

Oral History: Production, Quality, and Application

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Oral history is in many ways different from a text-focused, traditional approach, yet the two may certainly be used and understood in conjunction. To make the best use of a work of oral history, the reader, researcher, teacher or reviewer must think critically about the interviewer's methods, possible bias, reliability, applicability, etc.¹⁰⁵ In order to illustrate the basic principles of production/ preparation, qualitative analysis, and application of oral history, I will examine an interview taken from Chapel Hill's

In the work that I have chosen, Brent Glass interviews a man named John Wesley Snipes. Born in 1901, Snipes was a long-time resident of Bynum, North Carolina. His family had lived in Chatham County since before the American Revolution, and so they were connected to life ways, events, and institutions prominent in the history of the community. The Snipes interview is a fascinating firsthand account of the man's life and environment that includes material on farming, religious life, folk medicine, connections among families, the role of blacks, land ownership, veteran's recollections and folk memory of the Civil War, etc. (Snipes oral history interview, abstract). As I will demonstrate, this material may be of considerable value to researchers, writers, and teachers.

¹⁰⁵ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 117.

Snipes recounts several small stories, but Oral history is not simply recorded story-telling. Rather it is the product of formal or semi-formal interviews between the subject and the researcher - in this case between John Wesley Snipes and Brent Glass.¹⁰⁶ Thus, preparation beforehand on the part of the interviewer is essential to developing a good, solid oral history production. Like a journalist conducting an interview, the historian ought to enter the situation with some questions in mind. There is room for both a formal investigative approach and a more relaxed conversational style, but in any event a well-prepared researcher has an advantage. Understanding the context of historical events in and about the life of the interviewed person, conducting preliminary research, listening carefully, following up, etc. are all part of the process.

In addition to preliminary research and the actual conduct of the interview, a responsible oral historian must observe professional ethics. He ought also to be scrupulous and diligent in his observation of rules concerning the proper recording, use, and storage of recorded or transcribed materials.¹⁰⁷

How well does the Snipes-Glass interview hold up to these high standards?

If we are to judge by the interview alone, the answer must be: very well indeed. The rapport established between Brent Glass and John Wesley Snipes is plainly evident in the free and easy exchange they have throughout the course of the interview. In addition, it seems clear that Brent Glass came prepared with a list of relevant questions. Glass does not waver, stall, or arbitrarily change the subject in a disconcerting manner at any time. He refrains from needless interruptions, and allows John Snipes to tell his own stories in his own words. Glass made frequent use of leading, but open -ended questions, which is a very useful practice for any oral historian.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

Thus I rate the conduct of the interview. For those unseen and unheard preparations and ethical matters, I must needs trust to the good repute of Chapel Hill, a reputation that appertains to such professionally planned and carried out projects of the school and its staff.

I should note that the interview was presented online complete with transcripts, excerpts, an abstract, etc. Organized in such a fashion, with the full material available in both audio and visual media, the oral history was much more accessible and easy to use than might have been the case otherwise. I can imagine the potential difficulties of working with an unorganized piece that didn't have an abstract to summarize and provide context or provide a transcript along with the recorded interview.

In terms of overall quality, the Snipes interview is quite good. Although it does not possess a strong and overarching narrative structure, it does contain several smaller stories. The interplay between Glass and Snipes flows smoothly along, giving one the impression of an almost natural conversation. Pauses in the interview where one or both men laugh indicate the relaxed, easy atmosphere of the interview. This mood can be inferred from the transcript, but it comes through even more clearly by listening to the actual interview. The good humor and relaxed conversational feel of the interview can be seen in the following passage, in which John Wesley Snipes describes his grandfather:

JOHN W. SNIPES:

Yes sir, dipped snuff; my grandfather chewed tobacco. The stronger it was, the better he liked it. And I never smelled anything on my grandfather. He was a big, round man; wasn't very high, maybe 5 feet 6 or 8 inches, not as tall as I am. But he weighed about 230 or 40. And he lived to be eighty-four. But he had an old little brown jug under the stair steps. Where we went up the stairs there was a little closet under there, a little dark closet. And he had a little brown jug under there, and I'd catch him every once in a while in the morning slipping out off in the hall there to this little closet. He'd keep that little

brown jug full of homemade whiskey, old stumper or white lightning. He'd take a swallow or two every morning, I imagine. But I wasn't big enough for a long time to know what he was doing; I realized later what it was. Never smelled him, never heard tell of him being drunk in my life.

BRENT GLASS:

Just got himself started in the morning, I guess, huh?

JOHN W. SNIPES:

Just sort of a little tonic to shoot him off [Laughter] every morning, I reckon.

BRENT GLASS:

Well, he must have worked pretty hard on the farm. ¹⁰⁹

That particular passage is lively even on the page, but others might need to be heard as spoken by Mr. Snipes in order to be fully appreciated, just as if he were telling you the story in person. That touches upon an important point about understanding and using oral history. While transcripts are very useful adjuncts, I believe that the best way to 'read' interviews is to actually *listen* to them. Subtle but potentially important elements of mood, inflection, pacing, and tone may be lost or distorted in the translation from a spoken medium to a written medium. Transcripts are of course helpful, especially when dealing with issues of poor sound quality, accented speakers, foreign language material, etc.

