

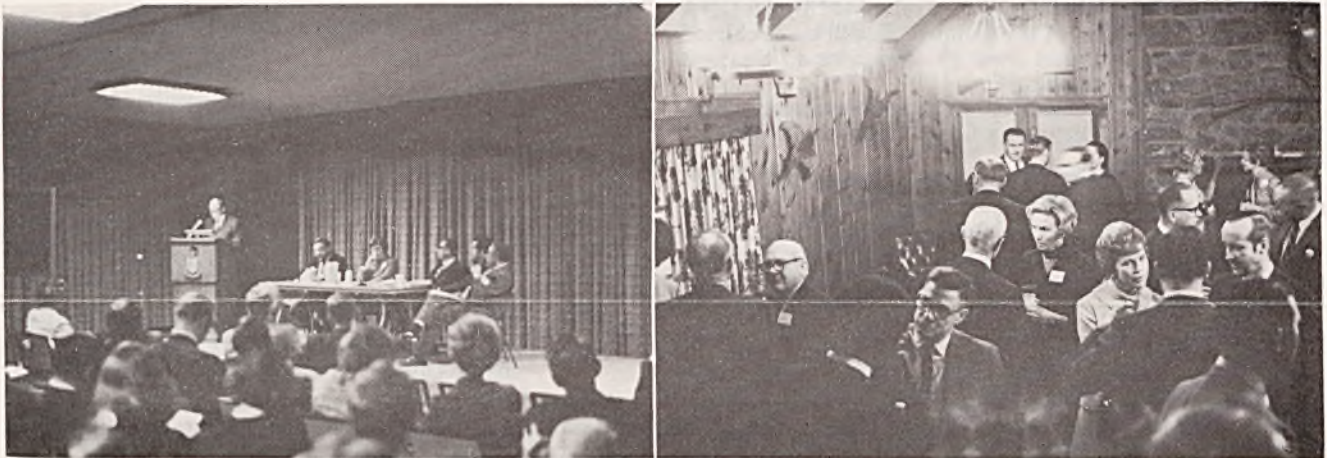
ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION newsletter

Volume IV, Number 1, January, 1970

165 Attend 4th National History Colloquium in Virginia; 1970 Meeting Will Be in California

The 1969 Oral History Colloquium attracted 165 participants from all sections of the United States and from Canada to the Airlie House Conference Center in Warrenton, Virginia — about 45 miles from Washington, D.C. — from November 7 to 10. Twenty-one sessions on the program included talks by historian Barbara Tuchman, columnist Frank Mankiewicz, news commentator Elie Abel, and others. Local arrangements were ably supervised by Royster Lyle, Jr., of the George C. Marshall Research Foundation in Lexington, Virginia.

In 1970 the 5th Oral History Colloquium will be held from November 13 to 16 at the Asilomar Conference Grounds on California's Monterey Peninsula, and plans for this meeting are already being made (see inside this issue for details). It was in California in 1966 that the first National Colloquium on Oral History was assembled — under the sponsorship of UCLA and held at its Lake Arrowhead Conference Center.



Forrest Pogue (at the podium, left), biographer of General George C. Marshall, gets things underway on the first evening of the Airlie House Colloquium by introducing the five panelists who discussed "Oral History In The Washington Environs." On the right the Airlie House conferees enjoy a social hour during the second day of the weekend meeting.

OTHER HIGH-LIGHTS OF THE AIRLIE HOUSE MEETING

Treasurer Knox Mellon reported that OHA membership was 408 at the time of the business meeting on November 9. He reported a balance of \$2566.63 in the OHA treasury.

President Gould Colman reported on disbursement from the registration fees received during the 1968 Colloquium at the University of Nebraska. The **Proceedings** of that meeting have been published and the **Proceedings** of the Airlie House meeting will be published.

Louis Starr noted that past issues of these **Proceedings** are available at \$3.00 per copy from Box 20, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York 10027.

Gary Shumway of California State College at Fullerton, explained his task of updating **Oral History In The United States**, an inventory originally prepared at Columbia University. 132 institutions had responded to his questionnaire about oral history projects, 93 indicating that they did have projects in operation.

Willa Baum accepted responsibility for revising and updating the OHA brochure on membership for distribution among prospective members.

The President reported a Council decision to join the Association for Recorded Sound in the name of the current president of the OHA in order to maintain awareness of mutual interests and activities.

The Council unanimously passed a motion permitting OHA officers to be reimbursed by the OHA for travel expenses to Colloquium and Council meetings after their second year in office. It also passed another motion unanimously to pay an annual salary to the OHA Treasurer (the amount to be determined each year). A suggestion that the Editor of the Newsletter receive a salary was referred to the Council for consideration. Compensation for the Secretary has already been considered by the Council, but the present secretary noted that since OHA funds pay secretarial costs she feels a salary is not necessary at this time.

President Oscar Winther asked Peter Olch to serve in his place as Chairman of the Goals and Guidelines Committee.

A proposed constitutional amendment that would allow OHA officers to be elected by mail ballot, rather than by vote at the annual Colloquium, was submitted by 10 OHA members at the request of the Council. It will be circulated among the membership at least 30 days prior to the next annual meeting for action.

