RETROSPECTIVE AND CURRENT ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS: A COMPARISON

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In the summer of 1789, Louis XVI of France was more preoccupied with his hunting than with affairs of state. His diary entry for July 14th recorded only his disappointment with the hunt: *rien*, nothing. Less than two years later, the great grandson of the Sun King had himself become the hunted and was destined to lose his life on the guillotine. Had Louis XVI lived another twenty years to write his memoirs, what would he have said about July 14th, Bastille Day, other than that the hunt had been poor? It seems certain that his retrospective version would have been colored by later circumstances: by whether or not he had been successful in putting down the revolution and in keeping his throne—as well as his head.

An account written at the time of an event is considered a more reliable source than one written many years later. The closer the document is to the event it narrates, the better it is likely to be for historical purposes.[1] If this is true for the written source, what about the oral history? Traditionally, oral history has been considered a means of recapturing the undocumented past or of supplementing the written record. Historians compare oral history to memoirs and autobiographies. This view overlooks one of its greatest potentials. A memoir can only represent someone's reflections on past deeds or events. An oral history can do that too, but it can also record how an individual feels at the time an event takes place. In that sense, a current oral history is much more comparable to a diary entry or a letter.

The purpose of this article is not to justify oral history as a research source or to claim that current oral histories are

necessarily better than retrospective ones. Rather, it seeks to illustrate some of the advantages of conducting oral histories at the time an event is taking place by comparing them to ones undertaken many years later. Four projects conducted by the staff at Western Historical Manuscript Collection-University of Missouri-St. Louis (WHMC) serve as examples. Two are retrospective projects and two are contemporary, and their themes complement each other nicely. The first set documents strikes in St. Louis: interviews with women who picketed the St. Louis garment industry in the 1930s can be compared to those covering the St. Louis teachers' strike of 1973. The other projects focus on women fighting for their rights. One is with suffragists and early members of the League of Women Voters; the second covers activities surrounding Missouri's International Women's Year in 1977.

In the summer of 1933, when the National Industrial Recovery Act guaranteed the right of workers to unionize, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) launched a nation-wide drive to organize dressmakers. In the St. Louis garment district, over two thousand women dressmakers struck the forty-eight shops making silk and cotton dresses. Although the silk dressmakers won recognition within two months, the cotton dressmakers remained on the picket lines much longer. At some locations, strike activity lasted into 1935. A series of photographs in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection documents these strikes. By showing them to retired ILGWU members, the staff was able to locate women garment workers of the 1930s who had witnessed the scenes depicted in the photographs. Interviews were conducted with both women who had struck and those who would not strike.[2]

The first strike in the history of the St. Louis public school system took four thousand teachers out of the classrooms in January of 1973. This strike had more than two sides. The St. Louis Board of Education represented the status quo, while the position of the teachers was complicated by two bargaining units, the St. Louis Teachers Association, affiliated with the National Education Association, and Local 420 of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. At the beginning of the strike, one-third of the teachers belonged to the union, one-third to the association,

and one-third remained nonaligned. After the strike had continued for several days, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection got involved. The staff collected all available manuscript material, including correspondence, strike bulletins, and copies of lawsuits, and kept a running clippings file from the two daily newspapers. A team of four, including two university professors, interviewed teachers who belonged to the union, the association, or were unaffiliated. None of the board members, administrators, or lawyers would consent to make a tape recording while the strike was in progress. However, some agreed to be interviewed immediately after the settlement.[3]

The St. Louis Equal Suffrage League, organized in 1910, was a member of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association and the precursor of the League of Women Voters of St. Louis. It was quite active in the years immediately preceding the passage of the 19th amendment. In 1916, for example, when the National Democratic Convention assembled in St. Louis, the league organized a dramatic demonstration called the Golden Lane. Seven thousand women, wearing yellow sashes and carrying yellow parasols, lined both sides of the street leading to the convention hall—a veritable gauntlet through which delegates to the convention had to walk. Over the next three years, the league held political rallies, collected signatures, and in 1919 hosted the National Suffrage Association meeting. During the convention, news came that the Missouri state legislature had just passed the presidential suffrage bill. This prompted Carrie Chapman Catt, the president of the association, to call on women in America to raise up a League of Women Voters. St. Louis suffragists organized a city league over the summer, predating the national organization by several months. During the 1920s, this league engaged in voter education and endorsed political candidates, a decision it later abandoned for non-partisanship. Because the Western Historical Manuscript Collection houses the papers of the Equal Suffrage League and the League of Women Voters, the staff was able to locate several women who had been active in both groups.

The first National Women's Conference met in Houston, Texas, in November, 1977. It was the only time in the history of the United States that the federal government sponsored and paid for a meeting of discontented citizens to determine their grievances.

