THE 1970 RESEARCH CONFERENCE AT HARRISBURG: ORAL HISTORY IN PENNSYLVANIA

BY HARRY E. WHIPKEY

SPONSORED by the Pennsylvania Historical Association, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the fifth annual Research Conference on Pennsylvania History was held on Friday, May 1, and Saturday, May 2, 1970. Schrafft's Restaurant and Motor Inn, located near the Harrisburg West Interchange of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, was the site of the afternoon session and the dinner meeting on May 1. The Saturday sessions were convened in the Search Room of the Archives Building of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg. Unlike preceding conferences, each given over to a number of separate topics, this one was devoted entirely to the subject of "Oral History." Oral history was viewed in respect to (1) plans and resources in Pennsylvania, (2) importance as historical documentation, and (3) techniques. The general chairman of the conference was Dr. William W. Hummel of Albright College.

Directing proceedings at the Friday afternoon session, "Oral History in Pennsylvania—Plans and Resources," was Dr. John Serff of Bloomsburg State College. The first of the four speakers introduced by Dr. Serff was Dr. S. K. Stevens, executive director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Dr. Stevens, in explaining the plans of the Commission, pointed out that his office has long been conscious of the need to do more in the field of oral history and has attempted a number of approaches toward the establishment of a workable program. Only lately have efforts been rewarded. Dr. Edward Tracy, of the history department of Kutztown State College, has entered into a contractual agreement with the Commission and is now in the process of setting up a well-organized oral history program.

Dr. Stevens noted that many who should be the subjects of taped interviews are of advanced age. Obviously, unless much
valuable oral history is to be lost, a good plan must be matured as rapidly as possible. As an example of how critical time can be, it was reported that definite arrangements, made through the intercession of Miss Genevieve Blatt, to interview Mrs. Emma Guffey Miller were suddenly upset with Mrs. Miller’s death, a death that prevented a lot of interesting history from being recorded. It is also to be regretted, among other examples that could be given, that former Governor David Lawrence died before his valuable reminiscences could be taped.

The Commission has, at this point, a small but valuable tape library. It includes interviews taped over a period of years by the reporters of the Patriot-News Company of Harrisburg with such prominent political personalities as former Governors George Leader and William Scranton, former Senator Joseph Clark, Senator Hugh Scott, and former Mayor Richardson Dilworth of Philadelphia. The tapes of the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of 1967-1968, including the deliberations of committee meetings, are also held by the Commission.

It was recently suggested to Dr. Stevens that should the news film of local television studios be preserved, organized, and indexed, instead of being destroyed after four or five years, the result would be a fine pictorial and oral record and a valuable supplement to any oral history program. While probably costly and clearly dependent on the key television stations in the state for implementation, the idea would seem to have much to commend it.

Dr. J. Cutler Andrews of Chatham College, the next speaker, dealt with the theme “Western Pennsylvania—Plans and Resources.” Outlining his personal experiences, Dr. Andrews observed that his interest in oral history may be traced to the time, ten or more years ago, when he became impressed with the work being done by Dr. Louis Starr’s Oral History Research Center at Columbia University. Accounts of how Dr. Starr would send interviewers into Manhattan to take the initiative in recording the recollections of notable men and women were thought-provoking. It was exciting to hear about a systematic method of making sure that the recollections of those who had been participants in significant historical events would be preserved. The idea was generated that this method should be adopted to record the reminiscences of important figures in the Pittsburgh area.
Along with others who were similarly interested, Dr. Andrews was gratified in 1968 when the Pittsburgh Foundation, after numerous talks, agreed to make funds available to underwrite a conference in Pittsburgh to discuss oral history. On April 20, 1968, with the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh acting as the sponsoring agency, some forty persons, mostly historians and librarians, met at the Hotel Webster Hall to set the groundwork for the establishment of an oral history program. Taking part in the conference were representatives from the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie-Mellon University, Duquesne University, Carnegie Library, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and the Pittsburgh Foundation. At the conclusion of the conference, a steering committee, with Dr. Andrews a member, was formed to decide where an oral history office should be based, to establish priorities among the ideas discussed at the conference, and to raise funds.

