

The Human Interest and Oral History Interview

by Alwyn Owen & Jack Perkins.

This segment, written by long-experienced broadcasters Alwyn Owen and Jack Perkins, has been extracted from their book *Speaking for Ourselves* (published by Penguin in 1986). The book is a collection of oral history interviews drawn from Radio New Zealand National's long-running *Spectrum* series, with an appendix detailing interviewing techniques.

Although the audience for this appendix was the amateur oral historian, it sets out an approach towards capturing human-interest interviews which are equally relevant to the budding radio interviewer.

We're delighted to bring you an abridged version of the appendix – as it makes interesting reading for anyone with a love of radio, and a desire to learn more about how programmes like *Spectrum* are put together.

Oral History and its Techniques

Oral history is so subjective and personal a thing that historians are often divided in their approach to it. Some accept it as a discipline in its own right, and others reject it, on the grounds that human memory is fallible and subjective, and that cross-checking and verification is frequently difficult and often impossible. Others take a middle ground.

The very qualities that give rise to uneasiness at times in the formal historian make for wider acceptance of oral history by the public at large. This is almost certainly because it is so frequently history at a common social level, in which the shared experience of emotions, if not of actual events, engenders a sense of participation.

Much of our formal written history outlines and analyses policies, decisions and events which have had a significant impact on our way of life. In so doing, it largely reflects the activities of legislators, statesmen, strategists and others whose exercise of power has helped shape our modern world. It goes without saying that historians must always be

vitality and validly concerned with such decisive matters, but history, like a mountain, can be observed from many viewpoints, and from each, a different perspective emerges.

The necessarily broad brush of formal history will fill in the light and shade of great events, but the fine detail of the effects of such events on ordinary people is often ill-defined. The scope and depth of the political and economic dislocation caused by the Depression of the 1930s can be amply illustrated by unemployment statistics, various economic indicators, and from Hansard and press reports, but the scope and depth of the day-to-day human misery which resulted is largely implied, and viewed at a distance.

Oral history can, however, provide us with first-hand accounts of those times; personal experiences which bring into sharp and close focus ordinary individuals coping with deprivation — and perhaps even more importantly, their feelings in so doing. Oral history, then, gives back to the people their own history. It holds a mirror to our shared past, and at the same time allows the uniqueness of individual experience to be expressed.

Oral history sits generally uneasily with politicians, officials, and wielders of power. Their recollections can be guarded, often unconsciously, perhaps programmed by years of public life and the understandable desire to conceal matters which may be embarrassing to them or to others. The recollections of ordinary people rather than those of former civic officials are thus more likely to bring alive the history of a small town, for example.

Among the sources of oral history are many individuals whose background and education dissuade them from recording their memories in written form. Yet these same people frequently have an eye, ear, and memory for detail — and a narrative skill — that equips them superbly as subjects for the tape recorder.

The type of history taught in the classrooms of many decades ago — 'battles and dates history' — has left a legacy in the minds of many. History, as they see it, is a ledger recording the debit and credit facts of past events, penned by the educated and professional classes. As an extension of this belief, they consider that only those in positions of authority are equipped to provide reliable historical evidence.

We have often found that enquiries for informants capable of bringing alive the history of a small town result in our being directed to former town officials, and a range of people respected for their prominence in community affairs. While the recollections of some of these people may be valuable, there is often a blandness and formality about them. It is often individuals whose names have not been disclosed — or indeed, those we have been warned to avoid — who have the powers of detailed observation, the

narrative gifts, and perhaps the slightly eccentric perspectives which make the town's past live again.

Because oral history applies to a time period within the span of living memory, it does not follow that all the material gathered must be fifty or sixty years old. The present becomes history in an instant, and the present and the recent past should also be a focus of attention. There is little point in waiting sixty years before recording, for instance, the first-hand experiences of the social division and conflict caused by the 1981 Springbok tour. In fact, there is much to commend recording, if not at the actual time of the event, certainly while memory is still fresh, uncoloured and unmodified by the passage of time.

One reason oral history concentrates on the early years of the twentieth century is simply a sense of urgency, the need to record information from this period while informants are still alive. The comparatively recent and widespread availability of small, cheap recorders, and the growing interest in, and acceptance of, oral history have naturally meant that the elderly have received the greatest attention.

There is, however, another strong reason for concentrating on the elderly. Despite the obvious drawbacks of failing memory, and the altering of perspectives with the passing of time, there is a well-known tendency which develops with old age — people want to remember their past, particularly their childhood. Early memories are intensely programmed, and many old people whose recollections of middle life are blurred and sketchy, and whose memory of recent events is even more vague, recall their childhood with a vigour, candour, and degree of accuracy rarely found in the memories of younger people.

