

The success of *Roots* has publically dramatized the symbolic significance of such efforts.

Genealogies originally functioned to provide pedigrees and legitimization for status, claims for property, inheritance, or access to skills or political positions. Such real and symbolic functions of genealogies have survived in American society, especially in the South, despite an increasing democratization of society. Even the Daughters of the American Revolution, whose genealogical efforts were initially directed towards the inclusion of common people into the nation's ancestry (providing they were present in America in the colonial and revolutionary period), eventually turned their pedigree into an exclusive status grouping justified by a genealogy.

When it was founded in 1890, the DAR was reacting against the heraldic genealogical movements of the earlier period, which tried to link Americans with the English nobility. Applicants for membership were required to have an ancestor who was alive during the American Revolution, regardless of rank or status. "Lineage tracing," writes Margaret Gibbs, "was as much the rage in this decade—and in the early 1900's as Mah-Jong and crossword puzzles in the 'roaring twenties.'"³ Along with numerous other patriotic societies which were founded in that period, the DAR was dedicated to the preservation and protection of patriotic ideals. Partly, the movement developed as an expression of anxiety in face of expansive foreign immigration, a fear of "race suicide" and a fear of loss of status for native born middle and upper classes.

On the other hand, the recent genealogical movements, especially the search for roots and the reconstruction of family histories, involve a different constituency and fulfill an entirely different function. They encourage individuals to locate their own life histories in the context of activities and historical settings of family members in earlier generations. Rather than concentrating on lineages as such, they encourage detailed knowledge of those relatives and of the historical events and the social context surrounding their activities. In this respect, family histories represent a recent popular version of an older generation of autobiographies or traditional biographies of great families. Whereas, in the past, formal family histories were limited primarily to the upper classes, the uniqueness of our time lies in the democratization of the process and in the inclusion of large segments of the population in the search. The tapestry has thus broadened from those claiming descent from the Mayflower or from Southern aristocrats, to include the descendants of African slaves and immigrants.

The emphasis on individual identification with genealogy has thus shifted from the search for legitimization of exclusive status to a concern with emergent identity. Erikson defines "identity" as the meeting between individual life history and the historical movement.⁴ The process involved in the current reconstruction of individual family histories goes beyond individual identity in Eriksonian terms. It encompasses the linkage of one's family background with the larger historical experience, which is recognized and accepted as part of a collective heritage. Earlier, and even today

THE SEARCH FOR GENERATIONAL MEMORY

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In 1958 Claude Cockburn recalled a meeting with three Ladino-speaking Jews in Sofia shortly after the Second World War. They explained that they were not Spaniards, but one of them added, "Our family used to live in Spain before they moved to Turkey. Now we are moving to Bulgaria." When Cockburn asked him how long it has been since his family lived in Spain, he responded that it had been approximately five hundred years. The man spoke of these events as though they had occurred "a couple of years ago."¹ This famous incident has been cited frequently as an example of the relativity of historical memory. It also suggests the lengthy time over which individuals associate themselves with events which occurred generations earlier.

By comparison to other cultures, for most Americans generational memory spans a relatively brief period. The term generational memory is employed here broadly to encompass the memories which individuals have of their own families' history, as well as more general collective memories about the past. Most people do not even remember, or never knew, their grandfathers' occupation or place of birth. For a small proportion of the American population memory reaches back to the American Revolution, or to pre-Mayflower England or Europe. For descendants of later immigrations, memory extends mostly to the first generation in America, or, in fewer instances, to the last generation in the "old country." A sense of history does not depend on the depth of generational memory, but identity and consciousness do, because they rest on the linkage of the individual's life history and family history with specific historical moments.

Recently, efforts in American society to stretch generational memory, namely, the search for roots, through the tracing of genealogies and through oral history, have gained considerable popularity. A touch of magic has been attached to the process since the Bicentennial, and, in the aftermath of *Roots*,² a number of efforts to commercialize the search have emerged as well. More traditional scholars and foundations have also begun to encourage oral history, both as a means of retrieving or salvaging vanishing historical information and as a way to spark community identity.

in some circles, the search for a genealogy was considered successful only if it led to high-status ancestry, but the current populist mood encourages the search for one's origin, regardless of the social status of one's ancestry. The discovery of ancestors who were mere commoners, poor immigrants, or slaves is now considered as legitimate as linkage to nobility and great heroes. The recent acceptance of slavery as part of America's heritage by whites as well as blacks is indicative of this change.