The 3M Company announced its intention to host a cocktail party at each forthcoming OHA Colloquium (greeted by general applause).

By acclamation the 76 OHA members attending the business meeting expressed their thanks to Forrest Pogue and Royster Lyle of the George Marshall Foundation, and to Peter Olch of the National Library of Medicine, for their excellent job of arranging and coordinating the Airlie House Colloquium.

Post-Airlie House Tidbits:

Harry Kursh, who suffered a recurrence of his heart trouble during the Airlie House meeting, was discharged from the hospital in Warrenton, Virginia, and returned to his home in Mohegan Lake, New York, on the weekend following the close of the meeting. His many friends will be glad to hear of his prompt recovery.

Mrs. Sarah Diamant, Cornell University graduate student who showed a film she made during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968 as part of a discussion of "Can Film Complement Oral History Interviews" at Airlie House, had her film introduced as evidence by the defense in the trial of the "Chicago Seven." Mrs. Diamant has testified during this trial that she was clubbed by a policeman outside Chicago's Conrad Hilton Hotel and maced twice during her efforts to film and tape record the demonstrations.

Elie Abel, Diplomatic Correspondent for NBC News when he spoke to oral historians at Airlie House, began his new job as Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University on February 1.

THE ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION IN 1970: A GUIDE TO OFFICERS AND OTHERS

Current President of the Oral History Association is Oscar O. Winther, University Professor of History at Indiana University. He is a native of Nebraska and received his A.B. from the University of Oregon, his A.M. from Harvard, and his Ph.D. from Stanford. In 1937 he joined the faculty at Indiana University and since then has published several books about the American West. He has been abroad as a Fulbright scholar and has received a Guggenheim grant and a fellowship from the Huntington Library. In 1963-64 he was President of the Western History Association.

Vice-President (and President-Elect) of the OHA is Peter D. Olch, Deputy Chief of the History of Medicine Division of the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. A native of St. Louis, Mo., and a graduate of Pomona College, he received his M.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1955. He won board certification in Pathologic Anatomy and Clinical Pathology and published several articles in these fields before adopting the history of medicine as his primary interest. His two most recent articles concern oral history — one in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* (Feb., 1968), and the other in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* (Jan., 1969).

Knox Mellon was elected to another term as Treasurer of the OHA during the Airlie House meeting. All correspondence concerning membership should be addressed to him at the Department of History, Immaculate Heart College, 2021 North Western Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90027.

Also re-elected at the Airlie House meeting was Mrs. Alice Hoffman, Secretary of the OHA. Her address is Department of Labor Studies, 209 Engineering E, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa. 16802.

The OHA Council consists of Forrest Pogue of the George C. Marshall Research Foundation, Saul Benison of the University of Cincinnati (elected to a 3-year term to replace retiring member Willa Baum of Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office), and Charles Crawford of Memphis State University (elected to a 2-year term to replace Peter Olch).

Charles Morrissey continues as Editor of the **OHA Newsletter** with Samuel Hand of the University of Vermont continuing as Assistant Editor. Editorial offices are located at the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vt. 05602 (Tel: 802-223-2311, extension 320).

Mrs. Elizabeth Mason of Columbia's Oral History Research Office has agreed to serve as Archivist of the Oral History Association. Items that belong in the permanent files of the OHA, especially records in the custody of former officers, should be conveyed to her at Box 20, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York 10027.

ORAL HISTORY HOLDINGS TO BE INCLUDED IN NATIONAL UNION CATALOG OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

A major step towards creating wider awareness of the location of oral history collections was taken during the business meeting of the OHA Colloquium at Airlie House when the membership approved the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Procedures for Reporting Oral History Materials to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. This report was prepared by James V. Mink (university archivist and director of the oral history program at UCLA), and David O. Larson (librarian and archivist in charge of oral history programs at the Ohio Historical Society), in consultation with Mrs. Arline Custer, editor of the **NUCMC**. The report defines oral history, outlines the procedure to be followed in describing transcripts of oral history tapes as collections, and gives an example of an imaginary collection on the reporting form called "Data sheet for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections." This form will be provided upon request to Mrs. Custer at the Manuscripts Section, Descriptive Cataloging Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. 20540.

OHA COLLOQUIUM SITES — 1970, 1971

Plans for the 1970 OHA Colloquium at Asilomar, Monterey Peninsula, Northern California, got underway on Thanksgiving weekend when the local arrangements committee (Willa Baum, Malca Chall, Amelia Fry, UC Berkeley; Elizabeth Calciano, UC Santa Cruz; and Elwood Maunder, Forest History Society; plus assorted spouses and offspring) converged on Asilomar to test the conference facilities. They report the weather was dazzling, the sands white, the cypresses twisted, and the facilities rustic to deluxe. Housing is being reserved for 175 persons for the weekend of November 13-16, 1970. Because of the scenic beauty and historic interest of the area, a camera tour is being scheduled for one afternoon of the colloquium, and conferees are advised to bring country clothes and walking shoes for the sand dunes and beaches that surround the conference grounds.

The 1971 Colloquium is tentatively scheduled for Bloomington, Indiana, and the Council of the OHA has asked OHA President, Oscar Winther, to make reservations for the weekend of October 8-11. Either a National Park lodge or Vermont will be the site of the 1972 Colloquium.

ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

The University of California at Irvine and California State College at Fullerton are co-sponsoring an oral history conference at the Irvine campus on March 14, 1970. The program will feature several prominent oral historians from West Coast colleges and universities and include attention to a wide variety of problems confronting oral history projects. Conference chairman is Harry Jeffrey of Cal State Fullerton, and for details he can be reached at (714) 870-3474.

ORAL HISTORY IN CONNECTICUT

The University of Connecticut's Oral History Project has decided after its first year in operation to expand its activities well beyond the original objectives of recording the memoirs of Connecticut men who have made significant public contributions and of compiling the University's own history through interviews. An effort is being made to interview former governors of Connecticut and ex-Governor Wilbert Snow's conversations have already been taped. In cooperation with the Labor Education Center, interviews will be held with both the leaders and the members of Connecticut's labor union movement. In addition, the study of the Negro's role in Connecticut history will be undertaken. The project's advisory committee considered interviewing student dissenters but decided to wait until there was a clearer understanding of issues and events.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS ABOUT EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

What was everyday life really like in turn-of-the-century England? This is the subject of an oral history program directed by Dr. Paul Thompson, Senior Lecturer in Social History at Essex University, and funded by Essex University, the Nuffield Foundation, and Nuffield College, Oxford. About 500 persons over the age of 64 will be interviewed; they are being chosen from families substantially representative of the population of Britain in 1911 as to occupation and type of community (rural, urban, and large-city). Already Dr. Thompson has found considerable interview evidence that suggests that accepted beliefs about Edwardian England are not as definite as had been commonly assumed. Among these are the beliefs that men seldom helped with the housework, that physical punishment was the common way to discipline children, that the extended family provided a sort of welfare cushion in the event of need, and that social mobility was very limited. Dr. Thompson expects the interviews to contribute to a major re-interpretation of the period.

ORAL HISTORY OF THE TVA IS STARTED

The Memphis State University Oral History Research Office has begun an oral history of the Tennessee Valley Authority. This project, sponsored by Memphis State and TVA, was started last June and is expected to continue for several years. The first interviews are being conducted with people from an initial list of approximately 60 retired employees of the Authority who were instrumental in its early development. Interviews have already been recorded in Ohio, Tennessee, New York, Michigan, Alabama, Florida, and Washington, D.C. by Charles Crawford, director of the Oral History Research Office. He reports that many of the people involved in the establishment of TVA were comparatively young at the time and consequently are available today for interviews. Their response and cooperation to date, he says, has been excellent. His goal is to record several hundred interviews with additional retired personnel, present employees, political leaders of the area, and others involved with TVA. The tapes and transcripts of these interviews will be preserved in the Mississippi Valley Collection of the John Willard Brister Library at Memphis State.

U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE EXPANDS ITS ORAL HISTORY ACTIVITIES

John T. Mason, Jr., Director of Oral History at the United States Naval Institute in Annapolis, Maryland, reports that the Institute has greatly expanded its oral history programs. Currently underway are interviews with men who participated in the early stages of naval aviation, with early members of the Coast Guard (especially those on revenue cutters during the Prohibition era), and with leaders of the Waves during World War II. Also in process are interviews with people who worked with Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz; these will be used by Professor E. B. Potter of the Naval Academy faculty for a biography of Nimitz that he is preparing. The Naval Institute is not overlooking its own history, either: a series of interviews are being recorded in preparation of the Institute's 100th anniversary in 1973.

ARCHIVISTS OF SOUND FORM WORLD-WIDE ORGANIZATION

The International Association of Sound Archives held its first general assembly in Amsterdam on August 22nd and elected Donald L. Leavitt, Head of the Recorded Sound Section of the Library of Congress in Washington, as its president. This new organization is devoted to increasing international cooperation, especially the exchange of information, techniques, and materials, between institutions which collect sound recordings of all types, both musical and non-musical. One of its first objectives is a study of the location and contents of recorded sound collections throughout the world so this information can be centrally coordinated and made available.

L.C. TAPES ITS FOLK SONGS, HIRES JABBOUR TO HEAD ITS ARCHIVE

The Library of Congress has taped the 80,000 songs and tunes in its Archive of Folk Song to assure safekeeping of the collection and also to make it more accessible to researchers. Previously the Archive consisted of 11,000 acetate discs on which the songs were recorded, and these were deteriorating to the extent that only about 10% could be played for researchers. The copying project was supported by grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc.

New head of the Archive of Folk Song is Dr. Alan Jabbour, formerly Assistant Professor of English and Folklore at UCLA. As a graduate student at Duke University a few years ago he made several field-collecting trips in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia to tape about 1,000 examples of folksong and folkmusic. He has deposited this collection in the Archive of Folk Song.

HOW LONG WILL TAPE LAST?

(EDITOR'S NOTE: During the Oral History Colloquium at Airlie House last November several questions about the life and proper care of magnetic tape were put to representatives of the 3M Company who were attending the meeting. Because these questions concern so many oral historians we are printing in this column a series of suggestions prepared by Clyde Donaldson, Public Relations Coordinator for 3M's Mincom Division.)

