An Early Assessment of the South Dakota Oral History Project

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Oral history is the pursuit of historical information through recorded interviews with people who have been directly or indirectly involved with past events. The search for information may take several forms, depending on the researcher's technique and interests, but several goals are usually evident. Oral history is gathered on the premise that an understanding of the past can be enhanced with certain information not available in printed form. Countless events, and personal interpretations of events, have gone unrecorded. In addition, other records of the past should be challenged. One version of an incident may be accepted only for lack of evidence corroborating or disproving the account. The function of oral history, therefore, is to advance knowledge of the past by broadening the base of historical evidence beyond traditional written records.

The practice of oral history is comparatively recent, although the oral tradition of securing information by means of eye witness accounts can be traced to the "father of history," Herodotus. In the past two decades a number of institutions, including presidential libraries and the Oral History Center at Columbia University, have compiled large holdings of taped interviews, newsfilms, and other audiovisual aids for research. Historians have begun to realize that not all historical data reside in printed matter. Government documents, diaries, memoirs, letters, newspapers, and secondary source material remain as the primary research tools; but films, records, and tape recordings have gained acceptance in recent years. These relatively new scientific advances complement historical evidence but do not seek to detract from traditional methods of research. Oral history adds the dimensions of sight and sound.

Enough valid evidence has been compiled to justify its application to every facet of history. As with newspapers, which were once considered questionable but are now accepted, oral history has come of age.

This past summer an oral history project was inaugurated in South Dakota. Five thousand dollars was funded by the state legislature at the request of Dayton Canaday, State Historian, and Professor Joseph Cash of the University of South Dakota.[1] Professor Cash and Mr. Canaday suggested to the state legislature that a project be initiated among white settlers while reminiscent accounts of early statehood were still available. The State Historical Society received the money as part of its budget allocation, and the University agreed to provide personnel and technical assistance necessary to produce taped interviews. It was also agreed that two copies of each tape would be produced and placed in the archives at Pierre and Vermillion. This writer was hired as the primary interviewer, and the remaining funds went toward the purchase of tapes, secretarial assistance, and other incidentals.

South Dakota is well-suited for an oral history project. First, it has an ample number of older citizens who continue to reside in the state. In 1969 the State Historical Society offered pioneer certificates to those citizens born in Dakota Territory (or prior to 2 November 1889). To date, over eighteen hundred certificates have been issued. The fact that so many territorial pioneers are still alive prompted pursuit of information on territorial and early statehood experiences. Most people live out their lives without recounting their experiences except in conversation; yet, their personal stories are important, not only to the state of South Dakota, but also to the region and nation. One of the significant themes in American history has been frontier settlement and the attendant man-versus-nature motif. In South Dakota, that history is available from two distinctively different natural settings east and west of the Missouri River. A

1. Cash is the director of the American Indian Research Project which began at the University in 1966. The project has produced nearly six hundred tapes, primarily on regional Indian studies under the auspices of the Doris Duke Foundation. This year it published Vol. 1 of its catalogue, *Oyate Iyechinka Woglakapi.* Vol. 2 is planned for December 1970.

unique opportunity has been provided to contrast differing environments and the settlers' response to the challenge of nature. Through the vehicle of oral interviews, scores of people may relate their own interpretations of events and frontier experiences. Historians and others can, therefore, broaden their understanding of the period and gain perspective through the use of these additional resources.

The primary goal of the South Dakota Oral History Project's first summer of operation was to search out "old timers" and record their recollections of life on the prairie. It was not limited, however, to that topic alone. All interviews were constructed to include relevant information on each respondent's life. This second facet of the interviews often proved more substantial than the subject of homesteading in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Religion, education, medicine, politics, national groups, law, relations with Indians, banking, and business were only some of the general topics covered in conversations. Nearly every interview delved into Depression experiences and how people were affected by them. Inevitably this open style of interview led to subjects that were only remotely related to state history. These accounts may someday interest researchers in other areas of history. [2]

Between June and September 1970 the project produced over 140 tapes made with nearly 180 people. This writer conducted sixty-five interviews in eight counties throughout the state.[3] Each tape secured thus far has redeeming historical value although some are more redemptive than others. This is the nature of oral history. Thoughtful respondents who answered questions with insight and elaboration made the best interviews. People who had gained a degree of position in their communities and the state were tempting prospects, although they were

2. Some examples include: the Klondike Gold Rush in the 1890s, an eye witness account of Pearl Harbor, the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska (and South Dakota), and hunting experiences in Africa and Asia.

3. The counties were: Hutchinson, Brookings, Brown, Hughes, Stanley, Haakon, Pennington, and Perkins. Isolated interviews were made in other counties as time and circumstances permitted. In each of the above counties the local and county historical societies were particularly helpful in suggesting people who might be interviewed, and sometimes established a schedule of interviews. The writer wishes to thank these societies for their time and enthusiasm for the project.

not always the best respondents. The project's purpose was to solicit information from all socio-economic groups, and, generally speaking, this purpose was fulfilled.