This is precisely why *Roots* had the impact on the American public which it did. Its most compelling aspect was not the book's rendition of the story of slavery in a humane and moving way, but rather, the successful trace of the connection between a contemporary man and the origins of slavery through an individual line of descent. In itself *Roots* offers few new insights into the history of slavery. Its key message is the resilience and survival of African traditions, demonstrated in the effort of Chicken George and his descendants to transmit their family history from generation to generation. Its uniqueness lies in the *process* of search and trace of the history of one family, whose odyssey fits closely the contours of the collective experience of American slavery. Although most reviews have praised Haley's book as a great epic of slavery, they underestimated the significance of the final chapter recounting Haley's journey into the past in his effort to trace his family history back to its African origin, prompted by several fragments of an aging grandmother's narrative.

Significant here are both the process of the historical search itself and its successful outcome, which offered thousands of people the opportunity of a vicarious linkage with the historical group experience. (This is one of the rare occasions when the painstaking and tedious process of historical research has been acclaimed in the popular culture as a heroic act.) To understand fully the role which *Roots* has fulfilled in American culture it is important to realize that Haley's search *had* to be successful. The process of search would not have been recognized as important in its own right.

What if Haley had failed? Consider two hypothetical alternative outcomes. The first alternative could have been a break in the chain of evidence. This is, in fact, what happens to the majority of people attempting to trace their family histories beyond two generations. Most people embarking on such efforts without Haley's ingenuity, commitment of time, networks of scholarly support, and financial resources, could never dream to travel a similar road. Had he failed, Haley's story of the search itself, without the final linkage to Africa, would not have electrified the public. Alternatively, suppose Haley had been successful in tracing his ancestry, but the tracks did not lead back to the kind of ancestor he found. Suppose the story diverged, and Haley discovered an ancestor, who, rather than being an innocent victim captured and sold as a slave, had himself been a collaborator in the buying and selling of slaves. The search itself would still have been historically meaningful and personally satisfying, but it would not have had the same impact on the American public, because it would have lacked the direct link with collective experience of slavery. In short, the significance of Haley's book for American culture of the seventies not merely in the successful tracing of a line of ancestry back to

Africa, but rather in the fact that this ancestor's history was characteristic of the mainstream of the slave route to North America and of the slave experience.

It is no coincidence that Haley is also the author of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.⁵ Both the *Autobiography* and *Roots* are American success stories. In both, the hero follows a progression which he views as destined to culminate in the ultimate triumph. Earlier life events lead in an almost linear sequence to the moment of triumph and redemption. In Malcolm X's biography, as in the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, the entire life sequence leading to the moment of conversion is viewed as providential. Even Malcolm's devastating life experiences, his "sins" and suffering, were justified as steps toward the final redemption. Similarly, in Haley's story, the memory of the suffering of Kinte and that of his descendants in slavery were redeemed in the historical moment of rediscovery and linkage between past and present.

Both individual stories fulfilled significant public functions: at the height of the Black Power movement, Malcolm X's story and conversion performed a symbolic function, purging Black Americans from repressed anger reaching back into several generations. Haley's story provided a symbolic route for rediscovery of a past and, with it, a historic identity for Black Americans. The two had to occur in this sequence. First, the anger had to be purged in order to reverse a negative into a positive identity. Then came the search for roots, the discovery of a past, and the acceptance of this past as a significant part of America's heritage. Appropriately, the subtitle of Haley's book is *The Saga of an American Family*.

Roots also represents another important historical linkage, namely, that of the informal family narrative transmitted from generation to generation, which is not intended as a formal source of history, with the formal oral tradition of Gambian society—the official chronicle recited by the Griot. In Africa and in other nonliterate societies both types of oral traditions coexist, each performing a different function. The oral history genre which has survived in the United States, especially in black culture, is personal and informal. One of the most remarkable of Haley's discoveries was the survival of fragments of an oral tradition in his grandmother's memory in 1950s America. By that time, these fragments had lost their specific significance, but they were still being transmitted with a purpose; so that one's children and children's children would remember.

