Oral History, Popular Culture...Democratization of History

By Lew Carlson

(The following comments were excerpted from a presentation given by Lewis S. Carlson, Professor of History, WMU, at the Friends of the University Libraries meeting held November 4, 1998. The full title is "Oral History, Popular Culture, and the Democratization of History.")

Popular myths not only affect how a society collectively determines its past, but also how its individual members react to and later recall their own changing experiences. Over the past fifteen years, I have been involved in a variety of oral history projects with Olympic gold medalists, inner-city residents, other disenfranchised Americans, and, most recently, former World War II and Korean War POWs. An indisputable conclusion to emerge from these undertakings is the striking degree to which popular culture and so many of its attendant myths affect the entire process of oral history. It is, indeed, fascinating to examine how popular culture massages collective and individual memories, as well as its effect on those who do the actual interviewing. In the end, we all have absorbed the messages transmitted through movies, television, photographs, advertising, periodicals, and various other forms of recorded information, including popular histories...

Oral history can free us from so many of our cherished myths which, in turn, have done much to distort our understanding of our society and its social and economic problems. We Americans have been taught about those nose-to-the-grindstone, over-achieving Puritans; the extraordinarily independent and resilient Colonists; the romantic and heroic soldiers of our many wars; and the rags-to-riches stories of the immigrants. Such myths embrace the Readers Digest/Ronald Reagan/Norman Rockwell interpretation of a homogeneous, small-town, loving America, where John-Boy Walton and his donut-faced siblings lovingly hug mom’s ankles as she plays her spinet piano, while father reads aloud from the Constitution, and Rover reflectively scratches his ear. The realities of life for most Americans have always been clearly at odds with such romantic nonsense...

The popular myths of our history do much to make us feel guilty about our own experiences. We feel guilty because we have not succeeded economically or because we were not heroic enough. Many of my POWS still have trouble talking about their moment of capture (one German-held POW received a letter from his wife stating, “Even though you are a coward and a failure, I still love you”). After all, John Wayne was never captured; John Rambo was, but only in order to escape and exact his bloody revenge. The individual must develop a sense of history—if for no other reason than to escape or at least illuminate the myths that affect his judgment of his own existence. A marvelous example of such thinking is Vietnam ex-POW Larry Guarino exchange with John Wayne at a 1973 White House reception...

“Duke,” I said, “I tried to think about how you might have handled the interrogators.” He listened intently. “So when they asked questions, I told ‘em to go to hell; when they asked me to do something, I told ‘em to stick it up their ass... And do you know what, Duke? They beat the shit out of me!”

Studs Terkel argues that we are conditioned not to have a sense of history, or, as we have learned the wrong history, a history without blemishes or controversies which omits millions of Americans and copious amounts of reality. Consider for a moment, the feminine mystique, and all its attendant myths. Surely there must have been something more than Dolly Madison baking those delicious cakes, or Betsy Ross sitting cross-legged, stitching away. Go back for a moment to the stories we were told in our elementary schools about Clara Barton and other noble bandage folders; think how such self-serving nonsense contrasts with what real nurses went through on the battle fields; stories, by the way which you can best get through oral histories. Perhaps in more sophisticated schools you might have caught a mention of Margaret Sanger, but I would argue it is more important to talk to the women who so desperately needed her birth control information. What were their lives like? Indeed, what are they still like?...

Terkel argues, in American Dreams: Lost and Found, that the common folks have been objects to be acted on, and seldom in their own interests: “Forfeiting their own life experience, their native intelligence, their personal pride,” he writes, “they allow more celebrated surrogates, whose imaginations may be no larger than theirs, to think for them, to speak for them, to be for them in the name of the greater good. Conditioned toward being ‘nobody’ they look toward ‘somebody’ for the answer.”

For Terkel, imagination is the key, because if “you blunt imagination you blunt humanity.” Our popular culture often reduces the lower classes to a level of banality, vicious baseness, or comic relief, but oral histories can often illuminate a raw intelligence, complexity of character, and intuitive understanding of historical forces that should put many professional historians to shame....

It is important to note that certain aspects of history can only be gleaned through oral history—damned documents just won’t tell us. Certainly this is true of what it means to be a soldier and a prisoner of war. Secondary sources can describe such experiences—even much of their horror—but they can never capture what war does to the individuals who do the fighting and dying. Arguably, oral histories also fail, but they come closer....

We must get older people to talk about their lives, their personal self-esteem. Seniors need to review their own history to see how much of it and their recent ideology is based on myth or truth. How we gray-hairs approach our twilight years has as much to do with perception as it does with reality. We need to understand the forces that have buffeted us and are now molding younger Americans. For example, I remember my mother saying, during what became known as the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, that no woman can be sexually harassed if she chose not to. Gadzooks, she sounded just like Phyllis Schlafly. I had to remind her of a story she once told me about her days as a single parent working in a factory during the depression. One of her bosses was notorious for hitting on the young girls in his department. My mother escaped his unwelcome advances largely because she was protected by a family friend who worked in management. I reminded her that, at the time, her wages were our sole financial support, and I asked her what she would have done if our very survival had been predicated on her being more “cooperative” with her boss....

As is the case with those who study...
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popular culture, oral historians ask their subjects to individualize or personalize events and experiences. Our subjects tell us not only what happened, but what they thought happened, that is, what they have internalized and interpreted from their own experiences. Studs Terkel insists, "In their rememberings are their truths." We oral historians are attempting to get at these "truths." How has the past affected our view of the present? POW support groups in which the men tell and retell their experiences over and over—and almost always the same way—are cases in point.

In the final analysis, the people we interview become our teachers. Interviewing soldiers and POWs, for example, teaches us just how cheap life is in war. Their stories make both subject and interviewer realize the naturalistic forces that buffet them—forces they cannot usually control, but which, through personal narration, they can at least come to recognize. After all, it is the grunts who do most of the dying in war, and this should not be a happy or rational prospect for present and future soldiers. We males are taught to worry about our personal courage. We must always appear brave. Yet, the capricious whims of Dame Fortune do not always recognize or reward courage. Unlike most fictional portrayals of war, it is chance that often dictates one's fate in combat or in a prison camp. Interviews with veterans also teach us how thin is our veneer of civilization, and how quickly it is stripped away in conflict. We learn that in war truth is quickly lost, and that soldiers also lose their sense of compassion and caring. Had Studs Terkel's The Good War been available in 1950 or, indeed, in 1963, one wonders if we would have been so willing to send our children off to Korea and Vietnam. The answer is "probably yes," because our popular myths about sacrifice, courage, and national glory are so deeply entrenched in our nation's psyche. Nevertheless, our hesitancy to become involved in a land conflict in the Gulf, and in Bosnia has certainly been affected by what we learned from our Vietnam experience....

Descartes once wrote, "I think, therefore I am." We oral historians change only one word in his famous maxim: "I tape, therefore I am."