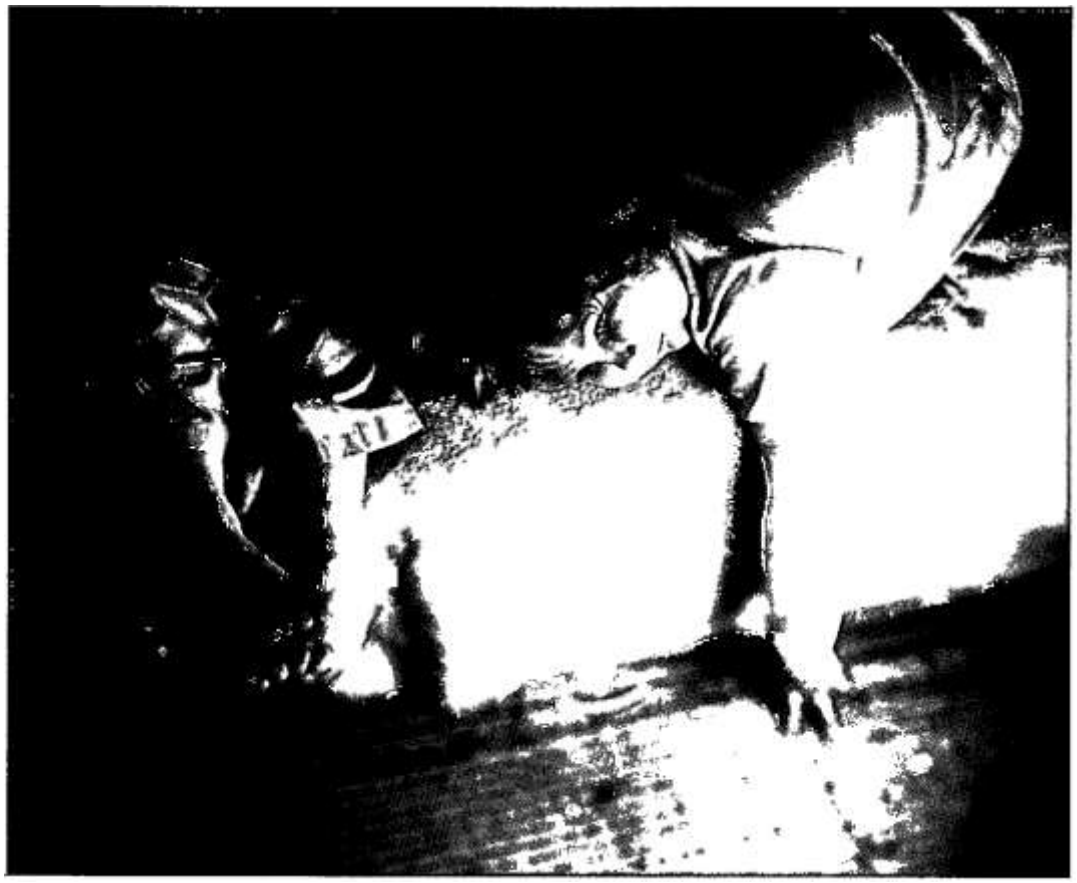

Photo by: Andrea Modica

Women" s Life Histories in the Classroom
A Student-Authorized Textbook/Reader

Margaret G. Blackman

She sat me down in the kitchen after my final fitting for my gown the night before my wedding, and told me that if I wanted to get his paycheck on Friday afternoon, I would have to do things Thursday night that I might not like. That was it, all she had to say . . . Later on the night of my honeymoon, as George and I were in the hotel I opened my suitcase and found a tube of contraceptive jelly. However, it did not have any instruction on it and I did not know where it came from. I had no idea of how to use it and as a result I had a baby eight-and-a- half months later.

Thus a mother related to her daughter in 1981 what her own mother had to say on the subject of sex. The information was passed on not in a private mother/daughter tete-a-tete, but in a formal interview and later committed to writing by the college student daughter. The final product was just one of more than four hundred life history papers of women written for my Women's Studies course that I have read over the last six years. Each student selects a woman--fri end, neighbor, kin, mentor, 'fellow worker--and through a series of interviews elicits her life story which is then presented in written form as a term paper. For virtually all students this is their first experience with interviewing, transcribing tapes, and writing a paper based on original research. For the many freshmen in the course, the life histories they author are also their first

college term papers. The papers are researched and written over a three month period, but because the class is an introductory Women's Studies course rather than a composition course, opportunities for critique and rewriting ara limited. Student authors recognize another shortcoming of the project: namely, that the life histories are merely sketches, attempts to encapsulate the richness of a woman's life in a very few pages. Still, however brief, these accounts speak meaningfully of the life experiences, feelings, and expectations of a sample of ordinary women.