In modern American society, archives and formal histories have long replaced oral chronicles as official history. As the rich collection of folklore in Appalachia, or the very moving account of *All God's Dangers* suggests, generational memory and real traditions have persisted as historical sources in islands of local folk culture throughout the United States, though most prominently in black culture.⁶ There is, however, a significant difference between the informal oral tradition in nonliterate societies. In such societies, the oral tradition has an institutionally recognized place and purpose in the culture, and whether it constitutes an official chronicle, a family narrative, a fable, or other types of memories, it is structured and presented in specific formulae. The function of oral testimony may range

from myths aimed at providing an explanation of the creation of the world and of society as it exists, to those providing a pedigree for tribal rulers or to a justification of the political structure. The oral testimony can be legalistic, didactic, or explanatory, and its structure and mode of presentation may vary accordingly. Whatever its function, its social purpose is officially valued in these culture.

In modern American society, although, in the absence of such a well-defined tradition as in nonliterate societies, it is difficult to find a formal place for oral history, informal oral history as a historical source is not a new phenomenon. It has been utilized systematically as an archival and research tool especially to record the memories of public figures who have been active in political and social life, as evidence in projects of Columbia University and the Kennedy Library. Such projects have been carried out with historical scrupulousness, where the process of interviewing itself was preceded by research in written documents. Informal oral history has been employed effectively also in more modest historical projects, where the oral evidence was linked with written records and interpreted in conjunction with them.

Oral history also has an important social science heritage, which has developed since the 1930s, namely, the use of the individual life history for the "study of lives," which Dollard and subsequently Allport and White had developed as a major research method in psychology.⁷ More recently, Oscar Lewis and Robert Coles have demonstrated the power of this method when applied to the urban poor, to Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, and the children of migrant workers and sharecroppers.⁸ Inspired by this approach, radical historians have utilized oral history as a means to record the experiences of workers, activists, and participants in social protest movements, not only to retrieve and record information, but also as a way to form group consciousness through the process of interviewing itself.

More recently, oral history has been used on the community level for a similar purpose, namely, that of firing collective historical consciousness through the discovery of a common past. Some oral history efforts which emerged in recent years are filiopietistic and attach a mystique to the process because of the encounter with the living past which it represents. The Bicentennial, in particular, gave an impetus to oral history projects which are intended to stimulate "community awareness" and "identity." Such undefined slogans, which have been used rather indiscriminately, do not explain how community consciousness would be raised through such projects and *whose* history is actually being recovered. The widespread use of the cassette tape recording machine over the past decade has contributed considerably to the popularization of oral history interviewing. Like the computer, the recorder has not only facilitated the gathering and preservation of data; it has also generated a mystique of authenticity which is conveyed through the magic of technology. Oscar Lewis somewhat glorified its role: "The tape recorder used in taking down the life stories in this book has made possible the beginning of a new kind of literature of social realism. With the aid of the tape recorder, unskilled, uneducated and even illiterate persons can talk about themselves and relate their ob-

servations and experiences in an uninhibited, spontaneous and natural manner."⁹ People using the tape recorder, like those using the computer, discover quickly, however, that it does not have intrinsic magic. Without the historical and sociological imagination shaping the interview, one can end up recording miles of meaningless information.

Little attention has been paid to two aspects of oral history which are central to its role, namely, the nature of the interview process itself and the function of oral traditions in a modern, literate society.

First, the interview process. During an extensive oral history project in a large New England industrial community,¹⁰ we became acutely aware of the fact that oral history is not strictly a means of retrieval of information, but rather one involving the *generation* of knowledge. Essentially, an oral history narrative is the product of an interaction between interviewer and interviewee. By its very nature such a process determines what is going to be recalled and how it will be recalled. The interviewer is like a medium, whose own presence, interests, and questions conjure corresponding memories. Even if the interviewer tries to remain inconspicuous, the very process is intrusive.

Oral history is therefore a subjective process. It provides insight into how people think about certain events and what they perceive their own role to have been in the historical process. "A testimony is no more than a mirage of the reality it describes," writes Jan Vansina, the leading scholar of oral tradition in Africa. "The initial informant in an oral tradition gives either consciously or unconsciously a distorted account of what has really happened, because he sees only what he has seen."¹¹

Oral history is an expression of the personality of the interviewees, of their cultural values, and of the particular historical circumstances which shaped their point of view. This is precisely its great value, rather than its limitation. Similar arguments could be made about written documents; diaries and personal letters are also highly subjective, though their subjectivity is of a different origin. A diary reflects a person's individual experiences or observations, whereas an oral history is the individual's experience as evoked by an interviewer who has an intentional or unintentional influence on what is remembered and the way in which it is remembered. Oral histories are also distinguished from diaries or letters in their retrospective construction of reality. Like autobiographies, oral histories are past experiences presented from the perspective of the present.

