The issue of who the self is and how the self is perceived or presented under different circumstances goes to the heart of the question of the validity and utility of oral history. I was one of the pioneers in the field of oral history.

Oral history officially revived an old Bancroft tradition at the University of California, Berkeley when Professor James Hart of the English department persuaded the Library to sponsor two experimental interviews by Ronald Duncan in Europe. I was then appointed in 1953 to conduct further interviews in Northern California. Not long after I was asked to develop and direct a "regional cultural" oral history project financed by the Library and responsible for its general policy to a faculty committee headed by Professor Walton Bean of the History department. For three years I established basic procedures, supervised and conducted a number of interviews, and helped persuade the University of California at Los Angeles to begin a similar project, before resigning as director in 1956-1957 to begin teaching and to conduct a research project involving a series of special labor-management oral histories under the auspices of the University's Institute of Industrial Relations (IIR), Berkeley and Los Angeles. The Library project was carried on after my departure by Willa Baum, who had been a member of the project's staff (along with Ronald Duncan and Katharine Wilson) almost from the beginning. Margaret Gordon for Berkeley and Irving Berlin (briefly) for Los Angeles made budgetary and general administrative arrangements for the IIR project. For transcribing, indexing, and the typing of final manuscripts, the IIR project's secretaries also had the able assistance of a number of people from the Institute's secretarial pool. A discussion of the early stages of both projects and their experience with oral history methods can be found in my article "Tape-Recorded Interviewing: Some Thoughts from California," in The American Archivist, *20* (*4*) (*October, 1957*): *335-344.*

The procedures at that time were as follows: the interviewer tape-recorded the interviews (at the time, tape recorders were very heavy and cumbersome) after extensive research and advance conferences with the interviewees. After the recordings were transcribed into typewritten rough copy, they were edited by the interviewer for clarity and continuity, with care not to alter

content, and then also edited by the interviewee. The terms of the written legal agreement concerning protections and rights were tailored to suit each case. Transcripts were typed into final form and indexed, "prefaced" by the interviewer, and bound for Library use.

In researching, conducting, and editing 45 book-length interviews, I developed a certain amount of experiential wisdom about how the self is presented for recordation in history. Following are excerpts from a talk I gave about oral history to the faculty and students in the Department of History at San Jose State College in California, 1960.

CHAPTER 3

Oral History: The Presentation of Self for Posterity

Two University of California Oral History Projects

Before we get into the subject of oral history, let us consider for a moment the question of what history is—that is, with what spheres of human experience does the historian concern herself or himself? In the ultimate, the historian perhaps should concern herself or himself with the totality of human experience. Since this is impossible, historians have always confined themselves to a fairly limited range of human events chosen for highly interesting reasons which, unfortunately, we do not have time to go into here. Even within the conventional patterns of history, historians tend to confine themselves to topics for which documentation exists in reasonably accessible form. Many an M.A. or Ph.D. thesis topic has been chosen because a body of unexploited records or manuscripts lies ripe for the picking. To be sure, many historians do not stop at readily available records. They search for ephemeral documentation of all types; and if their field is contemporary history, they interview eyewitnesses. However, this extra activity is designed primarily to fill in gaps where the main body of documentation has already been collected. And this is where oral history comes in. Tape-recorded oral history interviews are usually designed to fill in gaps on subjects for which there is already existing documentation. This was H. H. Bancroft's idea three-quarters of a century ago when he sent stenographic interviewers out to take down the memoirs of leading Westerners who might not otherwise write their own life histories. And this was Allan Nevins' conception when he revived the Bancroft tradition in the early 1940s, sending graduate students out to interview leading figures in New York state history and take down their impressions in note form. It was the concept behind the founding of the University of California's Oral History Project in 1953. Since then oral history has become semi-professionalized, and there are oral history projects all over the country.

