

Saving Legacies Pitfalls and Public History

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Abstract

This paper addresses issues found in the execution of the Saving the Legacy World War II veteran oral history project run in the early 2000s by the American West Center at the University of Utah. Several mistakes made it difficult or impossible for some of the stories collected to be archived as they had been intended. Organizationally, the paper is split in two parts: (1) A brief introduction to oral history as a whole with a subordinate introduction to the Saving the Legacy project. (2) Analysis of the failures found in the project with solutions offered based upon my own experience trying to fix the problems and "best practices" proposed by professional oral historians. The paper both illustrates pitfalls of oral history and provides a rogues gallery of failures experienced by the Saving the Legacy project. Through using the Saving the Legacy project as a case study, examples of specific failings are paired with insights from professional historians to illustrate causation between field practices in oral history and the establishment of Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association.

Information I collected personally while troubleshooting files of veterans who for sundry reasons could not have their stories archived serves as the backbone of my research. To support my own first-hand experience I bring in researched opinions from professional historians and the Oral History Association.

The conclusion highlights how improperly planned and executed oral history projects can waste resources and potentially do more harm than good, while properly executed oral history projects can successfully contribute to a public understanding of history.



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Saving Legacies

Fall Semester, 2010 I had the honor of taking a public history internship with the American West Center at the University of Utah. This opportunity afforded me an introduction to the Oral History and Public History which serves as the basis for this paper.

What is Oral History

In its most basic sense, oral history is the type of history humans engage in every day. The recollection of experiences, events and emotions with which, we create the narrative of our lives and the world around us. It is ironic then that this elemental mode of history, in which people naturally participate in from an early age, should be so neglected by the discipline of history as a whole and further that oral history might need to be described in such a manner so that educated adults may be able to recognize their own participation in the activity.

Perhaps because of oral history's pedestrian qualities, "straight" or mainstream history has discounted the importance of oral sources. Critics of oral history point to prejudice and vagueness of human perception and memory to invalidate oral history, preferring instead the unquestionable authority of the "written record," despite the fact that record is very nearly always the transcription of and commentary on the testimony of witnesses operating in the oral tradition. Throughout most of the "modern" study of history, oral history has held an impoverished and underappreciated status. The field only starting to come back as an identifiable specialty in the late nineteenth century as a way to collect folklore traditions, and even then, being used by more anthropologists than historians.¹

Oral history gained an opportunity to shine from a very unexpected source in the 1930s as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded public oral history programs in the United States which caused the specialty to get much needed attention and provided the opportunity to develop professional standards and applications.² Since

¹ John Worsencroft. American West Center.

² John Worsencroft. American West Center.

that renaissance, oral history has become an increasingly popular tool for use in social history, despite maintaining its detractors within "straight" history. Albert Einstein is reputed as saying that, "Memory is deceptive because it is colored by today's events." The truth of that statement cannot be denied; however, if one understands the limitations of oral history, one is freed to make use of the particular strengths it has to offer.

Saving the Legacy

The *Saving the Legacy* project began ambitiously in 2000 with the mission to record and archive oral histories of surviving World War II veterans and civilians who had stories which pertained to either the war effort or condition in America at the time of the war.³

Despite honorable intentions and 50 years of successful oral history experience at the American West Center, a series of mistakes were made in the planning and execution of the project which made successful completion of the project difficult.

Failure to Plan

It is important before beginning any project to have a plan for its successful completion; unfortunately, conditions surrounding the *Saving the Legacy* project hint at a failure to adequately plan. The project initially had three to four interviewers rapidly accumulating audio recordings of informants, while no one at the American West Center was tasked with transcribing those histories.⁴ This produced an enormous backlog of work to be transcribed.

It can be theorized that the intent of the American West Center was to make up for lost time, before any more veterans succumbed to old age, as Della Pollock (Professor Cultural Studies

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Saving Legacies

UNC) said, "catch them before they die, record those libraries before they burn."⁵ Certainly, the project team could not be faulted for trying to compensate for the fact that the history profession as a whole seemed to be complacent in waiting 50 years to record oral histories from World War II; however, the center's zeal-induced haste exacerbated failures in their planning.

