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Dr. Bobby H. Johnson Oral Transcription

As the history field has developed, historians have increasingly turned to oral histories to diversify their research methods. Oral histories provide historians with a wellspring of knowledge and perspectives that may not have been available or accessible through other methods. Dr. Bobby H. Johnson has gone to great lengths to interview hundreds of individuals over various topics - including World War I, World War II, Nacogdoches history, and Stephen F. Austin State University history – in order to obtain new perspectives on previously discussed topics of history. Johnson’s main purpose in doing these interviews “was to preserve, through tape-recorded interviews and subsequent transcription, the memoirs of persons who have observed or participated in significant historical events or developments.”¹ While Johnson conducted the oral interviews himself, the task of transcribing some of the interviews fell upon the Introduction to Public History class. The transcription process is tasking and time consuming, but the transcriptions are necessary in order to better preserve the oral interviews and to make them more accessible to researchers.

Oral histories have proven their worth time and time again. They are a valuable primary resource that is capable of providing information about someone whose life might otherwise be forgotten, or left out of historical records. It also allows people the opportunity to tell their own story in their own words, which is an opportunity that may not be available to them otherwise. Not only do oral histories provide new perspectives and insight on old research and events, but

¹ “The Bobby H. Johnson Oral History Collection: About This Collection,” SFASU Oral History Collection, accessed December 12, 2015, http://digital.sfasu.edu/ui/custom/default/collection/coll_OH/resources/custompages/bobbyjohnson/

also, by having someone relay their own version of history, the historical account is more personal and made more accessible to the general public. Perhaps most importantly, oral histories provide an opportunity to form powerful and rich relationships between the historian, the respondent, and the community. Considering the public history field is based on forming relationships with the public, oral histories are extremely beneficial to the field. Oral histories provide a way for historians to do that while asking questions they, or their community want answered.

Another interesting benefit of conducting oral histories and transcribing them is that it allows historians to compensate for today's increasing reliance on technology. Early historians had written documentation of people's lives, but in today's society people rarely write anything down. Historians must compensate for this lack of written records; otherwise, there is a risk of a significant decrease in the amount of resources available for future use. Also, this actually presents the avenue through which historians can present these oral histories: through the internet and online repositories. While other research documents may only be available in house, by conducting these oral interviews it becomes possible to study different research topics from anywhere around the world. This effectively expands not only what is studied, but how it is studied.

While there are obvious benefits to recording oral histories, there are some negative implications as well. Oral histories rely heavily on memory. It is possible for respondents to forget events, people, or actions, which may distort the historical account in some way. It is also possible for respondents to purposefully alter their account in order to seem more important and interesting to listeners, or the historian. In order to avoid these problems, historians need to research the time period, or event they are interviewing their respondent about. This prevents the

historian from endorsing information that is historically inaccurate. Historians also need to be careful in how they treat an interview's subject; some subjects may need more sensitive treatment than others. During the interview and the editing process, precautions need to be taken in order to avoid misrepresenting the subject of the interview and the respondent. All of these elements can create a false sense of history. In order to avoid these practices, it is necessary for the historian to be well prepared before the interview takes place.

The most effective oral histories are the product of extensive planning and preparation. Before the interview takes place, it is necessary for the historian to designate a repository and plan out the intended purpose and direction they wish the oral interview to take. This is done by planning out what question to ask, what portions of the narrative to focus on, and things of that nature. After these initial steps have been taken and a respondent has been selected, it is necessary for the historian to meet with the respondent in an unrecorded session to personally introduce themselves to each other and to allow the respondent the opportunity to voice any questions or concerns they may have. Through this unrecorded meeting, the historian can make the respondent more comfortable with the interview process by making them aware of the purpose of the interview, how it will be conducted, what is expected and needed of them, and, most importantly, their rights as the respondent. Historians make the respondent more comfortable by acknowledging that the interview is considered private property and cannot be released to the public until the proper release forms have been signed, which needs to be done at the end of the interview and editing process. It is important for the respondent to be comfortable because their comfort will either help or hinder the interview. The interview should be done somewhere quiet and the equipment should be in good, working order. Today there is new, more effective equipment available to historians. What may have been available in the 90s – when

these interviews were conducted - could be considered antique by today's standards. However, new equipment is costly and not always readily available. At times it is necessary to use whatever is available and make it work.

While these are only a few of the recommended practices, they are important to making an interview successful. It was clear in these interviews that Johnson used these recommended practices, not only because he is a seasoned professional and knows the importance of these steps, but because the interviews were very well organized and remained true to the original purpose of the project, which was to inform researchers about life in East Texas and Texas during and after World War II. While at some points the women being interviewed got distracted by the details of their personal stories, Johnson was able to keep them focused because he has planned out the interview and the direction he wanted it to take. Johnson also made a point of introducing himself and his respondent before beginning each interview. This is another recommended practice which benefits the listeners and transcribers because it allows them to know who is the interviewer is, who they are interviewing, and what they are hoping to achieve. These interviews were very well conducted and would be of great use to historians, amateur researchers, and community members because of their clarity and subject matter.