Congress authorized the creation of a national commission to organize the women's conference and allocated five million dollars to the project. To prepare for the Houston conference, the national commission appointed coordinating committees in each state. These committees convened state meetings to elect delegates to the conference and to pass resolutions for discussion there. In Missouri the coordinating committee disagreed with the elected delegation over the issues of abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. The Western Historical Manuscript Collection staff convinced both sides to share their papers and conducted interviews with key participants to document the division between the two groups.[4]

These four examples illustrate some of the differences between retrospective and current oral history projects. One of the more obvious distinctions concerns the pool of potential interviewees. An oral historian conducting a current project has the luxury of choosing from a greater number of persons to interview. They are easier to identify, they are alive, and they are in the area. The likelihood of getting the whole story is greatly increased, for one can revise the number of interviews necessary to fill the gaps. The more time that has passed since the event, the smaller the available pool from which to choose. Those who are interviewed may leave a view that is out of proportion to the actual event or to their role in it. Of course, this can happen in current projects as well, but an interviewee may be more accurate if he or she understands that others interviewed can confirm or deny the story. The four projects offer ample proof of this. Despite many hours at the ILGWU Retirees' Hall and the aid of a woman who had been active in the garment industry strikes, the staff was able to locate and interview only seven women, of whom three had chosen to strike. For the St. Louis teachers project, interviews were conducted with over twenty individuals representing all sides of the controversy. The WHMC was able to locate four women who were involved in the St. Louis suffrage movement over sixty years ago. In the IWY project, nine women were interviewed. Many more could have been and perhaps should have been interviewed. The point here is that in current projects one selects whom to interview rather than having that choice made by the passage of time.

There is a problem, however, in current projects, especially controversial ones. Although the participants are available, they

may not consent to be interviewed, as was the case with administrators during the St. Louis teachers' strike. The offer of closure in some cases will overcome this reluctance. In the IWY project, for instance, a tape with four women who participated in the Missouri state meeting is closed until the final resolution of the Equal Rights Amendment. With those who flatly refuse to speak at the time an event occurs, it is possible to set up a "future interviews" file and turn a current project into a retrospective one.

Interviewees may be more readily available in current projects, but interviewers may be better prepared in retrospective ones. They will have the luxury of consulting written sources and can take their time in designing the interview. Those who cover an event while it unfolds cannot afford time for reflection, nor can they rely on traditional research materials which have not yet been produced. During the St. Louis teachers' strike, oral histories were conducted while the news broke, with the interviewees being informed sometimes only seconds before the interviewers. What written documentation was available became obsolete in light of changes recorded via telecommunication. In the suffragist project, on the other hand, interviewers were able to prepare thoroughly by consulting articles, newspaper accounts, publications, and the papers of the St. Louis Equal Suffrage League. The oral histories gathered information that was not duplicated in writing by concentrating on reflections, comparisons, and personal analysis. Written documentation, however, can sometimes prove less helpful than it first appears. Those who worked on the Truman Oral History Project complained that although they had access to the Truman papers, the papers themselves did not document the decision making process.[5] Of course, the main danger with retrospective projects is that written documentation will be scant. This was true in the garment workers project. The WHMC began with only newspaper accounts and a set of photographs. Staff members who approached union management for access to old files were turned down. Bringing up problems of forty years ago was not deemed wise or important. In both retrospective and current projects, the interviews may represent the only records, other than newspaper accounts, that are ever created. For This reason, it is often necessary to spend much of the interview on simply reconstructing the event itself. This problem can occur with

both types of oral histories, but is much more prevalent in current projects where the oral history represents the first and perhaps the only record. In retrospective projects, it usually represents the last record.

It is important to stress the differences between the intent of a current oral history and that of an interview conducted to prepare a news story. Journalists have deadlines, so their coverage of an event will be limited. They may take only enough time to interview one person from each "side," when in reality there may be more than two sides. The press, for example, almost completely ignored the non-delegate caucus of women who went to Houston to represent pro-choice and ERA women in Missouri. A newspaper interview is conducted in order to give a relatively complete story as soon as possible. The oral history has a different purpose. It is conceived not as the end product of research, but as another source for research and, therefore, must be guided by traditional tenets of historical scholarship, primarily objectivity, accuracy, and thoroughness.[6] Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., in an article for *The Nation*, discussed the role of historians in oral history:

> They must stress their professional role in the process . . . decide who to interview, seek central issues and push aside trivia . . . The TV tape of a network news interview is no substitute for an oral history session. The most obvious reason being that the subject should be willing to say for oral history many things he was not prepared to divulge to the entire contemporary world.[7]

Charles Morrissey was even more adamant. He advised oral historians to read the transcript of Lawrence Spivak's *Meet the Press* and then "do just the opposite from the way he does it."[8]

