What's so Special about Women? Women's Oral History

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WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT WOMEN? WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY

Sherna Gluck

Refusing to be rendered historically voiceless any longer, women are creating a new history--using our own voices and experiences. We are challenging the traditional concepts of history, of what is "historically important," and we are affirming that our everyday lives are history. Using an oral tradition, as old as human memory, we are reconstructing our own past.

When women historians first began the task of creating and expanding the field of women's history, we relied on traditional historical concepts and methods. We busily searched for hidden clues to direct us to "lost heroines," and, whenever possible, we sought out those who were still alive in order to record their past experiences. Because so little documentation was available on the lives and activities of these women, we found ourselves in a situation similar to that of Allan Nevins, who "developed" the method of oral history in 1948.[1] With the advent of the telephone and the decline in the practice of journal writing and lengthy correspondence, historians were faced with a "drying up" of many of the sources on which they traditionally depended. Oral history, emerging then as the sound recording of the reminiscences of public figures, was hailed as a method which could create alternative sources.

Fitting women into this new scheme of things was essential and not very difficult. There were and are women who have been "important" figures in public life, both those who have functioned in the public eye and those who have worked behind the scenes. Some women achieved recognition as a result of their struggle for women's rights, while others who participated in that struggle remain unrecognized. But the majority of women did not lead public lives. Most women were not women's rights activists or union leaders or public participants in social movements. Until relatively recently, most women in the United States did not engage in wage-earning labor. By virtue of acculturation and socialization in a sexist society, women's lives were and are different from most men's. Whether women have played out public roles or adopted the traditional female role in the private realm, their lives have been governed by what Gerda Lerner has called a special rhythm.[2] In tracing this rhythm, it is important to document the lives and experiences of all of these women: to pore over newspaper accounts and organization papers, to seek out their living associates, to research fully their lives and activities, and to record their stories, for only then can we see the whole picture of women's lives, and how their rhythm has affected our lives.

Women all over the country have been using oral history to explore this rhythm of women's lives. In doing so, we are harking back to an oral tradition much older than that developed by white male historians in the United States in the 1940's. We are part of the tradition in which the life and experiences of "everywoman/man" was considered worthy of

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Feminist activist, lecturer, and teacher, Sherna Gluck was initially trained at UCLA as a sociologist. She directed an alcoholism research project for eight years, then worked in film production. As a means both of combining her own feminist activism and research skills, and providing encouragement to other women outside academia to pursue various research and educational projects, in 1972, with Ann Forfreedom, she founded the Feminist History Research Project. She presently coordinates the Project and teaches part-time in Women's Studies at California State University, Long Beach. She is active in both the local feminist community and in the National Women's Studies Association, currently serving on the National Coordinating Council and Steering Committee. Her book of interviews with five little-known suffragists, From Parlor to Prison, was published by Vintage in 1976.

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remembering and passing on to others--because it was history. It was this tradition, brought from Africa, which black historians tapped in the 1920's when they started to record the stories of former slaves.[3] It was this same tradition that both inspired Alex Haley to trace his roots and helped him to reconstruct the kidnap of his ancestors from West Africa.[4]

For women, using this model of oral history not only leads us to "anywoman," but it also raises a different set of questions to be explored. (Please see the Resource Section at the end of this issue for examples of interviewing guides used in women's oral histories.) We thus ask about clothing and physical activity, menstruation, knowledge and attitudes about sex and birth control, childbirth, economic functions in the household, household work, the nature of relationships among women, the magazines and books they read, the menopausal experience, and the relationship of the private life to the public life. Thus, not only is the political base of women's oral history different from the Nevins model, but also, and, just as important, the content is special. No matter what women we choose to interview, regardless of how typical or atypical their life experiences have been, there are certain common threads that link all women.

It is the recognition that women's oral history is so special, and significantly, that it has developed as a field unto itself--primarily through the work of women outside the major university oral history centers--that inspired us to devote an entire issue of a women studies journal to the subject. The articles in this special issue reveal both the range and depth of materials that can be found in women's oral histories.

In "Italian, Jewish, and Slavic Grandmothers in Pittsburgh: Their Economic Roles," Corinne Krause documents the kinds of work women did in Pittsburgh--work not usually covered in traditional census data--as well as their attitudes toward this work. Some of these grandmothers worked for wages outside the home, as did thousands of women working in industries in the Northeast. M. Brigid O'Farrell and Lydia Kleiner's presentation "Anna Sullivan: Trade Union Organizer," traces the experiences of one of these industrial workers who became committed to the labor movement.

But, in addition to the exciting and often moving insights offered by both of these pieces on urban women in the industrialized East, we have chosen to concentrate on women in the West and the Southwest--Chicanas, Native Americans, Anglos, Blacks, and Asians. This focus is similar to that discussed by Elizabeth Meese in her article on women and regional literature, "Telling It All: Literary Standards and Narratives by Southern Women." Other new and unfamiliar regional material is introduced in all of the following articles: Eliane Silverman's "Mothers and Daughters on the Alberta Frontier"; Sue Armitage, Theresa Banfield, and Sarah Jacobus's "Black Women and Their Communities in Colorado"; Judy Yung's "A Bowlful of Tears: Chinese Women Immigrants on Angel Island"; Kyle MacKenzie, Yvonne Tixier y Vigil, and Nan Elsasser's "Grandmother's Stories"; and Yvonne Ashley's "That's the Way We Were Raised."

