

Oral History as a Teaching and Learning Tool

By Mary L. Hanneman

“Every student should do oral history at least once. You get to *live* history,”¹ remarked a student in my Pacific War course. This endorsement came after the student completed an oral history project on his great-uncle, a soldier in the South Pacific during World War II. As a teacher of Asian history I often hear students say they “hated history,” then proceed to enumerate the usual complaints about history being nothing but names, dates, and dry-as-dust details. Many students have never experienced history as a vibrant and living field of study, nor have they come to see it as a key to understanding themselves and the world. One way to bring the study of the past alive for students is through oral history, a process by which we “collect . . . memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.”² The following essay begins with a discussion of oral history projects as a way to engage students in the study of history, teach them how history is recorded, and enable them to make real contributions to the body of historical knowledge. Following the article is a short “how-to” section for those interested in considering such a project for their own students.

Oral history, “both the oldest type of historical inquiry . . . and one of the most modern,” is accessible history, not only to readers, but also to researchers and, in particular, to student researchers.³

view, so the assignment must be tailored to the local community and its potential resources. Is there a large immigrant population, for example, or a nearby military base? Another common problem is when the “story” and the “history” don’t add up. Memories may change and fade and it can be confusing for any historian, let alone a student historian, to negotiate the potential conflicts between a “remembered fact” and facts as reported in written histories. In these cases, background research is especially important, and when gentle questioning doesn’t clarify the discrepancy, the student learns the necessity of consulting and weighing a variety of sources and comparing evidence. A footnote in the finished product can elucidate, or at least acknowledge, the differing accounts.

The historian’s problems also yield the historian’s rewards. Perhaps the primary reward, in addition to the satisfaction of the hunt itself, is that students learn for themselves that history requires thoughtful analysis, that it is subjective, and that it always involves and impacts living human beings! They get to experience a vital sense of connection to our past. Conducting oral history often energizes even unenthusiastic students, motivating them to immerse themselves in written primary and secondary sources as they conduct their background research. When it comes to sharing their knowledge

Engaging in oral history is a rich experience. Students gain an intimate, first-hand understanding of a variety of historical events, and the process itself allows them to directly practice the craft of the historian.

Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary by nature, oral history is especially appropriate in the contemporary classroom. It may be especially valuable in Asia-related courses, bringing immediacy to subjects otherwise distant for many American students. It also addresses one of the most persistent problems in teaching Asia-related subjects in the United States: the impossibility, in most cases, of asking students to do primary-source research. Moreover, because of Asia’s important role in our country’s twentieth-century history, oral history subjects related to Asia can give students a meaningful entry into a number of areas of scholarly inquiry. The approach can be used successfully in a variety of Asia-related courses and with a variety of populations. Veterans and those who lived through the WWII, Korean, and Vietnam war eras are potentially informative subjects, as are Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants and refugees.

Engaging in oral history is a rich experience. Students gain an intimate, first-hand understanding of a variety of historical events, and the process itself allows them to directly practice the craft of the historian. By “practicing the craft,” students experience the problems, as well as the rewards, of the historian. Many of the problems are familiar to all historians—what are the sources and where are they? What are the “facts” and what if they don’t match up? Students engaged in oral history face variations on these same problems. For many students, an obvious first problem is finding subjects to inter-

and experiences in class, often even normally reticent students are empowered to speak out, knowing they have something unique and original to contribute. As oral historian Barbara Sommer explains, oral history, collected in a “planned, organized, focused way, . . . permits those who collect it today—and those who may use it decades from now—to glimpse and perhaps understand a time and place in the past through the words of those who experienced it firsthand.”⁴

Another important reward is that, despite their limited scholarly backgrounds, students can make a real contribution to the body of historical knowledge, in most cases creating compelling historical accounts where none existed before. Particularly rewarding are student interviews with older family members during which they learn hidden or almost-forgotten aspects of their family history. This builds interpersonal communication skills, and, more importantly, helps cement and solidify ties across the generations, enabling the younger generation to enrich and deepen their understanding while learning more about their elders’ lives and experiences. Whether the end results are published for the broader public, or simply shared with classmates or families, oral history projects “may produce products of real educational and social value to families, schools, and communities and furthermore . . . the process and skills of field research are probably best learned in pursuit of these socially real products.”⁵

My students have completed successful oral history projects on topics ranging from Chinese experiences of the Cultural Revolution, to the Vietnamese refugee and immigrant experience, to the incarceration of the Nikkei. Here are excerpts from oral histories gathered by students in the World War II course. These samples demonstrate the immense impact of that war and show how oral history enables students to see the same set of events from a diversity of perspectives. Highlighting the richness of this approach, the following excerpts all came from the same class, the same term.