The value of oral history is not limited to the material gathered on tape, or transcribed on paper. There are also what might be termed social benefits to the informants themselves, especially the older ones. This is because the oral historian is drawing on a living, responsive source, as opposed to the mainly inanimate documentary evidence of more formal history. And so it is not uncommon to find among people that the very process of sifting-back through their lives develops an awareness of the value of their personal past, and stimulates a sense of dignity and purpose which may have been dulled with advancing years. These benefits may also be enhanced by the feeling of new friendship and mutual trust and confidence which often develops between interviewer and informant during recording. The establishing of confidence and trust will be discussed in more detail when the interview itself is considered.

In one respect, the broadcaster who employs the techniques of oral history is in a unique position, being able to reach an audience with material in its original form — as speech. Radio New Zealand has within the collection of Sound Archives / Nga Taonga

Korero a recording made by Florence Nightingale — and another by a centenarian who recalled the great Wellington earthquake of 1855. In neither case is the information itself of outstanding interest, and certainly contemporaneous written accounts would furnish it in greater detail. The fascination lies in the voice, in the first-person account, from somebody who was there.

Thus, paradoxically, one of the greatest strengths of oral history is also one of its weaknesses — that in transcription to the printed page, its emotional intensity is lessened.

The purely informational content, of course, remains after transcription, and there is some compensation at least in its comparative accessibility in print.

Preparation

In recording oral history for radio, the experience has led us to divide interviews into two groups — the ‘specific’ and the ‘fishing’.

The ‘specific’ interview can be researched beforehand, but in ‘fishing’, the interviewer has to shape the material as it comes, searching for clues that will elicit the most telling information. ‘Fishing’ is often done when time precludes the vetting of an informant or a preliminary chat. The broad outlines of an informant’s life might be known - the fact perhaps that she was brought up in a West Coast coal-mining township and became the wife of a high-country sheep farmer. Under these conditions, the interviewer is forced to fossick for material, patiently following leads and asking many questions ‘on spec’ – and not being too disappointed when they lead up blind alleys.

In contrast is the informant who has undergone a specific experience on which research is available. An example from the book *Speaking for Ourselves* is the late Albert Roberts’s account of the wreck of the ship *Dundonald*. With this type of interview, research must be extensive and thorough. It is not enough to encourage the story-telling with a, ‘Yes, go on’. The interviewer must be thoroughly conversant with the story, so that he or she can guide the subject through his experiences, and through his reactions to them. The interviewer provides the skeleton of the story, and the informant fleshes it out.

These, then, are the two extremes of interviews; the majority will fall part-way between them.

Ideally, the interviewer should have a reasonable knowledge of the period relating to his interview, and of the subject itself. There are obvious sources for this — libraries, newspaper files, etc. Some crafts and occupations have an idiom of their own; for

example, a miner will talk of 'adits' and 'shafts' and 'drives'. A nodding acquaintance at least with the words of the trade is desirable. There are two reasons for this. The point of a story, or clues to further material, may well be lost if an interviewer is groping with the meaning of terms. More importantly, a person who has devoted a lifetime to a craft or occupation will not strike any degree of rapport with an interviewer who appears ignorant of commonplace expressions. Inevitably, there will be no depth to an interview in this situation.

It is important, whenever possible, to have a preliminary chat with the informant, and at this discussion the interviewer should clearly set out his objective — be it local history or whatever — and the end-use of the material. The interviewer will discuss the broad area he or she wishes to cover, at the same time keeping an alert ear open for other interesting material to follow up on during the interview.

A little time is needed for two people to establish a degree of mutual confidence, so this preliminary conversation should not be rushed. Most elderly people will talk readily about such traumatic events as the Depression; or an RSA badge might provide a cue to talk about the war years, and so open general conversation. Once the interviewer has established his or her credentials as an interested and informed listener, and the informant is relaxed, the conversation can become more specific.

Elderly people often doubt the value of their recollections, and a common response is, 'I don't know that I can remember much. I think you'd be wasting your time.' Occasionally this is indeed true, but careful questioning can very often elicit more information than the informant realised they possessed. It is worth stressing to such a person that the period they have lived through is like a jigsaw puzzle, with everybody holding one or two small but often significant pieces which might provide valuable information. Notes should be taken during the preliminary chat, and where applicable, the informant questioned about other people likely to have material of interest.

For preference, the interview should be undertaken a few days later. Points raised in the discussion can then if necessary be checked by both parties, and the few days gap will restore a spontaneity which might be lost should the interview follow too closely.