These oral histories – and oral histories in general – would be of great use to all historians, but specifically social historians who seek to gain a better understanding of communities and cultures. The interview with Marie Pace Barton and the interview with Nita DeGrand – oral interview 327 and oral interview 382, respectively – both essentially covered what life in East Texas was like for an average American during World War II. Many historians have discussed life during World War II at great length, but those discussions usually only provide general information about the time period, or focus on life in large cities or cities where

there was a lot of military activity. These oral interviews specifically informed historians and researchers on what life was like in East Texas during and after World War II. Obviously, these interviews would be of value to those looking to learn more about - or research - East Texas, or Texas during and after World War II. While this may appear to be a rather narrow and limited view of World War II, these interviews could allow historians to compare the war experiences of those from small, rural towns to the experiences of those from larger, more urban towns that may have had more interaction with the war. A comparison of rural experiences and urban experiences researched through oral histories would provide historians and researchers a more personal understanding of the national climate during and after World War II. That understanding could be used in a study to present a more complete representation of World War II on the home front, or the social implications of the war.

Again, a lot of histories have been written in regard to World War II, but the majority of those histories focused on the political aspects of the war, or described the experiences of major political figures. These oral interviews provided information not only about an average American in World War II, but also the role East Texas women played in the war and how the war impacted them at home. Barton and DeGrand both informed listeners and researchers on their contributions to the war effort and how the draft, rationing, and the changing social climate impacted their families and their lives. These interviews could be used in a study of women's experiences during World War II, but they could also be used for other, larger studies regarding women. For instance, these interviews can be used as a comparison between women's lives in rural areas to those in more urban areas. Or these interviews could inspire a study of why some women were more involved in the war effort and others were not. Overall, these interviews provide a lot of new information on an already thoroughly discussed subject.

The transcription process itself could best be described as a necessary evil. It was no trouble to transcribe the interview when it was actually audible. There were periods throughout the interviews where it would be very quiet one moment and very loud the next. When the volume would decrease dramatically it was even more difficult to understand these already soft-spoken women, which would make it almost impossible to transcribe the interview without replaying very small portions repeatedly. Poor audio quality was generally the cause of most of the frustration, but this could be attributed to the equipment used in the interview.

There was another problem with the respondents perhaps not being entirely aware of interview etiquette. Johnson obviously knew what he was doing. He spoke clearly, made sure to spell out any words that may cause transcribers or listeners trouble, and he stayed focused on the task at hand. The respondents themselves caused the problems. Throughout the interviews the respondents – specifically DeGrand – would interrupt Johnson, or interject random thoughts. Then there were times when they deviated from the subject entirely and Johnson would be forced to steer them back to the original topic. These are all common problems with the interview process and historians just need to be prepared to respond appropriately, but when transcribing it becomes difficult to determine when it is necessary to include these interjections, or move on to a new portion of the conversation.

That raises a point about the importance of editing, which was clear while editing my own transcription and my peer's transcription. The question of whether or not to include everything the interviewer and respondent says is generally answered in the early stages of planning the oral history interview when you decide what editing method to follow. In the case of this assignment, we practiced the basic editing method, meaning we included the ones that added to the interview, but we edited out the ones that adversely affected the interview. Also,

this assignment makes it clear that it is important to have an outside source edit the transcription before it is submitted. While transcribing it is possible to miss parts of the interview, make editorial mistakes, or misquote someone. Even upon completing the transcription and doing an initial edit, it is possible for the transcriber to become desensitized to their own work and make careless errors. This makes an outsider's assistance crucial to completing an accurate transcription. Transcriptions are important because they allow readers to follow along with the tapes in order to better understand the interview, but they are also another means of preserving the interview in case the tape is ever compromised or lost. It is for this reason that accuracy is of the utmost importance when transcribing an interview.

Overall, this assignment was not only beneficial, but enjoyable. Aside from the valuable experience, the assignment provided students with the opportunity to hear oral interviews from women who students would probably not know, or meet under normal circumstances and it provided new perspectives on World War II. Johnson makes it abundantly clear that proper planning and preparation is needed in order to conduct an oral interview successfully. While there were certainly some elements that were tasking, this assignment is an excellent example of the benefits oral interviews and transcriptions provide to historians. A successful interview can be of unlimited value to a historian and researcher, making oral interview and transcription skills a much needed addition to a historian's repertoire.