One Japanese woman, a young mother in Kyushu at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, remembered the outbreak of the War: “The whole country pulled together, no one had to tell us, we all just did what we could, sacrificing in our own way.” By the end of the war however, “I did not care any more about winning or losing. After four years of war, it felt good that it was finally over. I was so happy to be able to change my baby’s diaper in the light—no more black-outs.” Those black-outs were particularly terrifying to a Japanese girl, four years old when the war broke out: “I hated to see darkness come because the bombing would start again. My family hid in the shelter and I tried to find a corner small enough to protect me from the continuous bombing.”

“When I heard [the Emperor’s announcement of the war’s end],” recalled another Japanese woman, “I was relieved.” The then-young Japanese girl’s memories of the war’s end were even more direct: “I was hungry the whole time I lived in the shelter. [Later] the American soldiers gave me corned beef. It tasted so good.”

Recollections from the American home front also focused on unity and sacrifice. An American woman recalled, “After the attack on Pearl, people were angry. Then they just rallied and everyone worked to make our country strong. Everyone was patriotic.” But, she continued, “We didn’t have butter, we didn’t have bacon, you couldn’t buy store-bought bread.” When the war ended, she remembered her happiness at going to the store and hearing, “‘You can have meat today, you can have beef, you can have pork.’ It was wonderful.”

An American woman who served on a hospital ship as an Army nurse remembered witnessing a kamikaze attack on a nearby ammunition ship: “I was on the deck looking outside. When I saw the crash, I ran through the quarter and headed to the bottom of the ship. An officer stopped to ask me what happened. I was shaky and could barely talk.” She also spoke of her feelings about the war and its impact: “During the war I had a lot of hatred. Hatred towards the enemy, hatred towards war. My patients were suffering. When I treated our soldiers in one of the Japanese prison camps, I was devastated, they were so skinny and had been treated so badly. I had so much hatred. But my feeling of hatred strangely diminished when I landed in Okinawa. The war was over. It was very strange that all the hatred I had was gone so quickly when I saw skinny Japanese civilians who also suffered tremendously during the war.”

A Japanese-American serviceman sent to Japan arrived in Yokohama in October 1945: “We took the train to Tokyo and everything was burned down. All you could see were brick chimneys—basically there wasn’t anything else left.” The train stations were clogged with Japanese soldiers holding “small boxes filled with the remains of soldiers. They’d have a white cloth hanging around their necks and they’d be carrying these urns, waiting at the train station to turn over the remains to the families.” Although of Japanese ancestry, he recalled, “I didn’t think of Japan as my ‘homeland’ and I certainly didn’t feel any guilt . . . If it hadn’t been for the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor, the life of my parents and those of other



Photographer Chad Japhet’s great uncle, Richard Drewry, appears in the large portrait. The items on the table rest on an autographed Japanese flag captured in the Cagayan River Valley in the northern Phillipines. The author’s father, Fred Hanneman, is pictured on the left in the foreground photograph. Photo taken by Chad Japhet.



Photos from Occupied Japan, taken by author’s father, Fred Hanneman, in 1945 and 1946. Photo taken by Chad Japhet.



Tools for the oral historian: tape recorder, maps, primary and secondary sources. Photo taken by Chad Japhet.

Japanese would have turned out quite different and the internment might not have happened.”⁶

Students’ comments about their oral history projects provide a resounding affirmation of the oral history approach. One young woman reflected, “The oral history project was my absolute favorite project throughout my undergraduate program. I felt a sense of accomplishment with this project that was unattainable in any other project. It was personally fulfilling to me to delve into someone’s past in such detail, and to be able to use their own words. I have read many, many history books about WWII. I have seen pictures and movies. But it wasn’t until I sat down to interview my veteran that I really learned the

history of WWII. Now in his 80s, he remembered how you could tell which bodies were [those of] new recruits by how clean their uniforms were, and he could still cry about a howitzer accident that killed two of his buddies. That, my friend, is history.”⁷

Our country’s twentieth-century history of interaction and involvement with Asia means that our students have ample subject matter for oral history projects. “Memory,” writes oral historian Donald Ritchie, “is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved.”⁸ Engaging students in oral history teaches both history and how to “do” history. Students themselves can extract and preserve important messages from our past.

SAMPLE ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

FORMAT: Two “introductions” and a body.