How long will recording tapes last? Expert evidence shows that with proper care, quality tapes may outlast the user.

Magnetic tapes did not become commercially available until the late 1940's, but engineers at the 3M Company, for example, have "torture tested" Scotch sound tapes on special equipment equal to 100 years of use—and with no appreciable change in the tape or the sound reproduction.

John Mullin, a magnetic recording pioneer who aided in the development of 3M's professional sound recorder, has tapes which are more than 20 years old. They had been stored in home garages where temperatures ranged from 120 degree California heat to 35-below-zero Minnesota winters. The tapes—Scotch No. 111—showed no signs of aging. Sound reproduction was excellent.

Mullin also reported that the tapes remained pliable on the reel and showed no tendency to pull or snap. There was no evidence of oxide flaking.

For another test, old and new tapes were spliced together. Recording and playback quality of both was excellent.

The Relubrication Myth

Many believe that tape lubricants will increase the life span of tapes.

3M experts say that any lubricant applied to the surface of a tape probably is not compatible with the oxide formula, and may gum recording heads and tape guides.

Is the Tape Really "Aging"?

Many times a perfectly good tape may be discarded because it is believed to be "old" and useless. Actually, other conditions may be at fault.

Tape that is improperly rewound, either too tightly or at irregular speeds, may have a ruffled edge. It will not pass properly over the recorder's heads, resulting in poor reproduction. The machine is to be blamed—and checked—for this condition.

A strong recorded signal may not be completely erased by the machine's erase head. Rather than discard the tape, use a bulk eraser with a more intense magnetic field to completely wipe the signals from the tape.

Tapes which have become brittle during storage under high heat and low humidity conditions can be restored by removing them to a more suitable environment, and leaving them out of the containers for 24 hours. The proper moisture balance also can be restored by placing a slightly moistened sponge or blotter in the tape container for 24 hours. Care must be taken to insure that the moisture does not come into direct contact with the tape.

Imperfections in a recorder's head or tape guides can score a tape, making it useless.

Performance also can be affected by a dirty tape surface. Rather than discard the tape, rewind it, cleaning it with a soft, lint-free rag.

Tapes should always be stored in containers to protect them from dust and physical damage.

Tapes which are stored for extended periods should be occasionally rewound.

Polyester vs. Acetate

Both polyester and acetate are used for tape backing. Each possesses interesting properties.

Polyester tapes are more stable under temperature and humidity extremes and will not be distorted by environmental changes.

Under high shock loads—for example, a sudden stoppage while rewinding—polyester tends to stretch. Acetate will break sharply.

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As a general rule, a polyester tape should be used if it is to be stored for an unusually long time. Ideally, magnetic tape should be stored at room temperatures—60 to 80 degrees—and relative humidity ranging from 40 to 60 per cent. Temporary variations beyond these limits generally are not harmful.

The White Box Question

Quality tapes, experts say, have long, useful lives. However, the probable useful life of "white box" tapes, despite whatever immediate price advantage they may offer, is doubtful. A "white box" tape is a "buyer beware" product.

By using quality tapes and by observing the manufacturer's recommendations for handling and storage, a good recording will last indefinitely.

A TIP FOR INTERVIEWERS:

When taping an interview with a person who is difficult to understand—because he speaks with a foreign accent, for example, or has a speech impediment—it is helpful to the transcriber if the speed of the tape recorder is increased from $3\frac{3}{4}$ to $7\frac{1}{2}$. A faster speed, according to some transcribers, improves the sound reproduction of the interviewee's voice.

Similarly, a transcriber can work more effectively with a tape recorded at a faster speed when the interview was marred by background noise from the outside (the noise from street traffic or construction projects) or from the inside (voices coming through thin office partitions or from air-conditioning systems that are loud).

Interviewers, of course, should include twice as much tape in their kits when they expect to use a higher recording speed because the time length of each tape decreases as the speed is increased.

Brief News About Books Already Published . . .

Robert T. Elson reports in the Introduction to his book, **Time, Inc. The Intimate History Of A Publishing Enterprise, 1923-1941** (Atheneum, 1968), that much of his account is drawn from 271 interviews with present and former members of Time, Inc., "whose recollections provided invaluable background and insights into the corporation's past." Henry R. Luce, Publisher of **Time**, "gave a number of long tape-recorded interviews which are the source of many of the quotations," Elson says.

John M. Myers has assembled 24 annotated transcripts of tape-recorded interviews with old-timers in the American West into a volume entitled **The Westerners** (Prentice-Hall, 1969). Their recollections depict western life as they experienced it several decades ago.

How tape recorders can be used to document events while they are happening is suggested by Eric F. Goldman in his White House memoir, **The Tragedy Of Lyndon Johnson** (Knopf, 1969). "LBJ was preparing for history too," Goldman writes (pp. 257-258). "At the confrontation about the vice presidential nomination in the Oval Office, Robert Kennedy had observed that the 'On' button of a tape recorder was down. At the ranch and in Washington, the buttons on many tape recorders were often down."

In Nicholas von Hoffman's **Two, Three, Many More**, a novel about a campus insurrection (Quadrangle Books, \$5.95), the central figure is a likeable faculty member who survives the student revolt and describes it later for the university's "Verbal History Project."

