

THROUGH INDIAN EYES
NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM

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The comparatively recent refinement of oral history methodology as an auxiliary means of compiling historical evidence has been matched by an equally strong fascination with the American Indian. While books of varying quality have flooded the market to capitalize on this shift in public tastes, tens of thousands of Americans have also invested heavily in Indian jewelry, art, and clothing. On a purely academic level too, interest in Native American topics has paralleled the revival taking place in broader society. A partial study during 1974 revealed eighty-three Indian Studies programs in the United States--a growth rate exceeded only by the proliferation of Black Studies.¹ Yet, in spite of the increase in such programs and the virtually endless succession of new publications about Native Americans, a great void in research still persists. That most elusive of all qualities--the "Indian point-of-view"--remains just as unapproachable today as it has for previous generations of scholars.

Typical of the misunderstanding is Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, which, despite its claim of being "An Indian History of the American West," merely collects under one cover what has previously been written about by a multitude of non-Indian authors.² In this and similar cases "the Indian viewpoint" has been confused with anything that is sympathetic to Native Americans. Understanding the Indian point-of-view, however, is much more complicated than simply recounting a long list of battles, massacres, and broken treaties. It entails getting at the very soul of a people and reevaluating situations through their world-view.

Recognizing the widened interest in both oral history and Native American Studies, it seemed that the two could and should be combined into classroom activities. The forum for such an approach found a ready-made home in the University of Nebraska at Omaha's "Graduate Seminar in American Indian History." Throughout the Fall 1975 semester ten masters-level students worked toward organizing and implementing a program in oral history that made the "Indian point-of-view" its primary concern. Although none of the students brought with them any expertise in Native American History, all demonstrated a willingness to do the necessary background preparation before beginning any field work. The fact that all were graduate students of diversified backgrounds and academic maturity added immeasurably to our chances of success since they would have to absorb much material quickly.

The first two-thirds of the fifteen week semester were devoted to an overview of Native American topics and the methodology of oral history. The severe time constraints of the semester obviated any chances for producing a body of true "specialists," but their progress exceeded my expectations. Beginning with the broad treatment of Indian-white relations in William T. Hagan's American Indians, students moved rapidly into more specialized literature focusing on the events of the twentieth century. Since the interviews would probably cover mainly twentieth-century experiences, it seemed wise to concentrate on this more recent era rather than dwell equally on all time periods. Especially useful for understanding this "contemporary" setting were two assigned paperbacks by Indian authors--Vine Deloria Jr.'s Custer Died for Your Sins and Robert Burnette's The Road to Wounded Knee.³ Even after recognizing the biased and frequently polemical nature of these two works, students agreed that they provided some of the best background information for developing interview questions.

Two other assigned books deserve special attention because of their successful integration of oral history with Native American themes. The first, Cheyenne Memories, represents one of the best cooperative efforts between an Indian chronicler, John Stands in Timber, and a white anthropologist, Margot

Liberty.⁴ With a dedication toward preserving the authenticity of an oral tradition from which Indian history is recorded, the co-authors have produced a fascinating account of Cheyenne life through Cheyenne eyes. While there is little explanation of the process used in converting the numerous taped accounts from an oral state into a written form, the utility of such an approach is well borne out by this example.

The second source is a true product of contemporary oral history procedures. To Be an Indian: An Oral History, edited by Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover, presents selected portions of transcripts compiled by the American Indian Research Project at the University of South Dakota.⁵ Each of the abbreviated selections offers literal transcriptions of taped interviews conducted among Winnebago, Crow, Coeur d'Alene, and various Sioux peoples between 1967 and 1970. With its primary stress upon twentieth-century issues such as land rights, citizenship, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, termination, and the struggle for self-determination, this book served as something of a guide for our more limited project. It provided students with numerous ideas for questions and undoubtedly conveyed some understanding of the widely varied answers which could be expected.