1. The first introduction develops the context, presents background on the era that is the focus of the oral history. Depending on the subject, it may be more specific. For example, if the subject was a code-talker during WWII, the first introduction may focus on code-talkers and their role in the war. (approximately 10 percent of the paper)
2. The second introduction introduces the narrator, including date and place of birth, family and educational background, etc. (5–10 percent of the paper)
3. The body of the piece is the written and edited version of the interview. Transcribe and edit the interview from the recording. Edit out questions and extraneous information, “umms,” “ahs,” etc. Re-order narrative when necessary. (80–85 percent of the paper)

ORAL HISTORY STEP-BY-STEP

1. Identify interview subject: Depending on the topic, subjects can be found through friends and relatives, churches, or various community organizations, Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, American Legion posts, Veterans Administration hospitals, and nursing homes. (An intermediary such as a pastor or social worker can be helpful for making contacts.)
2. Background preparation and research: Reading, library research in primary and secondary sources, class lectures and discussion; use biographical information about the narrator to focus the research.
3. Develop questions: Write out a list of questions designed to lead the subject through the topic. Questions should be used as a guideline and reminder, not a checklist. (Instructor may gather questions at this point for progress check and “quality control”.)
4. Set up the interview: Make arrangements for a time and a place,

and establish a time limit—forty-five to ninety minutes is usually enough. The place should be quiet, with few distractions. Interviewers should give their subjects an idea of what sorts of questions will be asked to help jog their memories and allow them to better prepare for the interview.

5. Test equipment: Become familiar with how to operate audio-and/or video-recording equipment.
6. Consent: Interviewer and subject must both sign consent forms, indicating the subject’s informed consent to the public use and/or dissemination of the interview material. (See “Resource List” for Web sites that offer sample consent forms.)
7. Conduct the interview:
 - a. For the recording, announce the subject’s name, the interviewer’s name, the place and date of the interview, and a one-sentence introduction to the basic topic. (“We’re here to talk about . . .”)
 - b. Start with questions about background information—the subject’s birth date, birthplace, education, and occupation. Although the interviewer should already have this information, it “breaks the ice” and documents the information in the body of the interview.
 - c. Follow with questions about the time period itself and the individual’s experiences and reactions to it.
 - d. Wrap up the interview by moving back to the larger picture and asking if there is anything else that is important, any other information that the narrator would like to share.
 - e. Thank the narrators for their time and interest and let them know they will receive a copy of the finished product.
8. Transcription and editing: Edit out interviewer’s questions, extraneous information, “umms” and “ahs,” and reorganize the narrative for clarity and cohesion. ■

SELECTED RESOURCES

Internet Resources

The Oral History Association Web site (<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>) provides the most complete Internet resource on oral history, and includes an important section titled Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association.

Other valuable Web sites include

The Oral History Society (UK) Web site (<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/resources/>) contains an extensive list of US sites dealing with specific oral history projects and collections, such as the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Project, Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, and many more.

Judith Moyer’s Web site (http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html) offers a step-by-step guide to oral history.

The Rochester Regional Library Council (<http://www.rrlc.org/>) recommends that oral

history researchers: “Have an oral history donor and release form which both the interviewer and interviewee sign that donates their taped session to a selected repository, releases all copyright and literary rights to the taped session, and permits unrestricted research and educational use of the interview tapes, transcripts and copies. Do not conduct the interview without a signed donor form in advance.”⁹

Samples of oral history narrator release forms are available at the following sites: <http://www.nelson.usf.edu/spccoll/collect/oralhty.html>, <http://www.ghidc.org/guide8/Forms.html>, http://www.jfklibrary.org/permission_oh.html.

The Upper Fraser Historical Geography Project site: http://web.unbc.ca/upperfraser/upper_fraser_interview_questions.htm has a list of sample interview questions helpful to students when they begin to frame their outline of questions.

The StoryCorps Web site (http://storycorps.net/participate/question_generator/) has a "question generator" that guides one through the question-writing process, helps to fine-tune questions, and suggests further ones to help elicit more information.

Printed Resources on Conducting Oral History

Brown, Cynthia, *Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History* (New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1988).

Center for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, *How to Do Oral History*, 3rd edition, revised (Honolulu: Center for Oral History, 2000).

Kuhn, Cliff and Marjorie L. McClellan, eds., Oral History Issue of *Organization of American Historians' Magazine of History*, (Bloomington: Organization of American Historians, Spring 1997, Volume 11, Number 3).