These pieces are an indication of the unique potential of oral history, the ability to move beyond the written record--which reflects the experiences of more privileged women, usually white and educated--to document the lives of all kinds of women. Because of our space limitations and the excellent recent issue of Southern Exposure which drew heavily on women's oral history,[5] we have not included here any of the rich sources on Southern women, particularly Southern black women. Also, except for Margaret Strobel's "Doing Oral History as an Outsider," we have not moved beyond our continental boundaries. As Strobel's experience shows, there exist rich sources about women in Third World countries, and the outsider--particularly with a consciousness about sex, class, and race--can play an important role in helping to create these sources.

But, in discovering the rhythm of "everywoman," we have not ignored those women who have achieved prominence. Harriet Gross's article "Jane Kennedy: Making History through Moral Protest," will help to rectify the male bias evident in most literature on the anti-war movement of the 1960's. Amelia Fry and Sally Roesch Wagner both discuss the ways in which oral history can help us to reconstruct the thoughts and actions of women who have struggled on our behalf in the past. Though both articles are largely methodological, Fry's "Suffragist Alice Paul's Memoirs: Pros and Cons of Oral History" provides fascinating glimpses of Alice Paul, and Wagner's "Oral History as a Biographical Tool" gives us a glimpse of the complicated personality of that long-ignored nineteenth-century militant, Matilda Joslyn Gage.

As these articles all amply demonstrate, oral history can be of great importance in expanding our knowledge and revising our historiography. In addition, the process by which the material is collected can be equally valuable. As the article by Joan Jensen,

Beverly Baca, and Barbara Bolin ("Family History and Oral History") suggests, oral history is an ideal form to help students develop a sense of continuity with their own family's past, to learn historical method, and to explore women's history through documents that they themselves help to create.

The process is a significant experience not only for the interviewer or those who might use the product, but also for the interviewee. As those of us collecting oral histories from women well know, there is invariably a reciprocal affirmation between interviewer and interviewee of the worth of the woman being interviewed. The fact that someone is interested in learning about her life--a life the interviewee may see as "unexciting" and "uninteresting"--increases her self-esteem. And, as Harriet Wrye and Jacqueline Churilla point out in "Looking Inward, Looking Backward: Reminiscence and the Life Review," oral history is one of the techniques which can serve a positive function in the aging process by helping to integrate past life experiences, cope with reduced life activity and loss of close relationships, and ultimately, prepare for death.

Women's oral history, then, is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women's experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity which has been denied us in traditional historical accounts.

II

Oral history, the creation of a new "document" through the tape-recorded interview, traditionally has been divided into three types: topical, biographical, and autobiographical. Each type is represented in this issue. The topical interview is, in many ways, most akin to the open-ended sociological interview; the interviewer brings in a specific focus in order to gather information about a particular event. It might center on something which applies to both women and men, like Yung's interviews with Chinese immigrants about their detention on Angel Island, or it might focus on those experiences particular to women only, such as hysterectomy.[6] The biographical oral history interview is characterized by this same kind of specificity, but the focus is, instead, on a specific individual--usually a public figure, such as Wagner's interviews about Matilda Joslyn Gage.

In the autobiographical interview, the course of the individual interviewee's life is what determines both the form and content of the oral history. Even when one interviews a group of women who participated in the same kind of activity, the questions will be tailor-made to each individual's experience and the information will be recorded as part of a total memoir. In other words, in biographical and topical interviews, a slice of the interviewee's life is explored; in the autobiographical interview, the total life history is recorded.

In reality, there is a great deal of overlapping among the three forms. In both the topical and biographical interview, enough autobiographical material must be recorded to establish the specific relationship of the interviewee to the event of the individual being researched. On the other hand, when autobiographical interviews are collected from a group of women who shared a similar activity, for example, participation in the labor movement, some common questions would be explored with all. (See the Resource Section for an outline developed by the University of Michigan for interviews with trade union women.) Further, in our efforts to revise women's historiography, there are certain areas which should be explored with all women as part of their autobiographical accounts, such as their reactions to the onset of menses.

The distinction between the autobiographical and topical interviews is further blurred by the fact that ultimately, specific materials might be extracted from several different autobiographical interviews and clustered together around a specific topic, such as Silverman's exploration of mother-daughter relationships or Krause's work on older women from three different ethnic groups.

In fact, the so-called autobiographical oral history should be as complete a document as possible so that a variety of uses can be made of it. Much like the anthropological life history, it should reflect the experiences, values, attitudes, and relationships of the interviewee--the patterns and rhythms of her life and times. It can stand on its own, as an autobiography of an individual, or sections can be extracted from it for analysis or use in documentation.

As with any source, questions about the validity of the material must be raised.

Despite their awareness of the obvious bias of contemporary newspaper reports, historians traditionally have relied on journalistic accounts as primary sources. As Fry points out in her methodological article, the same criteria should be used to assess the validity of any source, written or oral: how does it "fit" with what we know about the subject? The usual questions about the reliability of memory and the problem of retrospective interpretation must also be raised, as they would be for any autobiographical account.