The success of any oral history program obviously rests upon the types of people willing to be interviewed.⁶ Very often a direct approach is best when one knows a person well or has a mutual friend to help make the contact. Several of our choice sessions were set up this way and their successes were no doubt facilitated by the pre-existing familiarity between interviewer and interviewee. However, it is essential that one follow another approach when establishing a project devoted solely to Native American peoples, or other ethnic groups for that matter. Long before the project is ever launched the director should contact the major Indian organizations within the area where the majority of the interviews will take place. Most Indians are very sensitive to the fact that they have been "studied to death" by anthropologists and historians who have rarely left behind anything beneficial. To avoid breakdowns in communications, it is best to meet with the tribal councils on various reservations to explain the project and what benefits might accrue for all involved. Where possible, student interviewers will also attend these sessions to answer questions and make inquiries of their own. Should the tribal councils agree to such a program, perhaps their members will consent to future interviews and introduce students to other interested persons. Due to the constraints of time, we were not able to pursue this avenue as thoroughly as we would have liked. Most of our interviews conducted on the Omaha, Winnebago, and Santee reservations were negotiated more through individual initiatives than through close work with the elected tribal officials.

The primary area for our interviews was not the reservations, but rather the metropolitan district of Omaha, Nebraska, which contains approximately 5,000 Indian citizens. Many of these people are part of a "floating population" whose ties to the reservation are just as strong as their ties to the city. Thus we were able to get some perspective on both reservation and urban life without having to make frequent 170-mile round-trips to and from the reservations. Again recognizing the time and money limitations facing students, it appeared more feasible to concentrate our efforts in the metropolitan area. Luckily Omaha possesses several very strong Indian organizations through which we could direct our efforts. The American Indian Center, Sioux Indian Center, United Indians of Nebraska, and the Indian-Chicano Health Clinic all cooperated by consenting to interviews among their staffs, and suggested additional names for further contact. In a sense, their help was analogous to the aid of tribal councils so necessary in reservation interviewing.

Directors should also remember that non-Indians can often be worthy interviewees on Indian-related topics. Two of our sessions involved white attorneys, one currently representing disputed land claims bordering the Omaha Reservation

and the other having served as counsel to the Navajo tribe at Window Rock, Arizona. Another student, an attorney in his own right, interviewed the United States Magistrate at Rapid City, South Dakota, who presided over the initial arraignments of persons involved in the 1973 Wounded Knee occupation. More personalized were the accounts of several missionaries who related their experiences on Omaha, Winnebago, Pine Ridge, Rosebud, and Menominee reservations. The candid nature of their remarks regarding the positive and negative influences of missions on the reservations makes these tapes invaluable and sets them apart from the usual polemical literature on the subject. Taped sessions with non-Indians directly concerned with Indian affairs definitely have a place in a project of this type, but in trying to maintain the Indian viewpoint as a prime focus, it is important that these interviews do not take precedence.

The art of conducting an interview is something never truly mastered; it improves only with practice, experimentation, and newly-won confidence. In our case it is fair to say that almost all the students dreaded the initial contact like a plague. Perhaps a seventy-five page research paper might have seemed an acceptable option at that point, but no one was given the choice. Visions of mechanical breakdowns and fears of asking questions which might alienate the interviewees were the thoughts uppermost in everyone's mind. But the phobias were ill-founded, as the entire group produced polished interviews right from the beginning and became more proficient with each session. A number of the early interviews were played back in the seminar so that students could critique each other's labors and make suggestions. Listening to other people's work put minds at ease because now they had some orientation toward which to strive.

