

OHA MEETS IN KENTUCKY

September 20-23, 1984

Appalachian Focus

"Generations" Author John Egerton,
Nixon and Stockman Interviewers
Featured



The Oral History Association will meet in the heart of Bluegrass--Lexington, Kentucky--for its annual meeting this September. The four-day conference will have an Appalachian theme in many of its sessions, and will feature such speakers as John Egerton, author of Generations (see review in this issue) on "The Lost Art of Listening"; Byron Crawford, columnist for the Louisville Courier Journal on "Folks I've Knowed and Tales They've Told"; Joan Hoff-Wilson on "Political Oral History: Interviewing Nixon"; and William Grieder, author of "The Education of David Stockman," on journalistic interviewing.

For the first time, beginner and advanced workshop sessions will be fully integrated into the program. The new format also incorporates a greater amount of film and multi-media presentations of oral history. Sessions include oral history and river culture, museums, ethics, working athletics and racial integration, nursing, and teaching. Among the OHMAR members participating on the program are Mary Jo Deering, Pete Daniel, Elinor Sinnette, Martha Ross, Marie Allen, Howard Green, Ted Durr, and Richard Williams.

Social interaction is always an important aspect of oral history meetings, and Lexington will offer an array of activities. Thursday night's presidential reception will be held at Spindletop Hall. Friday night the meeting will move to the Kentucky Horse Park for a barbeque dinner and entertainment by the Reel World Spring Band. Saturday afternoon members can choose between a schedule of films, touring historic Lexington, or a box lunch picnic and tour of the Kentucky Horse Park.

The meeting will be held at the Marriott Resort Hotel in Lexington. For information about registration, contact Ronald E. Marcello, OHA executive secretary, NT Box 13734, Denton, Texas, 76203.

PAM HENSON NOMINATED FOR OHA COUNCIL

Pam Henson, of the Smithsonian Archives, a former OHMAR president, has been nominated for a seat on the OHA Council. Other Council nominees are Shirley Stephenson (Cal. State Fullerton), Terry Birdwhistell (Univ. Kentucky), and John Fox (Salem College). Sam Hand (Univ. Vermont) is slated for Vice President/President-elect.

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Linda Shopes
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Generations. An American Family by John Egerton. Lexington: The Univeristy Press on Kentucky, 1983, 272 pp. \$19.50.

John Egerton's Generations is an oral history of a family in south central Kentucky. The author, a Nashville journalist, set out to find a typical middle-class American family whose experiences could serve as a microcosm of America's last century. Particularly, he needed a lucid old couple with nineteenth century memories and with many descendants.

He found them in Addie and Burnam Ledford, ages 101 and 93, and parents of thirteen children. The Ledfords' memories of their own lives and their stories of their ancestor's lives in pioneer Kentucky are vivid, dramatic, detailed and coherent. Egerton has written a thoughtful, sensitive, almost lyrical book about them. It is also an ambitious book, divided into three sections. In one section, Burnam and Addie talk. In another section, Egerton imagines himself to be Aley Ledford, the original Ledford in Kentucky. In a third section, the children and grandchildren of Burnam and Addie speak. Altogether, Egerton wants to present the Ledfords as a history of the United States. In using oral history to achieve this end, Egerton faces dilemmas familiar to oral historians who have worked with a particular family, community or region.

First, in order to present the Ledfords as typically American, Egerton has to minimize their regional experience as Appalachians. Yet they are clearly and perhaps primarily Appalachian, from their emphasis on kinship networks to their storytelling patterns, from the effects of strip-mining on their old home area of Harlan County to the forced buy-out of the last of their family's land there by the Army Corps of Engineers. How much of their experience is regional or uniquely personal rather than a metaphor for the national experience? How much regional history is controlled or dominated by national history? How much is

separate? Researchers using oral sources and working intensively in one small group or region have to sort out what will bear the weight of extended national metaphor and what will not. It's very tempting to let a good source become Everyman and give local events cosmic significance. Sometimes it even works, as when Egerton failed to find the grave of the pioneer Ledford ancestor because strip-mining and flooding had destroyed the original contours of the valley graveyard. Here the family is clearly connected to national industrial policy, but often the connections between family, region and nation are not clear.

A second dilemma is how to use and interpret the material collected from the old couple. Burnam and Addie are powerful story tellers and repositories of generations of family history; furthermore, as long as they are center stage, the book has unity and drama. Egerton diligently tried to verify the history in their stories through travel, interviews and research in North Carolina, Virginia and Kentucky. He found much factual confirmation of the oral tradition, except that he could not locate the parents of Aley Ledford, the first Ledford into Harlan County from North Carolina.