The autobiographical oral history, however, is a rather strange hybrid, not like conventional autobiography, which is usually characterized by a certain amount of studied reconsideration by the "author" and by her self-selection of both form and content. The so-called autobiographical oral history is a collaborative effort of the interviewer (archivist/historian) and the interviewee (source/history). This very collaboration makes the oral history memoir unique. Based on face-to-face interaction, during which the source can be both questioned and evaluated, it becomes more than the sound of one voice.

Based on the background research and the historical perspective which the interviewer brings to the process, the life of the interviewee is reconstructed within a broader social context--a context not ordinarily provided by the self-recorded memoirist. An understanding of this context guides the interviewer in deciding which spontaneous material should be elaborated on more fully. Though the best interviewer will encourage spontaneity and self-direction, it is intellectually dishonest to discount the interviewer's role in creating the oral history. The advantages derived from her knowledge and perspective can, ideally, sensitize her to personal and cultural inconsistencies in the content of the interview. Such inconsistencies might be indicative of a highly idiosyncratic woman; they might be an important source of information about the complex patterns in women's lives; or they might raise questions about memory and candor.

Besides subtle nuances in the content of the interview and voice inflections--which are captured on tape--there are nonverbal gestures which only the sensitive interviewer (or--if the interview is being filmed or video taped--the sensitive photographer) will observe. These nonverbal cues reveal the emotional tone of the interview and should be carefully noted afterwards; they will become part of the record used by both the interviewee and others to evaluate the validity and reliability of the material recorded.

Despite the obvious advantages of the collaborative reconstruction of the interviewee's life, there are, of course, drawbacks. The perspective of the interviewer cannot help but influence, even subtly, the content of the material--particularly what the interviewee will judge as "important." After we completed an interview, one woman commented that she could tell by the way my eyes sparkled at various times that I was particularly interested in the problems she faced as a woman in the male world of science. Although we can console ourselves with the knowledge that there is no such thing as "objective" reporting, we must recognize our own influence in the interview process and make a concerted effort to maintain a balance between what we, as feminist historians, think is important and what the women we are interviewing think was important about their own lives.

As will become obvious from the richness of language in the oral histories included in this volume, the collaboration between interviewer and interviewee results in more than new "historical" documents. It allows for the creation of a new literature, a literature which can tap the language and experiences of those who do not ordinarily have access to such public expression except perhaps through the more anonymous forms of folk culture.

III

Oral history is not, nor should it be, the province of experts. On the contrary, some of the best work today is being done by individuals and groups outside "the groves of academe" and often by those without any formal training in history or journalism (see the Resource Section for descriptions of some of these oral history projects). Anyone who can listen to the women who are speaking can do oral history. It is not enough, however, to rush off to the nearest Senior Citizen Center with a tape recorder. It is important to be prepared.

Reading about interviewing technique is a helpful first step. Despite the proliferation of "how to" articles and manuals (see our Bibliography in the Resource Section for references to some of these), the most useful discussion of technique is still to be found in two older works by Willa Baum and Norman Hoyle.[7] Discretion and common sense must be used in evaluating recommendations for interviewing technique. Patently absurd suggestions are sometimes made, for example, the edict not to laugh when the interviewee says something

funny. The oral history interview is a human interaction and the same kind of warm, human responses expected in other interactions should govern our behavior. Reading the instructional articles will heighten awareness of the interview process, but nothing will contribute to this awareness more than the actual interview experience. The best training for conducting an oral history interview is actual practice; practice interviews which are carefully listened to and evaluated and analyzed. These "mock" interviews should be conducted with persons other than the intended subject.

The more practice the interviewer has, and the more experience she gains, the more partisan she becomes to her own methods. Although there is widespread agreement among oral history practitioners on some points, there is also disagreement. The oral history interview, above all, is specialized, and therefore highly variable; it is tailored to the experiences and style of the individual interviewee. Keeping in mind the proviso that there is no one perfect method of collecting oral histories, I offer the following ideas based on my own experiences over the past five years in personally interviewing an enormous number and wide range of women, and in training students to gather in-depth women's oral history. The methods of making contact, choosing equipment, adopting an interview style, and processing the interviews have all worked successfully for me. Although these suggestions are based on autobiographical oral history interviews with women in their seventies, eighties, nineties, and even one-hundreds, many of the points are equally valid for the topical and biographical interviews and for women of almost any age group.

Making Contact

Whom we select to interview obviously will be governed by our own specific interest. In my classes for the past three years, randomly selected women have been contacted and "everywoman" interviews were conducted. Fully exploring the life of each individual woman became the basis for a study of women's lives in the early twentieth century. To locate women who have had a particular kind of experience, such as involvement in the labor movement, or defense industry work during World War II, different methods might be used. I have successfully located union women through the retiree groups of various unions, through widespread advertisement of my work among older radicals, and through public speaking. Other oral historians and interviewers have placed ads in local and national newspapers.

In selecting the women to interview, the question of cultural likeness--including gender, race, class, ethnic, and even regional identification--immediately arises. As Strobel points out in her article, there are not yet sufficient numbers of women in Africa, for instance, who are trained to record their own history. The combined forces of racism and sexism have also limited the number of "minority" women in the United States who have had access to the skills and equipment which would enable them to record their own past. Until these skills are learned--and each of us must do everything in her power to share these skills--the role of the "outsider" will remain crucial. Otherwise, the history of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American women will be lost, not only to them, but also to us.