Through the remainder of 1968 and well into 1969, the efforts of the committee were aimed at getting the University of Pittsburgh to provide office space and necessary financial backing. Although considerable interest was evidenced by some university officials, all such efforts proved fruitless. Apparently budget minded authorities concluded that oral history was suspendable.

Several recent ideas, proposals, and projects are worthy of note. The idea has been advanced by Anthony Martin, librarian of the Carnegie Public Library, that a warehouse on Baum Boulevard, now serving as an annex to the library, could be used as an oral history center. Some expense would, of course, be necessary to renovate the structure for oral history purposes.

It was learned in April that members of the academic faculty at the University of Pittsburgh have made a request to one of the Mellon Foundations for a three-year grant of some $75,000. The money would be earmarked to support the use of oral history procedures in connection with the Pittsburgh Renaissance.

For the past several years, the Pittsburgh Council of Jewish Women has sponsored an oral history project designed to record the personal experiences of those Jewish immigrants who arrived in Western Pennsylvania between the years 1890 and 1920. The project, now successfully completed, required a group of fifty Jewish women volunteers to conduct some 220 interviews. Among
the questions raised by the interviewers were: Why did you leave Europe to come to America? What details about your trip do you remember? Did you stop in New York or did you come to Pittsburgh immediately? What were your experiences in respect to housing? What were your experiences in respect to education? In general, the emphasis of the questions was placed on the adjustment of the immigrant to life in Pittsburgh. Information compiled from the interviews is to be published in book form.

This project is viewed as an outstanding example of what volunteers can do to produce oral history that is not simply anecdotal but of sound value for academic purposes. It was also relatively inexpensive. The necessary cost was underwritten by a grant of $5,000 from a local foundation.

Dr. Andrews concluded that the future of oral history in Western Pennsylvania is not at all clear at this time. A number of possibilities may be suggested. Perhaps one centralized oral history center should be established at the University of Pittsburgh or at some other major institution. Perhaps a number of centers, each dealing with a specific program, could be strategically placed and operated without meaningless duplication of effort. Certainly it is conceivable that other ethnic, religious, and racial groups will follow the example set by the Pittsburgh Council of Jewish Women.

Dr. Edward Tracy next described the work being done by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. While the Commission's oral history program is still in the embryonic stage, an ambitious plan has already been initiated. The intention is to tape interviews with persons who played important roles in the administrations of some of the former Governors of Pennsylvania. Attention is presently being given to the Fine, Leader, and Lawrence administrations. As taped interviews are being arranged, the list of names of appropriate persons to interview is constantly being extended. A few taped interviews have already been concluded. However, since none of the tapes have been transcribed, the oral history stage has not yet been attained.

Dr. Norman B. Wilkinson, the session's final speaker, explained the role of oral history in the activities of the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation. Interest at the Hagley Museum and the Eleutherian Mills Library is on the industrial and business history
of the region coming within approximately an eighty-mile radius of Wilmington, Delaware. Interest is in all appropriate records. When the oral history program was commenced in 1966, it was perhaps third or fourth on the list of priorities. Other major responsibilities, such as collecting manuscripts and the development of the museum, prevented it from having a higher standing.

Since 1966, some 100 interviews have been taped. For the most part, those interviewed have been old-time employees, some men and some women, of the DuPont Powder Mills or of the nearby paper and textile mills. The objective has been to draw the kind of information from the memories of the older or retired workers that could help to explain such turn of the century matters as industrial techniques, labor relations, and life in industrial communities. The project has been, for all practical purposes, successfully concluded.

Perhaps it was knowledge of this experience and this success that motivated the Smithsonian Institution to invite the Foundation to join with it in documenting the history of a company that had been doing business for over 100 years in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The company, Hoopes Bros. & Darlington, was once described as the largest and most important wagon wheel factory east of the Allegheny Mountains. In 1969, when the Smithsonian's offer was tendered and accepted, the company was on the verge of closing down. The work of documentation, a thorough documentation, included making film, preparing slides, making photographic prints, drawing floor plans, and preparing drawings of equipment and tools. Taped interviews with the head of the firm, Mr. Thomas Hoopes, and with some of his key people were important features of the documentation.

