

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

History By Word of Mouth: The UCLA Oral History Program

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6s9809d3>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 6(0)

Author

Braitman, Jacqueline R.

Publication Date

1985

Copyright Information

Copyright 1985 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Special Features

History By Word of Mouth: The UCLA Oral History Program

Jacqueline R. Braitman

In 1959 UCLA established the Oral History Program in its effort to enhance the UC Library program in regional history. Since its inception the program has collected over 300 tape-recorded interviews. The interviews have been conducted with persons selected for their ability to provide first hand knowledge of the development of Southern California and other subjects, particularly if they relate to the collections and research work of UCLA. The collection draws upon individuals who best illustrate the culture of the region through their unique contributions in such fields as art, business, civil liberties, medicine, politics, social reform, water resources, and the development of UCLA.* Historians in many fields can utilize the unique insights of personal perspectives regarding local, regional and national events.

The earlier skepticism regarding the reliability of oral history as a methodology is disappearing, according to UCLA Program director, Dale Treleven. Oral historians have developed successful methods of collecting and processing interviews. They are not unlike other sources such as census reports and newspaper data, in that oral histories must be carefully analyzed and interpreted according to rigid standards of accuracy and objectivity. As described in the guide to the UCLA program, oral history methodology involves the collection and preservation of individual remembrances and reflections prompted by the disciplined inquiry of a skilled interviewer who is well versed in the subject of the narrative. Oral history interviews, as distinguished from those in other disciplines, do not adhere to a rigid schedule of questions. They usually proceed in a relaxed conversational manner, with the interviewer supplying the necessary guidance to maintain the flow of the discussion.

A useful introduction to the method and historical context of oral

history will soon be available in David K. Dunaway and Willa Baum's forthcoming book, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Other titles currently available include the quarterly *Newsletter* of the Oral History Association, and the annual *Oral History Review*, each with extensive bibliographies, and Willa Baum's *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, (Nashville, 1981.) A more specific utilization of the technique is found in *Oral History on Women in Medicine*, a collection of interviews conducted by Joyce Another for the Medical College of Pennsylvania, 1977-1979.

UCLA Oral History Program interviews are transcribed verbatim and edited for punctuation and spelling. After the interviewee reviews a draft of the transcript, it is re-typed, photocopied, bound, and preserved for researchers at the UC libraries at Los Angeles and Berkeley. The interviews currently on file are available through the Department of Special Collections in UCLA's University Research Library. The Oral History Program is a section of the Department of Special Collections at UCLA. The interviews are often closely coordinated with Special Collections' manuscript holdings.

A large portion of the holdings focus on the artistic culture in Los Angeles, particularly the rich histories of L.A.'s motion picture industry and art community. For example, animation experts, camera men, and screenwriters offer accounts of Hollywood beneath the glitter. Many accounts may be helpful to historians of film and labor. Trade union organizing, relations with the AFL, and studio strikes are vital aspects of the industry's past covered in some of the collection's holdings. Other holdings reveal events from a personal perspective in business, political, and social reform history. Some of the more familiar names on file include Walter Knott, Carey Mc Williams, Ruth St. Denis, Ray Bradbury, and John Anson Ford. California's military history, agriculture, literature, journalism, and education are a few of the other topics available for patrons to explore.

Two examples of interviews with early California residents are Samuel Butler (1866-1965) and Hancock Banning (b.1892). Banning discusses his family's role in the development of the region, including the development of the Los Angeles Harbor. Butler provides insight into early Pasadena, Monrovia, Venice, and Ocean Park. He also discusses railroad magnate Collis B. Huntington's role in the introduction of the Pacific Electric Railroad, and the Wrigley family's (of chewing gum fame) development of Santa Catalina Island.

For those persons interested in the Progressive era, William Jarvis Carr (1879-1959), a California State Senator from 1913-1923, talks about the struggles against the dominance of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Francis J. Heney and the "graft prosecutions," Governor Hiram Johnson, the

Lincoln-Roosevelt League, and the Progressive Party. John Gee Clark (b.1890), California legislator, executive administrator, and judge, focuses on more radical politics of the region in his interview. Clark was elected to office on the 1934 ticket of Upton Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) campaign. He relates his experiences and his views on a number of subjects including Normon Thomas and socialism, and FDR and the banking system. John F. Aiso, (b.1909) Superior Court Judge, participated in an interview entitled, "Observations of a California Nisei." This covers WWII military service and highlights aspects of the Earl Warren era. The "Government History Documentation Project: Ronald Reagan Era," was part of a joint interviewing project with the Berkeley Regional Oral History Office to document the administrations of California governors. This included projects on Earl Warren, Goodwin Knight, Edmund G. Brown, Sr., and Ronald Reagan.

Other interviews available in an extensive section on civil liberties include an interview with Fred Okrand, retired director of the ACLU, Southern California chapter. Future holdings under the subject of black leadership in Los Angeles will include John Lamar Hill, a successful black businessman, and Ruth Washington, publisher of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.

The Program accepts donated oral histories as well. These have included an interview with Edmund G. Brown, Sr., former governor of California, and interviews related to Holocaust Studies, the history of American photography, and California's Irish community.

If you are interested in the methods and techniques of oral history, Dale Treleven will teach a graduate seminar in the Spring quarter of 1986. See the UCLA Course Catalog under Department of History for details. The Program office in 136 Powell Library welcomes your visit, but requests that you call first, at 825-4932.

*More information can be found in *The UCLA Oral History Program*, compiled by Constance S. Bullock and Sandra Taylor, 1982 U.C. Regents.