The most important difference between current and retrospective oral histories is the element of time. A retrospective project is not a product of the age under investigation; rather, it represents perceptions filtered through subsequent years. The further one gets away from the time being studied, the more variables one must consider in evaluating an account as a primary source. An eighty year old person reminiscing about the 1920s not only must reach back sixty years, but also will be biased by events in the 1930s, 1940s, and so on. Tough times in the 1920s may not seem so bad after one has lived through the Depression. As Ron Grele noted in

an article entitled "Can Anyone Over 30 be Trusted," "the now informs the discussion of the then."[9] For this reason, a crash oral history program began immediately after President John F. Kennedy's death. Interviewers felt that the advantage of immediate recall uncorrupted by after-thought outweighed the lack of preparation. "My impression," said Charles Morrissey of the project,

> is that the closer you can interview the man with respect to the events he was engaged in, the better the interview will be. If you can get him soon after it happens, he still gives you the values, assumptions, attitudes and view points of the man he was at the time these things happened. For example, I interviewed John Bailey . . . about a month after the Assassination. He was still JFK's Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. I came back a year later and did another interview. He was a different man . . . We did better in the aftermath of the assassination than we did as time went on.[10]

The women interviewed in the garment industry project varied widely in their employment and union activities. Yet they shared a common sense of personal satisfaction in their work. Their tales of harrowing working conditions, long hours, and poor pay were mellowed by subsequent years and ironically by the gains that were made once unionization took place. "I liked it better then," confessed one of the women. "What, in the piece work days?" challenged her sister, "You liked it better then? Why, you weren't making no money! You work hard now, but you're getting paid a lot better." "I think the harmony was so much better then. There was something about it."[11] In the project with Missouri suffragists, one woman dismissed the idea that they had been radical or "blue stockings," perhaps because of her later conservatism or her disapproval of feminist activities today. "I think a married woman has all the right in the world to do as she pleases" conceded Isabel Houston Dobler, "as long as she keeps her home . . . if she doesn't have a family."[12] She could not remember much opposition to the suffrage league, although some newspaper accounts at the time had been very critical.

This time factor also affects the interviewer. Whether one has lived through it or not, the interviewer will perceive the period through present biases or knowledge. One of the garment worker

photographs shows a woman holding a collar torn off her coat, with a policeman standing nearby. The interviewers assumed it to be an example of police brutality documented in other cities during the nation-wide strike. This preconception was corrected by one of the interviewees, who identified a scab roughed up by those on the picket lines.

Current oral histories can more accurately reflect a person's motives and emotions than can retrospective ones. They may also be distorted by those emotions. A person interviewed at the height of a crisis may be much more interested in defending his or her position than in giving a sober account. In the St. Louis teachers strike project, the board members were not interested in discussing the question of union or association membership, but this was a red hot issue to the teachers. Board members preferred to talk about tax rates and finances, which were of limited interest to teachers. One striker summed up his feelings about the board: "Even if they could prove they didn't have the money, we still wouldn't believe them, it's gone too far."[13] The IWY leaders originally saw the oral history project as an opportunity to criticize each other or were interested in discussing only certain issues. When asked about her position on the Equal Rights Amendment, one delegate replied: "I take no particular strong interest in ERA one way or the other. I have a personal opinion but I don't think it's relevant and I don't care to spend any time on it."[14]

Current projects may uncover the forces behind an issue, but retrospective histories will often result in more thorough analysis of those events. Mary Jo Deering, in summing up a project to document a school desegregation plan in Maryland, noted that while a current project can provide the basic chronology of fast moving events and of the exact roles and motives of various actors, it is extremely difficult to evaluate a complex social phenomenon, such as integration, when one is a participant in it.[15] The further one is away from an event, particularly a controversial one, the more perspective one will gain on it. Thomas C. Reeves cites just this reason for interviewing McCarthyites in the 1970s, after many of the passions of the Cold War years had dimmed and his contemporaries were in their mid to late 60s.[16] Eula Carson, who was instrumental in the final negotiations for the local ILGWU, reflected on the give and take between the garment industry and

the workers: "You go in there 'bull headed' you know you're not going to get very far. You've got to sit down and talk things over, bring out their points and then you begin to put the two points together . . . then we'd see who wins."[17]

Just as perceptions are likely to change with time, so does memory. A study conducted by sociologists Ralph Daken and Donald Tennant offers some interesting observations on memory over time. They interviewed members of a water conservation organization at the height of a controversy and then reinterviewed some of them one year later, repeating many of the original questions. Of these questions, three were factual (years of education, residency), and four were attitudinal, relating to various aspects of the organization during the same year (opinions on leadership, agreement on goals, early achievements). Their results showed a consistency of response of 63.3%, which was higher for factual than for attitudinal data (68.2% to 60.2%). They also tested by age group and found progressively lower degrees of consistency with advancing age. Their final conclusion was that the rate of inconsistency on questions relating to recent conditions seemed significantly lower than on those dealing with conditions in the more remote past.[18]

