

THE DISCIPLINARY VIEWPOINT FROM HISTORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

History and historians have always relied on the written word. Technically it is what separates the prehistorian from the historian. Orally transmitted history, although often a primary source, and regularly used by historians in the past, has often been relegated to a less significant status. The "old school" focus on political and narrative history tended to place higher credibility on written documentation over the spoken word. The growth of social and local history in the mid twentieth century helped formally incorporate and institutionalize the methodology of "oral history" research. With the new focus on the history of the everyday lives of ordinary people in specific locations, the traditional documentary sources often proved incomplete and inadequate. Historians began to incorporate multidisciplinary methodologies such as oral history to help "fill in the gaps" of the historical record. Historical archaeology provides one such area to incorporate the traditional documentary record, material culture, and the oral record to provide a more complete picture of the past. Although the transfer of information from memory to history often has its "factual" limitations, oral history provides a "human" element to the study of local history and historical archaeology.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of oral history to help scholars of the past, such as historians and historical archaeologists. In this presentation I will briefly cover the historiography of "orally transmitted" sources within the discipline of history, as well as describe some of the advantages and limitations of these sources, and give a few examples of how oral history has aided my work as a historian and historical archaeologist.

Oral history research, itself, may turn out to be the most meaningful methodological re-discovery for the discipline of history in the twentieth century. This significance is not limited to the modernization and standardization of oral history method brought on with the advance of voice recording technology, but is in its reflection of the growing focus toward multidisciplinary approaches in the study of the past. The interest in oral history method during the last forty to fifty years is reflective of the growing interest in history, as in other disciplines, to incorporate different social science methodologies together such as cultural

geography, ethnography, history, and archaeology. Thus, melding the interpretive method of historians with the "human" experiences and perspectives from the orally transmitted record helps to create what Allen and Montell have simply called, "a fuller historical record" (Allen and Montell 1982:3-4). Especially in a multidisciplinary subject such as historical archaeology, the search for the most complete picture of the past is the goal, and through material culture, cultural landscapes, written documentation, and oral history, that goal can often best be reached.

Now let us take a quick look at the use of oral sources within the discipline of history. The use of oral sources in history goes back to the origins of the discipline. The Greeks and Romans were documented users of the words of men in learning about the past. Early Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides noted these methods in their 5th-Century B.C. work. Biblical scholars also note both Testaments as early examples of the use of oral transmission of information during the first few centuries A.D. In

Medieval times the bards and poet historians of the Celtic world certainly passed on their oral traditions and histories to scribes, while other chroniclers of Western Europe used oral sources and eyewitness testimony to record the lives of great men, important families, and significant events. This trend was also repeated for those chroniclers of the Islamic World (Henige 1982:7-11).

However, one of the first significant examples of the political power of the written source in Western history was 11th-Century Norman England's Domesday Book. This landholding survey is one example of the legal and political importance that written documentation gained in Western society. Therefore, by the 14th and 15th Century every important town, family, kingdom, & the Church in Europe had its own historians to help document the wars and dynasties and thus secure these elite patrons status within their communities or nations. Even then, the oral tradition and eyewitness accounts of far away and past events were a major source for these Renaissance historians. However, as Europe's market economy and nation-states developed in the 17th and 18th Centuries, it became rarer for historians to consult oral sources as they turned more to the public record and earlier writings which were now more available due to the introduction of the printing press (Henige 1982:9-13).

This trend toward the written word was reinforced by the development of the social science disciplines in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. It was then that scholars such as noted anthropologist Robert Lowie openly questioned the value of oral evidence--noting its great weakness--in that it often could not be supported independently and, therefore, not accepted without doubt. Lowie wrote that he could, "not attach to oral traditions any value whatsoever under any circumstances whatsoever," because simply, "we cannot know them to be true" (Lowie 1915:598). Most historians during this time were trained to agree with Lowie's premise, and subsequently accepted in practice the basic division of the

study of the past: primitive (oral) cultures to anthropology (pre-historic); while historians were obliged to focus on the documented past (i.e. political and social elites of literate societies) (Henige 1982:17-18). This division has been the basic defining line between the study of pre-history and history today.

During the last fifty years the acceptance of orally communicated history within the discipline of history itself has steadily grown. In the United States the first recognized, legitimate oral history program was started by the noted historian Allen Nevins at Columbia University in 1940 (Kyvig and Marty 1982:111). Yet Nevins' first interest was in recording "significant" Americans, great men and political leaders who in the technologically advanced society of the twentieth century were not writing letters and diaries as their 19th-century counterparts.

Although Nevins started his program to continue the study of the "elites" of society, he and historians such as Louis Starr quickly and successfully adapted the methodology of oral history to the growing social history movement which started in the 1950s and flowered in the 1960s. (The introduction of the wire recorder in 1948 and subsequent advances in tape recorders have added significantly). Social history opened up for historians the study of the non-elites; women, ethnic and racial minorities, the underprivileged, and also--local history. The search for sources for these subjects' histories often pushed historians toward interdisciplinary methodologies to seek out information on these "non-elites." Oral history provided a plentiful source for these subjects, which were not always represented in the traditional historical record (Dunaway and Baum 1984).

