

*Telling Women's Lives:
Oral History in the Women's History Class*

by

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Eunice McCarty, who calls herself a Kentucky tobacco farm wife, and Alice Donald, who describes herself as an Alabama mother and doctor's wife, along with most women I have interviewed, share one thing in common. They warn me that they know nothing about history. However, after this comment, both women narrated many hours of oral history. Similarly, women students seldom see themselves or other women as historical actors. However, when students, both women and men, listen to women telling their lives during oral history taping sessions, they come to realize the significance of all women as history makers.

Women's history is a dynamic field of study with plenty of opportunities to discover fascinating historical actors. Students of Women's history can contribute to the body of evidence, do primary research, and derive new interpretations of women's lives through oral history projects conducted during a term of study in an upper level Women's history course. Through such a project students learn to appreciate the personal, private side of history, discover the importance of individual women's lives, and understand the connections between public lives and private lives. They develop an enthusiasm for history by actively doing research with living subjects who powerfully vocalize their life histories and the history of their times.¹

In the fall semester of 1992, I proposed an oral history project to my class, "History of American Women, Colonial Period to the Present," at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama. On the first day of class I handed out the syllabus and the oral history project instructions. On the second day, we discussed the project and set the date for the oral history interviewing workshop that I conduct prior to any project. This workshop is adaptable to college classes, civic groups, high school or middle school classes. Depending on the group and its needs, the workshop provides theory, technical information, and practical instruction. For the Women's History course, I discussed theory in detail because I hoped to prepare the students for future research using oral history evidence.

The theoretical portion of the workshop covered the basic types of oral history interviewing, such as ethnohistory, folk history, and life stories, their purposes and critiques of each. We also discussed the use of oral history evidence, the problems, constraints, and the advantages. Information on theories about memory, autobiographical stories, folklore, cross-cultural interviews, and the re-creation of happenings long since past gave the students a full understanding of the advantages and shortcomings of oral evidence. It also left them with the knowledge that oral evidence is as useful as traditional sources if used with intelligence and care.

We then discussed oral interviewing women and women's history. Women in most societies create and preserve the culture, the everyday events of people's lives. Often this is an oral process involving memories of births, marriages and deaths, family history and folklore, and community information. Students reported how amazing their women interviewees were, who once prompted, began to reveal an encyclopedic knowledge of their families, churches, and communities. These women, the students noticed, dated their narratives by significant events in their lives that reflected the life cycles women experience. For instance, women would explain that an event happened prior to their marriage or after the birth of a child. The students then gathered the exact dates of marriages and births in the family and constructed a more accurate timeline for their papers.²

Students also discovered that their interviews often tended to become conversations. I told them to expect this and to participate because a naturally flowing interaction would make the interviewee comfortable, and result in a better tape. During these conversations the women spoke about their lives, sometimes revealing intimate information. One woman student who interviewed her grandmother found out some family secrets. Her grandmother chose to tell because she thought the interview was important and the information necessary for a historical study. The interviewees also related incidents about relatives, neighbors and community happenings that could be classified as gossip. The class then discussed the meaning of gossip and how it operates in society as a stereotypically female method of control in the culture. For instance, gossip about another person can make or break a reputation. Gossip can build relationships and it can destroy them.³

During the second portion of the workshop, I discussed the practical points of oral interviewing. These include preparation before the interview, conducting the interview, and the follow-up. Preparation involves conducting library research to determine a period to study, finding an oral interview subject, making an appointment for the interview, doing research for the interview, composing questions, and preparing the machine and tapes. I provide a detailed set of guidelines for interviewing and reserved a collection of books for reference.⁴

Students are usually most concerned about how to conduct the interview. We discussed building rapport, doing enough research to be a knowledgeable interviewer without becoming a know-it-all, how to question and elicit information without sounding like a deadline driven reporter, and how to raise new or difficult topics. During this phase of the workshop, I leave plenty of time for questions. Also, since students often develop questions only during the process of the project, I reserved class time each week to discuss concerns. The time spent on methodological problems was minimal, no more than five to fifteen minutes. During this period, students discussed problems, provided solutions, gave advice, and shared knowledge about their research with the class. This allowed the students to teach each other, to experience the process of a major research project and to retool their projects when necessary. For example, one student found he could never coordinate an interview appointment with his first choice for the project. The class advised him to find another interview subject who could fit the time schedule. One student brought up the ethical problem of dealing with an interviewee's anti-Semitism which provided the class with an opportunity to discuss people's prejudices and fears.

The students decided it was important for history to allow these attitudes to be voiced without the interviewer's judgemental comments during the taping. By discovering this idea as a group, the students learned how historians have to grapple with difficult questions and interpret them with objectivity.