A forty-minute excerpt from the taped interview with Mr. Hoopes was played by Dr. Wilkinson to illustrate the types of questions asked and the kind of information received. Mr. Hoopes, who had been with the company some sixty years, had much to say about his career, the nature of the wagon wheel industry, working conditions, types of labor, changes caused by the coming of the automobile, and the reasons for the firm's demise. Completing this "Case Study in Oral History," Dr. Wilkinson made the transcripts of the interviews and other documentary materials available for study.
Presiding at the Friday dinner meeting, Dr. George D. Wolf, of the Capitol Campus of the Pennsylvania State University, introduced Dr. Richmond Williams, national chairman of the awards committee of the American Association for State and Local History. Dr. Williams presented an award of merit to the Pennsylvania Historical Association for its “annual Research Conference, stimulating scholarly research and writing on state and local history.” The award was presented to Dr. Robert L. Bloom, president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association.

An award of merit was also presented to Dr. Lawrence Henry Gipson. Dr. Gipson was honored for “integrating local and regional history into a perspective of national and imperial scope during a long lifetime of distinguished scholarship and publication.”

The speaker of the evening was Dr. Louis Starr, director of the Oral History Research Center, Columbia University. Speaking on the importance of oral history as historical documentation, Dr. Starr suggested that such importance should be obvious. The scholarly use of Columbia University’s special collections of oral history materials is carefully recorded and clearly points to the worth of the materials. Oral history projects provide valuable insights into the attitudes, fears, and objectives of people, insights impossible to glean in any other way.

Those scholars, open-minded in most instances, who tend to be ultra-conservative when faced with such new techniques of recording history as those utilized by the oral historian would change their outlook if they would be objective enough to familiarize themselves with the techniques. Since it is a relatively new field, advocates are still discovering uses for oral history. If more scholars would come to appreciate its value and adaptability, the number of useful discoveries would certainly be increased.

Historians have always used oral history. What distinguishes the oral history movement, once it got started as a formal movement, from all previous oral history is that it is geared to service to others. Unlike the scholar who is gathering information for his own purposes, the present day oral historian is working for his contemporaries and, first and foremost, for posterity. He is creating a record on any number of subjects, a record that would not otherwise exist. Viewed at the time of their development, some oral history projects could appear a little absurd. It might
seem doubtful that anyone would ever care to make use of the information. At a future date, however, the material could be of immeasurable value.

Dr. Starr, in his stated capacity as "missionary," declared that a good oral historian will discard his scholarly robes and get into his prospector's togs. Like an oil wildcatter, he is not sure what he is going to find until he gets out into the field and "pokes" around. As in any "wildcat" operation, disappointments are not at all uncommon. This will not cause the dedicated practitioner to become disillusioned or discouraged.

The interviewer has to be flexible. If the respondent has an aversion to tape recorders, the old method of taking notes can be employed. If the respondent is having a bad day, perhaps the appointment can be planned for another time. Certainly interviews must not be conducted in highly structured ways. Strict adherence to style and form is likely to cause the oral historian to lose interesting and valuable information. Nor should timidity or fear of failure be allowed to get in the way. The interviewer should be inventive, bold, and able to gain the confidence of the respondent. Interviewing is, in short, a chancy and a demanding business. It is also exciting and valuable work.

On Saturday morning, Dr. Henry Glassie, III, of the Capitol Campus of the Pennsylvania State University, spoke on "Socio-Scientific Techniques Applied to a Historical Problem—The Breakdown of Resurrection City." Dr. Glassie depended heavily on pictorial evidence as he described his experiences in documenting a part of the "Poor People's Campaign" of 1968. Utilizing all the means at his disposal to record what was happening, he traveled with those Black Americans, Mexican-Americans, American Indians, and others who joined the "March on Washington" at Watts in Los Angeles, California, and at Albuquerque, New Mexico. He took about 9,000 photographs, taped approximately 150 hours of interviews, took thousands of pages of notes, and employed other techniques as he developed a thorough documentation, not only of what was seen and heard as the "poor people" were transported by bus across the country but also of experiences witnessed in "Resurrection City." The project was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution.