The growth of multidisciplinary studies in history was supported again in the 1970s with the legitimization of the sub-discipline of public history (the non-academia based history professions such as cultural resource management--CRM). Public history and CRM brought together historians and archaeologists to work together on site-specific studies--usually doing in effect, local history. It is in local history

that the use of oral history can be of great value in supplementing, complimenting, and adding new information to such site-specific studies as those undertaken by historical archaeologists.

What is it That Oral History Adds to Study of the Past?

Supplementing

First off is oral history's potential role in filling in the gaps. Oral history permits historians to collect data on particular subjects and areas about which too little information has survived from other sources. This is especially true for the study of the local site; more so if an ordinary person, particularly when someone of a working class or underprivileged group occupied the site. So even after you acquire the deed and tax records, newspaper accounts, photographs, & maps, holes may still exist.

In my experience, the supplemental function has most often come about in rural sites. When researching a pre-base farmstead site on the Naval Air Station, El Centro, oral history was a key element in unlocking the site's history. Title and deed records indicated only out-of-state absentee owners and bank-owned property. An oral source, however, identified a family name that led back to county directories that helped identify the family's twenty-year residence that was hidden in the traditional documentary sources (Dolan and Allen 1996). Another example was a small house site on newspaper magnate E. W. Scripps' San Diego ranch. Originally built for his brother, Fred Scripps, in the late 1890s, the site's inhabitant from 1903 to 1928 was unknown until Scripp's grandson identified the inhabitants as the longtime caretaker.

Another way in which oral history supplements the record, which historical archaeologists should note, is in the information provided about material culture. Whether buildings, structures, tools, consumer products, or personal items, oral history can provide information about the construction and use of objects, as well as the lifeways and customs that

required or reflected their existence.

Complimentary

Oral history can also be an important compliment to the written and physical record of past events. As such, oral history brings to historical study, human experience and perception. As such, it is different from written sources: it is richer in communicative power, it contains inflections, hesitations, expressions and nuances not reproducible in written form. It provides not only what people experienced, but what they felt about what happened. It also relates it in personal terms (Lummis 1988:44).

Often oral history is the only major source for large areas of experience. Such is the case that I found in research on an industrial archaeology site in San Diego: the Savage Tire Factory/Aztec Brewery site. Documentary context materials on the companies' histories, on tire making and commercial brewing, including maps, photographs, business records, etcetera were collected. Still the record of former employees added the "human" experience and perception of the place. In the tire factory, the memory of former secretary Helen Jordan as to the inherent safety dangers of the plant due to rubber dust, carbon black, open machinery, and intense heat were certainly not to be found in company advertisements and promotionals. Basic, but lasting impressions, such as her memory that the larger men worked in the vulcanizing room where great strength was needed to lift the superheated tires, add to the everyday operational "experience" of the factory. These memories correlated with Clair Gitzen's record of her father describing his tire factory work, and the lifetime health problems he attributed to working at the hazardous plant (Newland 1993:44).

For the Aztec Brewery, former employees such as Bill Gibbs and Gordon Parkhurst were able to compliment and confirm the assembly-line operations of the bottling plant from memory, these facts correlating to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and photographic records of the plant. These men also added the

workers' significance of knowing someone in the Union, as a key element in getting a job. Safety for the workers (certainly contexted by current standards) was again brought up as both men noted the regular "explosion" of bottles in the bottling machine. Gibbs recalled with pride his seventy stitches in his arms. Both men also noted the unique policy of being able to drink as much beer as one wanted during a shift--as long as one kept on working (pre OSHA days). Other unique jobs at the brewery were documented such as Dave Morgan's stint as the driver of the Brewery's "Neon-Car." This vehicle was used for promotionals such as county fairs, parades, and company functions. Dave's job was to drive the vehicle around the state to these functions (Newland 1993:79).

As I have illustrated, oral history allows for the obtaining of specific types of information about the past, most significantly about the individual who relates the information, and in particular, the way they perceive and make sense of their lives and the events they have experienced. In short, written records relate what happened; oral records comment as to how people feel about what happened.

What Are the Limitations of Oral History Sources?

Oral history is a methodology, not a separate discipline. Although it can add to political, economic, or social history, its contribution depends, as does any source, on its authenticity (Vascina 1984; Finnegan 1984). The limits of oral history information are fairly clear. I always preferred to use oral evidence as additional information to add to the written documentation and material culture record. Of course, oral sources themselves can provide reliable information only when considered within the same critical evaluation subscribed by historical method.

