

HISTORICAL RESEARCH: THE INTERVIEW

* * *

RICHARD GALLAGHER

The novice interviewer will find such a project challenging and frightening, but also bearing the potential of considerable rewards. Many students ignore interviewing as a research tool because the logistics problems appear, at first glance, to be immense. Furthermore, the popular concept of an interview implies that the interviewee must be a celebrity. In fact, while interviewing very prominent persons may indeed be fruitful, it is an axiom that the best subjects are often relatively obscure. Depending upon the topic under investigation, a historian may wish to interview persons from various walks of life. The best subject for your interview might be a former government official, but it could also be your next-door neighbor. The prudent historian explores all possible sources of information.

Granting that the potential for oral history is all around us, how does one arrange and conduct an interview? The first prerequisite is to have a clear idea of your goal. An interview may be a tool for gathering material for a larger project, or a finished product in itself. The next logical step is to contact the person whom you wish to interview. While this might be done any number of ways, writing a letter is the preferable method. Many individuals cannot or will not make such decisions over the telephone. A letter permits the subject time to consider the merits of your request, and affords an opportunity to consider when you can be worked into his or her schedule. When requesting a person's time, common

courtesy should be uppermost in your mind. The purpose of the proposed interview should be clearly presented. State, as fully as possible, what topics you wish to cover in the interview. Your subject may want to do some memory refreshing if your questions are going to cover events which occurred long ago. Allow maximum leeway in requesting a date and time for the interview. Be prepared to alter your schedule, but do not expect a stranger to go out of the way to accomodate your project. Most people are flattered when requested to give interviews, so let your subject know that you consider his observations to be of importance. Finally, be sure to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your letter. It is the height of impudence to expect someone to foot the cost of doing you a favor.

Once the logistics of the interview have been settled, you must ensure that you are well prepared for the task. Be sure that you are thoroughly familiar with the topics you plan to discuss. If you cannot ask intelligent questions, the entire project will be a waste of time. It is not advisable to make up a list of questions in advance. Pre-written questions tend to put an interview into a strait-jacket. It may be helpful, however, to jot down a brief list of the topics you wish to cover. This will ensure that you remember to explore everything of importance. Whether or not you tape the interview will depend upon your preference and upon your goal. If the interview is to be a project in itself, then taping is a must. If, on the other hand, you are merely gathering information for a larger project, then taping becomes optional. It is possible that a tape recorder will inhibit your subject. Knowing that his words are being preserved for posterity, he may be overly cautious and hedge his remarks. At the other

extreme, he may become theatrical. If you eschew the tape recorder in favor of notes, you may find that to be equally distracting for your subject. Note-takers also run the risk of overlooking subtle points which may be made in the course of the conversation. Any type of tape recorder will do a satisfactory job, but you may find that cassette recorders are the easiest to work with. Use long-playing tape; it will be distracting if you have to change it every half hour. It is also wise to bring along an extension cord in case there is no electric socket within reach. Experiment with the recording level beforehand. If the interview is done properly, your subject will be talking to you, not into the microphone. You must also take into consideration the possibility of noises interfering with the recording. Set your recording level high enough to compensate for the sounds created by air conditioners, highway traffic, etc. Your primary concern should be for clarity, not technical perfection.

When your interview begins, try to maintain a conversational atmosphere. Chances are that your subject will be as nervous as you, so it will be your task to overcome those jitters. When you ask a question, allow the interviewee the opportunity to give a full answer. Do not interrupt unless he is completely digressing from the subject matter. You may find that he will bring up points that are vital, but which you never thought to ask about. On the other hand, it is your responsibility to control the general direction of the interview. There is a fine distinction between appropriate anecdotes and going off the track completely.

Be adaptable. Do not let yourself be tied to your notes or preconceived notions. If your subject brings up something interesting, but unexpected, pursue the matter until it is exhausted. Great historical

insights have been obtained through off-the-cuff remarks. Discourage your subject from reading to you. The purpose of an interview is to discover new material, not to rehash facts which are already in print. If you see that your subject is getting tired, propose a break for a short while. This may be absolutely essential if your subject is an elderly person. If you see that the interview is running over the allotted time, do not impose on your subject. He may be willing to continue, but courtesy demands that you propose to meet again at a later date. If you are going to have the interview transcribed, offer to send a copy to your subject. Some people, in fact, will demand to receive a copy, as they may insist on having some portions deleted. You must keep in mind that an interview is the property of the interviewee, and must be treated as such.

Finally, do not be disappointed if your interview does not sound as smooth or well organized as one from, say, Playboy. Published interviews are always extensively edited and rearranged. The purpose of oral history is to shed light on subjects of historical interest. If your interview accomplishes this, then it will be a success.