus on a
particular time period or topic: Sandusky in the Depression or gambling casinos in Geauga County. Endless and stimulating possibilities, and a way to discover and preserve the culture of our region.

At this juncture I would like to make a few comments about several specific oral history projects with which I am or was associated. All are possible approaches for discovering the culture of the Western Reserve by using oral history. As part of that community's sesquicentennial celebrations, the Oberlin City Council established an Oberlin Historical Commission, one offspring of which was and is an Oberlin Oral History Committee. The committee called on me to work with them in establishing and organizing an oral history project and in training volunteer interviewers. Since that time about three years ago, the Oberlin group has carried out an on-going oral history program. About sixty individuals have been interviewed thus far, some of the interviews several hours in length. The material is most interesting and full of data about the Oberlin community since the turn of the century. Of particular interest are several accounts about Oberlin politics, especially in connection with the controversy surrounding specific issues, such as the attempt to construct a community swimming pool. The strong opinions expressed in these interviews by individuals of differing views shed light on the nature of political dynamics in the Oberlin community. Other oral history materials of particular interest are the interviews with Black Oberlinians, several of whom are active participants in this project as interviewers. The Black Oberlinians described their encounters with racism in the Oberlin community. One individual, for example, told about his experience as a postal worker. He worked inside. When a counter job came up in the early 1950s he applied and was indeed next in line for it, but the superintendent informed him that Bob would not be chosen; the public in Oberlin was not yet ready for a Black postal clerk.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of its founding in 1943, the Youngstown Catholic Diocese asked me to interview retired priests. This proved very rewarding and just recently I conducted a workshop for diocesan priests who wanted to become interviewers in the project. There is something to be said for priests interviewing priests, although this raises the whole question of who should interview whom. In any case, this is another example of a worthwhile oral history project.

I have been involved in two urban neighborhood oral history projects, one in the Highland Square neighborhood of Akron and another in the Old Brooklyn area of Cleveland. The Highland Square project was funded by the Ohio Humanities Council and included architectural and archival components. The oral history contribution was not as successful as I might have wished, and our shortcomings had to do with the very nature of such community oral history projects. The Cleveland project was aborted in part because the neighborhood's most eminent resident historian had more confidence in written documents and did not believe that more than one person's account of a particular topic would be of importance.

Another community oral history project was carried out in cooperation with the Pan-African Department at Kent State University. We trained residents of the Black community at Skeels Lake south of Ravenna to be interviewers. The purpose of the project was to collect folklore, and the material collected includes information about funeral and birthing customs, recipes and home remedies, stories from the south and songs. We also learned a great deal about migration patterns from the south to the Western Reserve.

In 1982 I was involved in an oral history of the Cleveland garment industry. The garment industry in Cleveland was one of the county's largest until the years immediately after World War II, but there is little written documentation for that great industry which in the last thirty years has dwindled dramatically. I interviewed retired operators and managers and owners, as well as individuals still active in the industry. The interviews revealed some fascinating insights into the conditions of work at various times during this century and in different facets of the industry. We learned about interpersonal relations among the operators, how the unions were organized and about the frustrations of management in the face of rising labor costs and the increasing competition from imports as well as from the garment industry in New York. Interviews with retired operators also provided important insights into the attitudes of women towards their work and their opportunities. Some of the retired women operators talked about their feelings as women and their lack of choices.

At the moment I am working with a group of volunteer interviewers including two medical students from the Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine in Rootstown. We are interviewing older men and women to find out about their personal medical histories, from childhood to the present. We want to know about home remedies, diet, experiences with and attitudes toward hospitals, etc. This is a pilot study to determine whether oral history methodology may be useful in gathering
information for a health care data base for older citizens.

Very recently two noted Cleveland architects died, Alexander Robinson and Merrill Barber. Both made very important contributions to Cleveland architecture: for example, Mr. Robinson in the design of a portion of University Hospitals and Mr. Barber as a designer of Severance Hall. Both were interviewed in an oral history project sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, Cleveland Chapter.

One on the great joys of an oral history project is the opportunity to listen to older men and women talk about their lives and accomplishments. One of the painful aspects of doing oral history is the awareness of how many of our neighbors with important stories to tell about lives rich in experiences die before we have an opportunity to interview them. It is also difficult to accept the loss of men and women who have become friends because we have been able to interview them. But we have their words, as they tell about the past in their own voice, and in this sense, they continue to live.

Which leads me to my last example, and a favorite project. A few weeks ago B.J. Shanower died at age 96. He was a leading citizen of Geauga County and a member of the Geauga County Oral History Project, a community-based volunteer effort which began eleven years ago and which continues to be a lively and active group, publishing a quarterly Geauganspeak based on excerpts from the more than 400 taped interviews in the Geauga County oral history archive. I had the great pleasure of interviewing B.J. Shanower several times. On each occasion the subject of the interview was different and on each occasion we learned something quite new. Last year we decided to videotape one of the interviews. On May 21 there will be a meeting of the Geauga Oral History project to commemorate B.J. and I think it will be thrilling for the community to watch a videotape of Mr. Shanower as he talks about his boyhood in Troy and his move to Burton as a young man.