Each year I alone had the opportunity to immerse myself in some eighty life stories, to learn how women of my own and other generations saw themselves. Despite our lack of· personal contact, I have shared in their' secrets, their frustrations, their sorrows, their aspirations. In particular, the personal discoveries that came from reading women's life histories made me eager to share them with others. Through my comments in the concluding lecture of the term, students learned the commonalities and contrasts in the lives of the women they interviewed. Given their research efforts during the semester, this seemed oo little, too late."

Accordingly, in the spring of 1988 I put tog ther for publication seventeen student-authorized life histories, representing a selection of better papers from 1981-1987.[1] Ihteoded for use in Women's Studies and Oral History courses, the textbook/reader contains the life stories of three generations of women. Readers are introduced to the life history in anthropology and provided a summary of what student life history papers can reveal about women's lives. The volume includes guidelines for the collecting, processing, and writing of life stories.

* * *

The' life history has a long and well documented history in anthropology (see, for example, Langness and Frank 1981; Mandelbaum 1973; Shaw 1980), but it is only recently that anthropologists have turned to life histories as an end in themselves--and, with good reason. The life history, more than many other forms of anthropological writing, focuses on the expressive side of culture--how people experience the meaningful events and crises of their lives, and how they feel about what they do (or at least what they say about how they feel). The life history is the flip side to the usual anthropological description of a way of life. Instead of how norms, values, and rules shape people's behavior, the life history reveals how the individual copes with the stream of events, values, and rules his or her culture imposes. Perhaps the most important function of the life history is giving voice to the ordinary person. Increasingly the life history has become a medium for the female perspective, a

counterpoint to a predominantly male view of the world.

Life histories have a special significance in our highly technological, fast-paced and complex world. As we have become more isolated from one another, the life history offers a means of putting us back in touch with others: pow do people in our culture approach the breakup of a marriage, growing older, the death of a close friend or relative, and other of life's crises? What do people see as the significant events or turning points in their lives? How do younger people view their life experiences differently from older people? How do women see their lives differently from men? The life history offers many opportunities for the discovery and rediscovery of ourselves, our gender, our humanity.

* * *

Borrowing the format from a colleague at a Canadian Institution,[2] in 1981, I introduced my students to writing life histories in an introductory Women's Studies course. The life history project fuHilled the 'Written composition" requirement of our college's liberal arts core curriculum; it provided students with a unique opportunity to engage in field research without the inherent dangers of turning loose a class of inexperienced researchers on an unsuspecting community; it averted the usual boring-for-the-instructor-to-read library research paper; and, compatible with the philosophy of Women's Studies, it required students to focus their research efforts on women. In learning how to interview and listen, and in learning to see the world through the eyes of another woman,[3] students acquired some useful life skills as well.

In Women's Studies 261 ("Sex and Culture") students are instructed to collect the life history of a woman (eighteen-years-old or older) by conducting a series of interviews with her. From these they are to piece together, in their own and their subject's words, her life history. In addition to the subject's narrative of her life, the paper must include a discussion of methodology--where, when and how the interviews were conducted--and some interpretive comments. This commentary, at the very 1east, comprises a discussion of what the participants--particularly. the interviewer--gained from the project. The research and writing is done between mid-September and the first of December and the finished papers range from twelve to thirty typed, double-spaced pages in length. The life history subjects who agree to participate in the project are informed in writing of the purpose of the assignment and of the final disposition of the term papers;[4] they sign a consent sheet agreeing to these terms, and retain the right to remain anonymous.

