DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 256 95 SO 010 182

TITLE Options in Education, Program No. 80, May 30, 1977. Learning from the Past: Oral History. Program Transcripts of a Weekly Series Broadcast by Member Stations of National Public Radio.

INSTITUTION George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. Inst. for Educational Leadership.; National Public Radio, Washington, D.C.

SPONS AGENCY Carnegie Corp. of New York, N.Y.; Corporation for Public Broadcasting, New York, N.Y.; National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.

PUB DATE 30 May 77

NOTE 20p.; Not available in hard copy due to small type size of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *Educational Radio; Historiography; History; *Interviews; Local History; *Oral History; Programing (Broadcast); Radio; *Social History; Tape Recordings

ABSTRACT

The transcript of a National Public Radio "Options in Education" program explores the relationship of oral history to traditionally written, documented history. A number of kinds of oral history are discussed, such as folk telling, family interviews, social history, and sound portraits. Program staff interview a variety of individuals, including a 92-year-old pioneer from South Dakota, an author of an oral history of Jews in the South, a folksinger who finds oral history in songs about slavery, a native American whose French great-grandfather joined an Indian tribe, and an author of a book about attitudes of working class women. The transcript combines excerpts of interviews with these people with analytical remarks about the nature of oral history. Among the comments are that conventionally documented history represents only the well-educated sector of a population, whereas oral history allows any individual to express himself in a culture where one of the most oppressing sensations is being anonymous. Oral stories about one's past or one's family may not be entirely accurate or true, but the process of interviewing and talking is good because it promotes a personal interaction among the participants and it reawakens pride in one's ethnic background. (AV)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Murray

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER"

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED141256

OPTIONS IN EDUCATION
PROGRAM TRANSCRIPTS OF
A WEEKLY SERIES BROADCAST BY
MEMBER STATIONS OF
NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

A CO-PRODUCTION OF NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO AND THE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY. PRINCIPALLY FUNDED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUE OF EDUCATION. ADDITIONAL FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND THE CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK.

SO 010 142

Program #80 LEARNING FROM THE PAST: ORAL HISTORY

May 30, 1977

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"Copyright © 1977 by National Public Radio & The Institute for Educational Leadership."

I was born in 1885 in an old shack in Campbell County, South Dakota.

Of course, I was the oldest in the school, and I had to come out early in the Spring, and come back late in the Fall when school lets out. We only had at that time - we had a schoolhouse that was built in 1904 here, and we had two rooms there, but sometimes we only had one teacher.

When my grandfather slipped the ring on her finger, it was the first time they'd ever touched, a story that all the family remembered.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair, and those are bits and pieces of some histories you won't find in your high school history textbook.

MERROW: Maybe that's not really history. After all, it was just ordinary people talking about things that happened to them, talking about what they remember as important.

BLAIR: It's called "Oral History."

MERROW: This week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, we're plunging into that debate. Is Oral History really history? Can you trust people's memory?

DURWARD HOLMES

I don't know if you can hear those sounds or not, clearly. But I'm down by the river, and it's dark, and I'm listening to the sounds from the swamp. The frogs crying for rain, and there's a southeast wind blowing the water up into the bayous and canals. It's quiet, and closer to the time in feeling that you want me to talk about for your report. It goes back a long, long way, and the more I think about those times and days, in material things, rough? Yes. They were. We didn't have too much, but what we had we enjoyed. And we were proud of what we were as individuals. An accomplishment like notoriety or international acclaim wasn't it. It was whether or not you could load a wheel barrel fuller than anyone else and move it. Just proud of what you did day to day and well.

BLAIR: That's Durward Holmes, who lives in Mobile, Alabama. That was from a tape recording sent to his daughter, the beginning of an oral history of their family and the Great Depression in Coosa County, Alabama.

MERROW: People all over the country are using tape recorders to capture and preserve family stories. Since the phenomenal success of Alex Haley's book and television series about his family, "Roots" has become a household word. But are roots -, yours and mine - really history?

BLAIR: Henry Ford said, "History is bunk." He meant we should concentrate on today and tomorrow.

MERROW: There are a lot of students who think history is boring, just memorizing names of kings and presidents and dates of battles and treaties.

BLAIR: And there are academic, traditional historians who say that oral history is bunk because oral historians don't check out facts. They don't abide by the rules of evidence. They're just glorified gossips collecting trivia.

MERROW: The controversy over oral history often comes down to a question of which camp you're in -- pro-Studs Terkel or anti-Studs Terkel.

STUDS TERKEL

TERKEL: I was simply gathering thoughts of people, talking to people who had never been asked about their lives before - their feelings, what the wellspring is that makes them, their grievances, their dreams. Now, these are called in a stereotypical fashion "ordinary people."

BLAIR: That's Studs Terkel, Chicago broadcaster and author who's been collecting the memories of ordinary people for years. Historians say that Terkel doesn't let you know what questions he asks to get his responses. Or he has no valid sample technique.

MERROW: His defenders say he's doing serious social history by giving a voice to people who've been silenced and omitted from past histories -- ethnic groups, working class people, women, Native Americans, even corporate executives.

BLAIR: Terkel disengages himself from controversy by saying simply that he is not an historian - oral or otherwise. He talked with Scott Simon in Chicago.