Besides being governed by necessity, the outsider can sometimes delve into certain kinds of experiences that insiders cannot.[8] There might be specific topics that are more easily discussed with "outsiders." Also, because outsiders are less conversant with the culture or subculture, they may take less for granted and ask for more clarification than insiders. On the whole, though, my experience has been that cultural likeness can greatly promote trust and openness, whereas dissimilarity reinforces cultural and social distance.

Because of my own light complexion and hair, the Jewish immigrant women I have interviewed have assumed that I was not Jewish. As soon as I dropped a clue for them, both the content of the interview (particularly about their childhood in the shtetls of Europe or the ghettos of America) and the nature of our relationship changed. On the other hand, because of my appearance and my socialization into the larger Anglo culture I have "passed" when I have conducted interviews with Anglo-Saxon women. A very light-skinned black student of mine from Texas was politely treated and her interview with a black ninety-two-year-old woman and her seventy-year-old daughter progressed uneventfully until, during the third session, the interviewees realized that she was "one of us." The nature of the interview changed dramatically. Similarly, the few male students I have had in my women's oral history classes, despite their efforts, never overcame the barriers of gender difference.

It is not only a matter of trust; the subtle cues to which culturally similar women

can respond might mean the difference between a good and bad interview. Though these nuances cannot be thoroughly learned by an outsider, the interviewer must prepare as best she can so that she can understand the attitudes, vocabulary, and body language of the group or subgroup with which the interviewee identifies.

No matter whom we choose to interview or how we have located her, the first contact with our interviewee is crucial, particularly since she might be subtly influenced by the way in which we located her. One of the activists whom I found through her union was convinced, despite all my explanations and protestations, that I was from the "union office." She was, therefore, guarded in her description of the difficulties she had faced as a woman in her union. On the other hand, when a particularly respected or loved friend was the source of my contact, the door was opened wide and the interviews were quite candid.

It is important in contacting the person to make clear how her name was obtained and to explain to her, in advance, what the interest in her is. For most women, especially those who did not participate in "important" events or in organizations outside of the home, there is tremendous initial reluctance to being interviewed; it is the reluctance which comes from being socialized female in this society. It is important to establish for her, at the very outset, why we feel her life and experiences are important. This might mean not only an explanation about our specific project, but also a discussion of how we view the daily life experiences of all women to be a part of history.

The interviewer's own credibility must also be established; this can be accomplished by reference to a relationship with someone the interviewer knows and/or by the use of letterhead **stationery** or a brochure which describes her work. (Though a letter from the instructor might be helpful for students, I have found that the "grandmother role" which the elderly so often adopt towards the student makes their entree relatively easy.)

Because it is often difficult for the elderly to hear well on the telephone, it is best to try to communicate this essential introductory material first by mail. Then, when contact is made, she will be clear about who is calling and what is wanted, and an appointment can be made. It is important to determine what time of day is best for her; her stamina and memory will vary. All the women I have interviewed have been sufficiently in tune with their own body rhythms to tell me exactly what was the best time to interview; then I adjusted my schedule accordingly.

It is still that initial face-to-face meeting which will make or break the oral history. Rather personal and intimate details about the woman's life will be openly discussed, and to do so means that there must be an attitude of trust. She will, rightfully, want to know how the material will be used. Although it is important to be open about both the purpose of the interview and the use of the material, I usually wait until after some sort of trusting relationship has developed before asking her to sign any releases or agreements; there is no subterfuge here, but even the simplest agreement forms can raise **specters** and create suspicions. (See the Resource Section for sample interview agreements.) I have had only two women refuse to sign an agreement once the interviews were completed; in both cases their oral histories were made anonymous and all identifiable references were deleted.

Open communication is crucial to establishing trust with an interviewee. Since we are asking a stranger to be self-revealing, we, in turn, must be willing to divulge information about ourselves. I have had some interviewees question me at length about my own background and life, whereas others have asked nothing. It is with the former that I have developed the most intimate mutual relationships and with whom I have probably created the richest oral histories. I do not mean to imply that the interviewer should insert her own life story into the actual interview. However, before beginning the first interview or while chatting over coffee, tea, or juice after the interview, the interviewer may talk about herself--to whatever extent is natural and the interviewee seems to expect. The interviewer's sharing her own feelings about the interview (her nervousness, for example), encourages the interviewee to talk about her feelings, and both parties can be placed at ease.

The first interview is not "just to get acquainted." The expectations and relationship which develop during that first encounter can determine the course of the other interviews. For this reason, the practice interviews, during training, should be done with others than those to be actually interviewed for a project. That first interview might be the only one conducted with a woman or, on the other hand, it might represent the first of some twenty sessions. The decision about how many interviews will be recorded can best be made on the basis of the outline developed and the research undertaken after

the initial interview. Though it is best not to make a definite commitment to the interviewee until you can be more precise, she should be prepared for the eventuality that more than one interview may be recorded.

How much preparation is done before the first interview will depend largely on who the woman is. For a prominent individual, a "local figure," or someone involved in a well-documented activity, it is possible to research existing sources such as newspapers, organization records, and histories ahead of time. However, many of those we will interview are women about whom a great deal is not recorded; they are the "voiceless" unknown women who worked in the home, the women who worked at office jobs pushing the huge carriages of old typewriters, the women who rose at five in the morning to chop cotton, the women who bore three, four, five, and more children, the women who panicked at their frequent pregnancies and performed abortions on themselves. The best preparation for a first interview with these women is a familiarity with the time period, especially the living conditions and tenor of life in both rural and urban settings.