The dynamic interplay between past and present in an individual's reminiscences can take different forms. At times, interviewees temporarily immerse themselves into a past episode as they recount it. This is especially true for childhood memories. On such occasions, the individual reminiscing slips back into the past, and recounts vibrant memories without any consciousness of the present. The interviewee becomes like an actor fully playing the role in his or her own past. On most occasions, the person remembering maintains a conscious separation between the account of the past and the present, though hindsight provides a contemporary perspective on past experience.

On many other occasions, interviewees find it difficult to distinguish past from present, or earlier from subsequent events. Interviewees also misrepresent or reinterpret actual events or situations through faulty memory or repression of difficult experiences. Traumatic experiences also lead to the reinterpretation of events. For example, when we interviewed former workers of the Amoskeag Mills, some of them said they had finished working in the Amoskeag in 1922. When we pointed out to them that their work records in the corporation files indicated they had worked until 1930 or later, the typical reply was "Oh yes, but that was after the strike. Things were not the same anymore." The strike of 1922 represented to the majority of the people who worked there at the time the destruction of the world to which they had become accustomed. Even though they returned to work after the strike, they associated the strike with the end of their career.

Sometimes people just forget experiences; other times they *care* to forget, or, if they remember them, they do not want to talk about them. As Gunhild Hagestad points out, in many families there are prohibited zones, which most family members choose not to tread in, as if by unspoken agreement. An interviewer can sense the invisible electrified fences when approaching such areas, but can do very little about them.

Oral history is a record of perceptions, rather than a re-creation of historical events. It can be employed as a factual source only if corroborated. The difficulty of cross-checking information does not detract, however, from its value for understanding perceptions and recovering levels of experiences which are not normally available to historians. It offers almost the only feasible route for the retrieval of perceptions and experiences of whole groups who did not normally leave a written record. The major contribution of *Akenfield* and of *Hard Times* is not in their historical accuracy, but rather in their contribution to an understanding of human experiences and social conditions.¹² As long as one understands this, rather than assumes, as some do, that oral history is the closest to "unadulterated human memory" we can approach, it can be valued for what it is and utilized creatively.¹³

The second major feature of oral history involves its very significance in modern industrial society. In the absence of an established oral history tradition in American society, it is difficult to define its place and to justify its meaning to individual interviewees. It is almost impossible to stimulate *spontaneous reminiscing* as many community identity projects suggests one should. To make oral history meaningful, one has to find a link between an individual life and a broader historical context. Such links are exceedingly difficult to identify unless the individuals participated in a common distinct cultural activity, organization, or group with a shared interest or if their lives were affected directly by a common dramatic event.

Even in the black community, where the oral tradition is alive, particularly in the South, it is often difficult to link informal experiences and memories to a larger picture, unless the interviewees themselves are aware of a common focus.

Without such linkages, in most instances in the United States, oral history interviewing remains a private exercise. In Africa, by contrast, Vansina points out, "Every testimony and every tradition has a purpose and fulfills a function. It is because of this function that they exist at all."¹⁴ In non-literate societies the functions of an oral tradition are socially defined and are recognized by all members. In modern America there is no such established tradition, except in regional oral traditions which survive in isolated localities. Within the larger community, the public role and social significance of oral history are not automatically understood.

People who have not been "famous" or who have not participated jointly in a specific movement, such as a labor movement, or a strike, or in an organized political or social activity, would find it difficult to achieve such an identification. Such people experience great difficulty in making the connection between their own lives and the historical process. Community organizers who expect the emergence of "instant identity" through the interview process face an instant disappointment.

In societies where the oral narrative is part of the formal culture, no explanation is needed as to why a certain story is significant. The very time-honored practice and the setting within which the oral tradition takes place lend it strength and meaning. In modern America, except for historically conscious individuals or groups and unusually articulate and interested individuals, most people do not see an immediate significance in being interviewed. Although they might be inclined to reminiscence privately, telling stories to their own grandchildren or sharing memories of past experiences, most people are rather bewildered when requested to tell their life histories to strangers.

