

The Potentials and Pitfalls of Oral History for Business Historians

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I come from a lifetime in communications -- of interviewing on radio and television and, finally, for the print media -- so perhaps my concept of oral history technique is slightly unorthodox.

But it is productive -- at least compared with one story I have been told of an individual who left an established oral history program in frustration when it was learned that it was estimated it would require two years to complete four interviews.

Today, let us concentrate on three major questions: (1) Who should be interviewed; (2) What do you want to learn from the interviewee; and (3) What are the qualifications of a good interviewer?

The role model to be used is that of a business history project, presumably commissioned by a private firm. Let us give ourselves the widest possible latitude, assuming that there is no time restriction to the project, nor is there a major cost factor in terms of equipment, travel, or followup clerical assistance.

WHO SHOULD BE INTERVIEWED?

The first effort should be to locate and interview the oldest living persons who had any connection with the company. Through them you will develop the insight needed to give you a base for your history, not only because of their personal careers and recollections, but because they will have a memory of those elders who preceded them. It can serve as a chain reaction that very possibly can carry you back at least 100 years in time.

For example, I have interviewed two men who began their careers in 1904 and 1910. Not only have they given me substantial answers to events that occurred during their careers, but also they, as young men in those years, knew and worked with key persons who, at that time, were at the peak of their careers. These first-hand oral recollections go far beyond anything that remains in printed form.

As a second example, early in the 1920s, a prestigious bank merged into another bank which had a more local reputation. Nothing in the records or even in the press of the time explains why this merger took place; I learned, in an interview with a 94-year-old man who had been an officer at the acquired bank. He confirmed what I had suspected but had been unable to prove. Upon rechecking the existing records of that time, I found the evidence I needed to reinforce this one man's memory. This, coupled with the tape-recorded remarks of the officer, satisfy me that I can use this as the truthful explanation in writing the bank history.

Although I know there are some who will disagree, I believe the historian should interview anyone and everyone who is willing to talk. I have had only one disappointing interview and even that, in a way, was revealing. It was with a woman who had a very lowly job with one of the predecessor banks. Questions about the bank's policies or its top management would have been a waste of time, for her work did not bring her into this side of the business. What she remembered best was the enjoyment of an inexpensive vacation at a company-owned mountain resort to which employees were given special privileges as a form of fringe benefit. She was old enough to have been working during the 1933 bank holiday. To my amazement, she had no recall of this, and I had to prompt her memory. But it brought to my attention the fact that bank employees did not stop working just because the banks were closed to the public. It prompted further questioning of other individuals in more important position which, in turn, revealed some superb stories about the struggle the banks had to keep their valued customers (businesses and individuals) supplied with cash to meet payrolls, pay bills, and so forth; in other words, to keep the creaky economy running during the paralyzing bank holiday. These valuable recollections go well beyond the available printed reports of that period.

Should I have refused to interview this individual because she was on the periphery of the business? I say no.

Another of my revealing interviews was with a retired black man who had served as a driver, receptionist, runner and yes, even personal valet, to one of the key men in an old bank. His first-hand impressions of how this bank was run, his relationship with this powerful individual, his personal life as a black man living in New York, are rewarding and enriching.

A 96-year-old lady talked with me about her "little brother" who had been the austere leader of an old company. All the other recollections I had gathered indicated he was regarded as a cold, remote individual. She, as the sister, 14 years older than her brother, recalled him as an endearing, bright child, quick to learn, and, as he grew older, devoted to his family with whom he shared many hours of laughter, jokes, and stories. I had suspected he was a well-rounded individual from a few wisps of comment I

had garnered from one of his closest friends. But I needed to hear it from another party to confirm the reality before I could write honestly about this man.

Listen to this man, a valued officer who loved his bank and who was pressed into service as a teller during a run on the bank at the height of the 1930 panic:

I wouldn't go through those years again if I had a chance to live my life over. It was a very trying experience to talk to anyone who was concerned about the safety of their money. When you can see how frightened they are it's the most terrible experience. I wouldn't want to go through that period again.

This man from the Deep South talked about his grandfather in the post-Civil War days:

They took the slaves away from him. The old man didn't do a damn thing except sit on his front porch. He took all these negro slaves and allocated the land to them that they could farm on. Then he opened a commissary and then he, in effect, had his own currency. They would trade. He just sat there on the porch and let them work to make a living for him. He never hit another lick of the stick...he quit. They were just tenant farmers and by God they worked and if they didn't work they didn't eat.

Another man recalled the shock of those who had been living on the income from their real estate:

...and all of a sudden, bingo. Our great city passed a lot of regulations and rules between 1934 and 1940. All the outside backyard toilets had to be moved indoors. And you had all these children who had been getting all the benefits of grandpa's investments all of a sudden having to pony up \$3500 to \$4000 and they would come back and say, "what happened?" Well, what happened was that they didn't save anything over the previous 30 to 40 years. The whole thing was so terrible.

To me, these stories reveal more than just banking history. They are pieces of Americana that become the mosaic of life in the United States. I regard them as a valuable contribution to the documentation of this nation's history.

But there is another point to be made here. These stories were told to me orally, and I have captured the voices, the accents, the inflections, the emotions that stirred these individuals as we talked. For those who are interested in the

structure of our language, the patois, the regional delineations, these tape-recorded voices are infinitely more valuable than the printed word. I, in the process of transcribing, do not tamper with the structure or cadence. I leave in every pause, every unfinished sentence, every mispronunciation, for I believe it reveals the true nature of the individual.