Looking at the 1920's and 1930's from the 1950's

Daniel Aaron's book about literary radicals in the 1920's and 1930's, **Writers On The Left**, was started in 1956 and published in 1961. A few years later Aaron gave a lecture at Ohio State University about the "inhibiting traps and pitfalls" he encountered in trying to depict literary figures who were left-wing radicals between the two World Wars. This lecture was published in a thin volume with the drab title of **Essays On History and Literature**, (edited by Robert Bremner and published by the Ohio State Press in 1966; 190 pages; \$5.00), but Aaron's lively commentary, entitled "The Treachery Of Recollection: The Inner And Outer History" deserves a careful reading by oral historians because it questions the reliability of what historians hear in interviews with participants in recent controversies.

Because, as Aaron puts it, "the forties and fifties saw a good deal of soul-searching, breast-beating, and mutual re-priming," his perspective toward the 1920's and 1930's was unavoidably affected by this mood that engendered a "political and cultural assault on what can be stigmatized as the liberal fallacies of the thirties." Likewise, the people he interviewed about their activities before World War II were similarly affected by the changes that made it difficult in the '50's to recall accurately the 1920's and 1930's. "When the investigator tracks down his man (or his woman) some twenty-five to forty-five years after a particular episode," Aaron states, "he is not seeing and talking to the same man who wrote the manifesto or who paraded in the picket line or sent a congratulatory message to the **New Masses** on its anniversary or who bit another celebrity in the leg during a drunken party." He asks: "would it be more accurate to say that he is confronting a different man in the same body, a man not necessarily the most reliable authority on his previous self?"

On the other hand Aaron learned quickly, as an interviewer, to appreciate the persistence of old feuds: "One learns that squabbles of a generation ago or earlier still divide people no longer politically engaged; that old quarrels still rankle, quarrels seemingly ideological but which may very well have been prompted by professional jealousy, a bad book review, a stolen mistress; and that the autobiographer writing his memoirs in the 1960's may still be settling old scores after an interval of thirty years."

Aaron considers other problems that arise in such a scholarly enterprise—the questionable propriety, for example, of "whether he has any business raking up the pasts of people who are still alive. In this age of public relations, covert investigations, and wholesale violations of privacy, should the scholar join the pack?"

His conclusions are reminiscent of what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., concluded in his famous essay "The Historian and History," in **Foreign Affairs** (April, 1963) about the difficulties of trying to write with confidence so that the narration truly depicts the historical occurrences discussed. Says Aaron: "After my long stint of gathering material about living writers—or the recently living—I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that my record of their lives, my explanations for their behavior and motives, are grounded on half-truths and partial evidence."

But he submits, too, that historians who feel more confident when they write about times that are so far behind us than all participants are safely interred and all the evidence has entered the public domain are only deluding themselves. "In how many instances," he asks, "have the keys, the essential disclosures, been lost or unrevealed? And how much history, whether written by contemporaries or by historians centuries later, has been the work of misinformed people relying upon incomplete data?"

By measuring the difficulties of doing research about recent events against similar difficulties in trying to explain events in the distant past Aaron asserts that "I don't think my mistakes or distortions or omissions could have been corrected in every instance by more rigorous methods of research, and I don't think the project was premature."

Aaron's essay about the "traps and pitfalls" confronting the historian-interviewer of recent events is relevant to what many oral historians have encountered, and for that reason his remarks deserve careful reading and consideration.

C.T.M.

COLUMBIA OFFERS REPRINTS AND REPORTS TO OHA MEMBERS

Columbia's Oral History office announces that copies of articles about various phases of oral history are available in quantity to OHA members who can make effective use of them in support of applications to foundations, or as a means of explaining the subject to potential interviewees. The following may be had while the supply lasts:

"History Making Idea," By Bruce Catton (cf. **A Bibliography of Oral History**, p. 3). Maximum order: 25 copies.

"History, Warm," By Louis M. Starr (Idem, page 11) Maximum order: 5 copies.

"Oral History: A Term Becomes a Movement," By Louis M. Starr. **George C. Marshall Research Library Newsletter**, VII, No. 1, (Fall, 1969). Maximum order: 25 copies.

The following reports of the Columbia office are also available:

"Oral History: The First Twenty Years" (1968), containing an annotated list of books drawing upon The Oral History Collection at Columbia—evidence of oral history's practical utility. Maximum order: 25 copies.

"Oral History: Prospects in the 1970's" (1969), containing a checklist of 100 notable Americans in many fields with the number of references to each in the OHC, by way of documenting oral history's broad applicability. Maximum order: 25 copies.

Single copies of any of the above may be had for the asking. On bulk orders, kindly enclose \$1 for postage and handling. Address Box 20, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York 10027.