TERKEL:
I discovered, during my adventures with the three books, Hard Times, about the Great Depression of the Thirties, Working, about peoples' attitudes towards their jobs; the Division Street America, thoughts about people in the large cities of America - that each person is wholely different, and, thus, each person is extraordinary. And that when you talk to the non-celebrated people, there's something very exciting when they open up. If they feel you are really listening, and, as they open up, and as they talk about their lives, talking about things they've never talked about before to anyone, not even their closest friends or members of the family, sometimes you play back the tape recorder to the person who had never been taped before, and the person says, "I'd like to hear what I sound like." And, after a moment of listening, that person, man or woman, might say, "I never knew I felt that way before." Well, that's a revelatory moment. I call that epiphanal, really.

SIMON: Do you sit down with the truckdriver and, say, talk about the Bears or White Sox to begin with because you think somewhere that that's something that interests him?

TERKEL: No. That might be patronizing, see. It would depend on the person. I'd sit down and maybe talk about childhood. No. I wouldn't do that. Each one is different. If a guy is interested in the Bears, fine. But not just because he's a truckdriver. What's it like sitting in that truck 24 hours, or an 8-hour day, going cross-country, whatever it is. He says, "My kidneys. Oh, my God, my kidneys, or my hearing." And, then, he goes on to other

things - the humiliations, the fears, dangers, and the brutishness of which sometimes he's guilty without realizing it. This raises a big question - and this is a big one! - Does one have to experience the agony in order to understand that person, the other person's agony?

SIMON: One of the limitations of conventionally documented history in journalism, according to Studs Terkel, is that it's so frequently the well-educated speaking with the well-educated, the winners with other survivors. Youngsters, he thinks, frequently grow up without understanding their parents as human beings.

TERKEL: Kids know nothing about the Depression. They weren't told what it was like by their parents. They knew, as history books tell them, Roosevelt was elected four times, millions unemployed, a war breaks out, prosperity. That's all they know. They didn't know what it was like to be humiliated, what it was like to be fearful - Where is the next meal coming from? - what it is to stand in line like a bunch of Alaskan dogs, a thousand guys applying for five jobs. You know why the parents never told them that?

SIMON: It hurt.

TERKEL: A sense of shame - because they - and here is one of the sadder things - blamed themselves. They hadn't questioned society. What went wrong with the machinery? Something's wrong with me because I'm not working.

SIMON: For a time, at least, it's possible under the best of interviewing circumstances to be listened to, and to know that your words have weight. For National Public Radio, this is Scott Simon in Chicago.

BLAIR: Studs Terkel is not an historian - at least that's what he says. But his books have made many people feel that we can all be historians - especially of our own family. Let's go back to Alabama now, and Durward Holmes' story about Coosa County and a man named Os Gamble.

MORE WITH DURWARD HOLMES

HOLMES: I remember vividly a case where one of his many children - he had several - was accidentally killed by a neighbor's boy. The boy's name was Breedlove, I believe. And he thought it would really be funny to circle a shotgun shell and take the shot away, and then fire the blank at this boy, and frighten him. But someone forgot to tell him that the wad from the shell was equally lethal, and it blasted a hole in the boy's stomach, and he died almost immediately. There was no law suit. There was no problem between the families. There was a shared sorrow that something had happened that should not have happened. And everyone shared their grief with the Gamble family and with the Breedlove family, and other than a few minor incidents with children saying, "There's the boy who got a boy." - nothing happened. And this was pretty much the way the times were.

This time, I guess was about 1931, maybe '32, somewhere around that period, the deepest part of The Depression. I'm remembering right now a very painful thing that happened for your Uncle Ebert. He was deep in love, or infatuated, with a little girl in the neighborhood. I think her name was Leona Jenkins. But we had at the church a box supper, and at the box supper the girls secretly made box lunches, tied them in pretty ribbons, and these were auctioned off at the church to raise money for the church. This was at

Grimes Chapel, which was named after your grandfather. And every girl let the boy that she was interested in know somehow the secret of what she had done to mark the lunch. And E.B. was aware of the ribbon that was on Leona's box, and he was bidding desperately with all he had against another fellow there in the church on the night of the box supper. I think the bid was up to about 35¢, which was almost unheard of for a box lunch to go for. And Art Stanville slammed the door to the church open, and he came in with a bullwhip in his leggin's and he swung down, and he looked up and he saw the pretty box, and he said, "I'll give 50¢." And, of course, my brother, I think, had 40¢, and that wiped him out; and everybody else. And Art bought the lunch, and took it and left, and went home to his wife. And left E.B. and Leona with a broken heart.

MERROW: Is that story by Durward Holmes oral history, or just family trivia?

BLAIR: A social historian might see some significant themes in it. The South is known as one of the most violent and poverty stricken sections of the country.

MERROW: But how do we know whether family stories are true or not? One author, Eli Evans, doesn't think the question is important. He thinks all of us could benefit from asking our families about the past, and he tells us how to do it.

ELI EVANS

EVANS: If you get stuck, pull out the family albums, go through the pictures and talk about the people in the pictures. Ask them about the kind of clothes they wore the first day they went to school, ask about the sad things - the wars, and what funerals were like. And I think, in the end of this process, people will have a rich interchange between the family on which they can build on relationships that can come out of oral history.

BLAIR: Eli Evans, author of "The Provincials," an oral history of Jews in the South. He talked about the South and oral history with Jo Ellyn Rackleff.