The 'preliminary chat' is a guideline only, and it has its exceptions. There is the occasional informant who is bursting to tell a story — possibly by pressure of recent events, possibly merely by nature. One of the stories in *Speaking for Ourselves* was recorded under just such circumstances. The wise oral historian keeps a recorder handy during the preliminary phase, ready for such occasions.

In dealing with informants from a culture other than that of the interviewer, social courtesies should be strictly followed. It may be customary, and is certainly courteous,

to be introduced to such informants by an intermediary. If extensive work is to be undertaken with older Maori informants, it may be necessary to first approach the kaumatua, or another significant figure in the individual's community. The decision may take time, during which the proposal will be discussed, and very likely the qualifications of the interviewer vetted. Assurance may be sought that any material will not be used for profit.

Within a Maori context, it is also customary — and gracious — to offer koha when recording. This can vary from an informal offering of some small delicacy to a donation to the marae fund in a more formal setting.

Whatever the cultural background of the informant, it is important in both the preliminaries and the actual recording not to tire him or her, nor disturb the normal daily pattern. Relatives can advise whether an elderly person is more alert at specific times of the day.

The Interview

It must be remembered that an interview is a social relationship between people, with its own conventions. These must be observed to establish and preserve mutual cooperation, trust and respect.

An interview is not a conversation (although it can be conversational in style), nor is it a dialogue. The interviewer's task is to get the informant to talk, and to guide that talk where necessary. Accordingly, the interviewer must avoid constant interruption, yet still play the part of guide and helper. Thoroughness of research must never show as a parade of knowledge. Nor should the interviewer be embarrassed by silence; pauses can add meaning in the context of an interview, and allow the informant time to think.

To seek only the facts in an oral history interview is to waste the potential of the medium; we also want to discover reactions to events. It is not enough to know that a woman had to make her own and her children's underclothing from flour bags during the Depression; we want to know how she felt about having to do so; what it did to her human dignity; the reactions of others.

In many cases — in recording for family archives, for instance — there is a further consideration. It is necessary to record not only the recollections and reactions of an elderly relative, but to preserve also the speaker's personality on tape: to hear the speaker laughing, reflective, angry. So in some way, the interview must be controlled without any loss of spontaneity.

The most useful word in the interviewer's vocabulary is 'why', closely followed by 'how', 'when', 'where' and 'what'.

'... and of course, every time she went into town she wore those black lace-up boots. All the women did.'

'Why was that? Was it the fashion then?'

'Good God, no! They were hideous things. But they had to wear them. No tar-sealing, and the streets were ankle-deep in mud.'

Which may well be a point you have never thought about before. Another example:

'You were wounded in France, weren't you? How did you get that wound?' 'Oh, that — that was nothing compared with what some of the boys got.'

No point in following up other people's ghastly wounds. The informant is pressed:

'Was it a bullet or a shell?' 'Oh, just a bullet.'

Further amplification required, so:

'But what happened exactly?'

'We were on patrol one night. A star shell went up, and there was a Hun patrol not twenty feet away.' (Pause.)

'What did you do?'

'Didn't have time to do anything. I was just bringing my rifle up, and I was suddenly bowled over. Just collapsed in a heap, and I thought, my God! I'm shot! And then... '

... and he's away at last.

In addition to the 'why', 'how', 'when', 'where' and 'what' questions, it is sometimes desirable to expand a point by means of description or comment. Phrases such as, 'Tell me about...', 'Can you picture for me...', 'Just describe...', 'How did you feel when...', 'What was your reaction to...' are most useful.

Questions, of course, should always be as simple as possible, and never double-barrelled. The double question will usually get only half an answer.

At times an informant will respond with an answer known to be incorrect. It is unwise in such a case to directly contradict the informant. A better approach is along the lines of, 'On the other hand, I have heard that...' or, 'Some people claim that...' This is not to suggest that the interviewer should not on occasion play the devil's advocate, but such an approach needs a certain amount of experience, and a shrewd summing-up of the informant's personality. Many subjects are upset by this technique, but when an informant is known to hold strong or aggressive views on a topic, playing the devil's advocate can on occasion highlight his or her attitudes.

At all times the interviewer must show interest in what is being said. This is best done by facial expression, or nod. The affirmative 'Yes' or 'Mmmm' can become intrusive with repetition, and is best avoided. Eye contact is very necessary.