My purpose in presenting this brief overview has been to suggest the kinds of oral history projects which are now taking place or which have taken place in the Western Reserve. Some of you may be inspired to develop comparable projects in your own communities.

Oral history can be of great value as a tool for discovering the past, and for discovering the culture of the Western Reserve, but only if the oral history research is properly carried out. I cannot overemphasize this point. A community or an individual oral history project must have well defined research objectives. The work should be carried out in an organized and systematic fashion. Interviewers should be properly trained and they must be knowledgeable about the subject matter of the interviews. The interviewing should be continually monitored and evaluated. Copyright for the tapes should belong to an appropriate institution, and tapes and transcripts should be permanently housed in a library or historical society where they will be catalogued and made available to responsible researchers. Some effort should be made to disseminate the results of oral history research. These are some of the ground rules for carrying out an effective oral history project.

Oral historians themselves are increasingly concerned that the methodology of oral history research be examined with more sophistication and they are raising important questions. Great masses of oral history material have been collected, but only a small fraction has been used. Does this material have any value or is it merely dross, an insignificant mountain of random memories? Are we ignoring valuable material embedded in this mass because we are not asking the right questions? What are and what should be the roles and contribution of narrator and interviewer in the creation of oral history documents? Have the narrators in a particular oral history project been carefully selected to insure a representative sample of a particular group or community? And what is the end product of oral history research? Is it the tape? It is the transcript, if there is one, or is it an article or monograph or book, or perhaps an audio visual program which makes use of the material?

Such questions should not deter us from undertaking an oral history project, but they should alert us to some of the issues which must be considered in any project so that we can be aware of what we are doing and why we are doing it. Our objective is to elicit significant information as sensitively and as intelligently as we can and to evaluate and analyze that material with sophistication and understanding.

Many of you may now be thinking of possibilities for oral history projects in your community. May I offer a few suggestions which I hope will stimulate your thinking:

1. Migration patterns: Migration to and from the Western Reserve as well as movement within it are topics with great potential for generating useful and interesting tapes.

2. We have heard and learned much in recent years about ethnic history, but the various ethnic
communities are rapidly changing. We must hasten to collect the recollections and experiences of disappearing cultures, and we should prepare ourselves to carry out oral history interviews with the newest immigrants from southeast Asia, for example.

3. The history of labor -- not only the history of organized labor, but of labor itself -- by farmers, by blacksmiths, on the lake steamers, in steel mills -- first person accounts of people at work are needed.

4. The history of institutions -- churches, social clubs, fraternal organizations, schools, political groups all lend themselves to the oral history approach. In addition the histories of ad hoc groups, organized for specific purposes can perhaps be best preserved by means of oral history.

5. The history of movements such as the civil rights movement of the sixties offers oral history opportunities. There were, after all, men and women from the Western Reserve active in the civil rights movement, or prohibition and the women's temperance movement.

6. The history of a neighborhood -- rural or urban, large or small. This is a most frequently attempted oral history project.

I mentioned earlier, I have worked on neighborhood oral history projects, and there are many problems in such projects common to all projects which depend on volunteers (problems of organization, direction and continuity), but the benefits to be obtained once such problems are solved, far outweigh the pesky minor tribulations involved in solving them. In fact, all of what I have been discussing comes under the rubric of community history, and as such can be and should be carried out by members of the community. And if it is done at all, will only be carried out by members of the community. This is indeed the beauty and the reward of local and regional history. It is history by the community about the community. It is or can be an exercise in democracy. Young people will work with older people, students with teachers, non-professionals with academic historians. Oral history requires historians to return to the street and to work among and with people. It helps to make citizens more thoughtful about the past and more aware of the complexities of history.

In closing I would like to read a paragraph from Paul Thompson's illuminating and sensitive book about oral history. The book is entitled: The Voice of the Past: Oral History (225-226).

The far limit of the past recoverable through oral evidence recedes remorselessly through death, day by day. But the real justification of history is not in giving an immortality to a few of the old. It is part of the way in which the living understand their place and part in the world. Landmarks, landscapes, patterns of authority and of conflict have all been found fragile in the twentieth century. By helping to show how their own stories fit into the changing character of the place in which they live, their problems as workers or as parents, history can help people to see how they stand, and where they should go. This is what lies behind the present popularity of recent history in Britain. It also points to the key social and political importance of oral history. It provides a new basis for original projects, not just by professionals, but by students, by schoolchildren or by the people of the community. They do not just have to learn their own history; they can write it. Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making.