Even without a transcript, this history could be put to good use in the classroom. Oral histories may be employed by teachers as tools for drawing students into the study of the past and the people of the past. Students may be better able to connect with major themes and events if they have access to personalized, individual accounts related to

¹⁰⁹ John W. Snipes, "Interview With John W. Snipes."

those matters. In recent years, trends in historiography and pedagogy have spurred an interest among educators in the use of oral histories as a tool for teaching.¹¹⁰

For example of how a teacher might use this material, let us examine this passage:

BRENT GLASS:

Do you remember any things that you particularly enjoyed doing with your grandparents?

Did they like to tell you stories?

JOHN W. SNIPES:

I fought the Civil War. My grandfather and old Mr. Isaac Morris—I. J. Morris lived just across Polkberry Creek about a mile.... And in the summertime when I was a little fellow my grandfather, about every week he'd go over there to old Mr. Isaac Morris's. And I'd sit down and play in the sand, and him and Mr. Morris would go over the Civil War. I knew every word of it by heart: what they done at Gettysburg. "Well, John Joe, you remember that day we went in there? There was about fifty of us went in there and captured so-and-so?" "Oh yes, Isaac, I remember it." Well, one day my grandmother said something to me about the Civil War. I said, "Oh yes, I was there. I know all about it." She said, "Hush your mouth. You weren't even born!" [Laughter] I said, "Well, I've heard it a thousand times from Grandpa and old Mr. Isaac Morris, a'fighting the Civil War." I said, "I've heard it; I know it by heart." [Laughter]

BRENT GLASS:

Did you enjoy hearing it over and over again, or did you get a little tired of it?

JOHN W. SNIPES:

Yes sir. Well, I just heard it so much I could tell it as good as they could, just about. But they enjoyed old buddies getting together.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 223.

¹¹¹ John W. Snipes, "Interview With John W. Snipes."

John Snipes describes his experiences as a young boy interacting with former Confederate soldiers in his family and their circle of friends. Growing up, Mr. Snipes heard stories of the war from men who'd fought in it. Indeed, he had heard these tales so often that he knew them by heart as a child. This section of the interview, once placed in a proper context by lecture and instruction, might give students some insight into how people in Snipes region, ethnic group, and family circle remembered and thought about the Civil War. Thus, a major theme or event is taken from the large and abstract level to the intimate and concrete level.

Not only the Civil War, but also slavery shows up in tangential fashion in the interview. Although Mr. Snipes was born over a generation after the end of the 'peculiar institution', he knew people who could remember slavery days, and he knew the children or slaves and slave-owners. Some of his mother's people owned slaves. His family had a personal connection with some black folks through slavery, and this connection was maintained after emancipation. They also had black friends and acquaintances).

Mr. Snipes describes a black friend and neighbor, a woman who was also midwife to the community:

JOHN W. SNIPES:

There was nine of us young'uns, and I believe about six of them were brought into this world by what we called the old granny-woman: old Emeline Cotten, my old black mother.

BRENT GLASS:

Would you know if that's C-o-t-t-e-n or o-n?

JOHN W. SNIPES:

That's right, C-o-t-t-e-n, Cotten.

BRENT GLASS:

Now who was she?

JOHN W. SNIPES:

She was a neighbor. They had a little piece of land. I believe my grandfather give them about twenty-five acres, and they had a house there right adjoining the place up there at my father's.¹¹²

This picture of friendship and cooperation across racial lines provides and interesting contrast to the picture that emerges from the study of Jim Crow, lynching etc. While such anecdotes in no way erase or even contradict the powerful significance of those darker aspects of the region's history, it might be helpful to read (or hear) an example of how people could and did get along despite racial tensions and legal segregation. Snipes speaks of Mrs. Cotten at some length, and evidently regarded the old woman with warm affection.

His personal accounts of how other major events, such cotton-devastating outbreaks of the boll weevil and the Great Depression, intersected with his own life might similarly serve to bring these potentially intimidating matters down to a human scale in classroom discussions and course work.

Not only teachers, but researchers and authors of history books, and papers could make use of this oral history work. An author writing a book about rural life in North Carolina in the late 19th through mid-20th centuries might find the interview very useful, as it describes everything from rabbit hunting to folk medicine. A researcher working on an academic text could also make selective use of this piece of oral history to reinforce certain ideas, such as the attitudes of rural folk about religion, race, and work. While the material in this interview does not in itself contain enough matter for a dense history of anything but John Wesley Snipes' personal and family life, when placed in context it does provide an engaging and useful set of examples, patterns, and personal data- which

¹¹² Ibid.

may be used by a historian or other writer for purposes of illustration or support of other concepts.

I would personally to anyone interested in researching, writing about, or teaching Southern history not only the Snipes interview, but the whole body of oral history collected by Chapel Hill for its Southern history project. This material is an excellent resource, if it is properly used and if the researcher/writer/teacher/student approaches with a good understanding of the historical context in which the interviewed persons had lived.

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