When approaching the former workers of the Amoskeag Mills in Manchester, New Hampshire, for interviews, we frequently encountered the questions: "Why ask me? My story is not special," or "What is so important about my life?" Except for a few people, those who consented to be interviewed did so, not because of their understanding of the importance of this process, but because, prompted by their own work ethic, they wanted to help us do "our job."

Attitudes changed drastically after the exhibit "Amoskeag: A Sense of Place, A Way Of Life" opened in Manchester.¹⁵ Although this exhibit was primarily architectural and was aimed at professionals and preservationists rather than at the larger public, it evoked an unexpected response from former and current textile workers in the community. It provided the setting for the former workers' public and collective identification with their old work place and it symbolized the historical significance of their work lives. Thousands of people, mostly former mill workers and their families, came to see the exhibit. Most striking were recurring scenes where old former workers searched for their relatives in huge historic group portraits of the workers, and where grandparents led their grandchildren through the exhibit, often describing their work process of thirty to forty years earlier. Even though they had privately cherished many memories associated with their work experience, they felt that industrial work, especially textile work, was generally looked down upon. The sudden op-

portunity to view their own lives as part of a significant historical experience provided a setting for collective identification. Under these circumstances, interviewing ceased to be an isolated individual experience. It turned, instead, into a common community event. Former mill workers recognized each other at the exhibit, some not having seen each other for thirty years. Although the exhibit was not designed to serve this purpose, it turned into a catalyst.

The oral histories which followed were of an entirely different character from the earlier ones: people we approached were willing to be interviewed. They related their work and life histories with a sense of pride. Many individuals who had heard about the project volunteered to be interviewed. Identification with the work place and with the buildings thus provided a more direct and immediate stimulation of memory and interest in the process than isolated interviewing. The exhibit established our credibility as interviewers and laid the foundation for a continuing series of interviews with the same individuals. This is not to suggest that every successful oral history requires an exhibit or some other external device to engender identification. It suggests, however, how tenuous oral history is among those elements of the population who do not have an oral tradition. It is also becoming clear that, except for the search for roots through the reconstruction of one's own family history, the quest for oral history is more common among the educated, the professional, and the semiprofessional, especially among second- or third-generation ethnics, than as a "folk movement."

Why this exercise of "tribal rites" in an advanced technological society? Today, when the printing and circulation of information have reached an all-time peak, and when computers generate and objectify knowledge, scholars, foundations and cultural organizations, and the general public are reviving genealogy and the oral tradition—the tools of transmission of collective memory in nontechnological societies. Among scholars, this revival represents a revolt against "objective" social science and a shift from an emphasis on strictly formal knowledge to existential process. Oral history and the search for roots also fit into the effort of recent scholarship to integrate the experience of large segments of the population into the historical and sociological record. On a more popular level, the oral history revival is connected with an effort to authenticate the experiences of different ethnic groups in American culture. It thus represents a commitment to pluralism and expresses the reemergence of ethnicity and its acceptance as a vital aspect of American culture.

The current search is also prompted by a realization that the traditions which one is trying to record are about to become extinct. *The World of Our Fathers*, *The Godfather*, and many other ethnic monuments were generated at the moment when the last living links with the world are about to disappear.¹⁶ Most of these efforts to capture ethnic traditions do not bring back the heritage from the old country, but rather the experience of the first generation of immigrants in America.

The search for roots in our time is not entirely new. An earlier centralized effort of this sort took place in the 1930s in the midst of the Great

Depression. Current popular oral history projects are miniscule by comparison to the undertakings of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writer's Project in most American communities. Some of its achievements include the American Guide Project, which generated a massive collection of local guides, the recording of over two thousand narratives of former slaves, the compilation of numerous volumes of local oral histories, and the assembling of a number of major collections of folklore. The national folklore project under the direction of John Lomax was intended to capture the surviving oral traditions and folkways. It produced a national volume entitled *American Folk Stuff*, designed as a collection of readable tales. "All stories must be narrated as told by an informant or as they might be told orally with all the flavor of talk and all the native art of casual narrative belonging to the natural story-teller," read the instructions of the national program director to all state directors.¹⁷