Familiarity with the texture of life allows us to explore fully her family history and her early years. The same principles will guide us as in later interviews; her own experiences and style of reminiscing provide the framework, while our general topical outline sensitizes us to certain areas and provides suggestions for probing. (See the Resource Section for sample Interview Guides.) After covering the early years, usually to adolescence (which might require more than one interview), a general biographical sketch is recorded in roughly chronological sequence. It is this sketch which will then be used as the basis for both structuring the subsequent interviews and directing us to the areas which should be researched.

Though most of the women whom we will interview probably do not have "papers," almost all do have photographs and various objects which they have kept from their past. Looking over these helps to inform the interviewer and to jog the memory of the interviewee.

I thought I had fully exhausted the recollections of a union woman about the various strikes in which she had participated until we looked over her photographs, late in the interview series. A picture of an ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union) picnic reminded her that this was a victory celebration; she was then able to recount her activities in yet another strike. It is best to look over these records early in the project, ideally during the first interview. Furthermore, it is a good idea to let the tape recorder run as she comments on her photo album or a newspaper clipping or displays her yellowed wedding dress. Although the material should be recorded again later, in the context of the period in which it took place, the second version of the story might be quite different from that first rendition--which could become a lost gem were we not to record it when the memory spontaneously surfaced.

The Interview Process

The interview is a transaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, and their responses to each other form the basis for the creation of the oral history. Each woman has her own style of recollecting, as well as her own specific experiences. As sensitive interviewers, we respond to each individually, and the interview process will therefore vary. This variability is one of the most distinctive features of the oral history interview and is what makes it different from the standardized interviews used by social scientists.

Despite experience and careful planning by the interviewer, there are several common tendencies which can mar any interview. (See Appendix A for a discussion on equipment.) These are a function of our own impatience and (in our eagerness to use our background research) a dependency on our prepared outlines or guides. We fear lapses of silence. We squirm at what appear to be long, irrelevant digressions. We become impatient at the chaotic manner in which memory divulges the past. In our fear and impatience, and also in our enthusiasm for the material we are uncovering, we succumb to talking too much, asking too many questions too soon.

The best oral history is a quasi-monologue on the part of the interviewee which is encouraged by approving nods, appreciative smiles, and enraptured listening and stimulated by understanding comments and intelligent questions. Though the ideal interviewer is there primarily to provide a broad leeway in which to help the interviewee structure her recollections, sensitivity to both individual idiosyncracies and class or culturally determined characteristics, might lead to more direct questioning in some cases and total silence in others.

For example, despite her protestations that she would not be able to talk without a lot of questions, an old Jewish immigrant woman whom I interviewed would embark on an hour-long monologue at the beginning of each session. She had self-selected that material which was important to her, or which she thought was of general interest. I quickly learned that asking questions--except for points of clarification--was an intrusion. She demanded total eye contact at all times! During her spontaneous reminiscing, I remained virtually silent. Then, towards the end of the session, or at the beginning of the next one, I would ask some additional questions relating to the material she had provided or to my own outline.

In planning for the interview, I review the types of questions I wish to ask, and the order in which I want to ask them, but I also try to avoid too much "preordering" of the material. The principle which I generally use is to ask the most general question first, waiting to see where that question leads. It might lead to a detailed description, to what appears to be a digression, or to a blank. My own reaction, then, is tailored to the woman's response. If the general question, for example about living conditions during her childhood, yields detailed information, I can sit back, keeping a sharp ear for unexpected information, new directions to explore, and confusing material. If, on the other hand, the general question leads to a vague or general response, then the questions can be re-cast or phrased more specifically. If we are clear in our own minds what it is we are looking for, this is not difficult to do. For instance, when I ask about living conditions during the woman's youth, what I am seeking is sufficient information to re-create the basic social setting as well as the financial circumstances of the family. A general response such as "we were very poor," or "we lived in a tenement" does not tell me much. Asking more specific questions (for example, how many slept in a room, a bed; was there water/plumbing in the living space, in the corridor, outside) can yield sufficiently rich descriptions so that no further questioning is necessary.

A general or vague response might indicate that the interviewee did not consider the subject very important. If we have touched upon an area that is not part of her basic self-definition, but is important to us as feminist archivists, then we must devise a way to get the information without letting our questions over-determine the interview. It might mean that we wait until the very end of the oral history recording sessions to ask some of our questions, even though they may be out of context. Otherwise, we can easily end up with an oral history that is defined not by the values and rhythm of the individual's life, but by the perspective that we bring about women, about class, about race.

If our general questions lead to a lengthy digression, then we must be prepared to follow that line until it is exhausted. It is imperative that we learn to let the train of memory association run its course; that we be able to scrap totally the direction in which we were originally headed; that we know when to ignore our outlines and pick up new avenues of inquiry. If, at the end of this new track, we still do not have the information we were initially seeking, then we can return to our original line of inquiry, perhaps asking for the same content in a different way.

