FOREWORD

Donald A. Ritchie

Donald A. Ritchie is Associate Historian in the U.S. Senate Historical Office. He is the author of James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators *and* Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents *and is past president of the Oral History Association.*

The sociologist C. Wright Mills once wrote that "The historian represents the organized memory" of society.[1] If so, then the oral historian collects society's otherwise unorganized memories. Oral history is an active process in which interviewers seek out, record, and preserve people's stories and observations. In their quest, oral historians conduct preparatory research so they can coax and guide interviewees, provide a ready supply of forgotten names and dates, give some context and structure to the dialogue through their questions and the order in which they ask them, and challenge any seeming misstatements and contradictions in the testimony. Ultimately, however, interviewers must depend upon the reliability of the interviewees' memories.

The "organized memory" traditionally entrusted to historians reflects how a whole society or its component groups recall and interpret their past. By contrast, oral historians work with individual memories, which can range from sharp to dim. Those historians trained to rely chiefly upon documents often express distrust for memory as a source, dismissing individual memories as self-serving and exaggerated. Oral historians concede that dealing with memory is a risky business, but it is inescapably the interviewer's business.[2] Since the reliability of oral history is bound to the reliability of memory, Baylor University's Memory and History symposium therefore asked the necessary question: What do we really know about the phenomenon of memory?

Previous attempts at interdisciplinary examinations of memory produced little common ground. Psychologists generally studied short-term memory and dealt more with the immediate perception of events. These short-term memory studies gave little assistance to oral historians in explaining the uncanny preciseness with which some interviewees could recall events that took place decades ago, or understanding how

interviewees who had reached obvious senility—forgetful even that they had scheduled the interview—could nevertheless talk authentically about events far in the past.[3] The Baylor symposium brought psychologists and oral historians together to discuss and evaluate both long- and short-term memory studies. Although disagreements arose, the exchange was remarkably fruitful, demonstrating mutual interests and achieving considerable consensus.

Both oral historians and psychologists have observed that memory is largely a matter of personal interpretation. Individuals mentally reconstruct their experiences, so that their memories represent an act of assembly and of relearning.[4] In this sense, the memories of individuals resemble the "organized memory" of the historical profession, for, as Mills observed, "Memory, as written history, is enormously malleable. It changes, often quite drastically, from one generation of historians to another."[5] Historians rewrite history to incorporate new evidence and to fit different interests and interpretive frameworks. Individuals similarly reshape their memories as current events to help them make new sense out of past experiences.

There seems to be a variety of stages through which people's recollections are preserved over time, including perception, retention, rehearsal, reinterpretation, and recall. Interviewees all tell their stories from their own subjective points of view. Their individual perceptions vary substantially, since not everyone had a clear view of what happened or a comprehensive understanding of what it meant. Generals in the rear may know the broad sweep of the battle plan, but foot soldiers will have a different view of the action on the battlefield; those at the center of events can proudly recount their own accomplishments, but those on the periphery are often better able to make comparisons between the principal actors. Perceptions that were originally flawed will produce flawed memories. Distant and routine actions and second-hand information will be more susceptible to outside manipulation and distortion. By contrast, direct, dramatic, and emotional situations tend to produce more lasting and unchanging memories. For these reasons, oral history projects attempt to collect a wide range of interviews, to piece the puzzle together from a variety of perspectives.

Not everything perceived is retained. When the television journalist David Brinkley was writing *Washington Goes to War*, which covered the years during the Second World War when he first arrived in the capital as a young broadcaster, he was surprised to find so much in the old newspaper files that had faded from his memory. "I've always thought I had a good memory. Now I know I don't," he commented. "Things I knew very well and in fact stood and watched and interviewed people about, I'd totally forgotten. That was the startling thing—how much I'd forgotten."[6]

Information once considered meaningful can become so irrelevant, routine, or insignificant that it is no longer recalled. David Brinkley still concerns himself with today's news and uses his memory of the past to make sense out of current events. But the more distant an occurrence becomes from this week's headlines, the less likely he will think about or retain it. This recalls some sage advice from an old professor: When writing a book an author invariably collects more data than can be used. To cope with the painful task of cutting out material arduously acquired, he recommended putting the excised sections into a folder marked: "For articles I intend to write in the future." Ten years later, the author can take the folder out of the file cabinet and throw it away. By now long forgotten, it will no longer hurt as much to discard.

Rehearsal is another key ingredient in memory retention. Everyone tells stories about past experiences to relive glory days, to celebrate shared experiences, or to make comparisons to the present. Each telling of the story becomes a rehearsal for the next telling, embedding it all the firmer in one's mind. I once used an oral history that Columbia University did with Ferdinand Pecora, a lawyer and judge whose greatest triumph occurred during the early New Deal years when he conducted a highly publicized investigation of Wall Street banking and stock market malpractice. The voluminous transcript of his interview, which took place forty years after the investigation, was remarkable for its detail and precision. When I mentioned this to Pecora's son, he assured me that his father would tell those stories to anyone who would listen, and even on his deathbed he was telling them to the hospital nurses.