A few surprises, however, awaited this interviewer traveling through the state in search of good informants. Amateur historians or people who had gathered information on their town or county, for example, tended to offer more secondary information than first-hand accounts of their own experiences. People billed as "good story tellers" often proved disappointing. They had related their stories for so many years that fact and fiction could not be separated. One notable exception was Billy Shoun of Haakon county, who spent a Sunday morning making one of the most memorable interviews in the collection.[4] Interviews with women fell into a separate category. They could be interviewed on home, social life, education, and religion; beyond that, their fund of information was limited. There were exceptions, but generally women remembered little about politics, economics, and the world outside the home.

Analysis of the project also requires comments regarding interviewers. Subject content should be the primary concern of every interviewer. He must have a good grasp of national and state history to insure consistent quality. Local county historical societies should be encouraged to begin or continue oral history projects, but interviews should have scope and breadth. Broad questions on economics, politics, social relations, religion, and other subjects must be incorporated into each interview in addition to occupational data and questions on schooling and family and cultural life. Ample time should be given to develop the respondent's answers and to interject follow-up questions. Interview technique is an individual matter, but there are basic rules to follow. Informants must not be led astray or urged to make false statements. Interviewers must diplomatically guide them to maintain organized responses. These characteristics, and others, are acquired with practice and a knowledge of history. Oral history is a worthwhile endeavor for anyone to pursue, regardless of his qualifications, but the result must be something of substance and historical value.

4. South Dakota Oral History Project (S.D.O.H.P.) Tape #027.

As mentioned earlier, over 140 tapes were made during the summer, and more are expected in the near future. More than half the tapes were obtained from other sources. The Friends of the Middle Border Museum at Mitchell supplied over thirty tapes, many of them made by the late Leonard Jennewein of Dakota Wesleyan University. Jennewein's tapes are excellent additions. They indicate his grasp of state and local history and his ability to encourage respondents to speak openly and factually. Other fine tapes were procured from John Stockert, of the Badlands National Monument, Professor Paul O'Rourke, formerly of South Dakota State University, Winifred Ziemann of Midland, and the historical societies of Brown and Clay counties. In addition, more tapes are still available to the project from the Friends of the Middle Border Museum, Augustana College, and a continual production of recordings from county historical societies. These interviews have added considerable dimension to the collection. Some were made in the early 1950s and included many people no longer alive. Jennewein, for example, interviewed a participant at Wounded Knee and one of the last survivors who came out to the Black Hills in 1876.[5] Several other examples could be cited, but acquisitions from other institutions and individuals have enhanced the project in quantity and quality.

Considerable information on state history has now been preserved, even though only eight of the state's sixty-seven counties have been surveyed. There is a wealth of data that should be gathered by the project over the next ten years. Although its importance is primarily historical, sociologists, political scientists, government officials, economists, and many others will find the collection useful. Ultimately, a catalogue, that will indicate South Dakota's commitment to the preservation of its history, will be published and distributed nationally.

The tapes and their transcriptions will be used for many years to come. Oral history has gained wide acceptance, primarily because it has a variety of applications. In the past year two well-received historical works were published which

5. S.D.O.H.P. Tapes # 095 and # 102, respectively. Another Wounded Knee account made by Dr. Ray Lemley of Rapid City, and his father, is contained on S.D.O.H.P. # 063.

made extensive use of oral history. The first is Studs Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression.* This book is a series of interviews made with people who experienced the Depression in various parts of the country.[6] The second is a biography of Huey Long, written by T. Harry Williams, which received the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for biography. In a recent *Writer's Digest* article, Williams makes several comments on the value of oral history. He points out that researchers can come closer to the truth of history through interviews. Each respondent knows that others will be asked similar questions and is inclined to be more accurate. In addition, Williams believes that modern communications have made oral history more necessary. The personal letter, which has traditionally been a source of historical insight, is being replaced by telephones and rapid communication. Even though we communicate more today, there is a possibility that fewer records will be left behind. Oral history attempts to fill that void because people, according to Williams, "don't mind talking, but it would never occur to them to put it on paper themselves." [7]

The future of the S.D.O.H.P. depends upon funding which has not been guaranteed—and even renewal of a $5,000 allocation would not be sufficient. Corners were cut, and many volunteered hours were spent producing the collection thus far. None of the interviews made this past summer (about seventy) has been transcribed. Transcribers must be hired along with more interviewers in order to complete the survey of the state. In the next five years many of the pioneer settlers and their recollections will be gone. The project proposes to preserve those memories, not in books or museums, but in the words of the people. The future of the oral history project may be questionable, but no one can deny that those citizens who have been interviewed have made a collective contribution to the history of South Dakota.

6. Emil and Ruth Loriks of Arlington, S. D., are included in Terkel's book. A series of interviews were made with Emil Loriks for the S.D.O.H.P. See Tapes #005, #006, and #007.

7. Peggy Ann Brock, "An exclusive interview with T. Harry Williams," *Writer's Digest,* 50 (September 1970): 27.

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