Dr. Glassie, explaining his use of oral history techniques, ob-
served that those who are dedicated to understanding history or sincerely interested in appreciating the events influencing the lives of men are often frustrated. This is true because of the methodological limitations of the traditional forms of print. Those who attempt to make historical interpretations often find no alternative but to rely on old printed data that could very easily be incorrect. They are asked to base their views of a particular historical event on the subjective account of the reporter who may have observed only a small segment of the action. A narrow and one-sided view is apt to be the result. Clearly, if the tradition-bound techniques of the journalists are used, much is going to be left out.

It is necessary to expand the methods to include at least a new form of print. With oral history, words that are written down are still used. The difference is that these words come directly from the mouths of participants and eyewitnesses instead of from what others have written. The oral historian is expected to do more than record the recollections of people before they die. He has the responsibility of getting to those places where contemporary events are happening, at the time they are happening, with every means available to record the action. He should not restrict himself. He should gather both what can initially be classed as scholarly material and what may originally appear as ephemeral information. A total record is the desired objective.

At the beginning of the “Poor People’s Campaign,” Dr. Glassie suffered from several erroneous preconceptions generated by journalistic accounts. These accounts gave one to understand that the “March on Washington” was being made by poor people and radical militants. It was explained that these people were being called together, or at least coming together, at the wish of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had, of course, been assassinated prior to this time. In light of the collected evidence, these views seem incredible.

Instead of poor people, who apparently had no real understanding of what the “March” was all about, those involved appeared as relatively well-dressed members of the middle class. Instead of trouble makers and terrorists, the “marchers” were old ladies, little children, and, for the most part, young people intent on being as peaceful as possible. The Black Panthers were
involved but their purpose was not a violent one. While skeptical of what the movement would accomplish, the Panthers were satisfied to act as observers and to give the “Campaign” a chance. Why were people taking part in the movement? Instead of the vague reason offered in the news reports, literally dozens of explanations were spelled out by the participants.

Once residence was established in “Resurrection City,” journalists gave considerable attention to the “plight” of “the poor, the lame, and the weak.” Somehow overlooked was the fact that those in residence, especially after inclement weather made conditions extremely miserable, were generally strong, healthy, and not so poor. In these ways, as in others, the manner of journalistic reporting was found wanting. It is to be regretted that some historical treatments of this important event will probably be based on this kind of misinformation.

Dr. Glassie’s documentation was aimed at the activities and attitudes of the ordinary “marcher.” He was not really interested in the views and actions of the “leaders.” In fact, his findings would indicate, the press accounts to the contrary, that a good number of the “troops” refused to accept the self-acclaimed and nationally prominent “leaders.”

Commenting on Dr. Glassie’s talk, David Hufford, State Folklorist on the staff of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, made the following points:

1. Oral history does not have to be merely “salvage work.” While the attempt to reconstruct past events is laudable, oral history techniques should definitely be used to record contemporary events. Documenting current happenings, as compared to the “salvage work,” can be done with more objective accuracy.

2. The use of tape and film should not be considered simply an extension of those resources that are ordinarily available to the historian. They can, it is true, function to make note taking easier or even unnecessary. With tape and film, however, you have an extended ability to get at the beliefs and attitudes of people. Because of the spontaneous nature of interviews, unless they happen to be highly structured, you can get more in the way of psychological analysis.

3. There is more subjectivity in the techniques of the oral his-
torian than we sometimes tend to realize. This can be seen especially in projects concerning complex events. It is difficult, for example, to get a totally objective recording of a large movement like the "March on Washington." Since it is impossible to record everything, selection is necessary. The recording will become more and more subjective as more choices are made. The editorial stance, whether it be conscious or not, of the person taking the recording must be taken into consideration.