A few suggestions for successful interviewing are worth emphasis. First it is necessary to make the initial contact with prospective interviewees as friendly and informative as possible. A phone call is the preferred method since it necessitates a personalized approach and provides a chance to generate "feedback" from both parties. The project should be explained thoroughly, along with an explanation of how that particular person has been selected as a possible participant. If the phone conversation produces the promise of an interview, the student should indicate that he will prepare a list of sample questions for the subject to consider in advance of the interview. These questions are geared only to activate the recollections of the interviewee and are not meant to be the full scope of the taped session. When the two people come together approximately a week after the initial inquiry has been made, both probably will have a fairly comfortable feeling about each other and about the nature of the questions.

The best interview is one which takes place in a relaxed and familiar setting, preferably the home of the interviewee. Try to choose a location devoid of interruptions, especially telephones, which offer great competition to a successful interview. Begin with basic information by identifying both participants, the setting, and the date. From there a general question about the person's background, including place and date of birth, relatives, and childhood memories, will usually get things off to a good start. As the session progresses only one rule need apply--listen closely to the person's story, and from his revelations interject questions for matters of clarification and to provide direction to the narrative. The student who merely reads from a list of prepared questions will kill all spontaneity in the interview and lose vitally important information. New questions will undoubtedly come to the interviewer's mind as the exercise continues, and in most cases they are better phrased and more to the point than the long list of prepared questions. If a particular question does not fit into the topic being discussed at a given moment it can be jotted down and asked later. Remember, the interview has no prescribed formula; its free form is its greatest strength and the most interesting information will often be sparked by a casual comment.

Recognizing that each project pursues different goals and individual interviewees provide widely diversified accounts, it is not necessary to list here a long series of sample questions. It is instructive, however, to point out some of the most commonly conveyed themes in our tapings. Educational experiences offer a lucrative field in almost all cases, especially among older Indian people who attended boarding schools. Religion presents a second broad area for discussion since experiences range from the Native American Church to fundamentalist Protestant sects, and from bitterness to religious fanaticism. Similar feelings are manifested on the question of Indian health care. Questions about the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, Public Law 280, and the Termination Policies of the 1950s almost always strike a sensitive spot and frequently provide perspectives quite different from those presented in white sources. The events of the 1960s and 70s, including the Alcatraz occupation, fishing rights litigation in the Pacific Northwest, the 1972 murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder at Gordon, Nebraska, the Trail of Broken Treaties to Washington, D.C., and the well-publicized events at Wounded Knee generate diverse feelings only slightly perceived by broader society. Be assured that there is no shortage of questions to ask, but the quality of these rests heavily upon how much background research one is willing to do beforehand.⁷

Once the tapings were completed, students were required to compile a three or four page summary of each interview. Because most sessions lasted a minimum of ninety minutes, it was deemed unrealistic to require verbatim transcripts of each interview. The normal time required for accurate transcribing is six to nine hours of typing for each hour of taping, and with three lengthy interviews per person plus other duties related to the class, this additional burden became prohibitive. Grading was done on a comparative basis between students, but more importantly on the basis of improvement from interview #1 to interview #3. Those who demonstrated the best techniques and the best command of background knowledge were often able to turn routine sessions into sparkling ones, and they justifiably received the best evaluations. Critiquing other students' work likewise served as an indicator of overall performance, as did the initiative taken in setting up difficult interviews. All of these factors, together with some additional reports, discussions, and simulations, comprised the final grade of each person. In the end, despite initial fears and uncertainties, everyone agreed that the experience had been a valuable one, an experience which they would be willing to repeat in the future.

Though the seminar was completed by Christmas, the project was really only beginning. If we had ceased our efforts at this point we could have been satisfied with the results--ten students had gained an appreciation of an unfamiliar type of historical methodology and had seen Indian affairs from a different point-of-view for the first time in their lives. But to make the tapes readily accessible for use by other persons, they had to be accurately transcribed. Release forms had already been signed by interviewees and interviewers, giving the Oral History Project at the University of Nebraska at Omaha full rights to the tapes. Those with conditions placed upon them were so designated on the release forms and those stipulations will be scrupulously honored. Fortunately our limited project found a ready-made home as an independent part of the Omaha Folklore Program which has been centered at the University since 1972. This computerized collection, containing several thousand items and fast gaining national attention among folklorists, gave us a reputable institution through which to work and to deposit our growing archives. With the aid of small grants from the University we have begun the transcription of all tapes. Two copies, cross-checked by the interviewee, will be placed in the collection, and a third copy will go to the person who granted the session. The tape itself will remain with the collection, and where possible, a second copy will be recorded.⁸