My initial experiment with student-authorized life histories in my Women's Studies course proved

sufficiently rewarding to students, life history subjects, and instructor alike, that I have continued the project every year since. In 1986, the quality of the term papers was so high that I decided it would be useful to try to publish a selection of student papers. Accordingly, I invited six students to contribute their papers to the proposed book and to participate in a post-course discussion of the life history assignment. Culling through the papers I hava saved from previous years, I was able *(o* locate the addresses of four former students, two of whom submitted their papers. Following my 1987 class, ten more students participated in the project. Because of the work involved in revising papers, each of these participants took a one-credit independent studies course from me in which they rewrote their own papers and read and critiqued each other's.[5]

When the project was introduced in 1981, students read Marjorie Mitchell's (1980) analysis of student life history papers from the parent project and three articles on interviewing (two chapters from Spradley 1979 and one from Langlois 1976). For guidance they had brief project information sheets I authored which dealt with selecting an informant, interviewing, and writing up the results. An "A" term paper from a previous year was made available for consultation. Since 1985, required reading for the course has included Nisa, Marjorie Shostak's (1981) excellent life history of a !Kung San woman of Botswana, and, beginning in 1987, an early version of "If You Want His Paycheck . . ." which, at that time, included only seven life histories. Throughout the semester I discuss the project in class, occasionally listen to tapes, read and comment upon rough draft. and so forth. Not surprisingly, the final papers vary tremendously in quality. Some are mere recitations of factual information offering little insight into the subjects as persons, and some of the .worst comprise merely answers to- the interview questions suggested on my project information sheet.[6] In the very best papers, the life history subjects come alive, sharing their experiences directly with the reader.

Most of the life histories follow the chronological format characteristic of biography and autobiography in the western tradition, presenting an ordered life illustrated with anecdotes and examples. Most papers are structured around either the interview questions I suggested 'in the early years of the project, or around the interview topics adapted from Gluck (1977) which I have used most recently. Despite these overarching similarities, students have elected various ways to present life history data from straight expository writing to a series of letters to a friend, to free verse.

The life history papers are particularly rich in data on selected categories of women's experience, but silent on other aspects of women's lives. I have, for example, received very few physical descriptions of life history

subjects (either from authors or subjects). Few life history subjects are placed by authors in any physical setting: the reader does not learn their tastes in reading matter, music, personal belongings, their pet peeves, favorite leisure activities and hobbies, or how they dress and the image they present to the world. There is little information on the work history of older women or on the career plans of younger women; the reader rarely knows what impact the Women's Movement has had on the lives of these women, or how they have reared their children. Few of them pause to offer their philosophies of life. The papers do, however, provide insight into many personal issues: tragedies affecting their lives, childhood memories, feelings about parents and siblings, schooling, puberty, first sexual experience, marriage, having children, and more. Moreover, the life histories are a means to understanding generational differences in women's experience, certain critical events in women's lives, and how these women see themselves as different from men.

The women who have told their life stories to my students range in age from eighteen to eighty-five (the largest percentage comprising eighteen to twenty-two year-olds). They are college students, old childhood friends from home, friends from the work place, friends of friends, sisters, aunts, sisters-in-1aw, mothers, grandmothers, girlfriends of male authors, and in one or two cases, strangers. Most are middle class and many have had at least some college education; women from working class and poor backgrounds are represented in smaller numbers. Most life history subjects have been white, but also included are American blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, a Panamanian, Lebanese, Nigerian, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and an Italian. Except for the occasional foreign student interviewee, all th women are from New York State.

The oldest w o m e n, grandmothers and women of this age cohort, are regarded with some awe and reverence, treasured by their granddaughter interviewers and described in terms like "loving," "giving," and "kind." Their life histories contain significantly less analysis and commentary than those of younger women. Grandmothers remember clearly the Depression and World War II. When they were growing up sex was not discussed between parent and child; women were given minimal information on menstruation by their mothers; and, a woman's first anct only lover was her husband. Grandmothers have seen their homes emptied of all their children; they have experienced menopause and, some, the death of a lifelong spouse.

Mothers and women of mother's generation grew up in an era when divorce was uncommon, and when to be the product of a divorced home was a serious social stigma. Their own mothers did not talk to them of sex; rather, these women spoke with older

friends, perused the pages of National Ge ogr aphic, and c onsult ed encyclopedias and women's magazines. Many of their mothers didn't prepare them for menstruation either, but virtually all saw he movie" on menstruation. In their time, "nice girls" didn't engage in sex in high school, though they frequently did everything short of sexual intercourse. The unfortunate teenager who became pregnant vanished from school and for all intents and purposes ceased to exist. The pill wasn't available until after their first child was born. Several of these women were unable to complete college because of early marriage and family; in fact, an incomplete education is the most commonly expressed discontent of these women.