In the third section of the workshop we discussed the interview follow-up. This included writing a thank-you note to the interviewee and giving them a copy of the tape for reviewing and keeping. The students also completed a personal data sheet on the interviewee, secured a signed and dated release form, prepared a biographical outline connecting the interviewee's life to significant historical events, and prepared a chronological outline of the tape contents. I did not require a transcript of the tape because I believe oral history is valuable only if the researcher listens to the tape. Transcripts make it too easy for historians to read the interview and miss the nuances of the spoken word. Women's voices need to be heard, not silenced through transcription and reading.⁵

Following the workshop, students ventured forth to conduct their interviews. Their instructions required a formal proposal including information on their interviewee and how they hoped to use their research to write a paper. This task forced them to get started early in the term, prepare well, and think ahead to the research paper portion of the assignment. I read the proposals, made comments, and gave approval to continue. As stated before, we used class time each week to trouble-shoot and share ideas.

The projects form the nucleus of an oral history archive that I hope to build at Jacksonville State University. The projects were of high quality, covered topics of interest in women's history, Southern history, labor history, and African American history, among others. They will be available for scholarly research in the future. One of the top papers was written by a non-traditional male student who had recently retired from the army. He followed the detailed instructions for the project from beginning to end precisely and provided a model to use in future classes. Students at JSU seem to crave an exact model of any assignment. I often resist providing examples because it limits individual creativity. However, I will probably compromise here in order to encourage students to produce excellent data for the oral history archives. The subject of this interview was a middle-aged woman who, along with her second husband, was building and running a horse ranch in rural Alabama. This paper was excellent because it told a good story, allowed the woman to speak through use of quotes from the tape, and included analysis by the student placing this woman's life in the context of history.⁶

Another non-traditional student, a woman, interviewed her grandmother in a life history format interview. Her paper concentrated on the 1930s Depression era and revealed the daily struggles of a home-making wife and mother. The student connected the events of her grandmother's life to the history of women during this time period as described in our textbook, Nancy Wolooh's Women and the American Experience. Other students had also covered the Depression in their interviews, and their research enabled them to critique and compare their findings with the textbook's arguments. They discovered how textbooks or histories of a specific period or topic may generalize or omit women's experiences. Students learned through practice how to include ordinary lives in the larger historical picture. Now they can intelligently criticize works that do not attempt to give the

whole story.⁷

By doing the oral history project the students discovered how their interviewee's so-called ordinary life had been a part of history. This is particularly important at Jacksonville State University because forty-nine percent of our in-coming students are the first in their families to ever attend college. The project can link these students with people in their communities or families who have great knowledge and wisdom, though they lack the symbol of learning, the college diploma. Students realize that they and the community from which they come are a part of the historical process. They learn to be actors instead of passive observers or receptacles of knowledge. Students can develop the ability to think critically about the role of humans in society from their studies of ordinary people. This ability is particularly important for women students, who in the college classroom, may not act, speak up, or take part. One of my reticent young women became vocal and animated when she began to talk about her interviewing experience. She saw that voicing her opinions resulted in positive responses from her colleagues and her professor. She has continued to practice speaking up in subsequent classes.⁸

Sometimes history students find it difficult to determine a pattern in the vast array of facts presented in lectures, texts, and research. By focusing on one life story and connecting that single narrative to a chronological timeline of alleged important political or public history, the student can see the connections between the public and the private. They discover that a pattern exists in history. To achieve this understanding, I required students to draw a timeline beginning with the interviewee's date of birth and connecting her life to major events like wars, presidents, and the Great Depression. In this way, students can visualize how women fit into the narrative of history.⁹

Several students excitedly showed the class photos, material culture items, and other evidence that their interviewees had given them to aid their research. In this way, they gathered excellent primary evidence. The women interviewees benefitted from the opportunity to provide information and material evidence for the purpose of recording history. I encouraged students to collect other data from their interviewees, such as photos, scrapbooks and mementos and provided them with an outline for evaluating material culture evidence in a history paper. They learned that ordinary things like ordinary lives can reveal fascinating information about the past if the historian knows how to use them. In this way students learned how to do history from the bottom up and give voices to the powerless people in society.¹⁰