The folklore project stressed the collection of materials from *oral* sources with reference to the life of the community and the background of the informant. It captured urban and ethnic folklore as well as rural. "All types of forms of folk and story-telling and all minority groups—ethnic, regional and occupational are to be represented for two reasons: first to give a comprehensive picture of the composite America—how it lives and works and plays as seen through its folk storytellers; second, by the richness of material and the variety of forms to prove that the art of story-telling is still alive and that story-telling is an art."¹⁸ Under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration, some of that generation's master photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, James Agee, and Walker Evans, recorded the words and faces of sharecroppers, "Okies," migrants, and Appalachians, bringing the faces of rural America into the center of the nation's consciousness. Thus, through a concerted government effort, rural roots were exposed and recorded for posterity.

Much of the social documentation of rural life resulted from the recognition that that world was fast disappearing, and from the fear that some of its wholesome values would be swept out by a new industrialism. To a large extent, this passion to document rural life was stimulated by the discovery of chronic poverty and deprivation in the rural South and Midwest, which had been ignored while the "pathology" of cities had occupied the limelight during the first three decades of the twentieth century. While they conveyed the suffering and deprivation of their subjects, the photographs and narratives in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and in other kindred documentaries also conveyed the resilience and wholesomeness of this group.¹⁹ The faces of the "Sharecropper Madonna" and of the Okies also had a sobering effect on those who idealized the myth of self-reliance and frontier life. In addition to the strong humanistic empathy for the subjects and their ways of life, these projects also expressed the period's longing for a lost mythical past of innocence and wholesomeness. The very launching of these projects in the midst of a catastrophic depression resulting from the "industrial plant being overbuilt" was a reaction against "progress" and with it, the destructive pace of modern, industrial life.

The 1930s was the era of the discovery of rural native American and black roots. The day of the immigrant was still to come. The WPA writers' project also attempted to record urban folklore. The New York City folklore project, for example, was intended to reveal "the epic of construction, excavation and wrecking, transportation . . . and the symphony of New York night life. . . ." Similarly, the social ethnic project which the WPA launched was intended to shift the emphasis from "the contribution of ethnic groups to American culture" to their participation in various aspects of community life. However, the definition of ethnicity which the WPA introduced was one very different from the ethnic revival today: "Immigrants and the children of immigrants are American people. Their culture is American culture."²⁰ Generally, the images and experiences which captured the imagination of the thirties were the documentaries of rural life. The earlier documentation of life and poverty in immigrant slums in New York, Chicago, and Baltimore, which was carried out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Jacob Riis, the Russell Sage Foundation and the *Survey*,²¹ and Lewis Hine's prolific photographic record of child labor, was documenting the plight of urban immigrants and the deterioration of social and economic life as part of a social protest movement, not in order to capture ethnic "roots." Immigrants who had flooded American cities between the 1880s and World War I were still too recent and still represent undigested alien masses.

The current quest for roots holds in common with that of the 1930s a genuine concern for recovering the historical experience as it was viewed and perceived by participants. As in the thirties, the search emerged from a crisis in values, and from a questioning of the very foundations of American society. Both in the 1930s and in the 1960s, the search for roots came in response to a disillusionment with technology, industrialism, and materialism. In the thirties the effort led to a reaffirmation of the qualities and strengths of American folk culture. Alfred Kazin, one of the unemployed writers in the WPA project, described the interview experience as "A significant experience in national self-discovery—a living record of contemporary American experience."²² The current search is aimed more specifically at the recovery of ethnic group identities. In the 1960s and 1970s the search for roots has been individual as well as group oriented. Unlike in the 1930s when the effort was organized and supported by the government, in the current decade it represents a more spontaneous movement. Its very emergence is part of an aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and as part of the recent acceptance of ethnicity as part of American culture.