Firstly, by not having transcription start until years after the interviews were recorded, it was not until very late that problems with records and interviews were discovered. When staff tried to resolve these problems, the overly simple release form and insufficient record keeping surrounding the initial interviews left oral histories that had been collected but could not be archived or used as they had been originally intended; in essence, poor record-keeping kicked in the last wall of the burning library.

Legal Releases

The Oral History Association states, "Interviewees should be informed of the purposes and procedures of oral history in general and of the aims and anticipated uses of the particular projects to which they are making their contributions."⁶ In order to ensure that due care has been taken to inform the participants of their legal rights and role in the process, a well written release form is important for both interviewer and interviewees.

When the *Saving the Legacy* project began, a simple two line release was used with the informant simply signing that they intended to have their stories used for "scholarly purposes."⁷ Outside the release however, informants were promised the right to edit the transcripts before they were archived. This produced a disharmony between the American West Center's "legal" commitment on paper and its ethical commitments to the informants. Fortunately for the ethical standing of the project, the American West Center staff had no

⁵ Della Pollock. *Remembering*. p 10.

⁶ Oral History Association, *Practices and Standards*.

⁷ American West Center, *Saving the Legacy*. 2000.

intention of dishonoring those oral commitments; however, it is possible in an environment where staff turnover is frequent, that those oral commitments could have been forgotten when new staff members came into the project, only aware of the "letter" of the agreement found in the release. Problematically, those waivers did not specify what should happen to the oral histories if the informant should die or become unable to complete the edits originally agreed upon.

The American West Center currently uses a new *Oral History Interview Agreement* which conforms to the guidelines established by the Oral History Association. This agreement attempts to decrease these ambiguities and presents a sixty-day timeframe for informants to return the edited transcripts or final approval is assumed.⁸

Idiot's Guide to History

The Oral History Association also recommends, "Interviewers should possess interviewing skills as well as professional competence and knowledge of the subject at hand."⁹ When an interviewer or transcriptionist has little or no knowledge of the events or culture being discussed, misunderstandings can be frequent and may threaten the historical value of the document produced.

When a transcript reads, "I was promoted to *corporeal*" it is embarrassing enough; however, when the interviewer does not know about the subject at hand, entire avenues of questioning which could have been vastly rewarding never present themselves. While every interviewer and transcriptionist cannot be a subject matter expert, a "complete idiot's guide to..." level of competence should be insisted upon.

⁸ American West Center, *Saving the Legacy Interview Agreement*. 2007

⁹ Oral History Association. *Principles and Standards*.

Planning for the Use of the Record

Strangely enough, in the excitement of preserving oral histories, it appears that it is easy to forget about the fact that these records must be accessible to researchers in the future to have the greatest contribution. In addition to the physical security of the transcripts, which is the realm of the archivist, there are steps oral historians can take to make sure the histories they record are most accessible and likely to be interpreted correctly in the future.

The Oral History Association states, "interviewers and interviewees should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value and to make that information accessible."¹⁰ Consistency in format is helpful in meeting this goal. Starting each interview in the project the same way will aid researchers in identifying transcripts they wish to focus on. Perhaps name, date of birth and place of birth followed by a short statement by the interviewer as to why the informant was selected to be in the project, before any "tell me about your childhood" questions are asked.

When possible, both interviewer and interviewee should make efforts to avoid vague statements, which become notoriously ahistorical as "someone" said "something." Interviewers should pursue the interview to meaningful conclusions, ask questions to promote continuance of possibly interesting stories and never quash a story because they find it objectionable.

In one transcript in the *Saving the Legacy* collection, a Hispanic veteran started saying how he left his home in Texas after World War II because of racial tensions and sought to settle down in Utah.¹¹ Unfortunately, the interviewer did not adequately pursue details of either his treatment in Texas or what made him think Utah was a more inviting place. The informant's answers to both questions could have shed light into Anglo-Hispanic race relations at the time, which is often overlooked in history.