Sometimes, though, the interviewee truly cannot recall the information we are seeking. As little as we know about memory function, we do know that it is related to blood flow and that it will vary at different times of the day and on different occasions during the week. Thus, sensitivity to the health and stamina of the interviewee is important; it is also a basic sign of human respect. This generally means determining what time of day is best to interview her; being prepared to cancel an interview if, when you arrive, she seems tired, upset, or "under the weather"; and, knowing when to cut the session short. During the course of the interview, as she tires, there will be noticeable memory loss and increased difficulty in remembering words. That should signal that it is time to end the interview for the day. (I have found that the ninety-minute interview is about the right length for most elderly women, though for some, one hour is the maximum. I openly discuss this with the interviewee.) When a question draws a blank or a line of inquiry is not productive, we have to be willing to give up. If it is important, we might want to make a mental note of it and try again on another occasion.

How do we keep track of our own line of thought during the various passages into the by-ways of memory? With attentive listening we can easily forget our own questions. How do we quickly note a new line of inquiry that was triggered by a comment of the interviewee; how do we keep some chronological sense when an interviewee's style is to rush headlong from one anecdote to another? There is as much diversity of opinion on note-taking during the interview as there is on sharing the outline or guide with the interviewee. My own experiences vary from one interviewee to the next, though invariably I do

not share with her my outline or specific questions. My fear is that this outline, which is really just a guide for myself, will determine the course of the interview too much. I will suggest at the end of each session the general areas we might want to cover at the following session.

As for note-taking during the interviews, I usually try to avoid making notations of more than a single word or phrase--just enough to keep my memory intact. Stopping to take notes signifies to her either that what she is saying is not very important and that you do not have to listen, or that it is very important and you are taking notes in order to ask her more about it. In any event, the loss of eye contact, even for a brief moment, the break in the pattern of concentrated listening, can be very disruptive. In reviewing the tape later, the interviewer can note names, places, and dates, and can then ask for clarification of confusing material at the next session.

Perhaps the most difficult and frustrating task is to keep clear in our own minds some sense of chronology and the order of events. Some women, particularly less educated working-class women, are not accustomed to reflecting about themselves, to viewing their lives as important. The stories they are used to repeating are those which recount a courageous act, a funny episode, or a tragic event in their families. Consequently, the interview might be a string of anecdotes with little connecting material or insufficient descriptions to place these anecdotes in a context adequately understandable to outsiders. This is her style and rather than interfere (which would be useless anyway) the interviewer has to develop some systematic way of keeping time references clear and to ask questions in relation to the anecdote which helps to provide the total context. I have found it helpful to actually develop a chronological chart, based on the first contact interview, which clearly outlines the various stages in the woman's life. In this way, it becomes easier to keep straight which anecdote fits where.

The interview with the more educated, middle-class woman usually is quite a different process. She is more accustomed to reflecting about life, and also to articulating ideas. As a result the interview is more "orderly"; thoughts are more often completed, and sentences hang together. This is not to say that one interview is better or worse than another, but rather that we have to be aware of the ways in which class, particularly, affect thought processes and speaking patterns, and to adapt ourselves to these variations.

In addition to those differences related to class origins there are certain cultural characteristics which are a function of both ethnicity and generation. Though older and/or immigrant women might talk without much hesitation about "female concerns," they often find it difficult to be very explicit. For instance, most women will freely talk about the onset of menses. However, they might find it more difficult to describe the "pads" they used, where they were collected, washed, and so on. By the same token, though women might be willing to talk about birth control, they might be embarrassed to describe specific techniques and might speak in euphemisms, such as, "My husband took precautions." She might be referring to his using condoms, or to coitus interruptus. It will be up to the interviewer to then phrase questions which elicit the information without requiring the interviewee to use words with which she has difficulty or which embarrass her. Faced with the timidity of some older women, the interviewer must have sufficient knowledge about birth control practices in the earlier part of the century to step in and provide words as well as to ask for more details. This is part of the preparation that any good interviewer will have done, and these cultural differences may have important implications for the editing process.

Processing the Interview

Once we have successfully recorded one or a series of interviews, the initial product (and perhaps, the final one) is the raw tape recording. Since an important primary document has been created, it is important to take measures both to protect it and, at the same time, to make it accessible to others.[9] Minimally, this requires some summarizing and indexing of the contents of the tapes and either depositing them in archives or making their existence known to those who would have an interest in the materials. By using either extensive funding or a willingness to put in countless unpaid hours, we can next transcribe and edit the interviews, perhaps ultimately into a continuous narrative. The way in which the recordings are further processed depends on both the resources available and the use to which the material will be put.

The easiest and least expensive method is to develop a running summary of each tape. As a matter of course, if more than one interview is recorded with a single individual, it

is a good idea to listen and to take notes on each interview before proceeding with the next. This is both to make sure that nothing has been missed--particularly new avenues hinted at--and to continually appraise our methods and sharpen our skills. Since the tapes should be reviewed anyway, it does not require much more time to keep a running summary while listening to them. Properly done, this summary can then be used as a basis for indexing the entire group of interviews with a single individual. (For a description and sample of the method that we use in the Feminist History Research Project, see Appendix B.)

This simple system allows the use of the material for any of several purposes, including extraction of specific segments for presentation as evidence, and development of audio or audio-visual presentations. In other words, this system allows for easy retrieval of the material which can then be selectively transcribed as needed. Though it might take a bit longer to locate the material on a tape and listen to it than it would to scan quickly the printed page the material is available for scholarly use, nevertheless. Furthermore, because of subtle communication patterns that cannot be captured on the printed page, listening to the segments might be considerably more revealing than merely reading a passage.