Ironically, we are now engaged in recovering generational memory, after much of it had been wiped out in a century-long effort to assimilate immigrants. As Lloyd Warner pointed out, the symbols which dominated the historical rituals and pageants of Yankee City's Tricentenary were those of the colonial period and the era of the American Revolution.²³ An entire century of Yankee City's history had been almost completely ignored. Despite the fact that they already comprised a significant element of the city's population, the ethnic groups were expected to choose themes from the

colonial and revolutionary era for the floats which they sponsored in the historical pageant (the Jews choosing an episode in the life of Benedict Arnold). Even in 1976, during the Bicentennial celebration in one of the historic mill buildings in Lowell, Massachusetts, the majority of the participants from the community (who were of different ethnic origins) were wearing revolutionary era costume, though Lowell was founded in 1820 and symbolized the beginning of the new industrial order. Similarly, a recent follow-up study on Yankee City in the 1970s find that the new owners of the Federalist houses in Newburyport are reconstructing the genealogies of these houses, rather than their own family histories.²⁴

The current return to ethnicity in American culture is possible precisely because so much has been forgotten already and because of the distance in time between the current generation and the two generations of immigrants who came to the United States between 1880 and 1920. Before ethnicity could be recognized as a permanent feature in American culture, the different ethnic subcultures had to go the full cycle of assimilation and come close to extinction.

In some ways we are now witnessing the final consequences of the closing of the gates in the 1920s. The end of immigration at that point facilitated the absorption of immigrants who had arrived earlier into the United States. Had there been a continuous influx of new immigrants, it is doubtful whether ethnic diversity would have been accepted today as a genuine part of American culture. The current search for ethnic roots is in itself a rebellion against the concept of the melting pot; it is an effort to salvage what has survived homogenization. In the process, it is also likely to create new identities, new heritages, and new myths. Part of this process represents an effort to counteract alienation and to seek comfort and reassurance in memories of close family ties and community solidarity which are generally attributed to the lost ethnic past. For most ethnic groups this past represents the world of the first generation of immigrants in the United States, rather than the old country. The search for an ethnic past becomes especially significant for our times because of the generational watershed which we are currently experiencing: the two generations of European immigrants which had come here from the old country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are now dying out, while the generation which is now reaching the prime of its adulthood has no personal memory of World War II. What this would mean for the generational memory of the children of this age group is an interesting question in itself.

In assessing the significance of the current search for roots from a historical point of view, we must ask where this all leads. In 1911, confronting the DAR, Jane Addams warned them: "We know full well that the patriotism of common descent is the mere patriotism of the clan—the early patriotism of the tribe—and that, while the possession of like territory is an advance upon that first conception, both of them are unworthy to be the patriotism of a great cosmopolitan nation. . . . To seek our patriotism in some age rather than our own is to accept a code that is totally inadequate to help us through the problems which current life develops."²⁵

It would be a historical irony, of course, if the groups which had been excluded for so long from the official cultural record, would fall into a similar trap of exclusiveness and separatism when recreating their own history. Some of that danger would be present if the reclamation is particularistic and parochial. Is the current individualism and ethnocentrism going to result in a retreat and withdrawal from a common culture and common social goals? Will it eventually lead to fragmentation rather than a balanced pluralism? Whatever the outcome might be, the current search inevitably has to take place first within the subcultural compartments, since until very recently, the larger society has tried to mold the identity of different ethnic groups in its own image.

NOTES

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1. Quoted in M. I. Finley, "Myth, Memory, and History," in *History and Theory*, ed. George H. Nadel (New York: Harper, 1965), pp. 281-302.
2. Alex Haley, *Roots* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).
3. Margaret Gibbs, *The DAR* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 21.
4. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), Erickson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975).
5. Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
6. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974; also see chapter 20 of the present volume).
7. John Dollard, *Criteria for the Life History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935); Gordon Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1942); Robert White, *Lives in Progress* (New York: Dryden Press, 1952).
8. See Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis*, particularly *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic, 1959); Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966).
9. Lewis, *La Vida*, p. 2.
10. This project involved extensive and repeated interviews of approximately three hundred former workers in the Amoskeag Mills in Manchester, New Hampshire (once the world's largest textile company). The people we interviewed represented all levels of skills and came from different ethnic groups. In addition to the workers, we also interviewed people from management, as well

as people from different programs, including the clergy and in the community. This oral history project grew out of extensive research in historical records. The reconstruction of most of each interviewee's work history and family history preceded the interview itself. Edited selections from this project were published in Tamar K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