For the youngest life history subjects,. marriage, children, and careers are still aspirations. The college experience is relatively new, high school memories yet fresh, and pre-secondary schooling is often recounted grade by grade. For these women sex was often discussed with parent(s) at a fairly early age and their mothers dealt with menstruation more openly than mothers of the preceding generation.. Divorced parents were fairly common, and several women reported early experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Despite nationwide statistics -showing the decline in age at first sexual intercourse, a trend toward sexua! conservatism appears among this age group; the number of eighteen to twenty-year-old virgins represented in these papers has increased slightly each year and there seems to be less stigma attached to virginity. With few exceptions women of this generation expect marriage, children, and a career. Most hope to work immediately following college and be on their own for a time. The majority of student interviewers, not surprisingly, identified most strongly with this group.

* * *

The student interviewers and their subjects speak thoughtfully, often humorously, and occasionally eloquently on many topics. Discussing their methodology, interviewers often elaborate upon some of the frustrations and difficulties they had to overcome. Inquiring about highly personal matters, including sex, is a favorite topic of discussion.

On interviewing a grandmother:

> *Before the actual interviews· took place, I wrote down some questions that I had intended to ask Julia, just to get her familiar with the material She looked at the top of the list and said, "Oh my God," then went further down the list and said, "Oh my God!" with a little more emphasis on the "God" this time. I showed the list to my parents the night before, and they both agreed that if I could pull this off, I could do anything.*

..

Interviewing younger women about sex wasn't necessarily easier. One of the several males in my 1987 class who had a difficult time with his life history subject remained alarmingly persistent. His technique is not recommended!

> *Sex is one subject that is very difficult to talk about as I found out when I asked Amy if she had had a sexual experience. "None of your business!" "C'mon, all I want is a yes or no." We had a stalemate on the topic but I thought it was beneficial to the paper so I kept insisting she answer. After deliberating with her I called her roommate in who knows more about Amy than Amy does. I asked her to help me drag a yes or no out of Amy. That didn't seem to work well either. Than I asked the roommate if she'd had a sexual experience. She replied "Yes!" Immediately following her response I asked Amy again and this time she answered "Yes, I have."*

The life history subjects themselves offered detailed and rich material on certain life experiences. Menarche and first sexual experience are highlighted in their accounts.

About menstruation:

> *I had no idea of wltm was going on, no one told me about 'the pain. All this blood was flowing out of me. You just could not believe the hell I went through. I threw my underwear out, it was filled with blood. I couldn't stop bleeding. I started crying.*

The younger the individual, the more difficult and/or frightening first menstruation usually is. A woman who reached menarche at age eight remembered that her mother put a thick pad in her underpants and told her to sit on the porch and not to move. "Every month it was the same thing. The kids would ask, 'What's wrong with Mary; is she sick?' I felt like I did something wrong, like I was being punished; Mom told me to sit on the porch and 'don't let the dog sniff ya.'"

For a few menarche was eagerly anticipated and highly positive. "I wanted it so badly before I got it! I remember waking up for school and running downstairs to show my mother my underwear. I felt so grown up! I was thrilled!"

Although menarche is not a life cycle event that is usually shared publicly or celebrated in American culture, there was the occasional subject whose menarche was given wider importance by family members. One daughter received a dozen long- stemmed roses from her proud father; another, a gold bracelet from her family. In a few families the news was joyfully spread: "The day Lisa began menstruating her mother informed all the relatives; it was like a family

celebration. First her mother ran in and called her father at work . . . When her father returned home from work that evening her parents called all the relatives."

Regardless of the particular memory of menarche, menstruation was special: "It was maturity. A mark that you would never be the same again. It was something to fuss about, talk about, whisper about." A shared tradition among women.

For many of the women, first sexual intercourse was clearly an act of choice; for others it was equally a response to perceived peer pressure or to boyfriends' demands. For a few, first sexual experience was "very romantic," and "very, very good,' but for most, regardless of age and generation, first sexual experience was somewhat of a letdown. The women's accounts point also to both the existence of a double standard and the importance of meaningful sex to women. Not surprisingly, no one reported learning the details of sex from her mother ahead of time, but one mother who was interviewed by her daughter offered the following motherly advice: "Do it before you're married, really love the person, don't get pushed into it, and don't tell me about it until you're thirty!" A sampling of what the y.iomen themselves had to say includes:

I was with a friend of mine. We were both inexperienced and didn't know what to do. We had a book and were reading from that. We were both seventeen and neither of us learned about it from our parents. I'm glad it was with this friend because if it wasn't, it wouldn't have been special.