Yet, while important for retaining memory, rehearsal can create stumbling blocks for interviewers. Every telling of a story perfects it and moves it further from reality. Events are telescoped, chronology tightened, order rearranged and edited. Rehearsed stories often tend to omit negative events and concentrate on triumphs. Interviewees rarely reconstruct dialogue in which they did not have the last word or achieve the perfect squelch. They have not necessarily forgotten old wounds and mistakes. When questioned, interviewees can recall past defeats, even if they do not always feel comfortable talking about them. But often by the time the oral historian asks the question, the answer will simply be the oft-told story. A well-researched interviewer may spot inaccuracies and gently challenge inconsistencies, but the interviewee may have told the story so often that he or she simply cannot remember it any other way. Under such circumstances, all that an interviewer can do is to give stories and, when the supply is finally exhausted, try to retake control of the interview with questions that will lead down less rehearsed paths.[7]

Historians are not the only ones who can benefit from hindsight. Sometimes only the passage of time enables people to make sense out of earlier events in their lives. Actions take on new significance depending on their later consequences. Certain people become more important in the story, while the influence of others is downgraded. Like historians, individuals reinterpret their historical memories and recast earlier judgments. Their later memories may take on a more mature, mellower, or disillusioned cast, often depending on the condition of the individual at the time of the interview. Moreover, oral historians by necessity tend to interview "survivors," those who lived through it, stuck to it, stayed behind, or otherwise succeeded, all factors that shape how and what they remember.

Oral historians have explored the use of artifacts to trigger recall. In an interview with a retired newspaper photographer, I found that every picture reminded him of a story about that person or event or how he shot the photograph. The photodocumentation provided the clues and structure needed to unlock his memories.[8] Family photo albums, newspaper clippings, letters, and other archival documents have all proved helpful tools for unearthing long-"forgotten" information. Some interviewers have even experimented with the sense of smell to unlock memories and get them on tape.

Recognizing that most people do not readily remember names and dates and that the flow of narration can stop short when an interviewee gropes for a name, interviewers attempt to become familiar with the major players in the interviewee's life and its basic chronology. Providing names and dates also puts interviewees at ease, since some see an oral history as almost a test of their memories, worry that they should review for it, and apologize for any lapses.

Interviewers need to take into account all facets of memory. Are these creditable witnesses? Were they in a position to experience events first-hand, or are they simply passing along second-hand information? What biases might have shaped their original perceptions? Have interviewees forgotten much of their past because it was no longer important to them or because the events were so routine that they were simply not memorable? How differently do interviewees feel now than they did at the time the original events took place? What subsequent incidents might have caused them to rethink and reinterpret their past? How closely does their testimony agree with other documentary evidence from the period, and how do they explain the discrepancies?

During the course of the symposium, I found most appealing the suggestion that memory was less a photograph of the original image than a montage of images and suggestions. Interviewers who have encountered a

wide variety of memories will agree that memory may be a montage, but not a hodgepodge, for people frequently remember stories—especially of significant personal incidents—in a reasonably orderly, chronological, and verifiable narrative. The memories of direct participants are far too rich a source for historical researchers to ignore. The message of the Baylor symposium is that interviewers need to become aware of the peculiarities of memory, imaginative in their methods of dealing with it, conscious of its limitations, and open to its abundant treasures.

Notes

1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 144.
2. "Memory has always proven difficult for historians to confront," Michael Frisch noted in his essay, "The Memory of History," in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 15-27; see also David Thelen, "Memory and History," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1117-29.
3. See John Neuenschwander, "Oral Historians and Long-Term Memory," in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1984), 324-32; and James W. Lomax and Charles T. Morrissey, "The Interview as Inquiry for Psychiatrists and Oral Historians: Convergence and Divergence in Skills and Goals," in *The Public Historian* 11 (Winter 1989): 17-24.
4. See Jean Piaget, *Memory and Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); and Edmund Blair Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting: Inquiries into the Nature of Memory* (New York: Walker and Company, 1988).
5. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 144-45.
6. David Brinkley, *Washington Goes to War* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988); and "The Conversation: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Interviews David Brinkley," *Washington Post Magazine*, 10 April 1988, 29.
7. An interesting case study can be found in Mary Elizabeth Aubé, "Oral History and the Remembered World: Cultural Determinants from French Canada," *International Journal of Oral History* 10 (February 1989): 31-49.
8. George Tames, Washington Photographer for the *New York Times*, 1945-1985, Oral History Interviews, January 13 to May 16, 1988, Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C.