Finally it should be indicated that this project has unlimited possibilities on both a small budget for the moment and on a larger budget envisioned for the future. During succeeding semesters we continued our efforts through a number of students who were enrolled in "History of North American Indians," an upper-level and graduate lecture course. In addition to completing the requirements of a heavy reading load, volunteers attended several sessions on oral history methodology modeled on those which prefaced the seminar. A screening process was employed so that only those persons truly committed to the project and its background preparation were given the go-ahead. From this exercise came additional taped sessions, ranging from an interview with a former officer of the Winnebago Tribal Council to a discussion with Albert Trimble, former tribal chairman of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. The spin-offs and possibilities of follow-up interviews are virtually unlimited once a program is launched, and with each new exposure perhaps a little more empathy is generated on both sides.

As the historical profession grows to accommodate new methodologies, evidence, and climates of opinion, it will increasingly embrace the techniques of oral history. New emphasis on social history and the "history of the inarticulate" has demonstrated a shift of public interest toward more personalized approaches which describe grassroots experiences of people. This paper does not wish to consider the pros and cons of "elitist" versus "common man's history"; it merely draws attention to the unique perspectives of Indian peoples which have escaped the scrutiny of most scholars and bureaucrats. Until whites begin listening more to Indian viewpoints and cease their unilateral policy-making in behalf of Native Americans, the problems created by conflicting cultures will persist. There is no better way for opening new avenues of understanding than to listen to the diverse points-of-view offered by Indian peoples throughout the country. On both a national plane and at the classroom level the experience can be a richly rewarding one.

NOTES

¹Wilcomb E. Washburn, "American Indian Studies: A Status Report," American Quarterly, XXVII (August, 1975), 263.

²Dee Brown, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West (New York, 1970).

³William T. Hagan, American Indians (Chicago, 1961); Vine Deloria, Jr., Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto (New York, 1969); Robert Burnette and John Koster, The Road to Wounded Knee (New York, 1974).

⁴John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, Cheyenne Memories (New Haven, 1967).

⁵Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover, eds., To Be an Indian: An Oral History (New York, 1971). Two additional sources tracing similar projects at other western universities are: Julia A. Jordan, "Oklahoma's Oral History Collection: New Source for Indian History," Chronicles of Oklahoma, XLIX (Summer 1971), 150-172; and Richard N. Ellis, "The Duke Indian Oral History Collection at the University of New Mexico," New Mexico Historical Review XLVIII (July, 1973), 259-263.

⁶Even before completing our background research into Native American history and its traditions of an orally-preserved literature, we began examining the mechanics of conducting a successful interview, and studying the types of equipment to use for the project. The best advice came from Willa Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society (Nashville, 1971), and

William G. Tyrrell, Tape-Recording Local History (Nashville, 1966). These works are available from the American Association for State and Local History.

⁷In addition to Willa Baum's suggestions on conducting an interview, one must read the best single article relating purely to interviewing Native Americans: Herbert T. Hoover, "Field Work--American Indian Oral History," in The Practice of Oral History: A Handbook, edited by Ramon I. Harris (Glen Rock, New Jersey, 1975).

⁸An excellent chapter on transcribing and preserving tapes appears in Ramon Harris, "Processing and Editing the Interview," in The Practice of Oral History: A Handbook. The appendix of this book offers numerous examples of release forms, demographic sheets, archival forms, and sample catalogue entries around which you can develop a similar project in the classroom or on a larger scale.