

LBJ, Oral History and Box 13

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About a year ago, through the History Department of Wesconn, I had the opportunity to meet and subsequently be employed by an author living in the area (Merle Miller, Plain Speaking, An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman). The previous summer while taking the History Research Seminar, I had become acquainted (albeit, a nodding acquaintance) with a modern research tool, Oral History. I mentioned at that time that in my remote past I had been a transcribing typist and offered to do some transcribing of Oral Histories at the college if the need arose. When Mr. Miller made an inquiry of the History Department about help in finding someone to make transcription of Oral Histories, the department recommended me. My initial duties were to transcribe interviews (on cassette tapes) and speeches (on reel-to-reel tapes) recorded by Miller in the process of research for an oral biography of President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

During the past year I have learned more, perhaps, than I ever wanted to know about LBJ and, more important, the methods of obtaining and use of Oral History in preparing an in-depth biography of a modern-day political figure.

What is an Oral History? It is precisely what it's name implies: a history, given verbally, by mechanical means (Cassette or reel-to-reel tape). The subject matter can range from specific topics (as my research will), to the collective memories of a person or an event or the random recollections of an age. Today, more and more Presidential libraries are employing these devices to round out their collection and knowledge of the man and events. Many universities and colleges are beginning their collections of Oral Histories, not only about "historically" important men and events, but also interviewing and recording the memories of people in the community, especially the elderly, while not being in themselves historically significant, provide a rich treasury of otherwise lost recollections of a past age.

In today's age of electronic communication, Oral Histories has become very important as a means of preserving these recollections. Letter writing and journal keeping have virtually become lost arts. In the past, these primary sources were invaluable to the historian. If the taking of Oral History does not become a basic practice, then much material will not be available to the historians of the future.

And occasionally, often by accident, important data can come from unexpected sources. I had been transcribing cassettes for several months when one day, a friend, an older woman from Texas, remarked, "Have you come across anything about Box 13?" I hadn't

and my blank expression caused her to elaborate. During the 1948 Senatorial race in Texas, there had been a heated contest between Lyndon Johnson and Coke Stevenson. This contest culminated in the small South Texas town of Alice and Ballot Box 13. Mrs. V., as I shall call her--political animosity dies hard in Texas--said that she had been in Alice during that hotly contested race.

The controversy was indeed so heated that it found it's way into the Supreme Court. The scandal surrounding this election was notorious but as it was not (ethically) the finest moment in history--either Johnson's or Texas'--those who would speak about it had to be partially discounted because of their animosity toward Johnson and those who could didn't because of their loyalty to Johnson. Therefore, an actual eye-witness, hopefully unbiased, was really a find.

I practically tripped over my own feet racing to the phone to tell Merle Miller of my discovery. He in turn paid me a supreme compliment and asked me to conduct the interview.

Fortunately, my months at the other end of the interviews (the typewriter) had taught me a number of things. Interviewees, like most people, can be grouped into two categories--talkers (one interview I dubbed, "Endlessly Speaking") and non-talkers. There are pluses and minuses to both categories. For the non-talkers, one must be able to ask enough questions to prod the interviewee out of his reticence. For the eager talker, one must be able to ask enough questions to keep the conversation from meandering through the highways and by-ways of the sum total of the interviewee's life recollections.

You may have noticed that in either case, one must be able to ask questions. Not any questions--but the right questions; hopefully, even astute questions. Some may have a gift for this and some may not but in either case, a good background with a basis in fact is essential.

So my first task was to gather enough information to ask those astute, probing questions. In this, I was in a most fortunate of positions. I had at my fingertips, so to speak, (pardon the pun) a wealth of information about Lyndon Johnson. I had been transcribing Oral Histories for nearly a year, and, if only by osmosis, had absorbed a great deal of background material. Some of it highly historical; some of it highly amusing. An example of the latter is the local Alice, Texas joke of 1948--an area populated with many Mexican-Americans. "Little Juan ran home and shouted, 'Where's my father?' The relative replied, 'Juan, you know your father passed away three years ago.' 'But,' says Juan, 'I was just at the court-house where they said he voted for Lyndon Johnson.' Or Coke Stevenson, depending on whose side was doing the telling.