Overall, the project proved very successful. All of the tapes and supporting documentation were prepared and filed. The tape quality was good and will be useful to future scholars. The only problems I encountered were with the students' research and writing skills. Over half the class had never done a historical research paper. I spent time explaining the basics of research and writing, yet mediocre papers resulted in some cases. I attribute this problem to the lack of writing experience and the lack of a research methods course for our history majors. I evaluated the students' projects on the basis of one hundred points. Content, research skill exhibited, writing mechanics, proper historical citations, and following the directions for the paper were factors in the grade. The total course grade was derived from two essay tests worth one hundred points each, the oral history project, worth one hundred points, and seminar participation, also valued at one

hundred. Thus, the project weighed equally with exams and participation in a four part scale. However, projects can be valued at different levels depending on the course and the plans of the professor. For future projects of this type, which I use in all my upper level courses and some survey courses, I plan to add an oral presentation. The student will be required to prepare a ten to fifteen minute talk based on their oral history research. This will allow students to compare and contrast their work with others and to learn about more women. This will also give them practice in speech-making, another area where our students need additional experience.

During the final weeks of the semester, I learned that the project interested the students and fostered their enthusiasm in the study of history, of women, and the lives of ordinary people. As one student wrote about her decision to take a course in women's history, "I thought I had made a mistake and that I would be wasting 3 hours of credit better spent on English history...." However, she "loved the idea of a project on Southern women. I had never thought about taking a regular person like my mother and placing her life in perspective of the times she lived...."¹¹

Students also recognized the value of oral history for the interviewees. For example, one student wrote in her evaluation that "the person being interviewed is excited that someone thinks that their life is interesting....It gives the interviewee a chance to analyze and reminisce about things they probably haven't thought of in years."¹²

This project empowered, excited, and taught the joys and the trials of primary historical research through "hands-on" experience. As one student explained, "I really enjoyed the oral history project even though it was a lot of work." According to her, hearing people "speak of their own lives and tell their own tales and apply that to what I've read in textbooks is the best way to learn."¹³

NOTES

1. John Forrest and Elisabeth Jackson, "Get Real: Empowering the student Through Oral History," The Oral History Review, 18 (Spring 1990): 29-33. Also see, Robert D. Ilisevich, "Oral History in Undergraduate Research," The History Teacher 9 (February 1976): 196-201. For a collection of articles useful for developing an oral history project, see: David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History in Cooperation with the Oral History Association, 1984).

2. The importance of women's talk and their role as community preservers is addressed in the following: Susan Harding, "Women and Words in a Spanish Village," in Toward an Anthropology of Women, edited by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975): 293-95.

3. Ibid.; for more analysis of gossip see, Patricia Meyer Spack, Gossip (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Robert Paine, "What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis," Man 2:2 (June 1967): 279.

4. Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). Some of the books reserved for references included: Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell, From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research, (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981); Dunaway and Baum, Oral History.
5. Obtaining a formal release form is essential if the tape is to be used by scholars for publication. For information on this see the following: Donald A. Ritchie, et. al., "Interviews as Historical Evidence: A Discussion of New Standards of Documentation and Access," The History Teacher 24 (February 1991): 223-225; Holly Cowan Shulman, "On Interviews: A Discussion of Historical Documentation," Organization of American Historians Newsletter (February, 1987): 6-7.
6. Joseph Walton Michael, "The Growth of a Dream; The Realization of Success," Oral History Project Paper, History 436, Jacksonville State University, 24 November 1992.
7. Susan Green, "Bertha Tims," Oral History Project Paper, History 436, Jacksonville State University, November 1992. Interviews with persons related to the student can be very valuable. See, Roger D. Long, "The Personal Dimension in Doing Oral History," The History Teacher 24 (May 1991): 309-312. For an article on using the Great Depression as a topic and a questionnaire on the subject see, William E. Ellis, "Using the Great Depression Experience in a College American History Survey Course," The History Teacher 25 (November 1991): 87-92.
8. My ideas on teaching are derived from my reading of the following: Ira Shor, Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, 1987); Ira Shor, Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. For information teaching and empowering women students see, Adrienne Rich's "Claiming and Education," and Taking Women Students Seriously," in her On Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Selected Prose, 1966-1978 (New York: Random House, 1979):125-155, 231-247.
9. Ira Shor, Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, p. 35.
10. E. McClung Fleming, "Early American Decorative Arts as Social Document," Mississippi Valley Historical Review (September 1958): 276-84. James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early Life, (Garden City, New Jersey, Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1977).
11. Tammy Bobo to Suzanne Marshall, letter, n.d. in the author's possession. See, Sherna Gluck, "What's So Special About Women? Women's Oral History," and Linda Shopes, "Using Oral History for a Family History Project," in Dunaway and Baum, eds., Oral History: 221-238.
12. Kristin Owens to Suzanne Marshall, letter, n.d. in author's possession.
13. Kristin Owens to Suzanne Marshall, letter, n.d., in author's possession.