4. Even if the interviewer is completely objective, he will have to understand the subjective responses to his questions. In treating any given event, he is dealing not merely with a list of facts but with the event as it is screened through the mind of the respondent. The individual will react to what he thinks is happening not to what is actually happening. Of course, what actually happens in the objective sense is not as important as what the participant or eyewitness believes is happening.

5. In conducting an oral history project, it is customary and relatively easy to interview the notable persons. They are fewer in number, easy to seek out, more articulate and more egotistical. While it is more difficult to record the views of the "rank and file" participants, it is necessary that this be done so that a well-balanced documentation can be achieved.

Mrs. Alice Hoffman, of the department of labor studies at the Pennsylvania State University, was in charge of the Saturday afternoon session, "Oral History at Penn State." Taking part in the discussion were Ronald Filippelli, archivist at Penn State; and Dr. Gerald G. Eggert and Dr. Phillip E. Stebbins, both members of the University's history department.

Filippelli, explaining the development of the program, noted that oral history at Penn State was initiated in 1967 almost solely because of the interest and drive of Alice Hoffman. Mrs. Hoffman, as the daughter of a prominent labor figure, had long been interested in the possibilities of preserving the history of the labor movement by recording interviews with those remaining individuals who had been active in the organization of the unions, particularly of the industrial unions. Since the great surge of
industrial unionism took place in the 1930's, many of the participants were still alive. The ages of these men and women suggested, however, that there was little time to spare.

It was felt by Mrs. Hoffman and others that the Pennsylvania State University had a responsibility to document the labor history of the Commonwealth. In considering the vast labor history of the state, two industries, steel and mining, came immediately to mind. Officials of the United Steelworkers of America, with headquarters in Pittsburgh, were contacted to see if they had any interest in an oral history program. Their reaction was enthusiastic. Believing that the history of the labor movement in America had either been neglected or grossly distorted, they viewed oral history as a means of telling their side of the story. Given this firm enthusiasm, a much larger program than had originally been anticipated got under way. The Union's historical records were turned over to the University and became the keystone of the new Labor History Archives.

The Union and the University's department of labor studies agreed to jointly fund the oral history project. Mrs. Hoffman was hired as an instructor in the department of labor studies and was provided with office space, secretarial help, and a graduate assistant. Consultations with the Union led to the drawing up of a master list of people to be interviewed. While Mrs. Hoffman was by no means restricted to the people on the list, it served as a valuable point of reference.

In September of 1967, president Eric A. Walker of Penn State and president I. W. Abel of the Steelworkers signed an agreement officially establishing the Oral History Project. At that time, an advisory committee, representing both parties, was set up with the understanding that it would meet several times each year to review the progress of the program.

Since the autumn of 1967, Mrs. Hoffman's office has recorded interviews with eighty-two persons. Sixty-seven of the tapes have been transcribed, approved by the respondents, and located in the Labor History Archives. They are available to researchers. The remaining fifteen tapes are in the process of being transcribed or approved. As of now, no restrictions have been placed on access to the tapes or transcripts.

Not all of the interviews concern, at least not directly, the United Steelworkers of America. Some relate to the United
Filippelli concluded by pointing out that the oral history resources at Penn State are not totally restricted to labor history. The archives has a complete file of the tapes and transcripts of the weekly television reports of United States Senators Joseph Clark and Hugh Scott. The speeches of a number of notable visitors to the University have been recorded and are preserved in the archives.

Dr. Eggert, speaking on the theme “The Uses of Oral History in Training Graduate Students,” described a seminar he teaches in oral history techniques. The course, largely a result of the persuasive arguments of Alice Hoffman, has value in that it gives the students considerable experience in data collecting and historical research. It also provides the Oral History Program with interviewers. Dr. Eggert’s main concern is to provide the students with the background information to enable them to do competent jobs of interviewing. Since the people to be interviewed are connected, in one way or another, with the United Steelworkers of America, it follows that readings, lectures, and discussions relating to the basic facts of the steel industry are employed. A steel mill is visited. An attempt is made to get some appreciation of what conditions were like when the Union was being organized.