11. Jan Vansina, *The Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine 1965; also see chapter 9 of the present volume).
12. Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (London: Allen Lane, 1969) Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon 1970).
13. Cullom Davis et al., *Oral History: From Tape to Type* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977).
14. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p. 77.
15. The exhibit, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and by local foundations, was created and produced by Randolph Langenbach at the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. It documented the development of the architectural design and the urban plan of Manchester, New Hampshire, by the corporation which founded the city and continued to control it until the corporation's shutdown in 1936. Through eighty mural-size photographic panels by Langenbach, as well as historic photographs, the exhibit documented the connection between the architectural environment, corporate paternalism, and the experience of work. Unexpectedly, 12,000 people came to see the exhibition during its five weeks. Most of them were former mill workers.
16. Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).
17. Instructions from Henry Alsberg, director of the writer's project to all state directors quoted in William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), p. 7.
18. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, p. 11.
19. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941). For slave narratives see George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972). On local oral history projects, see, for example: *These Are Our Lives: As Told by the People and Written by Members the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1939).
20. On the ethnic program see McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, p. 725.
21. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Scribner's, 1890); *The Children of the Poor* (New York: Scribner's, 1892). The Russell Sage Foundation sponsored and published studies of poor and working people; its most notable publication was Paul Kellogg, ed., *The Pittsburgh Survey*, 6 vols. (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909-14). The *Survey* was the best of a number of social reform journals.
22. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern Literature* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 378.
23. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).
24. Personal communication, Prof. Milton Singer, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
25. Jane Addams, quoted in Gibbs, *The DAR*, p. 2.

APPLICATION: ORAL EVIDENCE

As in all forms of research, one must become comfortable with the use of research material in order to fully appreciate its potential. A major failing of classroom courses is that students rarely gain experience in carrying out research projects. This failing is all the more general when it comes to the use of artifactual or oral sources.

We therefore encourage some practice in the use of oral evidence. Unless the course under study is focused on some distant past, students should be able to tie-in oral interviewing in some form. In a general American History course, one should be able to interview a person who lived through the Depression. Or if the course covers on an earlier period, why not interview some person who participated in a war—even a more recent one—in order to better understand the reactions of soldiers to separation from families, fear of battle, justification for fighting, etc. If the subject under study is narrowly based, and no oral testimony is relevant, why not find a person with an avid interest in the subject, or a person who represents that period to the public, and find out more about his/her motivations? In whatever guise, it is important to gain some understanding of the use of the oral evidence as a research tool. Such understanding can be gained only from participating in the process of historical research. Comparing the results from some oral history project with the coverage of the same or similar topic in a textbook will serve to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of oral evidence. Reviewing in class some of the interviews will also be useful to evaluate the techniques used in oral interviewing. We include a pragmatic guide for the launching of an oral history project. This guide is most useful in conjunction with some practical project, and can readily be adapted to use outside a classroom setting. We recommend its use with some defined project which will continue throughout an academic semester.

ORAL HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM

George Mehaffy, Thad Sitton, and
O. L. Davis, Jr.

Across the nation, increasing numbers of teachers and their students are using oral history techniques during portions of the school year. The oral history process has been used, in fact, in classrooms at every school level—elementary, secondary, college, and university. While some schools have developed full-blown projects including publications, most classroom efforts are smaller in scale. This . . . [article] is designed to help social studies teachers make practical decisions about using oral history with students. It is based on an understanding of the real constraints of real classrooms.

Two major commitments about oral history and classroom teaching are explicit in this guide. First, student learning is more productive *and more fun* when students are active rather than passive. Oral history is useful in helping students find that “the stuff” of history is everywhere around them. Engaging in a search for explanations and descriptions relating to important local matters is satisfying and increases personal meanings. Some of these meanings relate to substantive historical knowledge; for example, construction of a highway (and transportation system), communication of national election results before and after the development of television, and the effects of wartime on a particular family. Other meanings relate to the essential methodology of history; for example, the necessity of using incomplete data and the hazards of generalization. Of particular importance is that oral history can be stimulating, exciting, and fun for students. Their active participation takes them “into the field.” They meet people they do not know. Their work “counts”; it is not just “checked.”

Second, students can create useful documents as they learn about their past. Classroom oral history efforts continue to produce important, even impressive, documentation; for example, eyewitness accounts of a strike or of events during a presidential inauguration. These oral histories make available recollections, insights, and perceptions that others may use. Classroom oral history is not restricted to the individual classroom or a particular set of students. The accumulated oral histories (“memoirs”) constitute an invaluable archival source about local communities and