Aley is thus the primal forebearer, orphaned on his way to Kentucky, who continued on to the promised land of Harlan County and proceeded to populate it. Aley is the subject of much awed speculation by the elder Ledfords who see him as a mythic figure and indeed he is. Myth and history mingle in the stories of Aley, the young traveller who, with his wife, tests himself against nature in Kentucky and prevails. What are these narratives meant to tell in addition to a history? How many family histories have these elements and which ones occur most often? "There were three brothers came to this country...". "He came in here all by himself..." or "with his family, but they died" or "moved to Ohio." These are versions of family histories I have heard again and again. Why three brothers? Why does the ancestor start out so alone? What can't be verified in the oral tradition may be the part that tells us the meaning of the whole.

The oral histories of the collective descendants have two main themes: the intrusion of modernizing technology into east

researchers that instead, with the most primitive of theoretical arguments, simply slammed cliometrics.

While Plummer dislikes the arrogant sociology that, instead of allowing individuals to speak for themselves, describes them with innumerable jargon terms, he is himself no small master of jargon. He distinguishes, for example, among the "comprehensive life document," the "limited life document," "the comprehensive topical personal document," and "the limited topical personal document"--to no particularly illuminating end (pp. 108-109). He provides a number of long tables that repeat matter in the text--lists, for example, of representative social science life stories, of Chicago school textbooks, and of sources of 'bias' in life history interviews. And he relies heavily on lengthy and very dull quotations from an array of humanistic sociologists. Reading these quotations seriously shook my faith in the innate value of each individual's narrative expressions.

Plummer writes against "positivist, hard, cold" social science in favor of "perspectivist, soft, warm" research. But further rigidifying this dichotomy between so-called scientific and empathetic work is helpful neither to social science nor to history. Exciting work in both fields often combines measurement and human expression. Carol Stack, for example, in her ethnography of a group of impoverished Black Americans, All Our Kin, combines the use of welfare documents on her informants and her informants' own lives and statements to present a convincing indictment of institutional white racism in the welfare system. And Barbara Melosh, in her history of American nursing, The Physician's Hand, uses interview materials, nursing fiction, and first-person accounts to illuminate the meaning to nurses of economic-historical changes in nursing practice.

Similarly, Plummer warns against structuralist and post-structuralist discourse analysis approaches to life documents, and reserves particular animus for French historian Michel Foucault's "marked anti-humanism and denial of the subject" because of his emphasis on the meanings of texts to readers rather than to their authors (p. 132). But extremely sensitive,

"humanist" interpretations of readers' responses to texts exist--for example, Ann Snitow's analysis of Harlequin romance novels as 'women's pornography' ("Mass Market Romance," Radical History Review 20(Spring/Summer 1979)).

Plummer does include lengthy annotated lists of references at the end of each chapter, and the historian who wishes to read up on the Chicago school of sociology or on "guerilla journalism" can consult these with benefit. But in general, those who wish to know more about social science research as it touches on the concerns of oral historians are better advised to read symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological work, to look at the late James Spradley's writings on doing ethnography, or to read actual ethnographies that self-consciously reflect on the research process. Documents of Life does not adequately represent either the breadth or the subtlety of social science approaches to field research with living informants.

Micaela di Leonardo
National Academy of Sciences

Lee Smith, Oral History (New York: Putnam's 1983), 286 pp., \$14.95.

Aunt Arie - A Foxfire Portrait, Ed. by Eliot Wigginton and Linda Garland Page (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983), 218 pp., \$9.95.

"Don't you ever come back here no more with no tape recorder because you'll likely hear what you don't want to hear." These lines from the end of Lee Smith's novel Oral History suggest both the threat and the lure of practicing oral history. Under the cloak of fiction the author raises serious questions about the ethics of anthropological intrusion, while also demonstrating the riches to be gained from field investigation.

Lee Smith the novelist apologizes for not being an oral history scholar, yet her novel Oral History reveals her sensitivity to the methods and goals of oral history. The title emerges logically from the content: a college student in Virginia travels to her old family home in the mountains near the West Virginia border. She has the mission of tape recording a ghost in the cottage where one of

arrive for the first time. Aunt Arie has her hands plunged into the head and is trying to wrench out the eyes, because she doesn't like to eat the head with the eyes in. When one is finally extracted she throws it away but the fateful eye bounces off a shed roof and catches on the clothesline, where it is photographed and becomes the object of hilarity. All the while Arie is prattling on about which parts of hogshead people eat, how knives used to be made, how her cabin is organized. She is surprisingly candid about her life, spilling it all to these strangers.

Eliot Wigginton needs to make no apologies about being an oral historian. His Foxfire project in all eight volumes has given prominence not only to oral history, but also to the country life it records. In Aunt Arie he and Linda Garland Page pay homage to a woman whose willing participation in the process expresses the happiest kind of experience in Appalachian oral history. It is a pleasure to read and study, but the most valuable part may well be the introduction and initial interview, where the whole oral history research process is revealed in its excitement and awkwardness. And in the statement by a video technician who worked on filming her--"Now I see her in every older person I take the time to get to know,"--we can appreciate how oral history enlarges the whole human experience.

