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Oral History Response Paper

Oral history is a key component of public history even though the debate regarding the validity of oral histories as a historical source is ongoing. Arguments about the reliability of memory and the bias behind the subject and the interviewer are two faults that some scholars use to discredit the practice of oral history. Most of the readings from this course dealt with scholars (not necessarily just historians) who embraced the practice and how they chose to use oral histories to develop projects and programs, create and re-create memory and identity, and oral history as an activist practice—three topics Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes explored in detail. Our introduction was brief; however, transcribing requires little to no scholarly preparation.

There is no easy way to complete an oral history transcription. There are really no shortcuts or loopholes to make the process go faster. However, I found that my experience conducting and transcribing several oral histories over the past few years taught me how to use my time effectively and edit as I go to reduce the amount of editing and revision later. I also understood that every word (even if it comes at a point when the sentence changes direction) is important in the grand scheme of things. Although it might disrupt the sentence flow, those words are representative of an individual and their personal colloquial style. They can also alter the meaning of what they said (even if it seems minute). The “uhs” and “ums” are a part of speech and, while you do not need to transcribe seven “uhs” in a row, the insertion of these nervous pauses and fillers enhance the subject’s voice and human quality. In the end, a large part of oral history is capturing nuance and individualism.

Rather than transcribing just to provide ease of access, I understood that these transcriptions can be used in the research and writing process. Given the fact that I have used several oral histories as the basis of my honors thesis and other pieces of academic writing, I approached the transcription process differently. It was not just getting the correct words on paper. I wanted to capture phrasing and pace and tone, if possible. Although it can be difficult, I attempted to use punctuation to effectively preserve the way Virgil Thompson spoke instead of simply documenting the words he spoke. This is difficult and by no means perfect.

Overall, the quality of the interview was decent. The conversion from cassette tape to a digital MP3 file distorted the audio making several places difficult to hear and understand and creating unintelligible spots. After listening to two other interviews with Bobby Johnson, I wondered if the quality was due to the conversion or if it was something that happened to the tape over time prior to the conversion. VLC Player is my audio player of choice because I have found that it allows for more flexibility in terms of altering the audio speed and adjusting the audio amps and hertz to better understand what the subject is saying. The voices might sound differently in terms of pitch, but this helped make them clearer and allowed me to clear up most of the unintelligible phrases. In the end, the sound and quality problems were minor and did not impact the overall usefulness and integrity of the interview.

Bobby Johnson conducted a rather limited interview with Virgil Thompson (roughly 90-percent of the focus was on WWII) which left a lot to be desired in regards to who Thompson was beyond his time in an aircraft factory during World War II. The worst part of the entire interview was within the last two or three minutes when Johnson reached the end of the tape and made a comment about having more questions but they were out of tape to record them on. This is frustrating because I do not understand how a professional oral historian could go to an

interview with only one cassette tape. Today, technology is different and the storage capacity of recording devices allows oral historians to record more information without having to worry about running out of room. Technology of the time greatly limited the interview to a maximum time of one hour. Given that Johnson had additional questions and Thompson did not seem to be done talking, it leaves the researcher to wonder what additional information could have been gathered from this individual. I was also left shaking my head and unable to comprehend having just one tape at an oral history interview because you never know what could happen. It seems like best practice (even in the 1990s) would have been to be overly prepared. Having worked with the oral history collection at Texas A&M University-Commerce, they also faced this problem as late as 2010.

Johnson, a seasoned oral historian, followed most of the Oral History Association's (OHA) "General Principles for Oral History." Johnson made sure the interview was grounded in Thompson's recollections of the past and his experiences rather than commentary on contemporary events, and Johnson made a point of acknowledging the subject of the interview during his opening remarks. Johnson showed respect for Thompson as the narrator by allowing Thompson to respond freely to questions without leading Thompson's answers. Johnson also demonstrated knowledge on the subject and locations Thompson discussed which allowed him to ask detailed and knowledgeable follow-up questions. Although Johnson conducted a thorough interview, there were gaps in the narrative and no follow up interview provided to further the discussion. It is also unknown what (if any) documentation accompanied each interview because no biographical data sheets or similar forms were provided to the students. The recording equipment used by Johnson is also unknown beyond the fact that he used cassette tapes that have since been digitized. This information may not be pertinent to the use of the interview in

research, but it does have value to public historians and other scholars who are also attempting to analyze best practices or possibly the evolution of oral history methods.

Virgil Thompson was born December 30, 1910 in Vernon, Texas. He spent his entire life in Texas from the panhandle all the way to the piney woods. He spent much of his life in rural areas because his dad was a cotton farmer and then Virgil eventually worked in the oil fields as well as smalltown grocery stores. Virgil married in 1933 (wife's name unknown) and moved to east Texas where he spent the rest of his life (sans his years during WWII at Consolidated Aircraft Corporation). Thompson related his story on the home front working for Consolidated Aircraft Corporation to broader themes related to the home front such as women in the factories, rationing, effects of coming out of the Great Depression, and key political figures like President Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, the last half of the interview—particularly the last fifteen to twenty minutes—included more free-flowing answers from Thompson which made it appear as though it took him that long to become comfortable talking which was interesting given that he had known Johnson since Johnson was a child.

Thompson's interview best fits into or relates to research dealing with the Great Depression, especially in more rural areas of Texas and the United States, and home front efforts during WWII. He started discussing the broader significance of the war when the tape ended, but was unable to finish his point. Thompson did discuss some of his experiences during the Great Depression and how growing up in rural Texas almost mitigated the effects because they were already poor; poor on top of poor is still poor. The most valuable information from Thompson was his experiences working at Consolidated Aircraft Corporation during WWII. He provided quite a bit of detail about what he did and what went on at the plant. Thompson

discussed women in the workforce, patriotic attitudes among the workers, and the manufacturing of B-24 bombers.

One struggle I noticed when editing the transcriptions of other students was how a lack of knowledge regarding the subject matter led to gaps or incorrect phrases within the transcription. One example was place names. People unfamiliar with training bases and their locations did not understand the name of the place the subject was talking about. Although Google can often help find locations (especially if you know something concrete about the location like the state it is in or a nearby landmark), sometimes you do not have enough information for that to be effective. Also, transcribers sometimes assume that what they hear is correct and fail to double-check the accuracy of their assumption. People do not always speak clearly and that coupled with unfamiliar geography, or even locations that no longer exist, can lead to misinformation. However, I did find that my knowledge of WWII from both studying the time period and interviewing veterans helped me to avoid many of these mistakes. Not only did I understand when they were talking about subjects such as canning or locations such as Carswell Air Force Base and Barksdale Field, I also had enough background to be able to search for specific terms relating to the manufacture of B-24 bombers. I was surprised about how helpful this previous historical knowledge helped me in the transcribing process.

Overall, the process was nothing new. Transcribing is the same no matter what the subject. We were responsible for helping to provide access and hopefully our efforts will encourage scholars, and even students, to utilize these oral histories as a resource. I have mixed emotions about transcriptions because I know that increase accessibility, but I would hope that those individuals using these transcriptions still listen to the interview. James Bennett and Rhonda Williams discussed how the value of oral histories goes beyond the audible word—that

is, the pauses, periods of silence, inflection, and cracks in a speaker's voice all provide information that cannot be captured or understood on paper.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully people still listen to the interviews and experience the nuances and stories for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> James Bennett, "Human Values in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 11 (1983): 1-15; Rhonda Y. Williams, "I'm a Keeper of Information': History-Telling and Voice," *The Oral History Review* 28, no. 1 (Winter – Spring, 2001): 41-63.