EVANS: The South is more conscious of its history maybe than any other section of the country because its history is so tortured and so poignant, and on the part of Blacks and whites so real. The South is defined by its history, a captive of it in many ways. One thing that is true, though, the South has an incredibly rich oral tradition. It, of course, has a rich written tradition, too, but that's another story. But Blacks passed on the history we now know, the history of their own people and of their own past from generation to generation in an oral style. And so much of white story-telling in the South is interlaced with language. For interviewers, for people interested in oral history, the South is just a rich, rich gold mine of activity and stories and wonderment. When you grow up in the Bible Belt Jewish, I think in many ways what I was doing was a search very much like many other writers have undergone which is a search for their own roots - something which is very much alive in America today from all people. Alex Haley, in some ways, is the most celebrated example, but he is an example in a train of history, really. He is not a sort of a bubble that burst suddenly on the scene. The search for roots in this country among writers has been going on for many, many decades. And I always felt that somewhere in between those two streams of history, Southern writing and Jewish

literature from the North, there was a book to be written, and it was a book on Jews in the South - growing up in this, if I can put it this way, this mysterious underland of America, where you both belong and don't belong.

And, then, sometime in the late Sixties, a cousin happened to be moving, and she found this little, yellowing, typed manuscript, which was 100 pages of my grandmother's oral history. I began to read it, and I was just struck down by it. Here was this brilliant woman, really, talking about growing up in the Eastern North Carolina tobacco belt in the 1915's, 1920's, running this little store in a town that had nine Jewish families in it. The thing just bristled with quotes. Quotes like, "The lonely days were Sundays. You know, Sundays when everyone else in town went off to church, and we'd sit there at the top of our store and watch them." And just these poignant, wonderful stories how when my grandfather slipped the ring on her finger, and it was the first time they'd ever touched; how he'd decided they would have the first movie house in this little town, and invited everybody in town because they were very progressive people, and they started this Charlie Chaplin movie, and all the lights in town blew out. A story that all the family remembered, and it was important.

Well, the reason I was telling this story is that my grandmother's written, oral history - if I can put it that way - triggered in me a powerful bridge to the past. This was a rich story of American life that had never been told, and as I began to interview, I suddenly realized that my grandmother's story which I had not really thought of as relevant was relevant, and that the one way I could convey to people the experience of growing up Jewish in the South was to write about myself, to interview my parents, to write my own story, to alternate those chapters with the history of Jews in the South, and by doing that I could convey to the reader some sense of what the experience was like for three generations.

Interviewing my parents, as an interviewer, was really one of the profound events of my life. For one thing, one had to organize such an interview. One had to think about family trees and relatives, and the town my parents grew up in, the lives that they had led. And I found myself interviewing them, and asking questions that I would never have asked as a son, and the very fact that I was recording the history really excited them, and galvanized a lot of interaction between us. So, the stories we heard, I think, were much different than the stories we would have heard had they been a casual conversation.

I haven't been in analysis, but a lot of people have. And much of psychoanalysis focuses on the relationship with your parents. But what people don't focus on is the relationship of your parents with their parents, which is where their qualities come from. And I found out, somehow very comforting, that my grandmother was very ambitious, very organized. She had to be. She had nine children to contend with.

RACKLEFF: I've looked at a lot of books just in trying to decide what to talk about on this thing called oral history, which is getting bigger by the moment. And, at first, when I started reading them, I was so moved by things, things that I thought were like my family, and ultimately, I started feeling kind of empty about it, and I was thinking what drama is there in my life. As you said, the immigrant story is so dramatic. But if oral history does anything, it ought to make you feel that your life is important. So, if you're sitting in a suburb outside of Atlanta, what do you have to pass on?

EVANS: You know, I don't think oral history is necessarily just a recounting of facts about people. I mean, the important thing about it is what feelings were, what emotions were, what was it like, what was that era like.

MERROW: Eli Evans, author of "The Provincials," an oral history of Jews in the South.

("THE GRAY GOOSE" sung by Bernice Reagan)

BERNICE REAGAN

BLAIR: That's another kind of oral historian, a storyteller, or folk singer. Her name is Bernice Reagan. The song, "The Gray Goose," is a sort of allegory about slavery and freedom, a mixture of African and Christian cultures. Bernice Reagan visits schools, bringing with her African customs and spirituals from the days of slavery in America.

REAGAN: Okay. And by this time we have an indication that the preacher, he wanted the gray goose for his dinner. When he couldn't get his gray goose for his dinner, he got mad and says, "Well, if I can't eat yah, at least my hogs will eat you." Right?

STUDENT: Yeah, what you said was, "A hog would eat anything."

REAGAN: Yes. That's right. Throw him in the hog pen because a hog would eat anything. Did they let the gray goose go?

STUDENTS: No.

REAGAN: No. He really got serious. He said, "If I can't eat yah, my hogs can't eat yah, I'm going to fix you." What happened.

STUDENTS: Broke the saw's teeth out.

REAGAN: Broke the saw's teeth out. And then? And what are goslings?

STUDENTS: Baby geese!

REAGAN: Right. The best way to prove that you still exist is to be able to reproduce. So, the goose not only showed that he survived, and was not the preacher's dinner, the goose had some babies to show that he was still a functioning goose. Okay. This next song also comes from slavery. Now, when Black people got to this country, most of the people who had settled this country practiced a certain religion. What was the religion?

