

Introduction to Chapter 3, "Oral History: The Presentation of Self for Posterity"
Toward Holistic History by Corinne Lathrop Gilb, Atherton Press, ©2000, 2005

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.