Editors’ Introduction

This virtual issue, the first produced by the Oral History Review’s editors, is presented in celebration of the Oral History Association’s fiftieth anniversary. It brings together fifteen articles, all previously published in the Review, that probe the nature and value of oral history. That theme is, admittedly, capacious, and it was purposely chosen to showcase some of the most influential work published in the journal. The aim of this virtual issue is to show how understanding of these essential aspects of our practice has been explored in the pages of the Review since it began publication in 1973.

In choosing articles for this issue, the editors aimed chiefly to cover the forty-plus-year history of the journal and to approach the topic of the nature and value of oral history from a variety of angles. This introduction briefly considers the contribution each article makes; beyond that, we simply invite readers to discover how and why they might find each piece interesting and vital to their work.

One observation, however, is worth making: These selections, like much of the work published in the Review, are heavily skewed toward work on topics related to oral history as practiced in the US and produced by oral historians working in the US. In its more recent history, the pages of the Review have increasingly featured work about international topics and from authors working around the globe. We expect the next retrospective virtual issue—OHA@60 perhaps?—will showcase many more pieces from beyond our borders.

Here, then, is a sketch of what lies within:

• “Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy,” Alex Haley, Issue 1.1, 1973. The nature and value of oral history is often revealed in quite specific case studies and by insightful autobiographical writing on the part of the oral historian (what we now call reflexivity). Such is the case here. Alex Haley described, in the first issue of the Oral History Review in 1973, hearing his family members talk about their ancestors and then the process by which he traced their memories back to the family’s ancestral village in Africa. Oral history is revealed to be a methodology at times in line with the familial tradition of passing down stories.

In something of a review essay, published in 1978, Ron Grele assessed the discipline of oral history thirty years into its modern (that is, post-World War II) origins in the US. He pointed to the immense value of oral history, but also raised questions about its future and probed issues that oral historians continue to discuss to this day, such as how to manage the volume of stories being recorded and how the relationship between the oral historian and the narrator (what we now call intersubjectivity) shaped the oral history being recorded and created.


In this reflection on Studs Terkel’s Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression, Michael Frisch offered an important early (1979) rumination on the nature of memory in oral history work and in the process engaged with the work of one of the great popularizers of oral history. Frisch decried the tendency of many reviewers of Hard Times to see it as a “like it was” book, rather than the “memory book” that it was. The problem he pinpointed (that is, how to accept the pastness of oral history while also probing present-day perspectives on the past) continues to challenge oral historians to this day, and the burgeoning field of memory studies has brought us ever deeper understandings of the nature and working of memory.


Charles “Charlie” Morrissey used a mention of “oral history” he discovered in an 1863 biographical sketch to offer an overview of oral history. Morrissey provided readers with a roadmap of oral history’s nature and value, featuring Joe Gould’s failed “Oral History of Our Time,” Allan Nevins’s oral history “experiment” at Columbia University, and the early years of the Oral History Association. Morrissey’s folksy way did not take away from his conviction that oral history in 1980 had gained a place in the historian’s toolkit.


Gary Okihiro, one of many oral historians working in a field called “ethnic history” in the early 1980s, articulated the value—and even more so the political significance—of oral history for ethnic history. Most profoundly, he found oral history to be not only a method for recovering history but also a means for various communities (often marginalized communities) to reflect on their own histories and take part in rewriting them.


Linda Shopes, the OHR’s book review editor in 1986, interrogated the nature of oral history by examining a wide variety of published book reviews. She
revealed the ability of book reviews to create ongoing conversations about methodological concerns, the interpretation of interviews, and the relationship between oral history and other kinds of historical evidence.

- “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History,” Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, Issue 15.1, 1987. The emergence of a self-consciously feminist oral history practice in the 1980s was a critical development in the field, both as to the nature of oral history and its value. This selection is a representative piece of that scholarship in which the authors explored what it means to develop a feminist methodology grounded in women’s experiences and perspectives.

- “History-Telling and Time: An Example from Kentucky,” Alessandro Portelli, Issue 20.1, 1992. In this article from the early 1990s, Alessandro Portelli approached oral history with a literary sensibility and revealed oral history to be, quite simply and profoundly, a form of literature. He argued that “an oral personal narrative can achieve levels of structural complexity comparable to those of literary texts, and can therefore stand the close individual analysis we usually devote to written literature.”

- “‘Do I Like Them Too Much?’: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa,” Valerie Yow, Issue 24.1, 1997. In this piece on the essentially and necessarily reflexive nature of oral history, Valerie Yow clearly articulated the importance of analyzing the impact of the interviewer on the oral history being produced. She maintained, “I am not advocating that the researcher’s personal reactions become the emphasis of the research. What I am suggesting is that when we pretend there is nothing going on inside of us that is influencing the research and interpretation, we prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool.”

- “‘We Know What the Problem Is’: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up,” Daniel Kerr, Issue 30.1, 2003. For many oral historians, a particular value of the practice is the potential it holds for reframing our understanding of current social and political issues and effecting social change. Daniel Kerr’s emphasis on the ways various intended audiences will consume and use the oral histories collected brings home another of the most widely discussed ideas in recent oral history practice: sharing authority.

- “Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History,” Mark Feldstein, Issue 31.1, 2004. Many oral historians are asked at some point how their practice relates to journalism. In 2004, Mark Feldstein took on that very question and, in the
process, outlined what each of these “kissing cousins” might learn from each other.

  In 2007, Jerrold Hirsch looked back at the work of the New Deal’s Federal Writers Project (FWP) and observed that in key ways the theoretical and social concerns of early twenty-first-century oral historians more closely parallel those of the interviews for the FWP than of the oral historians who purportedly founded modern oral history at Columbia University in the post-World War II period. The history of the nature and purpose of oral history research is thus a more circular than a linear development.

  Erin Jessee’s 2011 article is representative of a range of work that emerged in the early twenty-first century on the nature of our practice when oral history involves the recording and analysis of, as Jessee put it, “extreme human experiences.” Jessee argued there are discernable limits to the way oral history can be deployed and understood when it is applied in highly politicized contexts.

  Fifty years after the founding of the Oral History Association, the fundamentally oral nature of our practice continues to invite analysis, and the growing ease with which digital technologies allow for dissemination of the oral calls us to contemplate its oral nature more deeply. In this 2012 piece, Siobhán McHugh probed both the oral and aural nature of oral history and provided a sustained analysis of the ways sound and the act of hearing affect listeners of oral history.

  Among the most profound transformations in oral history for its current practitioners is the still-emerging digital revolution. In 2013, Steve Cohen called for establishing “a body of research about the effects, benefits, and consequences” of oral history as it is practiced and presented in the digital age. He argued that long-standing questions about the form, presentation, and analysis of oral history need to be reconsidered in light of the ready and growing access to oral histories online.

While this selection of fifteen articles reflects the editors’ choices, the process of arriving at the work presented here involved input from a number of OHA members who shared their nominations of especially influential work
published in the *Review*. The editors thank the members who took time to respond to the call for nominations. We now invite all readers to enjoy this collection, to contemplate how the nature and value of oral history has been variously understood over time, and to contact us with ideas for future virtual issues.

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