The traditional subscription to this method is that there is no such thing as absolute historical truth. History is always an interpretation. Therefore every historical scholar is obliged to interpret the sources he/she uses. All sources

have a bias and the historian's job is to interpret which one is the most likely source to uncover "what happened" and why. Of course this is always just a likelihood of truth. The past is gone and most eyewitness accounts are often gone with it.

Oral history practitioners tend to believe that the bias that oral history introduces can be welcome when it directs the historian's attention to the common things of life, most notably the elements of individual and social experience, rather than upon administrative and political chronologies of the past. Remember, evidence does not have to be literally "true" in order to be of historical value. As folklorists and ethnographers know, myths and stories can reveal beliefs and moral precepts. However, where oral tradition focuses on the past beyond the recall of one lifespan, oral history focuses on the individual's direct experience and perceptions of the past. As such it is patently subjective and evaluative, revealing attitude and perspective of both the subject and their culture.

Warning: Proceed with Caution!

Many historians still have doubts as to the reliability of memory and the accuracy of the spoken word. They note that oral history often varies in detail and often contradicts itself and known written documentation. In an effort to "wade through" the tangle of the oral record, it is advisable to be cautious.

First off, try to obtain several oral sources when possible to help find the collective thread of experience that might exist. Trends lead to patterns that lead to interpretive conclusions. An example was my ability to get several confirmations on the beer drinking story at the brewery.

Be wary of embellishment. A good story does not necessarily mean bad history, but remember that added "local color" makes for a better, more entertaining story. Often you may be interviewing someone who believes you are interested in only great stories, not the less exciting reality (their interpretation).

Watch out for local myth and legend. I am often reminded of the old gentleman in El Centro who proudly told me that a tall tale he had invented during his interview with a local author had been included in a book and then widely repeated. Local myths, especially the interesting ones, tend to get repeated. At the Hedges Mines in southeastern California, legend has it that 150 Chinese miners died in a cave-in. This is repeated in several old articles and local history books. Documentary sources such as census and company records indicate that only two or three Chinese workers even worked in the town at any one time (Newland and Van Wormer 1993:5.17).

Do your homework first. Have as much historical information together as possible prior to interviewing anyone to help you lead the interview in the direction you want and wade through the misinformation and legends, especially when it comes to dates and names and other specific "facts." What are the biases of your source? Did they have any economic or personal stake in the events in question? Are there group or community biases? Even though your source may not deliberately deliver false information, the community attitude toward specific groups, families, or individuals may cloud their interpretation of people or events. They may also ignore details that they perceive as damaging to themselves, their families, or community.

Submerged Truths of Oral History

Oral history's significance is not always in its factual data. Historians can obtain information "between the lines." Values, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings can be read from aforementioned exaggerations, distortions, and contradictions. What people believe really happened can often reveal as much as about them as what really did happen. This submerged truth can be found through noticing the tone and attitudes to which certain subjects or events are discussed. This is especially the case when political, economic, social, or moral issues are involved. Watch out for judgmental responses and contradictory accounts. They may not be useful in

documenting activity or chronology of events, but they will certainly tell you about the sentiments toward them and how they affected the community.

The same can be said for attitudes toward institutions. In my work in the mountainous back country of southeastern San Diego County I came across a general distrust and blame that the local ranching industry placed on the National Forest. The ranchers and their families placed all the responsibility on the Forest for the decline of the industry since the 1920s. No mention of changing markets, prices, or stock problems were considered in their evaluations, just that it was the darn Forest.

This is the same for the information coming from non-factual accounts. During my research on the Hedges Mines I interviewed a woman who had grown up in Yuma and lived at Hedges in the 1930s as a married woman. The heyday of these mines were in the 1890s. When I asked if she knew anything about the earlier period she told a story of her mother's cousin, the family's favorite son, who had tragically died at Hedges in the mines. Each year she would go with her mother to visit his grave in Yuma and place flowers. This young man, Manuel Boboun, had one of the more infamous death's in the town. Newspaper and coroner's inquests well documented his death on March 9, 1896. Boboun had died in a barroom fight over a disagreement about a local prostitute (Newland and Van Wormer 1993:5.24). Amelia's story about her mother's cousin can lead us to submerged information about how her family dealt with Boboun's death. It may have been that Amelia was too young to be told the real story, or that the family ignored the reality to save their reputation. Either way, or some other explanation, this story still tells us something about the lives and times of these people.

Therefore, by listening, identifying, and paying attention to these varied tones and attitudes, the historical archaeologist as local historian can hope to identify not only supplementary, complimentary, and new data from oral history, but recognize and identify the

submerged information it holds.

Conclusion

For all scholars of the past, and especially those doing local history, such as historical archaeologists, the combination of the interpretive method of historians with the "human" experiences and perspectives from the orally transmitted record provides new avenues for gathering information. Especially in a multidisciplinary subject such as historical archaeology, the search for the most complete picture of the past is the goal, and through material culture, cultural landscapes, written documentation, and oral history, that goal can often be best reached.

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