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Oral History: Catching the Stories of Our Lives

**Donna M. DeBlasio
Youngstown State University**

Oral history is one of the best tools for democratizing history; one does not need a PhD to engage in collecting, preserving, and presenting the past through interviews. Those who do so understand the importance of recording the memories of people who were eyewitness to or participated in events in modern history. Oral history has long been accepted as a primary source that can illuminate the past in a personal and compelling manner. The power of oral history to enrich how we interpret the past is an important instrument in the historian's toolbox. As we know, documenting the life stories and experiences especially of groups left out of the traditional history books has been greatly enhanced through interviews. It gives us a way to look at our past from many facets, not just from the "winner's" perspective.

Oral history can be defined as "collecting spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange on audio or video tape [or digital format]"ⁱ The Youngstown State University oral history program, which I ran for over twenty years, notes that "Oral history allows us to use first-person narratives to explore the private dimensions of public careers, add new voices to the historical record, track the creation and recreation of historical memory, and present history to the public in creative new forms."ⁱⁱ

The earliest recognized programs in the United States, such as the one at Columbia University, originally focused on history

from the top. By and large, this young methodology on the US side of the Atlantic centered on collecting interviews with the elite. Oral historians in Great Britain, on the other hand, were more interested in interviewing average people. By the late 1960s, American oral historians began shifting their focus to the broader society. Several events and developments influenced the direction of oral history in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and other calls for social justice all contributed to demands for history to be more inclusive in its interpretation. At about the same time, the cassette tape recorder, with its greater portability, made doing oral history interviews far more accessible to more people. No longer were oral historians stuck with the fifty-pound, decidedly not portable, reel-to-reel machines. Nor did the interviewees have to come to them. Rather, the interviewers could meet their subjects on neutral territory or places where they were most comfortable. Over time, oral historians have broadened our perspectives by interviewing people from all walks of life, catching their stories, all of which contribute to and democratize the larger narrative of historical interpretation. As someone who not only conducts oral history interviews, but uses them in my own research, I am often amazed by the gems of stories that are there waiting for someone to discover them.

The urgency to catch individual experiences and stories is becoming even more tangible. The rapid and widespread growth of electronic communication has certainly altered many aspects of everyday life. While there is an overwhelming plethora of information, the question that arises is how will we save these bytes of life for future generations? It is not a surprise to anyone that archivists and other keepers of the past are developing ways to preserve this material, much of which is ephemeral and living in a cloud somewhere in the ethernet. While this material will provide fodder for future historians, it, like other historical materials, will need to be used with other sources. This is where oral history can become an even more valuable resource. People's recollections about their life experiences, through participation in or as eyewitness to historic events, and their observations of and reflections on moments in time will provide the future with invaluable keys to understanding the past.

The times we are living in are interesting, to say the least; they are monumental, to say the most. That we need to get these stories now is imperative. The events of this past year, culminating in the insurrection on January 6 (another date that will live in infamy), I think has created a new urgency to understand the times that we are living through. Doing oral history interviews, I think, can help us come to terms with the turbulence and upheaval surrounding us. We need to preserve how people are coping with and surviving in this landmark era. We need to get these stories now, not wait a generation as memories fade, people pass away, time changes perspectives. While there is value in perspective and reflection, there is also value in fresh memories and experiences.

This past year's events inspired the topic for my graduate oral history class this spring semester at Youngstown State University. YSU possesses one of the largest regional archives in the state, dating back to 1974 when Professor Hugh Earnhart started the program. In the early years, Hugh adopted what he called a "shot gun" approach, doing many interviews on a wide variety of topics. Since I took over the program in 1999, I decided that we would have a more directed approach, selecting a specific topic for each time I taught the graduate course. I looked over all the topics that have been done over the years, and realized we had a paucity of interviews dealing with African Americans in the Mahoning Valley. Given all the deep discussions about race in America, I decided that African Americans would be the topic of our interviews. As I write this, each student has done at least one interview—and all the interviews have been very long and in-depth. The interviewees were gracious and open to discussing their feelings about race and racism, both in the past and up to the present. Besides the basic biographical information, the interviews are also covering topics like COVID, vaccinations, and Black Lives Matter. I am very encouraged about the quality of these interviews to date and I think they will be valuable assets in preserving our history.

Of course, it is not just conducting the interviews that is important. They need to be accessible to a wider audience. The YSU program has a web site through the university's Maag Library (http://www.maag.ysu.edu/oral_hist) where the transcripts as

well as the audio interviews are available to the general public. Transcribing, which is the most difficult part of the process, is the way to go, since most end users often do not want to listen to an entire interview to get the information they are seeking and it is also the only reliable archival method of preservation. While voice recognition software exists, it is not sophisticated enough to deal with transcribing multiple voices as one would have in an oral history interview. For anyone interested in transcribing, it takes 8 to 10 hours to transcribe about one hour of an interview. That being said, digitization does allow us to upload the raw interviews and make them accessible to the general public. Or, as we said back in the days of the cassette tape, oral history interviews do no good sitting in storage inside of a shoe box. We must make these interviews available to all, whether in an on-line archive, through publications, web sites, exhibits, or other methods of disseminating these important stories.

The state of Ohio is remarkably rich in oral history projects at all kinds of agencies including institutions of higher education, museums, historical societies, archives, and libraries. Less obvious entities that house interviews are for-profit corporations, non-profit organizations, and religious institutions. This is not to mention the many individuals who have collected interviews with family members to preserve for their descendants. Ohio-based projects are the tip of the proverbial oral history iceberg; there are hundreds of oral history projects and programs in existence globally. Oral history has become the embodiment of what Carl L. Becker described in 1931, "Everyman his own historian," or as revised for our time: "Everyone their own historian."ⁱⁱⁱ

Oral history interviews provide us with a window to the past, but they are the product of memory and subjective interpretation. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli challenges us to rethink our concepts of how people recall their own pasts. In his important essay, "The Death of Luigi Trastulli," Portelli believes that oral histories are subjective and that how we remember the past is at least as important as what we remember.^{iv} Oral history interviews are primary sources and should be treated as such, subject to historical analysis and interpretation in conjunction with other sources. This does not negate their value or their importance

in giving a “voice to the voiceless.” The momentous events of 2020 should spur us to redouble our efforts in catching the stories of our lives.

ⁱ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 1. There is a growing literature on oral history methodology, process, and theory, some of which are geared to academics and others to a broader audience. Some of the more recent works include: Valerie Yow. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Walnut Creek: CA: AltaMira Press, 2005. Donna M. DeBlasio, et.al. *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History*. Athens, OH: Sparrow Books, 2008. Thomas L. Charlton, et.al. *A History of Oral History*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2008.

ⁱⁱ YSU Oral History Collection. http://www.maag.yosu.edu/oral_hist.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carl L. Becker. “Everyman His Own Historian. *American Historical Review*. Vol. 37, no. 2, 29 December 1931. pp 221-36 .

^{iv} Alessandro Portelli. *The Death of Luigi of Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.