BOOKS: SEVERAL NEW ONES ARE DRAWN FROM TAPE RECORDINGS

Oral historians who are interested in seeing how books result from tape-recorded interviews should note these new or forthcoming volumes:

— Betty Yorburg's **Utopia and Reality: A Collective Portrait Of American Socialists**, based upon interviews with leaders of the Socialist movement in the United States, and published by the Columbia University Press;

— John Garraty's **Interpretations Of American History: Conversations With Historians**, coming from the Macmillan Company in February, 1970;

— **Watts: The Aftermath**, by Paul Bullock of UCLA—a volume that utilizes oral history in the same manner that Oscar Lewis used successfully with impoverished people in Mexico;

— **Hard Times: An Oral History Of The Great Depression**, by Studs Terkel, coming in April, 1970;

— **The Hand And Eye Of The Sculptor**, by Paul Waldo Schwartz (Praeger Publishers, \$15.00), in which ten leading European sculptors discuss their working methods and credos.

Also of interest is **Elite And Specialized Interviewing** by Lewis A. Dexter, which the Northwestern University Press will publish on March 2.

ORAL HISTORY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

By Louis Brenner

African Studies Center, Boston University

During 1965-66, I was engaged in field research into the nineteenth century history of Bornu, a Muslim kingdom in what is now northeast Nigeria. Although there exists a sizeable corpus of written evidence on nineteenth century Bornu, most of my efforts in the field were directed to the collection of oral data. The documentary evidence for this subject consists of Arabic correspondence and histories, European traveller reports ranging throughout the century, and extensive and often detailed administrative reports compiled by British Colonial officials in the early decades of the present century.

The historical traditions of Bornu are not preserved in any formal or fixed format as is the case in many African societies. Information about the past is transmitted informally, usually in anecdote form. Oral knowledge of the Bornu past can be subdivided into several categories. First, there are accounts about famous persons and events which are widely known among the Bornu people. These are popular stories and taken together provide a close approximation of how most of the people of Bornu conceive of their past. Second, there are accounts which are less well known and are related much less often. The limited circulation of these stories results often from their parochial nature, dealing as they do with family or local history. There are also stories which lack wide circulation because they are considered repugnant to the interests and reputation of respected individuals or families. Third, there are genealogies and lists of title holders, of family names, and of battles. Finally, there are isolated facts tucked away in men's memories which are best elicited by question and answer interviews.

The Shehu (or King) of Bornu was surrounded by numerous courtiers of both free and slave origin, most of whom bore official titles granted by the Shehu himself. I began my field work by compiling a list of contemporary title holders in Bornu and interviewing the more important ones about the histories of their titles and families. It soon was apparent that the arrangement of the court in 1966 only partially reflected that of the nineteenth century. Some titled offices had disappeared and new ones had been created; in a few instances ancient titles not in use for over a century had been revived. Moreover, it became evident that some of the politically most influential persons in nineteenth century Bornu had possessed no official titles at all. This knowledge led me to redirect my attention from the examination of court titles to the search for influential historical personalities and their families.

I began to interview individuals who were reputed to be knowledgeable about general Bornu history. I interviewed many persons, but only a few exhibited exceptional knowledge; these men became my principal informants. They were able to provide specific information covering a broad range of subjects. I also located informants who could provide information about the communities of slaves, of Islamic scholars, and of traders. Within about two months I had identified a group of informants who represented the historically significant segments of Bornu society: the royal family, the title holders and other political leaders, the titled slaves, scholars, and merchants. From this pool of informants I was able to elicit information representing each of the categories listed above, from the very general kind of story to isolated details.

The synthesizing procedure is common to all historians, but in working with living sources, the collector of oral history has the opportunity to re-examine his informant and perhaps to obtain revised evidence. In Bornu, where there are virtually no fixed testimonies and the informants are

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ANCIENT POLYNESIAN HISTORIES BEING RECORDED IN WESTERN SAMOA

Under the direction of Derek F. Metcalfe, Research Specialist for the Genealogical Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, a taping program has been initiated on the Island of Upolu, Western Samoa. Since commencing the program in December 1967, 195 pedigrees have been recorded and are now in the possession of the Society. Both transcripts and tapes are being deposited in its Library. Several years of work are ahead for the field operator, Mr. Mulivai Purcell, who is making the contacts, recording the pedigrees, and then transcribing them.

Because of the reluctance of the Polynesians to recite their genealogies publicly (as they believe them to be sacred to the individual) progress in the beginning was slow. But momentum is increasing and now many people are waiting to record their family lines.

The Polynesian genealogies have been handed down from generation to generation. In Samoa the pedigrees are fairly accurate back to about 850 A.D. and many contain common ancestors which are in the genealogies of many other areas of the Pacific.

Because of local custom, progress at a recording session is also slow. First a meeting is called, then a kava ceremony is held, talks are given by all of the males present, and finally after a large feast it is agreed that the time is appropriate to get down to business and start recording.

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therefore free to relate only what they wish in the manner they wish, such cross-checking and re-examination is extremely important. It was necessary continually to synthesize all the sources at hand in order to pursue any new leads which might appear while still in the field. New information about an important individual was confirmed with his descendants. Lists of battles were compiled and names of persons were gleaned from the European and Arabic sources in the hope that their mention in an interview might stimulate the memories of my informants. Constant efforts were made to coordinate specific with general data; all inconsistencies and apparent anomalies were investigated.