This is not to argue against transcribing the tapes if it is possible to do so, and if the resources are available. However, we should bear in mind that the enormous amounts of time and money required to transcribe an interview (an average of five to eight hours per interview hour) might be better utilized in collecting more oral histories from those older women whose numbers are rapidly diminishing.

If the tapes are transcribed, there are then several different methods of treating the literal transcription. Minimally, it is edited for clarity, punctuation, and correct spelling of names and places. The resulting "edited transcript" is usually placed on a library shelf, to be used primarily by scholars. More extensive editing of the transcripts might be done, when sufficient funds are available, as is the practice of the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library (University of California, Berkeley). The transcript is edited for smooth flow and continuity, which means that similar material from different portions of the interview is pulled together and organized into coherent sections with headings and subheadings. After a review of the transcript by the interviewee, the interviewer/editor writes an introduction and indexes the volume. Photographs and other documents might be included selectively in the final bound volume, which is deposited at Berkeley and UCLA and is available for purchase by other libraries. The resulting volume is more readable and certainly more accessible and usable than a simple, minimally edited transcript. However, it is quite costly to produce.

Another form of editing, usually in preparation for wider publication, involves all the other prior steps discussed above and editing the question/answer format into a continuous narrative, removing the interviewer's questions and comments. Once the questions are removed, transitional passages might be missing. We don't want to put words into the interviewee's mouth, yet we want the materials to flow smoothly and to preserve her unique syntax. We must work the material in ways that will render the written form the most authentic rendition of her oral account. This does not necessarily mean the most literal. When the spoken word is translated into the printed word, a great deal is lost--particularly when we are interviewing women unaccustomed to articulating their ideas or to revealing themselves publicly, especially working-class women. The subtle nuances of the spoken word, or the posturing and gesturing which accompany it often more effectively communicate emotional tone than do the words themselves. The sensitivity of the interviewer to the interviewee will largely determine many of the editorial choices that will be made. Ultimately, this kind of editing entails what can only be described as literary judgment, though it certainly does not require a writer to make these judgments.

No matter how we process the recorded interview, we must remember that we have created a unique "document," one which above all is oral/aural. There is no one method for best creating this new source or for best processing the raw materials. Each of us must develop the style that best suits her and the women she interviews. With our foremothers we are creating a new kind of women's history, a new kind of women's literature. To this task we should bring the sensitivity, respect, tremendous joy and excitement that come from the awareness that we are not only creating new materials, but that we are also validating the lives of the women who preceded us and are forging direct links with our own past.

NOTES

[1]Allan Nevins, "Oral History: How and Why It Was Born," Wilson Library Bulletin, 40 (March 1966), 600-01.

[2]Gerda Lerner, The Female Experience: An American Documentary (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), pp. xvi-xviii.

[3]A good account of the use of oral history in the study of slavery, beginning with the work at Southern and Fisk Universities in the 1920's, is to be found in Ken Lawrence, "Oral History of Slavery," Southern Exposure, 1 (Winter 1974), 84-86.

[4]Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," Oral History Review, 1973, pp. 1-25.

[5]See "Generations: Women in the South," a special issue of Southern Exposure, 4 (Winter 1977).

[6]Interviews with women who have undergone hysterectomies are being conducted by Susanne Morgan of the Feminist History Research Project.

[7]Willa Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society, 2nd ed. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975); Norman Hoyle, "Oral History," Library Trends (July 1972), pp. 60-81.

[8]Yvonne Tixier y Vigil and Nan Elsasser (contributors to "Grandmother's Stories" in this issue) found that in interviews with Hispanic women there was a greater willingness to discuss sex with the Anglo interviewer than with the Chicana interviewer. On the other hand, topics associated with discrimination were more likely to be discussed openly with the Chicana than with the Anglo. See Tixier y Vigil and Elsasser, "The Effects of the Ethnicity of the Interviewer on Conversation: A Study of Chicana Women," in Sociology of the Language of American Women, ed. Betty L. DuBois and Isabel Crouch (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1976), pp. 161-70.

[9]There are several free booklets on the care of tapes which are available from 3M Company, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101. Generally it is a good idea to make duplicate copies of your tapes, preferably on a high speed copier (which is available at the audio-visual centers of most schools). To avoid accidentally recording over your taped interview, the tabs at the back of the cassette should be punched out. Should you, for some reason, later wish to record on the tape, it is possible to do so by taping over the empty space created where the tab was punched out. For storage of tapes, a moderate temperature is recommended. Some sources recommend rewinding and winding the tapes at least once a year.

APPENDIX A

RECOMMENDATIONS ON EQUIPMENT

Many oral history projects use reel-to-reel tape recorders, since the sound quality of these machines is reputed to be better than that of cassette recorders. A cassette recorder, used with a good microphone, can produce a relatively high quality recording. Whatever kind of machine you choose, it is important that an external microphone be used, preferably a lapel style. Though the sound reproduced by this type of microphone is somewhat more "bass" than that from a directional microphone placed on a stand near the interviewee, the advantage is that the interviewee's voice will not have to be boosted as much, and thus extraneous noises will be less. (Most machines have automatic gain controls which will boost the volume of all sounds, not only the voice of the interviewee.) A lapel microphone is also less obtrusive.