STUDENT: Christianity.

REAGAN: Christianity was based on what book?

STUDENTS: The Bible.

REAGAN: The Bible, right. Now, as Black people began to learn about Christianity and especially this book, they became attracted to certain stories in the book, and they made up songs about the stories. The songs are called "Spirituals." Now, I'm going to do you one of those spirituals, and then we'll talk about it as I do it.

("Song of Daniel," a Spiritual, sung by Bernice Reagan)

MERROW: Bernice Reagan just demonstrated that oral history isn't new. Those songs are hundreds of years old, and they're more than entertainment.

BLAIR: The most important oral histories were probably put to music - particularly in cultures where there were no books and few readers - American slavery, for example.

MERROW: Today, oral history ends up written. It's recorded and transcribed and edited by folklorists who collect all kinds of family sayings and stories and try to identify trends in the way we all do things as a nation of families.

STEVE ZEITLIN

MAAS: When my grandparents came to America, they brought their parents with them, and my great-grandfather was an old man, and when Napoleon was retreating from Russia, he had driven Napoleon's coach, and he had seen Napoleon himself, and being a good old German, he hated Napoleon with a Germanic passion. And he remembered the plume that Napoleon's hat had - it came up over his head. Anyway, anything having to do with Napoleon . . . .

BLAIR: Arthur Maas of Greenbelt, Maryland, talking with family folklorist Steve Zeitlin of the Smithsonian Institution here in Washington.

MERROW: Zeitlin goes into people's homes and asks them how they celebrate Christmas or Passover, and what they do on birthdays and funerals. He talked with Jo Ellyn Rackleff about oral history and family folklore.

ZEITLIN: The stories that people tell in their families, which we take so much for granted, are actually a part of a folk literature of America. And I'm trying to put together a collection of family stories and to try to see the patterns in family stories. They differ somewhat from oral history in a number of respects. The most important one, perhaps, is that in trying to get at what the patterns are that we put into our stories, as Americans and as human beings, we're not so concerned with what the accuracy of any given story is.

RACKLEFF: My next question was going to be -- Who cares about all these stories besides you and me? And do you care about my family's stories? And why collect them?

ZEITLIN: One of the classic jokes about this kind of thing is that people never like to watch other people's home movies. And one of the things that we did as part of the program is that we put together a documentary about home movies which just really showed - it took like the home movies of five different families, all with the same scene in them, and showed them to people, and people were transfixed by it. I mean, people were so fascinated by the fact that these home movies really seemed to say so much about other people.

RACKLEFF: What was the scene you picked?

ZEITLIN: Oh, we picked a number of them. One of them kids splashing in a plastic pool, and playing in the snow, and birthday parties.

RACKLEFF: It's doing kind of two things: If you listen or read stories that you collect, you get a feeling that you're a part of the nation, that

you fit in, that you've splashed in the pool, and, on the other hand, if you're telling a historian, like you, a story, it says to you, "I'm important. I'm as important as President Nixon because I've tried my best, and I've lived a good life." Is that part of it?

ZEITLIN: Yeah. Very much. One of the things we do in talking to people is that we just give them a chance to kind of express themselves in a culture where one of the most oppressing sensations is being so utterly anonymous. Almost all Americans were immigrants to this country. And one of the most common kinds of family stories, and the furthest back story that people tell, is often "how they left the old country to come to America."

RACKLEFF: Tell me a couple of your favorites.

ZEITLIN: Okay. It's the story of a crossing out of Eastern Europe, a border-crossing story. It comes from a Jewish family that was escaping from Russia, and there were two people who were trying to escape, one of whom happened to look very Russian, and the other one who didn't, who looked a little bit more Jewish, and they were brothers. And they were on the train together, and they were trying to get across the border. So, one of them said to the other, "You go across the border with the baggage, and I'll distract the guard at the border." And, so, this man's brother started across the border, and the other guy started chatting with the guard, and he said, "Well, what's it like out here guarding the border?" He said, "Yeah, it's a beautiful night," and he's trying to distract the guard. And, finally, the guard says, "It's terrible the number of Jews that try to cross the border." And this man says, "Well, you know, what do you do if you see a Jew trying to cross the border?" And the guard says, "I shoot them on sight." And, so, the man says, "That's terrific. That's exactly the best thing you can possibly do."

RACKLEFF: Meanwhile, his brother's creeping . . .

ZEITLIN: Meanwhile his brother's creeping across. But, all of a sudden, the guard looks over and he sees this man's brother crossing the border, and he starts to raise his rifle to shoot the man, and, so, his brother looks at the guard and says, "Look. Give me the gun. Let me have a chance. I mean, you're here all the time. You can shoot Jews any day of the week. Let me have a chance to shoot him." And, so, the guard gives him his gun, and he hits the guard over his head with his own gun, and then the two of them cross the border together.

RACKLEFF: That's a great story. I see what you mean. A folklorist can't be too concerned with accuracy.

ZEITLIN: Right, right. Maybe it is accurate. I don't know. That's the kind of story that's probably been greatly exaggerated, if it ever was true. But that's sort of the furthest back story that they tell because it's where the family history began. And one interesting fact to us is that Alex Haley, in his articles and lectures where he talks about how he came to write "Roots," talks about sitting at his home in Tennessee and listening to his grandmother's stories, and the furthest back story that was passed down in his family was how Kunte Kinte went out to chop wood in Africa one day and he was caught and brought into slavery. And the story of how he came to America was the furthest back story in his family, too, as different as that experience was from the immigrant experience. You're still having the furthest back story being how the family got here in the first place.