Mrs. Hoffman has the responsibility of explaining how an interview should be conducted. The student learns what should be done and what should not be done. The next step requires that each student be matched with a respondent. Intent on getting the best possible results, Mrs. Hoffman makes the assignments with a great deal of care. Once the assignments are made, each prospective interviewer is expected to learn as much as he can about the person assigned to him.

Just prior to the actual interview, the student prepares a list of the questions he is thinking of using. The seminar, operating with much constructive criticism, decides what questions are proper and which ones should be jettisoned. After the interview is arranged and conducted and after the tapes and transcripts become part of the oral history collection, the student has to write a report explaining what he has gained from the experience. He
must also prepare a report evaluating one of the other interviews. The seminar, given its value to both the students and the Oral History Project, is considered a major success.

The next speaker, Dr. Stebbins, described his experiences in conducting taped interviews with members of the legal staff of the United Steelworkers. His objective was to determine the part played by the Union's lawyers in the formation of policy. This sort of investigation had not previously been undertaken in respect to the organizational structure of the trade union movement.

The techniques of the oral historian are ideal for recording the views and recollections of men like lawyers, who are not very likely to write about their own attitudes and experiences. Lawyers, while perceiving of their own importance, are generally too busy with their day-to-day activities to write memoirs. Since they rarely retire, they have no real chance to sit back and to think over their careers in the expectation of writing books. By participating in taped interviews, these individuals are afforded the opportunity, with very little time being consumed, to record their historical records.

In preparing himself to be an oral historian, Dr. Stebbins read histories, studied the special issues that have plagued the Union, and tried to understand the environment in which the Union now functions and has functioned in the past. Holding a law degree, as well as a degree in history, he was ideally qualified to interview members of the legal profession. He could appreciate how lawyers think, understand their language, and gain their confidence.

Dr. Stebbins suggested that the interviewer can at times overdo his preparation. He can know the material so well that he may tend to impose his personality and his answers on the person being interviewed. A heavily structured interview has little justification, especially when the interviewer is dealing with a highly articulate person like a lawyer.

Illustrating her remarks with specific examples, Mrs. Alice Hoffman, the final speaker, dealt with (1) the problem of arranging interviews, (2) the preparation of the interviewer, and (3) the way to conduct an interview. Her conclusions were:

1. Since the seductions of talking for posterity are well-nigh irresistible, in very few cases will it be difficult to get a person to talk in an oral history interview. As for those
who may not have had the opportunity to speak out before and who are of the opinion that their side of the story has been neglected or wrongly stated, interviews will be granted with much eagerness. The problem is not one of getting the person to talk. The problem is one of getting him to talk well.

2. The interviewer should have a good point of departure. If he understands the background situation, is aware of the written interpretations, and, in short, knowledgeable in the subject field, he should be able to "break the ice" with the respondent and conduct a competent interview. The respondent should be satisfied that the motives of the interviewer are proper ones and that he will be given the opportunity to tell his own story.

3. Understanding the historic record, the interviewer must not fall into the trap of giving his own interpretations. Nothing will be accomplished if it turns out that the interviewer is being interviewed by the respondent. A good interviewer will approach the respondent in many different ways until he gets all that he thinks he can get in regard to a given issue or subject. He may challenge the respondent but not in insulting or belligerent ways.

Mrs. Hoffman concluded her presentation by illustrating the difference between the tape and the transcript of the tape. After playing a segment of a taped interview wherein the respondent became quite emotional, she noted that the life and feeling caught on the tape could not, of course, be transcribed. The words in the transcript appear cold and without feeling.

Whether they have been successfully completed, are in various stages of development, or exist only in the form of suggestions or proposals, the oral history projects brought to the attention of the Research Conference provide evidence of the growing awareness on the part of scholars of the importance of oral history as historical documentation. Along with illuminating some of the major problems and a number of the basic techniques, the conference made it clear that there is much to be done in recording past experiences and in documenting current events. Under-scored was the fact that there is a great deal for the oral historian to attend to in Pennsylvania.