The four St. Louis examples seem to bear out Daken's and Tennant's findings. In the teachers strike, for example, the important issues to each side were clear. The interviewees could name names, figures, and the progression of daily events. The women interviewed in the garment industry project, however, were unclear about the details and the chronology of the strikes. Several got the strikes of 1933 mixed up with the strikes of 1935; and there was a good deal of inconsistency in describing working conditions, hours, and pay. Memory was the poorest among the women who had struggled for the vote. At the time of their interviews, all were in their late 80s or early 90s. One of the women, who had been active in the equal suffrage league at the time, was asked if she had participated in the "Golden Lane" demonstration during the National Democratic Convention of 1916. She could not remember her own involvement: "somebody said they knew I was in it, but I can't remember, so I just don't claim it."[19]

Some interviewees may compensate for poor memories by sticking to oft told tales. One oral historian even believes that most

oral histories contain far more rehearsed than unrehearsed memories.[20] Three of the four suffragists interviewed told the same story in almost the same words, as if they shared a collective memory which had been polished over the years. When one of them was questioned further, she could not remember beyond those details she had "memorized." She rebuffed further questioning by replying: "I think I have given you the gist."[21]

The problems of poor memory can be countered to an extent by a skillful and informed interviewer. One suffragist's memory did improve when a general question was followed by more precise ones. Asked about the size of crowds at suffragist meetings, she responded, "I haven't the slightest idea" but was able to recall the attendance was not very large when asked specific numbers.[22] In some cases, props can stimulate half forgotten memories. When the garment workers were shown photographs of the strikes, they were able to recognize themselves and friends. Some of them dug into their attics and basements to share more photographs and scrapbooks of their own.

Oral histories record what people think they have experienced, either at the time or years later. Their perceptions are likely to change in the interim. Current oral histories may have the advantage of recording the details, the emotions, and the motives, while a retrospective interview will often produce a more thoughtful analysis. Archivists would enhance the historical record by having both versions.

FOOTNOTES

1. Louis Gottschalk, "The Historian and The Historical Document," in *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology.* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1945), p. 16.
2. Katherine T. Corbett and Jeanne Mongold of Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis created an exhibition that combined photographs with quotations from the oral histories. The exhibit has been shown at the IWY Houston Conference, the University of Missouri, and the Local ILGWU hall.
3. Irene E. Cortinovis, "Documenting an Event with Manuscripts and Oral History: The St. Louis Teachers' Strike, 1973," *The Oral History Review 1974* (1974); 59–63.
4. Anne R. Kenney, "The Papers of International Women's Year, 1977," *American Archivist* 42 (July 1979): 345–347.
5. See Richard Kirkendall's comments as reported in George Mazuzan, "Eighth Annual Colloquium," *The Oral History Review 1974* (1974): 83.
6. Philip C. Brooks as quoted in *Oral History at Arrowhead: Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History*, edited by Elizabeth I. Dixon and James V. Mink, University of California Conference Center, Lake Arrowhead, California, September 25–26, 1966, p. 5.
7. Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "The Voice as History," *The Nation* 205 (November 20, 1967): 519.
8. Charles Morrissey as quoted in *Oral History at Arrowhead*, p. 50.
9. Ron Grele, "Can Anyone Over Thirty Be Trusted: A Friendly Critique of Oral History," *The Oral History Review 1978* (1978): 43.
10. Morrissey, op. cit., p. 67
11. Interview of Sara Noto Macalusa and Genevieve Noto by Katherine T. Corbett, Jeanne Mongold, and Patricia L. Adams, March 23, 1977, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.
12. Interview of Isabel Houston Dobler by Anne R. Kenney, June 28, 1976, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.
13. Al Serkin as quoted in interview of Al Serkin, Tom Morgan, and Thomas Kupferer by Dr. Paul D. Travers, February 12, 1973, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.
14. Interview of Ann O'Donnell by Anne R. Kenney, December 5, 1977, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.
15. Mary Jo Deering, "Oral History and School Integration Research: A Case Study," *The Oral History Review 1979* (1979): 40.
16. Thomas C. Reeves, "True Confessions: Interviewing Liberal Intellectuals," *The Oral History Review 1979* (1979): 34.
17. Interview of Eula Carson by Kathy Corbett and Jeanne Mongold, March 10, 1977, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.
18. Ralph Daken and Donald Tennant, "Consistency of Response by Event—Recall Interviews and Characteristics of Respondants," *Sociological Quarterly* 9 (Winter 1968): 73–84.
19. Interview of Isabel Houston Dobler, June 28, 1976.

20. John Neuenschwander, "Remembrance of Things Past: Oral Histories and Long Term Memory," *The Oral History Review 1978* (1978): 49.
21. Interview of Isabel Houston Dobler, June 28, 1976.
22. Ibid.