Along with consulting other Oral Histories, the written word should not be ignored or discounted. Books and unpublished theses

abound on this (or any) subject. So I had information, although sketchy, on the 1948 election. But no eye-witnesses of the innocent by-stander variety.

One of the best sources, not only for basic facts, but also to put such facts into it's proper time frame, is the micro-film records of the New York Times (or even the local papers of the area). By this time I had begun to spend long (endless?) hours in front of the micro-film reader at the Danbury Public Library. (My duties had expanded enormously by this time into the interesting field of research and the not-so-exciting task of categorizing information and filing it.) I (we) use the public library rather than the Wesconn library because the Xerox micro-film reader also prints a reverse image copy of the newspaper article. In fact, by this time it had become a family project. My children are probably the only ten and eleven year olds in the area that need only to be told, "Find what you can on the Roosevelt 1937 fishing trip," to send them into action. They then get the New York Times Index for 1937, look up either Roosevelt or Texas (this they-we-learned by trial and error because the index is not consistent), write down the dates and pages (the latter also learned by painful and time-consuming trial and error), select the correct reel, find the article and line it up (another hard found skill) and press the button for a xerox copy.

My children also shine on the fourth floor of the Ruth A. Haas Library where another vital source of background information--the stacks is located. Those musty, crumbly back issues of magazines and journals are of enormous value in giving not only background information but also opinions that were held and examined at a given time. While I man the copier, the children scurry up to the fourth floor, clutching 5X8 cards with the name and date of a particular magazine and bring the magazine down to me. This, to the amazement of many college students who seemingly have been unable to master this art.

From all the research, I was able to assemble some background facts. The 1948 election was a democratic primary contest for the Senate seat held then by "Pappy" O'Daniels. In 1941, Lyndon Johnson (along with what amounted to a cast of thousands) had sought and failed to get the same seat, the only election Johnson was ever to lose. The primary was being held to decide which candidate's name was to be placed on the ballot in opposition to the Republican candidate in the November election. Many felt that the winner of the 1941 election should have been Lyndon Johnson, who had been declared, Dewey-like, the early winner. It is said that in the enthusiasm of winning, the Johnson camp released their win figures and thereby tipped their hand. The other side knew how many votes they needed to produce to win. The victory had been plucked from Johnson's hands.

In 1948, the Johnson camp was older and wiser and kept their vote count to themselves. The race narrowed to a matter of under

a hundred--separating Johnson and Stevenson. The matter went to the Democratic State Caucus for certification of the victor. And the subject of Ballot Box 13 from Alice, Texas was raised. The count (pro-Johnson) was questioned and the ballot box was ordered impounded. However, it had fortuitously disappeared. Enter the Box 13 scandal. Johnson eventually was declared the winner by special Supreme Court decision of Justice Hugo Black and from thence began the brilliant career that was to bring Johnson to the Presidency.

Armed with this background, I began the interview. It was conducted in the (relative) comfort of my own home. The optimum way to obtain an Oral History is in a one-to-one setting. And, from the view-point of the transcriber, in a quiet place. Much can be learned perhaps in the relaxed atmosphere of a good restaurant but much can be lost amid the clatter of plates and glasses. A group's collected recollections are also noteworthy but it is difficult to transcribe. People tend to often speak in unison or what's worse, out-shout one another.

My initial Oral History is as follows:

ORAL HISTORY

March 29, 1977

Interviewee: Mrs. V.

Interviewer: Rae Sammis

S: First of all, where is Alice, Texas? What county...and...

V: It's in Duval County, down below San Antonio, about 2 hours, about 60 miles in from Corpus Christi.

S: When...what years were you there and what were you doing while you were there.

V: I went down in 1945 to take a place as librarian in the high school. I was there until 195...the school year of 1951. I left there in June of '51.

S: You were there during the 1948 senatorial campaign...first of all, may I say that that is a primary campaign, not the actual campaign, which is...am I correct?

V: I don't know. I don't remember.

S: Do you remember who the candidates were?

V: No.

S: Can you just tell me what it was like and what transpired in your case, Mrs. V?