At the present time, there are five general types of oral history project: first, there are the strictly amateur recordings of local history and folklore made by libraries, museums and local historians, where the emphasis is on the old and quaint. Such projects have been undertaken in Spokane, Washington at the public library; on Cape Cod by a local history group; in New Mexico by a museum; in Yosemite National Park; and doubtless many other places. Also dealing with

local history in a sense, but on a broader regional basis and following the professional historian's standards of selection and thoroughness, are university projects such as the early Columbia University interviews on New York history or the interviews on California history being conducted by the Regional Cultural Oral History Project at the University of California, Berkeley. Third, there are oral history archives sponsored, paid for, and inevitably to some extent controlled, by particular industries—for example, the Ford Motor Company oral history archives in Dearborn, Michigan; interviews on the oil industry in Texas; or the oral history interviews sponsored by the Forest History Foundation. Interviewers in these projects are usually young men or women with M.A. degrees, sometimes under the supervision of a professor, who in turn must answer to a committee or a board of directors of some sort. Fourth, there are professional scholarly interviews in a single subject or field, either conducted by a post-Ph.D. researcher in that particular field or by people who are part of his personal research staff—e.g., the theater history interviews conducted at UCLA, the university history interviews at U.C., and my own interviews on the history of labor and management on the West Coast. Then finally there are general projects, such as the present Columbia project, which tackle the national or international scene or combine several of the previously mentioned approaches.

In addition, journalists, biographers, sociologists, economists, political scientists, psychologists, anthropologists and a variety of other kinds of people make recorded interviews for their special purposes, but in all these cases the empha-sis is not primarily upon producing historical documentation for the use of future scholars. It is only when interviews are made with this latter purpose in mind and are made in a reasonably professional way that they can be classified as oral history.

Today, oral history has developed to a point where there is far more to be said about it than I can possibly say in half an hour, so I shall confine my remarks to two topics which I think are especially important: first, the problem of how the oral historian picks people and subjects to document; and second, problems which arise from the preconceptions and biases of the people who are interviewed.

Unfortunately, the natural inclination of would-be oral historians is to start with a broad subject matter and then sit down and play "who's who." They ask: "Who is the most well known, generally recognized personality in this field whose memory goes back a reasonable length of time? Invite him to be interviewed, and if he says yes, we will take it from there." I have seen many highly trained people who ought to know better go about it in this way. A preferable approach is initially a much slower one. First, you must decide whether you are going to document famous events, trends, or institutions. In West Coast labor-management history, this means whether you are going to

concentrate on dramatic highlights such as the 1934 general strike or the LaFollette investigation or the AFL-CIO controversy; or whether you are going to trace the history of the rise of the hiring hall; or whether you are going to study the institutional structure of particular unions. Your selection of interviewees would be almost entirely different in each case. In regional history, you must first decide whether you are going to document what is most typical of the region, or what affects the largest number of people in the region, or what is unique in the region, or how the region has influenced other parts of the world, or vice versa.

Even after making decisions of this sort, you must decide whether your interviewees should be selected on the basis of their actual importance in the area to be documented or on the basis of their value as eyewitnesses. Let me explain what I mean. Maybe the best eyewitness of the 1934 general strike was somebody's stenographer who took minutes of all the major meetings and yet was not a key figure in the actual events of the strike at all. If you are documenting the history of a business institution, you may want the story of the key executives, but you may also want to experience vicariously how the institution appears to those who are at the bottom looking up. Unfortunately, people in charge of oral history projects often have a tendency to slip into journalistic or public relations criteria for selecting interviewees. The temptation is to make the project sound exciting by interviewing people whose names are well known and who are dramatic personages in their own right, even though these people either have said everything they have to say over and over again or will refuse to utter anything but safe platitudes anyway.

Another common fault is lack of imagination in picking topics in the first place for oral history interviews. Because historians have a tendency to stick close to what is already of record and already known, the full potentialities of oral history interviews have not been fully explored. Very little attempt has been made to advance into fields where little or no documentation already exists, and yet this would appear to be the most valuable way of all to use oral history interviews. Suppose you were in charge of an oral history project fifty years ago, and you knew your records were to be used in 1960. What would you think was important? Political history, to be sure. The growth of trusts, yes. Maybe diplomatic relations between the U. S. and Latin America. But you would not think to document art history, or social history, or scientific history, or labor history, or business history in the modern sense of that word. You would not think to probe for sociological or psychological explanations of events. By clinging too timidly to accepted canons of importance, contemporary oral historians are also failing to visualize what will be of concern to historians in the year 2000. And yet it seems to me that the whole elaborate process of initial research, prolonged negotiation with interviewees, listing of questions, recording, transcribing,

editing, retyping, and indexing is scarcely worth all the time and money it takes unless the interviews have more than passing value.