¹⁰ Oral History Association. *Principles and Standards: Responsibility to the Public and to the Profession.*

¹¹ American West Center. *Saving the Legacy.*

In another transcript, salacious commentary about sexual congress between sailors and members of the WAVES seemed to be too embarrassing for the interviewer to listen to, so the interview was abruptly ended, in effect censoring the oral history with the interviewer's bias.¹²

Additionally, oral history projects should seek to provide "adequate biographical information about both interviewer and interviewee."¹³ This is important because both the informant's and interviewer's "voices" will need to be understood by the future historian who (if we are lucky¹⁴) may be tens or hundreds of years removed from the period that the oral history was prepared in.

How Not to Contact an 80 Year-old Veterans

Perhaps not directly in the realm of oral history, but still pertinent to lessons I learned from my experience on the project, was that assumptions should not be made about the responsiveness of individuals to postal mailings. Specifically, mailers that can be confused with junk mail are a very poor way to attempt to get back in contact with participants. Several of the people I "found" had not responded to letters we sent, they were still healthy and living at the same address, but said they did not know we had been trying to contact them. In fact, one veteran who had not responded to several mailings was still at the same house and had been hoping to hear from the Center for years, eager to add his induction to the Utah Aviation Hall of Fame to his story.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Oral History Association. *Principles and Standards*.

¹⁴ Lucky, because if someone in the future is researching the project's documentation, then the project has been a success in that it has historical relevance to historiography in the future.

But Why Bother or the Value of the Oral Record

Critics of oral history often point to two general shortcomings of oral history: that oral histories are not factually valid and that oral histories lack verification or objectivity. However, the first complaint misses the point of oral history and the second is easily a criticism of any historical document.

Verification is no less (or more) important for oral sources than any other type of source *document*, as all historians should be careful to ensure that they are not being taken advantage of by a disreputable source.¹⁵ One participant, who the *Saving the Legacy* project found at a Veterans of Foreign Wars conference in Salt Lake City, told a story of a young Special Forces soldier in Vietnam. When the center was unable to contact the interviewee to approve his transcript, the file became one of mine for location of the informant. What I found was quite surprising: there had been a Special Forces soldier with the same name, year of birth and approximately similar story who served in Vietnam, but had died in 1971. While this could be presented as a Halloween story for oral historians, less than spooky circumstances are most like responsible.

Looking through the transcript there are some indications that the story is largely a work of fiction,¹⁶ which would have been apparent to someone familiar with the United States Army of the Vietnam era. An internet search taking a few moments in preparation for the interview would have likely either impeached the individual or given the individual the opportunity to explain that he was not in fact a 30-year dead soldier. Both points reinforcing the Oral History Association assertion that interviewers need to be prepared for the interview before starting the tape.

¹⁵ Portelli, p 67.

¹⁶ The transcript seems to indicate that the then 17 year-old informant joined the Army, completed Basic Training, Armor Advanced Individual Training, Jump School, Sniper School, Ranger School, was promoted to sergeant and nominated for Special Forces all before he turned 17 ½. Even if we ignore the cognitive dissonance of an airborne-ranger-sniper being a tank crewman, the list of schools the informant claims was more than six months long.

As to the criticism about the "factuality" of oral histories, they, "reveal the narrators' emotions, their participation in the story, and the way the story affected them."¹⁷ It is not the factual truth, but the psychological truth of the experience which oral history represents.¹⁸ This difference is especially poignant in regards to oral histories about war, as the veteran may have memories which exist without meaning assigned to them until long after the actual experience.¹⁹

Instead of being a failing of oral history, subjectivity can be seen as its biggest asset, as Portelli says, "subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'. What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened."²⁰ In this way oral history tells us less about *events* and more about what they *mean* to the people who experienced them.²¹

When conducted in a thoughtful and responsible manner, oral history can provide context for "conventional" historical sources and may pose "a challenge to the accepted myths of history"²² -- the very values at the core of social history.

¹⁷ Portelli. p. 73.

¹⁸ Matthew Laplante. *For Some Vets, Memories Can Conflict with the Truth of War*. 2010

¹⁹ RadioWest. *Memory and the Fog of War*.

²⁰ Portelli. p. 67.

²¹ Ibid. p. 68.

²² Thompson. p. 28.

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