Gradually I began to close the gaps in the oral picture I was piecing together. But in a project of this nature there is no point at which one can say his research is completed, because the number of possible informants is equal to the population. Since I concentrated my attention on the Bornu government, its composition and internal politics, I spent most of my time in Maiduguri, the capital of Bornu province, where the vast majority of the informants on this subject were living. I did collect local histories in those towns and villages which had figured prominently in Bornu history, but the data gathered was of limited value. It was only through my long residence in Maiduguri (almost a year), that I came to know my informants well. The better we came to know one another, the more information I obtained; mutual respect between myself and my informants determined my success in the field more than any other factor. Therefore my necessarily brief visits to outlying areas could never produce anything but the most superficial kind of information, the type of story which was common knowledge to the residents of the locality. The complexities of local politics rarely emerged from these abbreviated visits.

My experience in Bornu suggests that oral historians in the field require generous quantities of both patience and time. I am patiently waiting to get more time in the field, for much remains to be done in Bornu.

CORNELL INTERVIEWS RECORD MERGER OF FOUR RAILROAD UNIONS

The merger of four railroad brotherhoods into the United Transportation Union on January 1, 1969, is the subject of a new oral history project at Cornell University. Tapes have been made of interviews with union leaders who were instrumental in planning and consummating the unification. These leaders represented the Railroad Conductors and Brakemen, the Locomotive Firemen and Engineers, the Railroad Trainmen, and the Switchmen. The records of these unions were previously donated to Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, which already had a major collection of archival material dealing with railroad construction and operation in the United States. "Now that the four unions are unified we were afraid that their separate heritages would disappear after the older members died," explained Daniel Collins, assistant general secretary and treasurer of the United Transportation Union. The UTU is supporting this archival and oral history program at Cornell with a three-year grant.

AMERICAN CIVIL ENGINEERS ARE RECORDING THEIR HISTORY

An oral history program sponsored by the American Society Of Civil Engineers has recorded interviews with 11 prominent American engineers. This project is a function of the ASCE's Committee On The History And Heritage Of American Civil Engineering. As a minimum objective this Committee hopes to record interviews with all Honorary Members of the ASCE and to urge new Honorary Members, as they are chosen, to grant oral history interviews. In 1970 the ASCE intends to expand its oral history program and possibly open its collection to scholars (on a selected basis because of the confidential nature of some reminiscences).

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETIES: INTERVIEWS IN OHIO, HOPES IN UTAH

The Oral History Department of the Ohio Historical Society is conducting a six-month interview project on the history of the Columbus Urban League from its founding in 1917 to the present. Between 15 and 20 people will be interviewed by Edward R. Lentz, a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University who completed his M.A. thesis on the Urban League in Columbus from 1942 to 1962. His interviews will augment the extensive collection of Urban League records which were given to the Society in 1967.

Milton C. Abrams, President of the Utah State Historical Society and Librarian at Utah State University, noted in his 1968-1969 report to members of his Society that "No adequate program of oral history is being conducted in the state." He continued: "Because of the Society's special obligation for the perpetuation of state history, it would seem that an active, well-conceived program in collecting oral history now becomes a must. Such a program could begin with relative modesty. It should be regarded as an ongoing thing and a continuing effort must be made to gather the oral history of minority groups, of urban development, and of our political past as well as our pioneer heritage."

ILLINOIS CO-ED WINS UNEXPECTED PRIZE

Columbia's Oral History Research Office has a standing offer—a free copy of its catalogue and supplements to anyone who can name a book its staff doesn't know about that draws upon The Oral History Collection. Wendy Plotkin, a junior at the University of Illinois, wrote the office for research help on a term paper, mentioning that Charles L. Markmann's *The Noblest Cry*, a history of the American Civil Liberties Union, had a citation that led her to write. Inquiry disclosed, to the embarrassment of the staff, that the book had been out five years, and was available at three Columbia libraries. It is the 90th to have drawn upon the Collection. Miss Plotkin has her prize.

BERKELEY COMPLETES INTERVIEWS ON LAND USE, ALSO ON BOOKS AND PRINTING

The Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library at the University of California announces the completion of five additional interviews in its continuing series on subjects dealing with agriculture, water resources, and land use. The latest interviews have been with Wofford B. Camp and Cully Cobb, both concerned with cotton during the New Deal; Frank Swett, California orchardist who has long been concerned with fruit cooperatives; and Walter Packard and Walter Lowdermilk, experts in erosion control and land and water reclamation. 35 persons have been interviewed in this agriculture and water series since it was started in 1955.

The Regional Oral History Office at Berkeley has also completed 11 additional interviews in its series on Books and Printing in the San Francisco Bay Area. A total of 29 persons have now been interviewed in this series, which was started by Ruth Teiser in 1965.

Details about both series, as well as information about their deposit in research libraries, may be obtained from Mrs. Willa Baum of the Regional Oral History Office, Room 486, the General Library, University of California, Berkeley 94720.

UCLA HAS ACCOUNTS OF WATER DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

The UCLA Oral History Program is completing its series of interviews on Southern California water resources development, a project made possible through a grant from the UCLA Water Resources Center. In addition, personal papers, correspondence, and other related materials collected by the persons interviewed have been acquired for the library's Department of Special Collections, where they form an important resource for research in the subject.