It wasn't as spectacular as I thought it was going to be. After it was over I wondered why everyone was making such a big deal over it. The whole act was a letdown as I expected to be totally immersed in pleasure and love as it was in the movies. Yet it turned .out to be realistic and painful Afterwards I felt guilty as this was the first time I had ever done anything socially unacceptable.

I was curious about St:X but I was scared. I also considered myself a good Christian and felt I would be doing something wrong. Curiosity ruled. I was shy. It hurt and I told him to stop. I didn't like sex the first time and I cried after. I felt like I had betrayed somebody but I didn't know who.

I was a freshman [high school] and went after a senior. I though it was love; the next day he bragged all over school about it.

I heard the voices of the nuns . .

I guess I felt a little guilty because of my strict upbringi.ng. I didn't think I was a bad gi.rl because I

had done it though, because it felt too nice to be wrong.

Virginity was not lost with the grandmother generation. There were several self-professed virgins in the eighteen to twenty-two age group, a few of whom were convinced they were the only ones left on earth. Their responses too were mixed, ranging from pride to anguish, but in almost every case they stressed that the person and circumstances must be "right."

There were the unfortunate and tragic instances where first sexual experience was forced, as in the case of the high school student who went to a fraternity party at her friend's college. A fraternity member with whom she'd been drinking let her pass out on his bed, then raped her. She awoke the next morning, naked and alone, and exclaimed to her friend, "I felt so cheap." For the next month she thought everyone who looked at her was thinking "I know what you did."

For a number of life history subjects sexual abuse and its aftermath was a painful secret held from a young age. In some cases they carried the additional shame of being molested or raped by a relative. One father molested his teenage daughter when he took her out for driving lessons. Instructing her to park the car he would begin feeling her breasts. If she objected, he would threaten, "You don't want me to cheat on your mother, do you? Let me do what I want or I'll find someone else!" Hostility, mistrust of men and self blame were the common legacy of those who had been sexually violated at a young age. A young woman who was sexually molested from ages four to six by a male baby sitter suffered no obvious problems until adolescence. 'It was hard in high school with guys because the (baby sitter] was in high school when it happened. It just kept coming back ..." The young woman whose father molested her during "driving lessons" wants to get married and have children but worries about finding a man who would be loyal. 'Don't all men want something more, something better than what they have?" she queried.

As life history subjects have discussed sexual experiences more openly over the years, so they have also spoken more candidly about other once forbidden topics. Experiences with alcoholic parents, for example, have been reported by a number of women. Here are two examples:

In all my spare time after school I would have to be with my father in the car, because he thought that the police wouldrt't pull him over if he had a child in the car. Then on our excursions out we would stop at almost every bar we passed, so he could get a drink.

I can rememb"l!r the few times they would dress and go out together. I would tell them before they left, "Please don't fight when you come

home, please don't fight." Unfortunately I had the bedroom right next door to theirs and I can't tell you how many times I would awaken and there would be an argument. I could remember figuring that they would separate. Then I would see them in the kiJchen hugging and kissing and I'd think, "It's going to be all right." Naturally this was wishful thinking from a young child because the arguments got worse and my mother would wake us and tell us to get our coats . . . She needed to find a place to rest so she could go to work in the morning, and he would continue to argue with her because he wasn't working and didn't have to get up. Many times we would stay with a friend of my mother's around the comer who was single. [The interviewee and her mother moved in with a relative, and when they returned home] . . . my puppy was a dog and my father was gone.

As the professor who assigns and monitors this project, I am as interested in what the participants derive from the process as in the life history data themselves. The life history enterprise serves its participants well. Most of the subjects have expectations for the project beyond simply helping their collaborators toward a good grade. For some, creating a personal document that serves as the beginning of a family history is important. Especially when mothers are interviewed by their children, the life history offers an opportunity to share oneself and bestow a story upon an appropriate legatee. Others have seen in the interviews and final paper a statement of self to be examined and reexamined as choices are made for the future. Most obviously, the life history process provides an opportunity for self-revelation as it did the several women here who related life events or feelings for the first time. As well, the life history offers a medium for making a statement--to family, friends, or to the world at large. Whether statement, self-revelation, family history, or all of these, the life history offers the narrator an affirmation of self-worth, the promise of an attentive audience who will find value in one's words and life experiences. That attentive, even solicitous, audience is foremost the interviewer, an individual who typically has a meaningful relationship to the life history subject- already. The interviewers have asked, but more importantly, they have listened.