Professional oral historians take pains to avoid 'leading' or 'loaded' questions, or indeed any phrasing which might suggest an answer, or persuade the informant to think in the interviewer's terms rather than in his own, e.g., 'We all know that the Model T was an utterly reliable car, which just kept on going. You'd have found this, of course.'

The exception to this rule occurs when the informant's feelings about a topic have become clear, and the interviewer is prompting for further expansion. 'Loaded' or 'leading' it might be, but this form of prompting will not redirect or modify the informant's response, but merely amplify it.

'I didn't like that bloke after that; too right I didn't.'

'You hated him?'

'Yes, I did. I hated him — because for years after ...'

In a situation like this, the interviewer must be careful however to remain strictly neutral in his attitude, and not place himself in a false position by currying favour with an informant with such comments as, 'That was a rotten thing to do'.

There are several methods of extending an answer. The simplest-is the direct question: 'Can you explain that more fully?'

Another technique is to echo the speaker's last words:

'...a Hun patrol twenty feet away.' - 'Twenty feet away?'

'Only twenty feet, as sure as I'm sitting here. And then ...'

The use of repetition must be controlled, however. Nothing is more wearying than listening to or transcribing a tape in which the interviewer echoes the last words of each answer. This is a common fault; it is done almost unconsciously by the interviewer to provide 'think time' as he or she struggles with the framing of the next question.

At times an informant's memory may have slipped to the point where he or she finds it difficult to remember events in sequence; strays from the point, and rambles interminably. The value of basic research and the preliminary chat becomes very evident here, because the interviewer draws on it not only for backgrounding, but also to signpost the interview. If a person's memory is faulty, it is useless asking 'When did you move to Rawene?' It is quite likely that ten minutes will be wasted establishing a date that may already be known to the interviewer. More useful material can be gained by saying, 'In 1921 you-left Kaeo and went to Rawene. Why did you move there?'

The only way to cope with a long and rambling answer is to interrupt it, gently, but firmly: 'That's interesting, and we'll get on to it later, but I'd like to get back to your move to Rawene ...'

Despite this measure of control, many people will still tend to ramble, and a good deal of patience is necessary in handling such informants. The recording of elderly people is work that can never be hurried. No attempt should be made to push a long interview through in one session; in that way material will be lost through tiredness. Time should be allowed for a break — for a cup of tea and a stretch. It is often at such times, with the recorder switched off, that fresh leads will come to light for exploration later.

The more interesting and pleasant the recording session becomes for the informant, the better the material will be. The interviewer is not merely a sponge, soaking up information, but must be prepared to contribute, and give a little of their selves— not so much during the interview, but certainly before it begins, and during breaks from recording.

The Location Approach

Most interviews are best conducted with only the interviewer and informant present, and preferably in the familiar surroundings of the latter's home. The presence of a third person — even a close relative or friend — can subtly inhibit or modify responses. There are occasions, however, when it is desirable to record two people at the same time. An elderly couple who have shared the same experiences may be a stimulus to each other's memory, as well as providing somewhat differing perspectives on the same events.

This stimulus of memory is constantly at the back of the oral historian's mind. Photographs, letters, diaries, etc. can be important 'triggers' to the memory, and their use should not be overlooked. One of the most potent triggers is a location connected with an informant's story. The importance of recording in the familiar security of the informant's home has been noted, but there is no reason why an active subject should not be recorded 'in situ', if fit enough to travel. An ex-guard at the Featherston POW camp, for example, might be able to recall the events of the tragic Japanese riot and shooting there in some detail. If he is taken over the ground again, however, his narrating of the story will take on an entirely new dimension. Some of the most intense and telling radio and television programmes have used this 'location' approach.

The Magpie Syndrome

Wherever the interview is recorded, it is the interviewer's task to shape it. A degree of flexibility is necessary, but there should always be an overall plan in mind. A common fault with beginners is the lack of discrimination. Gratified with a flow of information, the tyro often neglects to control it, and comes away with material on half-a-dozen topics, none explored thoroughly — a state of affairs known to the professional as 'the magpie syndrome'. So a plan is necessary. It may be a strictly chronological approach, covering perhaps childhood to middle age, or it may focus on specific incidents — the 1951 waterfront dispute, the 1918 flu epidemic. Whatever the approach, a plan in the form of brief notes indicating the key areas of questioning is highly advisable. It will allow a more natural flow of questioning, and make it easier to return to the point after any digression.

Interviewer must also realise that, plan notwithstanding, they will not come away from a recording session with a tidy, nicely shaped interview. Instead, material will at times wander down blind alleys; there will be breaks during which the machine was switched off and points discussed; questions and answers may become entangled.

But the interviewer will have a unique record of personality and human experience.