The advantages of a cassette tape recorder, in addition to lower cost, are that it is less obtrusive, simpler to operate, and easier to change tapes in one than in a reel-to-reel machine. I have personally used Sony cassette recorders for the past several years; presently, the Craig machines are reputed to be better. No matter what brand you choose, the lowest priced models usually do not have some features which are important. They also seem to have more system noise than the more expensive machines.

A modulation needle on the machine is crucial. It allows you to check that you are, indeed, recording. Since you have no means of knowing whether you are recording or not until you play back the tape, this is an essential feature. Though the digital counter is not essential, it certainly is helpful both in monitoring the approaching end of the tape and in making your task of logging the tape easier.

Perhaps even more important than the brand of the machine or the type of microphone, is the quality of the cassette itself. Cheap cassettes should not be used under any circumstance. Not only do they create more mechanical noise, which is evident on the recordings themselves, but also they are more likely to jam in the machine, and are certain to jam on fast copying machines. This does not mean that the highest priced cassette must be used. It is often possible to buy good quality cassettes such as Memorex, in large quantities. These are labeled and come fifty to a box; they cost approximately $1.25 each. Generally, it is not possible to find a good ninety-minute cassette for under that price and, usually, not for much under two dollars. Though I have successfully used ninety-minute cassettes, I have heard complaints from others that they have had problems with jamming, particularly when transcribing. Certainly, no cassette longer than the C-90 should be used.

During recording, an AC adaptor plug should be used. (The interviewer should always remember to carry an extension cord, too.) Unless it is impossible to use an electrical outlet, or unless there is a fully-charged cadmium battery in the recorder, it is unwise to use the tape recorder on battery power. It is impossible to know what the battery level is and as it wears down, the machine runs slower and slower. Then, on normal play-back, the interview plays back in a necessarily speeded-up version, and the interviewee sounds like Minnie Mouse.

If a directional microphone is used rather than the lapel style, it is important not to place the microphone on the same surface as the tape recorder; the microphone will pick up the vibrations from the machine. Also, the microphone should be placed as close as possible to the interviewee, preferably on some sort of stand.

APPENDIX B

SUMMARIZING AND INDEXING THE TAPE

The Feminist History Research Project (FHRP) uses a relatively simple method for summarizing and indexing our tapes. Each tape is broken down into fifteen three-minute segments (for a forty-five-minute side of a C-90), and each segment is assigned a number continuous from one to fifteen. It is easy enough to sit down with a stop watch and note the number on the digital counter of the tape recorder at each three-minute interval. It is crucial to do this for each tape recorder, since the digital counters vary from machine to machine--even on the same model. Once done, you merely have to watch the digital counter as you make the running summary. Once each three-minute segment has been assigned a number, these would be used as would the number of a printed page.

When you begin to record, make sure the tape counter is set at zero. Once you start to record, check to see that the tape is running and that the needle is modulating. Though nothing should happen in the course of that side, once you have begun it is a good idea to glance down and double check periodically.

Though it is not always possible, it is best to design a break before the end of the tape, rather than risk the tape running out in the middle of a sentence. Some machines even have a buzzer that sounds when the tape is nearing the end. I usually use the digital counter to determine when to start listening for an appropriate break. It takes but a second to flip the tape over or to start a new tape. Be sure, once again, to check that all systems are working at the beginning of each new side. After you have completed the recording it is a good idea to punch out the tabs at the back of the tape so that you will not inadvertently record on this tape again (see Note 9 above).

Following is a sample Tape Summary and a sample Index Page.

TAPE SUMMARY

Rebecca August--The Chicago Years

Tape Section	Time Segment	Content:
Side A		
1	0'1 to 2'59	Tape identification London - work experience, conditions
2	3' to 5'59	Cont. Work experience in London as child
3	6'	London - living conditions schooling
4	9'	London - work conditions Emigration to U.S. 1904
5	12'	First knowledge unionism Story re: price cuts buttonholes and protest
6	15'	Cont. story re: protest over price cut; fired; blacklisted Association with Jane Addams begins efforts to organize Hebrew Trades Union (Council) R.A. goes to women of men on strike to enlist their support; wives of cigar-makers and bakers.
7	18'	Cont. re: organizing wives 1906 strike incident; arrest, trial
8	21'	Cont. 1906 incident
9	24'	Discussion trial by jury
10	27'	1930's incident; fired for talking unionism
11	30'	Association with Jane Addams Jane Addams called "the garbage lady"--efforts to clean up garbage Rebecca August's help enlisted--sent to wives of bakers and cigar-makers
12	33'	Cont. R.A. could speak to wives in Yiddish Formation of Ladies Branch of Workmen's Circle, with assistance from Jane Addams.
13	36'	Cont. formation of Ladies Branch of Workmen's Circle Jane Addams speaks at first meeting, only 14 women attend
14	39'	Involvement with anarchists and socialists Socialists too mild, joined anarchists Attitude towards marriage, free love Discussion common-law marriage recognition in Washington; Home Colony; Children of common-law marriages at Home Colony
15	42'	Cont. re: offspring Home Colony common-law marriages Anarchist associations, ideology Rent strike in Chicago, led by Ben Reitman Incident with Ben Reitman re: free love

TAPE INDEX

Rebecca August--Cumulative Index: Tapes I, II, III