RACKLEFF: So, there's holiday traditions and crossing-over stories, and what else?

ZEITLIN: The list goes on. I mean, one of the things that we're fond of, the forms I'm fond of, is family expressions. And everybody has these in their family. One that was told in my family is "Jumping Off The 15-Story Window For The Breeze On A Hot Day."

RACKLEFF: You mean, they were desperate for air?

ZEITLIN: Well, the idea was whenever you're overdoing something, that expression will be used because it goes back to a time when I was being offered some Chiclets, and instead of taking one Chiclets, I took five. And my brother said to me, "Well, why don't you just jump off the 15-story window for a breeze on a hot day?" And that becomes used in anytime that a situation arises that's parallel to that one.

RACKLEFF: I have a great one. My Aunt Bessie, when she is saying that someone is being ostentatious, she would say, "Well, you don't have to be plain as a pig on a sofa." Which is as obvious as a pig on a sofa, I guess, we would say. A pig on a sofa is pretty obvious.

BLAIR: Family folklorist Steve Zeitlin, Coordinator of the Family Folklore Project at the Smithsonian Institution here in Washington.

MORE WITH ARTHUR MAAS

MAAS: And things were pretty much in short supply. One of the regular visitors who came through was a peddler, and he also stayed at my grandparents' place when he came by. Grandmother, who I never saw, was a lady who liked to see people eat, and so she gave him a dish and he took a spoonfull. "Ahh, Mrs. Maas, make a dead man be alive." So, ever since then, if something is exceptionally good, why, they say; "Make a dead man be alive!"

MARGARET YOKUM

MERROW: In family folklore, you enter the houses and lives of the people you interview. Folklorist Margaret Yokum says, "The relationship between the historian and the person being interviewed is personal and carries with it a lot of responsibility."

YOKUM: Well, after you interview this person about their life, what are they going to be thinking about after they've rehashed all these years for you? And are you going to go back and visit them because they'll call you and want you to come back? And are you willing to be a part of a person's life for a short period of time and realize everything that that does mean? I believe that the person who goes in for an interview of a personal, sort of "life history" nature owes the person they're working with a lot more than many people have given them.

MERROW: Folklorist Margaret Yokum talked with Tom Looker in Amherst, Massachusetts.

YOKUM: I don't think it's all surprising in a time when people are increasingly interested in ecology, alternate sources of power, making their own food again and gardening, that some people are turning back to people of

past generations who knew how to get along in a world without electricity, who made their own clothes, grew their own food, did the kind of processes that somehow many of us are now separated from - to find out those things once again. It is a link to the past that we might need for the future. I find now people in my family might speak a little bit more about their past. When I'm around, it's no longer a thing that anybody's really ashamed or not interested in talking about.

MERROW: Folklorist Margaret Yokum.

("The Old Rugged Cross")

ADRIANA NEUSMA

NEUSMA: I was born in 1885 in a little sod shack. It didn't even have a floor in it, or a door, in Campbell County, South Dakota. I guess I was the first baby in our county, and there were a few settlers there, and built a sod church, our Reformed Church there, about three miles away from my folks. A few settlers that were there. There were mostly Dutchmen.

MERROW: That's Adriana Neusma, who lived in Strasburg, North Dakota. Neusma, who is 92 when this interview was recorded, has since died. She led the kind of self-reliant life that folklorist Margaret Yokum talked about. Reporter John Ydstie talked to Neusma as a part of an oral history project, "Our Town."

NEUSMA: Dad would go to Eureka maybe once a month, and he'd get a few groceries, but we kids - we didn't have school in the winter then because we didn't have the fuel, you know. And it was just three months in the summer time. But I think as far as being as satisfied and happy, people were more satisfied then than they are now. We didn't have all kinds of toys that we could lay our hands on. Well, in the wintertime, we'd usually sit around in the sod house - oh, it was cozy, you know, and my dad spent most of his time during the winter reading stories. We had story books. We kids could sit there all evening, and it was Dutch, we could sit there all evening, and we'd read such interesting stories, and we didn't want to go to bed. "Read some more, Dad." Of course, that was all in Dutch. And we played checkers or something like that, and I don't know time never laid heavy on my hands that I can remember when I was a child.

BLAIR: The memories of people like Adriana Neusma don't have to be lost when they die. By talking to residents, young and old, of Strasburg, North Dakota, John Ydstie was able to paint a portrait of the town as they remembered it. Another resident he talked with was Pious Kraft, who is of German-Russian ancestry.

("Wedding Dance")

4 PIOUS KRAFT

KRAFT: My folks, you know, we came over here - well, we come from the Ukraine. When we come over here in 1906, and we landed in Quebec 12 days on a boat, and we come down to Aberdeen, South Dakota. You know what the fare cost at that time? From the Russian railway station to Aberdeen, South Dakota, we paid 140 rubles for the ticket. At that time, a ruble was only worth about 55¢.

YDSTIE: That would have been about $70.

KRAFT: It was cheap, wasn't it? Of course, it wasn't 1st Class, I know.

YDSTIE: Well, what was Strasburg like when you first got here?