David W. Seaman
Davis & Elkins College

OHMAR WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS

Maurine Beasley, University of Maryland
Elizabeth Gray Kogen, Philadelphia Saving
Fund Society
William Moss, Smithsonian Archives
Warren Stone, Bethesda, MD
Margaret Stone, Bethesda, MD
Susan Falb, FBI
Sister Delores Rosso, Maryknoll Sisters
Center, NY
Martin Gordon, Army Corps of Engineers
Fox Chase Cancer Center, Philadelphia
Great Falls Historical Society, Virginia

STATE OF THE ART

Edited by Mary Jo Deering

DATABASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMS

by Roy Rosenzweig

[Excerpted from a paper presented at OHMAR's
Spring Conference]

Virtually every oral history project faces the problem of organizing and making available the mountains of tapes piling up in the office. Although not a panacea, the microcomputer offers some much needed help in getting this problem under control. If your project is contemplating the purchase of a microcomputer for "word processing" of transcripts, you should also consider what the same piece of equipment might offer you for data base management.

A data base quite simply is a collection of interrelated data or information. For an oral history project this data could be the names and addresses of interviewees, interviewers, or volunteers; a list of equipment owned by the project; a compilation of topics covered in a particular set of interviews; or a combination of these sets of data. The point of computer data base management is to have the computer maintain and manipulate the information for you.

Your first decision is choosing the appropriate software. The choice is generally between a file management system, such as Perfect Filer, and a relational data base management system. For the simplest applications like maintaining a mailing list or a list of interview prospects, a file management system is usually adequate. For more complex tasks, like cataloging or indexing an entire oral history collection, you will probably be better off with a relational data base management system. There are many books that compare different systems, such as David Kruglinski's useful Data base Management Systems: A Guide to Micromputer Software. Among the factors you will want to consider are ease of operation, adaptability to your project's present and future needs, and price. A good relational data base management system can be purchased for about \$400.



***** MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY *****

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

URGENT APPEAL: OHMAR is preparing its new membership directory. If you have not filled out one of the new membership forms, please complete and send in the form attached to this newsletter. Check the date on your mailing label to be sure your membership is current! We want to include you and your project in the new directory, and we want to publish the correct information!

ORAL HISTORY ANTHOLOGY

The Oral History Association and American Association for State and Local History have jointly published ORAL HISTORY: AN INTER-DISCIPLINARY ANTHOLOGY, edited by Willa Baum and David Dunaway. Containing 37 articles on theory and interpretation, the anthology presents the best scholarship on the beginnings, directions, and applications of oral history. It should prove especially useful as a text for oral history classes. Among those in the mid-Atlantic region whose articles are included are Alice Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History," Bill Cutler, "Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing," Amelia Fry, "Reflections on Ethics," and Linda Shopes, "Using Oral History for a Family History Project." Hardbound and paperbound editions of the anthology are available, and discounts are provided for OHA and AASLH members. For further information contact Ronald Marcello, Executive Secretary, Oral History Association, P.O. Box 13734, NTSU Station, Denton, Texas 76203.

BILL MOSS and ENID DOUGLASS, past presidents of the Oral History Association, were guests of honor at a reception at the home of MARTHA ROSS, on May 3rd. The new OHMAR logo made its debut in icing on the cake welcoming MOSS to Washington as the new archivist for the Smithsonian Archives.

LINDA SHOPES has received a Woodrow Wilson research grant in women's studies to further her doctoral dissertation on Baltimore's cannery workers.

OHMAR treasurer BILL NOLTE is a candidate for treasurer of the Society for History in the Federal Government.

The Organization of American Historians and Conference on Public History held a joint meeting in Los Angeles, April 5-8. A number of OHMAR members were on the program, including HEATHER HUYCK, who commented on "Interpreting and Managing the Cultural Landscape," PATRICIA COOPER, who chaired a session on "Work Process and Class Formation in Two Nineteenth-Century Industries," ROY ROSENZWEIG, who commented on "Urban Class Relations and the Commercialization of Labor," JOHN SCHUCHMAN, who spoke on "Oral History Interviews with Deaf Individuals," DONALD RITCHIE, who spoke on "Interviewing Senate Staff," and CARL OBLINGER, who spoke on "Effective Presentation in an Industrial Community, Cornwall: Nostalgia and Public Policy."

FBI HISTORIAN APPOINTED

Susan Falb has been appointed historian for the FBI. An American legal historian, she previously worked in the National Archives, dealing with FBI records among others. The new historical office will provide assistance to researchers, and hopes to launch an oral history program. For further information, contact Dr. Susan Falb, Room 7883, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C. 20535. (202) 324-5385.

WORKSHOP IN ORAL HISTORY & FOLKLORE SOUND COLLECTIONS. May 21-25, 9-23 A.M. For information, contact Dr. Fred Stielow, University of Maryland, College Park, Md. (301) 454-5790.

* CLASSIFIED *

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