The interviews, begun in 1965, provide non-technical accounts of the history of California water development, thus supplementing the existing body of published technical bulletins and reports. Men prominent in the field of water resources have provided particularly valuable information on the making of policy decisions.

As the popularity of the technique increases and ever greater numbers of individuals are asked to record their candid views for posterity on magnetic tape, it is imperative that the practitioners of oral history as a group show evidence of a true concern and self-regulation in matters of scholarship and ethics. On a very practical level, it is only natural that those who are asked to provide financial support for oral history programs will demand evidence of attention to some sort of standards. I believe it is a fair statement to say that the future of oral history in the life sciences, as in other fields, depends to a great extent on the practitioners of the technique themselves. If a reasonable set of standards is followed and concentration is applied to the quality of interviews rather than the number of pages of transcript, the outlook is probably bright. If however, standards are not adopted and followed, the increasing numbers of taped interviews will result in many miles of magnetic tape and tons of transcripts collecting dust on our shelves.

—PETER OLCH in "Oral History and the Medical Librarian," published in the *Bulletin of Medical Libraries Association*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Jan., 1969).

News in Brief

Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles has received a federal grant of \$8150 from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to fund a pilot course that will train students in the techniques of oral history. The class will be given by IHC in the coming winter and spring semesters.

Clarence M. Simmons has replaced John W. Walton as Director of the Oral History Project at Mary Holmes College in West Point, Mississippi. Mr. Walton is now President of the College. Mr. Simmons will direct a project that is designed to involve faculty and students in a joint research effort for understanding the environment from which the students come. The program findings will also be part of a Research Center open to scholars seeking primary source information about rural Mississippi.

Douglas L. Cole, Assistant Professor of History at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, has started an oral history program about the origins and early history of his university. Other new oral history projects have started at the University of Louisville and at University Hospitals in Cleveland.

Plans are afoot among members of the Society of American Archivists to establish a committee on oral history that would seek to cooperate with the Oral History Association.

The Bacon Memorial Library in Wyandotte, Michigan, has "tape recordings of pioneer citizens' reminiscences," according to the **Directory of Historical Collections in the State of Michigan** published late last year.

The Kanawha County Public Library in Charleston, West Virginia, has started to record oral history interviews with long-time Charleston residents who can speak about events in local history.

Amelia Fry and Willa Baum of Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office contributed "A Janus Look At Oral History" to the October, 1969 (Volume 32, Number 4) issue of **The American Archivist**. Forthcoming articles about oral history include one by William Cutler of Temple University in the **History of Education Quarterly**, and one by Charles Morrissey in **Media & Methods**.

Bruce Stave, Director of the Oral History Research Project at the University of Bridgeport, is preparing an article based upon 40 interviews he recorded in India between the summer of 1968 and the spring of 1969. Twenty of these were done with students at a university in the eastern and relatively conservative state of Bihar, and twenty in the western and more progressive state of Maharashtra. The interviews concerned the Kennedy family image in India, American foreign policy issues, and present problems in India.

Transcripts and tapes of about 125 oral history interviews are among the first historical materials opened by the John F. Kennedy Library in its temporary location at the Federal Records Center, 380 Trapelo Road, Waltham, Mass. 02154. Write or call John Stewart (617-223-7250) for information.

I have recently become identified with the Oral History Association, and if I have observed one thing in this connection that disturbs me, it is that librarians and archivists, or, if you will, the collectors of rare Americana, appear to remain a safe distance from the oral historians. Beginning with Columbia University where oral collecting was, in the modern sense, born—thanks to the instigation of Allan Nevins—the oral history projects appear to be operating outside and apart from the central library institutions in this country. There are, of course, exceptions, but I believe it is correct to say that of the one hundred or more representatives attending last year's meeting of the Oral History Association at Columbia, those identified with established research libraries were conspicuously few in number. Those in attendance represented mainly organizations operating apart from libraries. They have their own budgets, their own collectors, their own archives, and set their own standards. At my institution oral collecting is done by the folklorists, the musicians, the anthropologists, and the historians. Each group works independently of the other and each group deposits its tapes not in the central University library, but in such places as the Archives of Traditional Music or in respective departmental offices. None of the materials are to my knowledge deposited in the central University library where they belong. Collecting on the subject of immigrant trains, be it of the written record or of the oral record, should, it seems to me, be coordinated, directed, inspired, and financed by the central library administration of respective academic institutions.

—OSCAR O. WINTHER, in a talk about "Immigrant Trains" to the Reference Services Division History Section at the Kansas City meeting of the American Library Association in 1968. This paper has been published as an article in **RQ**, the journal of the Reference Services Division, Volume 8, Number 3 (Spring, 1969).

Membership in the Oral History Association is open to all who are interested in oral history. Dues for individuals are \$7.50 per year, and for institutions and associations they are \$25.00 per year. Non-voting student and library memberships are \$5.00 annually (these members receive all publications but do not participate in the selection of OHA officers). Life memberships are available at \$150. Institutions which generously decide to become Sustaining Members pay between \$100 and \$150 each year. All checks for membership dues should be sent to OHA Treasurer Knox Mellon, Dept. of History, Immaculate Heart College, 2021 North Western Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90027.

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