KRAFT: Strasburg? Well, there was two stores here, three, already, when I got here. You know, those days - every-town had a little band and a baseball team those days. Not anymore, mind you. Everybody knew everybody when you settled.

("Wedding Dance")

BLAIR: That music, by the way, is from a German-Russian Wedding Dance, a part of the old country that Pioda Kraft and others in Strasburg still enjoy.

MERROW: As part of his sound portrait of Strasburg, John Ydstie also talked to Native Americans. Norbert Davis, a metchief, or mixed blood, is a descendant of Native Americans who married French trappers from Canada. Davis lived at the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation and he told Ydstie how his white great-grandfather came to be a part of the Turtle Mountain tribe.

NORBERT DAVIS

DAVIS: They landed in New York. They heard talk about discovering gold in places. So, he went along with this bunch to go to the big office, and then while they were on the train, they saw some antelopes running. So, he shot one and crippled it. So, he start chasing after it. He didn't know how to hunt much. He kept chasing this, and got quite a ways, got dark on him, and he lost the trail. And come to our camp where he found out they were not his people. They were Indians and mixed bloods, and he was warned not to go near Indians for they might scalp him. But what these people were after was to try to find a herd of buffalos where they could hunt. So, he went one day to a high hill, with the hopes of seeing the sight of his wagon train or somebody. The Indians had what they called scouts. So, one of the scouts reported to the head man - he was a "metis" or mixed blood named J. B. Wilkie - well, they captured him, and they brought him to the camp. And they had to guard him at night for a while till they found out that he was such a good hearted man, and he was always helping the women-folks taking care of their meats, drying, curing, and so forth. And the women liked him. And they begged their husbands to call up a meeting and adopt that man as one of their own for such a nice man.

MERROW: That's pow-wow music from the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. The oral history project, "Our Town," was sponsored By the North Dakota Committee for the Humanities and Public Issues.

BLAIR: We've talked about different kinds of oral history - folk telling, family interviews, social history, and sound portraits. There's a theme running through all of this, a common thread, that the melting pot theory is no longer valid. People don't want to bury their past anymore. They want to rediscover it, and take pride in it.

MERROW: Nancy Seifer found that to be true for working class women. For her book, "Nobody Speaks For Me," Seifer went into their homes, sat around the kitchen table with them, and talked - and listened.

SEIFER: We talked around the kitchen table. That seems to be the favorite place for talking and entertaining, in general, in most women's homes. It's comfortable. We drink coffee. In some cases, smoke cigarettes. It's a bad habit that I do. And that's where most of the interviewing went on. And that was a very comfortable place to be. The feeling that comes across is that -- not that they're so special, necessarily, but that most people are too passive; that they just sit and let things happen to them. Whereas, these women feel - some of them have articulated it in these words - that you can't let things happen to you.

RACKLEFF: Some of the criticism of all history, generally, is that all of you are running around collecting a bunch of trivia that isn't really academically sound.

SEIFER: And if people's lives are trivia, then I guess it's trivia; But what really motivated me to do this book was the fact that working class women in America don't write books. They don't write magazine articles. They very rarely appear on television. And with all the changes that the Women's Movement was bringing about, nobody was speaking for them because they're not . . . because they, in general, based on the definition of what working class people in America are, the category - although I hate categories - they would fall into - one aspect of that would be people without any education beyond high school. And I knew that a lot of the stereotypes of working class women that the middle class feminists especially held were not true.

RACKLEFF: Like what?

SEIFER: Oh, that they were passive and dependent, traditional, conventional, and were not interested in equality, or certainly not in change. Those kinds of things.

RACKLEFF: Now, wait a minute. Isn't that really true of a lot of them, and the ones you picked were the ones who weren't like that?

SEIFER: I don't think it's any more true of them than it is of middle class women, or wealthy women. I think most people are fearful of change to a degree.

RACKLEFF: It's a strange vocation. You're not a historian. You said you didn't feel like a writer. You are just sort of there in the middle.

SEIFER: That's right. I think it has to be seen for what it is. It is people's memories of things - more than it is history, as we know it. And I think there is a legitimate place for that, and this whole business of oral history, which is just blooming now, just blossoming all over the place, is clearly a result of technology. I mean, now that we have tape recorders, we can go out and get stories from people that in the past you couldn't. And I think what's happened over the past few years - really since the Civil Rights Movement - is a reawakening of our sense of pride in one's ethnic background, and a rekindling of interest in all those immigrants - you know, "those huddled masses yearning to be free" that everyone wanted to forget about because we were the descendants of them, and we lived in the new land, and we had every opportunity, supposedly, that one could want. And, so, as opposed to shutting out the past, and pretending it didn't exist, and wanting

to forget that we may have had ancestors who lived in ghettos of various kinds, you know, on the lower East Side of Manhattan, or in the back of the Yards in Chicago, or wherever it was, and, you know, all the jokes about the Jews, the Poles, and the Italians - and all that stuff - I think there's been a 180 degree turn towards looking legitimately at what happened, and wanting to have a sense of pride in what happened.

BLAIR: Nancy Seifer, author of "Nobody Speaks For Me," self-portraits of working class women in America. She talked with Jo Ellyn Rackleff. Like Studs Terkel, Nancy Seifer does not call herself an historian, and most historians would probably agree.