National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS), *Japanese American Oral History Guide* (San Francisco: NJAHS, 1991).

Ritchie, Donald A., *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Sitton, Thad, George L. Mehaffy, and O. L. Davis, Jr., *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (and Others)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

Sommer, Barbara, and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002).

Bibliography: Oral History Collections on Asia-Related Subjects

Cook, Theodore F. and Haruko Taya, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1992).

Freeman, James M., *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese American Lives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

Lee, Joann Faung Jean, *Asian American Experiences in the United States: Oral Histories of First to Fourth Generation Americans from China, the Philippines, Japan, India, the Pacific Islands, Vietnam, and Cambodia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991).

Mullener, Elizabeth, *War Stories: Remembering World War Two* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2002).

Peters, Richard A., *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean and Chinese Soldiers* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

Tateishi, John, *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

Terkel, Studs, *The "Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

Sources Cited

Japhet, Chad W., personal conversation, November 1, 2005.

Laketa, Margaret A., personal correspondence, October 31, 2005.

Oral History Association Web site: <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>, accessed February 12, 2005.

Ritchie, Donald A., *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Rochester Regional Library Council Web site, <http://www.rrlc.org/hrac/oralhis.html>, accessed February 8, 2005.

Sitton, Thad, George L. Mehaffy, and O. L. Davis, Jr., *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (and Others)*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

Sommer, Barbara and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002).

NOTES

1. Chad W. Japhet, personal conversation, November 1, 2005.
2. Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.
3. Oral History Association Web site: <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>, accessed February 12, 2005.
4. Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), vii.
5. Sitton, Thad, George L. Mehaffy, and O. L. Davis, Jr., *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (and Others)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 23.
6. Some of the material in this paragraph was recently published in an article by one of the author's former students who used the interview conducted for class as the basis for his article. The article is David J. Jepsen, "Northwest Nisei in Tokyo: Impressions of a Seattle-born Japanese-American Serving in Occupied Japan, 1945-46," *Columbia: The Magazine of Northwest History*, 19:4 (Winter 2005-06).
7. Margaret Laketa, personal correspondence, October 31, 2005.
8. Ritchie, 19.
9. Rochester Regional Library Council Web site, <http://www.rrlc.org/hrac/oralhis.html>, accessed, February 8, 2005.

MARY L. HANNEMAN is an Assistant Professor of Asian history at the University of Washington, Tacoma. In addition to conducting research on issues of national identity in early twentieth-century Japan, she is currently working on an oral history project about Tacoma, Washington's Japanese Language School.

New in ASIAN STUDIES from PENGUIN GROUP (USA)



MAO ZEDONG

JONATHAN SPENCE. An intimate history of one of the most formidable and elusive rulers in modern history. "Exceptionally successful."—*The New Yorker*. Penguin 208 pp. 0-14-303772-2 \$13.00



RASHOMON and Seventeen Other Stories

RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA. Translated with Notes by Jay Rubin. Introduction by Haruki Murakami. Cover by Yoshihiro Tatsumi. A brilliant new translation of the Japanese master's stories, featuring a stunning new cover from the grandfather of Japanese alternative comics. Penguin Classics 320 pp. 0-14-303984-9 \$15.00

THE LITTLE BOOK OF HINDU DEITIES

From the Goddess of Wealth to the Sacred Cow SANJAY PATEL. Pixar animator Patel brings to life Hinduism's most important gods and goddesses in fun, full-color illustrations with succinct profiles. Plume 128 pp. 0-452-28775-8 \$14.00

R. K. NARAYAN IN PENGUIN CLASSICS



THE RAMAYANA

A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic Introduction by Pankaj Mishra. Drawing on the work of an eleventh-century poet called Kamban, Narayan employs the skills of a master novelist to bring this luminous saga to new generations of readers. 208 pp. 0-14-303967-9 \$13.00

THE GUIDE

Introduction by Michael Gorra. In Narayan's most celebrated novel, a corrupt tourist guide fresh from prison seeks refuge in an abandoned temple and is mistaken for a holy man. 240 pp. 0-14-303964-4 \$14.00

Winner of the National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy

Also available:

THE PAINTER OF SIGNS

Introduction by Monica Ali 160 pp. 0-14-303866-0 \$13.00

MALGUDI DAYS

Introduction by Jhumpa Lahiri 272 pp. 0-14-303965-2 \$14.00

PENGUIN GROUP (USA) Academic Marketing Department, 375 Hudson Street, NY, NY 10014 www.penguin.com/academic