The problem is that people with very great imaginations, people with ability to see into the future to the necessary degree, are very rare indeed, and their services are so in demand that oral history as a profession will probably not attract and hold them. Perhaps oral history interviewing should not be a permanent form of work but a temporary apprenticeship for the brightest graduate students. What these students lack in technical ability and maturity, they can make up in imagination. And oral history work has much to offer them on their way to becoming fully mature historians: in the first place, there is no better way to learn what makes people really tick; the young historian learns to appreciate the full range of source material which can or should go into historical interpretation; he learns to appreciate the limitations of any given kind of source material; he gains many insights from his prolonged exploring of the minds of people who have helped to make history.

Oral history has won for itself a place in the world of historical research and writing. If it attracts the right kind of people, it can perform an enormous service for future scholars.

Even after subjects and interviewees have been chosen intelligently and a capable imaginative interviewer is at the helm, oral history is not all smooth sailing. The asking of questions is an art in itself. I will not have time tonight to go into this very fascinating subject, but I have written an article about it which you may be interested in reading. One of the major problems is that the interviewee begins to form conceptions and preconceptions about the nature of the task and about the subject matter from the moment you first contact him, and these preconceptions will color everything he says in the interview. For example, he will react in special ways to the title and nature of the organization sponsoring the interview, and the stated purpose or frame of reference of the interview. If he thinks of history as the narration of anecdotes about picturesque people and you tell him the interview is for purposes of historical documentation, you are liable to get anecdotes about picturesque people whether you want them or not. If you say the interview is essentially a biography, he will be reluctant to talk about anything which he considers irrelevant to his own life story. If you say you are documenting the history of a union, he will pattern his narrative along the lines of histories previously written about unions, and you may have a hard time introducing an entirely new subject or tackling the union from a perspective heretofore neglected. The style of the interview will greatly affect what he is willing to say and how he says it. If you proceed in narrative style in more or less chronological order—telling a story, in other words—he will preselect and reject in the interests of making a dramatic effect. If you

adopt a question-and-answer form, he will not volunteer much information which would come out spontaneously in the narrative form.

Interviewees will also bring to the interviewing situation the conventions of related situations to which they are already accustomed. For example, a man who has often been interviewed by the press will prejudge his answers in the light of their "newsworthiness." Someone who is used to being interviewed on television will want to give the kind of answers which the typical television interview calls for.

Another pitfall is that the interviewee, even though he knows the interview is being recorded for posterity, will direct his statements to the interviewer. If the interviewer is a young and pretty girl, he will avoid all four-letter words and fail to mention all four-letter situations. He will not talk above the maturity level of the interviewer. If the interviewer is mature, he will not dwell for the record on what is obviously already known to the interviewer. The trick is to get an interviewer who does not know too much but enough to be talked to candidly. Sometimes the interviewee will talk over the head of the interviewer to a hidden audience. For example, he may be thinking in terms of leaving a record for his wife and children and will tailor what he says accordingly. He may be in effect dictating a defensive statement which he visualizes as being read by his enemies. If he is a politician, he may think of the potential reader as a possible voter, and so forth. Then there are two final factors which will influence what he says. The first is his insights into his environment. If he has little insight, then he can convey little insight. If he failed to see many things before his eyes, then he will not describe those things even though objectively they were there. The second is his own image of himself. He may see himself as a struggling artist, a nonconformist, a fighting liberal, a common man, and so forth, and he will tend to give only those facts which support his image of himself.

A POSTSCRIPT

When I gave that talk, I did not have time to discuss some of the broader issues which come under the general heading, "what is the nature of historical reality?" Is it the sum of the self-perceptions considered relevant to certain events or situations, or is it only actual behavior without any reference to self-perception? How did the situation at the time determine what aspects of self-perception were relevant? How did the interaction of self-perceptions affect events? How do we know what a person's self-perception was at a particular time? Can we rely solely on his later memory of it? And so forth.