- V: Well, I think I better start out by saying that when I went down there, I was warned that it was riddled with politics. That there was one man to look out for...that was the Duke of Duval. Cause if you got cross-wise with the Duke of Duval--your goose was cooked.
- S: Who was the Duke of Duval?
- V: George Parr.
- S: George Parr.
- V: Inheritor from Archie Parr. Archie Parr started the whole deal. I think it was a sort of...lesser Mafia, that had all of that section of South Texas, down to Brownsville, under their thumb. If you wanted to sell a bottle of beer, you had to get permission of the Duke. (Phone rings...party on other end hangs up)
- S: We left off before the telephone rang...talking about George Parr and his control of Duval County. And where you were arriving to teach school. Are the jobs appointed or do you get your job through the Board of Education?
- V: Through the Board of Education, yes; but who controls the Board of Education?
- S: George Parr.
- V: George Parr. So...he controlled all the jobs, the political jobs, the city jobs, the school jobs...you name it. George had the upper hand. And you stayed on the good side of George politically, if you wanted to keep your job. So I just didn't meddle in politics, at all. (Phone again)
- V: One did not discuss politics unless you knew to whom you were talking. And so I just sat and watch things fly by. But when the election time came, that Box 13 business. It is all very hazy...but they said that they had dead ones voting that had been dead twenty years.
- S: Did that happen on both sides?
- V: I don't remember. I don't know whether it was on both sides or all for the Democratic side. I think...
- S: It was...all...all those people were Democrats. It was a primary election.
- V: Well.
- S: In Texas, the primary would be THE election.
- V: Well, whatever, I stayed out of it because I would have been on the wrong side.

S: Parr's candidate was who? Coke Stevenson?

19

V: I don't know. I don't remember. All I know, this to-do Box 13 disappeared. Just disappeared. And lots of the gentlemen in town disappeared to far parts. South America, preferably.

S: Did...you had said at one point that this had affected your job.

V: Oh yes. The tale went, that if you were to loose a job; they took you out of the position you were in, if you were in high school, and put you in junior high.

S: As a punitive measure?

V: As a punitive measure. And then you'd find your way out. At the end of that particular year. So I made a mistake. My daughter came home with a tale from school. Some little girl stated that a county official...had paid...the town or the city had paid for his home. Out of funds...out of funds which should not have been used to that purpose. So my daughter came home with that tale; some little girl had told her that her daddy said...this county had paid for his home out of city funds. So the next day at school I spoke with one of my co-workers... "Do you suppose that is true?" Unfortunately, this teacher's son was a lawyer who worked for this county official. She went to her son with this tale that the county official's home and lo and behold that night I got a phone call. This county official wanted to know where that story came from. I didn't know what child had told that story. He had to speak with my daughter to ask where she got the tale. And thank heavens, she didn't remember who told her the tale. So, sure enough, that spring I was removed from the library and put down teaching social studies in the seventh grade. And a little later that year, I was told that if I resigned, they would give me a good recommendation. I was never told why.. for what reason they wanted to be rid of me but, if I would resign, they would give me a good recommendation to any place I wanted to go. So, perforce, I resigned. Why fight the machine?

S: That was in 1951?

V: '51.

S: And you then went to Wharton?

V: Bolling.

S: Bolling, Texas. In the '48...the Box 13 scandal...was it...did you talk about it? Or was that so quiet and so hush-hush...that along with the other...

V: Oh, all you got was what came of publically but everybody was talking about it. Who had disappeared to South America and all of the extra votes that shouldn't be there. But, as far as talking about it...oh, you could, I guess, if you were with... bona fide friends who wouldn't pass on the naughty things you might say.