MERROW: The debate over oral history is heating up. Family oral histories in books like "Roots," "Working," and "Nobody Speaks For Me" are part of a new wave. But major institutions, like Columbia University, called the "Fort Knox of Oral History," have been collecting spoken recollections for over 20 years, and the term "oral history" actually dates back to the invention of sound recordings. The big difference is that Columbia University, UCLA, the National Archives and the Library of Congress here in Washington concentrate on the lives of famous people, the people you read about in history books. They collect letters, Inaugural Speeches, news broadcasts, diaries . . . .

BLAIR: And in the case of former President Nixon, tape recordings of telephone conversations.

MERROW: But these institutions are concerned with research methods, and only interview people they deem important, and unique.

BLAIR: This kind of oral history is much harder to collect and validate as Dr. Alan Shaffer, Chairman of the Department of History at Clemson University, told Carol Gable.

DR. ALAN SHAFFER

SHAFFER: If someone were writing a book about the Spanish-American War in 1920, there were still people alive who had been in that War, and they would talk to. So, it's not a new thing. It's become a much bigger thing in history because of the invention of the tape recorder - especially the small, light, portable tape recorder. Because that meant that historians and other interested people can go out and interview people on the past, and then get it down on tape exactly - instead of relying on transcriptions or stenography, or their own memory, about what someone said to them, which is clearly frequently very faulty. So, it's not a new thing. It's just an old thing used in a new way. It's a valid tool when it's used as judicibusly as any other tool in history. Historians do research. We read papers; we read letters; we read diaries - anything we can get hold of to understand the past. If we can use someone's [redacted]emory, we will use that, but it has to be used carefully. It has t[redacted]sed within the "rules of evidence." In other words, you can't go out and interview your grandmother about what happened to her when she was 15 years old, and expect that everything she says to you is true. No more than I could read the letters of Thomas Jefferson, and assume that everything he wrote was true. You know, from your own experience that you write letters to people, and sometimes you tell the truth, and sometimes you lie a little bit. You fudge it for various reasons. When you write your mother, you probably don't tell her every blessed thing

that happened to you, right? So, if someone's writing your biography fifty years from now, or one hundred years from now, or five hundred years from now, if they believe everything you say, they're going to get a very faulty view of history.

I did this - when was it? Around 1960 or '61. I was working on a biography of a New York City Congressman who grew up in what's called East Harlem, the Italian Section of New York, and he died when he was 51 years old. There were a lot of people around who were quite a bit older, but who remembered him, including one man who was one of his best friends when they were kids. So, I found him, and I talked with him. He was a very successful businessman in New York. I talked to him about his friend's childhood, and he'd tell me all kinds of stories - including one that really intrigued me - that he was a great student in high school, a super-student, bright at everything, best in the school. Then I checked the school records which is available, and he wasn't the best student in the school. I think he failed every science and math course he ever took. The only reason he graduated at all is because they broke the rules to get him out. This man's memory of him was faulty because this was an old friend of his. The man was now dead. He knew that I was writing a book about him, and he wanted to give me the best picture of someone he admired very much. If I had simply taken his word about it, I would have written a dishonest biography.

MERROW: Alan Shaffer, Chairman of the History Department at Clemson University, talked with Reporter Carol Gable of Station WEPR in Greenville, South Carolina.

AN ORAL HISTORY LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

BLAIR: The University of California at Berkeley has a famous collection of oral history. Jay Baltazore has this report.

BALTZORE: If you're looking for the personal experiences of folks who lived during the Depression, you might turn to Studs Terkel, but if your interest lies more in the political history of the administration of former Governor Pat Brown of California, you can go to the Regional Oral History Library at the University of California in Berkeley. Mimi Stein, an Interviewer with the Library, is convinced that oral history is an essential part of academic research.

STEIN: We interview mostly people who are important in government or in politics, or in business. And many people might say, "Well, these people don't need to be interviewed because they've already written a great deal, and their papers are left to archives, and all this kind of thing." But especially today that really is precisely why we need to interview them because there are many gaps left in papers that are left to archives. For example, just recently there was a study done of what most ex-congressmen do with their papers, and what's in the papers. And it was discovered that their campaigns are very, very little documented in their papers, and this is one of the things that we talk about a lot in our interviews - is how they organized the campaign, who gave them money, who were the important people in back of them, and these are some very important questions.

BALTZORE: Aside from getting the straight, historical facts from participants, oral history is a means to pick up on short, personal experiences - most of which are never written in the biographies or textbooks. One of

these involves former President Truman and a former National Democratic Committeewoman from California. She told one of the Library interviewers about an encounter she had with Truman during the 1952 Presidential Campaign. It involves Truman's daughter, Margaret, while they were in San Francisco. Unfortunately, the quality of most of the Library's interviews are marginal, but this short incident is one you're never going to read about in history books.

COMMITTEEWOMAN: So, he turned to me, and he said, "Am I President of the United States, or am I not the President?" I said, "Well, of course, you're President of the United States, Mr. Truman." That was my first President, too. I was very much in awe of him. And he said, "Well, will you do something for me?" I said, "Anything." "Will you go into Margaret's room, and will you tell her that the President of the United States said she has been late in starting everytime, every place we have been so far, and that the President of the United States is going to leave in ten minutes whether she's ready or not." So, I said, "Are you sure you want me to tell her that? She'd pay much more attention if you told her that." And he said, "Like hell she would."

BALTEZORE: How can you be sure that what they're telling you is the truth and how can you guard against falsehoods or lies?