I do my own transcriptions because I am very facile at the typewriter. It is easier and quicker for me to do the transcribing, and I do it as soon after the interview as possible while the person's voice is still fresh in my mind.

If time or inability precludes personally doing the transcribing, then one will have to devote considerable time to correcting the errors made by someone else unfamiliar with the technical language or the subject's accent.

WHAT DOES THE HISTORIAN WANT TO LEARN FROM THESE TAPED INTERVIEWS?

Everything that has not been preserved in the company records and also a clarification of some of the statements contained in the records. Why? To put some meat on the bare bones of those terse reports. To get the tenor of the times, the intimate details of the personal relationships, the attitudes, the approach to the daily work routine. What was it like to work for the company back when? What were the pay, the hours, the benefits? How did you get to work? Why did you come to work for this company? And so on.

In addition, those who have had access to company records, such as the minutes of director's meetings, are aware of how little they contain and how much has been distilled out.

For example, during a crucial period in a company's history, the reality of how the key officials approached the crisis will not be found in the official records. It was customary to conduct the official meeting, and close the meeting, then, off the record, move into the real business discussion. How does one learn what really was discussed, what decisions were reached? By interviewing those who participated. If the intervening period is extensive or if the interviewee is assured it is a confidential conversation, the historian often can obtain enough information to recreate the true history.

WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A GOOD INTERVIEWER?

One of the key attributes is to remain silent most of the time. You have come together with another person to obtain his or her thoughts, so let that person talk in as uninterrupted a flow as possible. There are countless stores of people who have entered into a project and proceeded to use it as a platform to

display their own intellect. These people state the subject, then continue to elaborate in a lengthy monologue. By the time the interviewer is through, there is little left for the interviewee to say except "yes" or "no."

This is particularly true of talk show hosts. I hasten to add that to use public interviewers as an example really is not fair. They are dealing with personalities quite skilled at being interviewed. It is a part of their profession. They cannot be compared with the majority of the individuals that oral historians will be interviewing.

I have never forgotten the comment of one viewer who was being very complimentary about my interviews. She explained, "it's because you always ask the very same questions I would, if I had the chance."

That is the key to my philosophy about interviewing. I never enjoyed the typical "show biz" interview. I wanted to find the real person behind the facade -- to discover how they thought and why and what really made them tick. This philosophy has transferred very well into my business history project, and I believe that the taped interviews I am compiling will reflect much more than just the routine, mechanical, surface responses.

Another necessary talent is to establish a warm rapport with each of the wide variety of personalities you will encounter. One has to have an instinct for knowing how to reach each of these people -- to interpret the mood of each. Is this one timid, this one a super ego, this one suspicious -- and particularly suspicious of a woman?

Let me say here that in many instances, I think women have an edge in conducting some of these interviews. There have been times when I have obtained a much more sympathetic audience because I was a woman. The protective male instinct drove some men to open up and be more candid than they might have been with a man with whom they might have felt compelled to maintain a more dignified and serious attitude.

There is another little game I play when I sense a feeling of insecurity or of "holding back." No matter how much I know about the individual or the segment of history I want to discuss, I pretend to be very naive. "Poor little thing," I can almost hear them saying to themselves, "she doesn't have any idea of what it's all about." I know I am massaging their male ego, but I get the interview I am after; for in their paternalism, they proceed to relate in minute detail their own view of the subject. While some of the resulting information may be no more than a duplication of already known data, it serves a viable purpose, for it reconfirms that the known facts are (1) correct, (2) wrong, or (3) incomplete. I repeat, this reinforces the need to interview as many people as possible, to assure that the truthful history will be documented.

Another rule I consider important is never (except under duress) submit a list of questions ahead of time to the

interviewee. I do not want all the interesting, personal nuances mentally edited out when we sit down to talk. I want the person's immediate reaction and recall, not a cautious, distilled version.

I do not allow the interviewee to edit the transcribed copy. This is when the embarrassment of revelatory comments takes over and some of the more interesting remarks are deleted. I say again, the true oral history should reflect what the individual really said, including all the errors and hesitations.

I quote Mary C. O'Connell, a private family historian:

People now retiring don't have the skills to write their memoirs; they're not literary enough. When they read (the transcribed copy) they think they sound stupid, illiterate or uninteresting. But the whole point is the spontaneity of the tapes.

To sum up, the successful interviewer must be capable of sizing up each personality, must be intuitive in reaching each person, must be willing to submerge himself in favor of the person being interviewed. You must be more interested in other people than in yourself. You must be a good listener, for if you are not, little remarks will slip by that, if caught at the time, could open up a whole unknown avenue of thoughts, and it may not always be possible to go back for a second interview.

Merle Miller, in an interview, said, "You have to ask the right questions and then hear the answers instead of getting caught up in the tape recorder's machinery."

Many will say that mine is not the academic approach to oral history. My argument is that I am not dealing with academics, with people who have spent their life reading, analyzing, or interpreting a major school of thought or period in history. Instead, they have taken their academic training (and remember that many people who are the subjects in an oral history did not have the luxury of a higher education) and gone out into the working world to earn a living, run a profitable business, and have learned to deal with the broad spectrum of people they have encountered in the pursuit of their careers. Thus we cannot expect all of the persons interviewed to be highly trained intellectuals, able to approach a subject as would an academician. Their answers, their view of life, their experiences are instead the warp and woof from which the historian can then weave a story that may prove more honest and revealing than has been conveyed in the more formalized writings of the past.

NOTE

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