- S: And George Parr, how long did he remain in power there?
- V: Well, he was just about on his way out. When I left there. But he still had a pretty good strangle-hold on it. Once he decided that he would sue Time magazine for having published something about him...he spent a hitch in Federal pen for... invasion on income tax, whatever, he was in the pen for a while and Time magazine had a write-up. So he was going to sue for this tale because it had hurt his daughter. She hadn't known that her father had been in the penitentiary and it was just such an emotional upset to her that he wanted to sue Time. But he couldn't because Time had the facts. They said nothing that couldn't be proved. So that's one time that George lost out. Now, I don't know whether he's still flourishing. I haven't heard a word about him. Since I left those precincts.
- S: Do you remember...this is just off the top of my head... do you remember the Pappy O'Daniel election?
- V: I don't remember.
- (tape shut off)
- V: Because of...buddies...who was working against him. One night this lawyer's son came home after dark and somebody had ambushed him and he was shot and killed in mistake for his father.
- S: What was George Parr? Congressman? Senator? Or did he ever hold office?
- V: I don't know. I don't know a thing about him.
- S: He just held the power.
- V: Now how he got in the position he was in, I don't know. How does a gangster get control of anything? His father started it and he inherited it from his father. I was in Mexico once, shortly after I had gone down to Alice and there were other Americans on this bus and when they heard where I was from, some man in front of me turned around and in a sort of jeering voice said, "Well, how's old Archie Parr?"
- S: He was well-known.
- V: He was well-known down there. Now, they may not have...nobody may not have known...
- S: Anything about him.
- V: Up the country. But down there he was a Big Bud...
- S: I have heard, especially through a discussion I transcribed of Ralph Yarborough, that due to the fact that Texas does have, or did have, at that time...a one-party political system, that

the Board of Education, therefore, because a much more important and viable political force that it is in other parts of the country. Did you find that in other parts of the country... besides Alice, too...that the Board of Education has more power than just over-seeing the schools?

- V: Well, I don't know. I truly don't. Now, there's a teacher's association that's supposed to fight for the teachers. If you think that you've been pitched out unfairly, then you can fight it. I would never have had the guts to do it...because I'm sort of a retiring creature anyway. But a School Board, I do know, can get rid of a teacher. If they don't want a teacher they can cook up some teacher. But I think that's true of any school board.
- S: But not so much...just because of chance remark, in Bolling... or Wharton?
- V: Oh no, no.
- S: You felt somewhat free in expressing your opinions?
- V: Down there in Alice, that part of the country, that was the only time I felt that my politics had anything to do with tenure. God, that was the only place I ever...
- S: Did other teachers...lose their jobs?
- V: Oh, yes, ma'am.
- S: ...in the town?
- V: Yes, ma'am.
- S: Did anyone ever say...
- V: No, I don't think it would have done you a bit of good.
- S: George had that much...
- V: He had the money. To begin with who would have the money to fight that sort of business. He's got people lying off in the bushes to shoot you if you get dangerous enough.
- S: Did...that shooting ever come to trial?
- V: I don't know. I don't remember. All I remember is that this young man was shot. He had been in the high school. He was shot in mistake for his father. Now, whatever became of that... I don't know.
- S: Thank you.
- V: Now, turn it off.



As you read the proceeding Oral History, one of the major pitfalls of Oral History--especially the eye-witness sort--may have become apparent. Eye-witnesses do not always eye-witness what you had expected them to eye-witness! As I heard those phrases ("no" "I don't know") that can cause an interviewer and a talk-show host to go into premature cardiac arrest, the visions of my project dissolved in front of my eyes.

However, as virtually worthless as the interview seemed to me, it was not worthless to my mentor. "It provided local color of Duval County." and it "illustrated the kind of fear George Parr had instilled." Or at least that was what Merle Miller was kind enough to say..

The use of Oral History differs from author to author, historian to historian. Even the most fascinating of Oral Histories does not make for scintillating reading, in and of itself. And after reading nearly 100 in the last year, I can state equivocably that quantity does not make the reading any livelier. Often the Oral History loses something in the transcription, not just due to typist error, but also due to the fact that the inflection of speech can often change the meaning of a word entirely. So listening to the Oral History is as necessary as the reading of them.

In the future, I feel that Oral Histories will form an important, perhaps major, part of Presidential and other repository libraries. More importantly, universities and colleges, with an eye to the future are beginning to amass a collection of Oral Histories. These collections are relatively inexpensive and small colleges such as Wesconn can and should begin such a collection now. Already there are some Oral Histories housed in the Library but with every passing day opportunities are lost for obtaining vital information, especially from the elderly. When I was a child, there were many Spanish-American veterans living; now few WWI veterans are alive. That one example alone, I hope, might spark someone to record the recollections of some elderly relative or friend or of anyone whom you feel might have something of historical importance or interest to relate.

What about Box 13? Well, if you want to learn more about that subject or LBJ himself--read Merle Miller's forthcoming book.