STEIN: During the interview session, if you know what they've told you is inaccurate, you can phrase a question in such a way that you're not going to put them off, or insult them, or ruin the rapport that you've built up. You can say, for example, "Well, I understand from other people I've talked to, or from books that I've read, that there are other explanations for how that event occurred. And the way they tell it is this." And, then, you give them what you think is closer to the truth. And see whether they buy it, or throw it back at you or whatever. You can try that. If they still insist that their version of the story is the correct one, or that that's the way they saw it, and there's nothing that's going to budge them from that, then sometimes we'll add a footnote and say, "For an alternate explanation of this event, see an interview with Mr. X."

BALTEZORE: Mimi Stein, an Interviewer with the Regional Oral History Library at the University of California. In Berkeley, California, I'm Jay Baltezore for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

MERROW: The debate about what is history and what is not really isn't that important. What is important is the role of history in our lives. If oral history infuses in us an interest in the past, that's good, and if it can fill in the gaps left by traditional historians who neglected Blacks, women, Native Americans and working class people in this country, then it will help give future generations a better picture of what life was like for us today.

BLAIR: But sheer nostalgia and sloppy research don't have a place in the academic world.

MERROW: And, too, authors may be exploiting the lives of people who share their memories.

KIM TOWNSEND

BLAIR: But certain kinds of oral history do rock back and forth between fact and fiction. And one enterprising teacher has put that to good use. He uses oral history to teach writing. Tom Looker met Kim Townsend in Amherst, Massachusetts.

TOWNSEND: You're learning how to do a certain kind of writing, and, to me, it's an extremely important kind of writing.

LOOKER: In Professor Kim Townsend's Small Town Literature Course at Amherst College, students of English use the techniques of oral history in order to become better readers and writers of literature. The overall subject of the course is community. Townsend's students read works of fiction, sociology and journalism to learn about life in America's small towns. But they also go out into Amherst, and talk to people about the sense of community that exists in this small town.

TOWNSEND: What we did was not to go out with clipboards, not to go out with questions, not to go out with hypotheses even. But to go out to hear people and come back and analyze the way they talked, to hear what's not said, so to speak. It's a bit of advice actually that the hero of Winesburg, Ohio's teacher gives to him. He said, "If you're going to be a writer, you should learn to hear what people are thinking and not what they say."

LOOKER: So, you were sort of sending your students out to become readers of people?

TOWNSEND: Yes. But here, I guess, it's only an English teacher that could sit easy with this paradox. There has been an awful lot of re-creation of the talk that actually went on - whether it was recorded or not. And the paradox is that you may well get, as with a novel or a poem, you may come closer to the truth of the situation through rearrangement, distortion, through recreation than you do by taking down faithfully all that's thought and said.

LOOKER: So, Townsend's students listen to the people they interview as they would read a literary text, and they write up those interviews combining techniques of creative writing with the goal of journalistic accuracy. Not surprisingly, a number of Townsend's students have gone on to become reporters. Laurel Sorenson still lives around Amherst and works for a local newspaper.

SORENSON: The writing courses that I'd taken before really set up principles to follow. You had to do this technically. You had to research in this certain way. And this really allowed you to discover your own style, and lay off reflecting the style of someone else. Because you have to edit to get down the gestures a little bit, to get down the inflections of the voice, the rhythm of the speech pattern, capture just the analogies that are important to that other person and mean something to that other person. You're a reporter, a reflector. You have to be absolutely accurate and precise because you're acting as that other person's voice.

LOOKER: Using the techniques of oral history, Kim Townsend's students listen to the voices of real people, and, then, as students of literature, they face the challenge of re-creating those voices on the typewriter. For OPTIONS IN EDUCATION in Amherst, this is Tom Looker.

BLAIR: The real issue in all of this is the role history does play in our lives. The late anthropologist and author Jacob Bronowski, who wrote "The Ascent of Man," said, "History is not just people remembering. It's people acting and living their past in the present."

MERROW: By the way, if you're interested in recording family stories, you can get a good cassette recorder for around $100. Cassettes that are reliable and durable cost about $3.00 for an hour. Good luck.

> If you get stuck, pull out the family albums, go through the pictures and talk about the people in the pictures, ask them about the people in the town, the ministers. Ask them about what holidays were like. Ask them about where they were during the Depression, and what it was like, and what the Twenties were like - whether they were "Roaring" or not. And I think in the end of this process, people will have a rich interchange between the family that can come out of oral history.

MERROW: Reports for this program on oral history came in part from Carol Gable, Station WEPR, Greenville, South Carolina; Bob Compton, KBIA, Columbia, Missouri; John Ydstie, KCCM, Moorhead, Minnesota; Tom Looker in Amherst, Massachusetts; Scott Simon in Chicago, and Jay Baltezore in Berkeley, California.

BLAIR: If you'd like a transcript of this program on oral history, write National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. The transcript is 50¢, and a cassette is available for $5.00. Ask for Program #80.

MERROW: And, please, tell us the call letters of the NPR station you're listening to right now.

BLAIR: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is written and produced by Jo Ellyn Rackloff and John Merrow. The Assistant Producer is Katharine Ferguson. Technical Assistance by Maury Schlesinger.

MERROW: This program is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. Principal support is provided by the National Institute of Education. Additional funds come to us from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. I'm John Merrow.

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair, and this is NPR - National Public Radio.