Just as the life history offers its subject an opportunity for personal revelation, it gives the interviewer the liberty to explore topics that ordinarily would net be raised even in a close interpersonal relationship. This is, at times, a very disconcerting license--as when having to inquire about sex, often the most frustrating aspect of the project. Their uneasiness arose not so

much from the reluctance of their informants, but from the lack of a precedent for asking such questions of mothers, grandmothers, older friends, and even contemporaries. One author, engaged to his life history subject, noted that the questions he asked her as interviewer he would never have asked her as fiance.

In every case, the unique interviewer/interviewee relationship· created new bonds between them. In the process of collaborating on a life history, they carve out new roles. The interviewer, in particular, seems to thread a narrow path between friend, confidante, counselor, researcher. One author, an alcohol and substance abuse counselor who interviewed her friend, remarks:

> *She didn't say anything I hadn't heard before [as a counselor}. I'm never surprised. I had my counselor face on, but she's my friend and she was feeling badly, and I was privy to this for the first time. I felt like, "If you 're going to tell me this, I should give you something back." As a friend, I felt awkward, as a counselor it wasn't my place so it was very frustrating and still is.*

Like a stone tossed into a quiet pond, a life history reaches beyond its collaborators in its impact. One author interviewed her mother's best friend and they became extremely close in the process, but she fears the project has strained her relationship with her own mother.

The personal rewards of researching and writing a life history have been a regular topic of comment by my students each year. Forming closer bonds with the life history subject is most often mentioned and seems particularly characteristic of mothers and daughters.

> *I was able to gain a better sense of what my mother was really like and I liked what I found out. I feel as though our talks together helped strengthen our mother- daughter relationship. I even understand w!zy she yelled when she did. I can reflect her life on my own and get a better understanding of what she was attempting to teach me all those years. I feel now after writing her life history I understand her a lot better and our relationship has prospered tremendously. I love that woman a real lot!*

Such rewards were not limited to mothers and daughters, however. A woman who interviewed a friend wrote:

> *I found many similarities in her struggle to become herself and my struggle to become myself. I believe that is why our relationship is important to us, because we give each other courage instead of uncertainties that the men in our lives have given to us.*

Interviewers' eyes were opened by lives very different from their own. Remarked a college student who interviewed a peer: "t came to college thinking everyone's parents, like mine, worked hard to put their children through school, called them at least twice a week, and sent them packages. But it's not that way." Concluded a male author of his mother's life history: 'It didn't occur to me that other people's lives could be that much different, and it was a wonderful experience. There's been a tendency, at least in my life, not to be exposed to the importance of people's lives."

Males, in particular, learned things about women provided by no other life experience. Exclaimed one surprised young man: "t have also had a chance to examine my own feelings towards women in general. It never occurred to me that it was any different growing up female. I know better now

The students in my 1987 Women's Studies class served as audience and Gritics for an earlier version of If You Want His Paycheck. Their comments not only helped shape the final volume but suggested new directions future life history research might take. The students presented a "wish list" *ot'* women's stories that ought to be heard but are not included in the reader: more women of color, lesbians, women of privilege and wealth, women who successfully combine career-marriage-family, women in prison, prostitutes, and handicapped women. They wanted to hear more positive life experiences, more about women's friendships with other women, more about women's political views and life philosophies, more bn women's careers and career choices, more of the content that makes life history subjects "come alive," more, more, more . . .

If You Want His Paycheck . . . is just a small beginning.

ENDNOTES:

1. Entitled I f You Want His Paycheck on Friday, You Will Have to Do Things on Thursday Night You Do Not Like: A Reader of Women's Life Histories. The volume is currently under consideration for publication.

2. Marjorie Mitchell, Camosun College, Victoria, British Columbia. Mitchell (1980) relates her own experiences with student life history research.

3. Or, in the case of male students, through the eyes·of a woman.

4. All papers are returned to the authors, and I note that I may make copies for my files of good term papers.

S. As editor I worked closely with all student authors to prepare for publication. I made minor editorial changes and requested needed amplifications and clarifications. In most cases life history subjects were reinterviewed and new material included

in the final paper. I requested that authors detail their methodology and that each compose an autobiographic;al sketch to accompany the paper. Students from th early years of the project also.wrote an epilogue to bring their subjects' lives up-t9-date. These changes notwithstanding, the papers retain the flavor of the original term paper compositions.

6. Then there is the occasional fabricated life history, usuall)(but not always discernable from its vagueness and/or its stereotyped content.

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