

STORY AT THE CENTER:
AN ORAL HISTORY WEBSITE ON CATOCTIN QUAKER CAMP

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes the form of a website. The site, which can be found at www.cqcoralhistory.org, or in the source files on the accompanying CD presents a model for exhibiting oral history materials in a modernized, user-friendly format. The project documents the memories of different members of the Catoctin Quaker Camp community from the past fifty years. Almost 200 short audio stories were edited from twenty-three oral history interviews. Half of these stories appear on the “stories” page and are organized by narrator. The other half appear on an interactive map of the camp and are associated with different sites on the map. This accompanying document traces the development of oral history, pointing at the limitations posed by the placement of the methodology into the discipline of history. It identifies several reasons why the website would not qualify as academic oral history by the Oral History Association’s current standards, and makes suggestions for liberating the methodology from the analytical necessities of the social sciences. Through combining elements of digital storytelling and oral history, this thesis proposes a new model for an engaging, far-reaching, and public end-product for academic oral history projects.

Dr. Maribeth Clark

Division of Humanities

Introduction: An Oral History Website

Are you near a computer? Good. Go to www.cqcoralhistory.org. That is where you will find my thesis: an oral history on Catoctin Quaker Camp. I entreat you to spend some time exploring the site. You will find that story is at the center of it. This document is intended to provide a brief description of the mission, the stories, and the project that led to the site's current state. Most oral history websites are created to supplement or increase access to already existing oral history interviews. My project reverses this trend; I collected oral history interviews in order to create the website. Perhaps this is a sign of the times, that my life is so entangled with the internet, I simply think in these terms. Rather than joining the masses of content-producers who ceaselessly add to what author Andrew Keen in his book *The Cult of the Amateur* calls a "digital forest of mediocrity," I am using the internet for the advantages it lends to documentary and historical preservation (Keen 4). In other words, I have chosen the internet for its value as an alternative to traditional scholarly forms of text.

The web has precipitated a paradigm shift in the way a growing population thinks and processes information. There has been an ascendancy of information that is succinct and summarized, bold and graphic. And many people have come to expect it this way. In contrast, A quick search for oral history projects on the web reveals that the oral history world has either deliberately remained traditional, or has not adapted to the contemporary internet searcher's attention span. For example, the Vietnam Center's Oral History Project website is massive, with hundreds of interviews arranged alphabetically. Each interview link contains an abstract, a link to the audio, and a transcription (The Vietnam Center and Archive). For a scholar interested in writing a book on reticence or

conversational shifts to limit discussion in post-combat war narratives, this would be a valuable resource. However, for a casual visitor looking for a glimpse at what it was like to be in Vietnam, this website would be rather cumbersome, if not overwhelming.

Few people have the time to listen through a three-hour interview only to find several minutes worth of engaging material. In today's world, where radio pieces are expected to be three-to-five minutes in length, most collected oral history material goes unheard. As someone who believes strongly in the value of personal experience and the preservation thereof, I view this as a significant loss. How can oral history projects, which require valuable time and energy to collect oral testimony, bring their material to a wider audience? The most common method has been to write books that contain long quoted segments from selected interviews. However, the books rarely reach an audience beyond the oral history community. In contrast, my website packages oral history material as an attractive, user-friendly format, employing the internet for the broadest reach possible.

In order to do so, I abbreviated one-and-two hour interviews into just a few minutes. In some cases, I moved a narrator's words around to edit for narrative flow or context. I extracted the stories and left everything else out. I created a small archive, but declined to subject the memories to critical inquiry or analysis. As I researched the theory, method, and application of oral history, however, I frequently came across features or requirements that my website could not fulfill. Thus, as I was creating my oral history project, I was learning that it might not qualify as academic oral history. I eventually resolved this dissonance by looking outside the field of history. On the internet

I discovered a movement described as “digital storytelling.”¹ Upon finding many projects that were similar to mine, I came to realize that my project fits between digital storytelling and oral history. To better understand this middle ground my project occupies, one must take a closer look at oral history.

Background: History of Oral History

Historical interviewing has been happening since history was first recorded, yet it was only called “oral history” when Allan Nevins established the Columbia University Oral History Project in 1948. Nevins’ Columbia University program fulfilled his dream articulated in his *The Gateway to History* (1938) for “an organization which [would make] a systematic attempt to obtain from the lips and papers of Americans who had lived significant lives, a fuller record of their accomplishments” (Hirsch 141). Note the qualifier in “significant lives:” The oral history projects of the late 1940s through the early 1960s were mostly interested in interviewing the prominent to acquire more empirical data in the same spirit as conventional historical studies outside of oral history.

Nevins thought of history as “a branch of literature” and its purpose as “first a creator of nations, and after that, their inspirer” (Hirsch 146). This rather liberating conception was undermined by the fact that his oral histories were intended to supplement the written record. As oral history vied for acceptance among the community of academic historians, the notion of history as literature was indicative of the need for a more careful definition. Debates over the role of oral history in the larger historical record quickly moved into the value and validity of oral testimony.

¹ To see some examples of Digital Storytelling, visit www.interactivenarratives.org.

These debates continued during the late 1960s as oral history increasingly became a tool for recording the experiences of racial minorities, the working class, women, and any person whose life could help represent a given social experience. Studs Terkel, an icon among oral historians whose books such as *Working* (1974) documented the lives of “everyday Americans,” liked to call it “history from the bottom up” (Frisch 73). This democratizing mission of oral history posed a challenge to traditional notions of history as exemplified in a quote by Terkel in a 1973 interview: “Fact is not always truth...If it’s their truth, it’s got to be my truth” (Grele 14). Although not immediately accepted into the historical canon, these projects helped oral history reach its potential for publishing the stories of the previously historically insignificant lives.

Oral history is distinct from history in that it allows the historical actors to speak for themselves, lending new insights into choices people made in the past and allowing historians to create a more nuanced, multivocal understanding of historical change. Because projects often involve less-prominent figures, oral history also provides new voices to historical events, sometimes contributing folk histories to more dominant narratives. Oral history has the ability to show what the facts and figures of history meant to the individual life. Furthermore, the framework of the oral history interview allows for a more equitable relationship between researcher and the “objects of study.” Historian Michael Frisch calls the resulting collaboration a “shared authority,” providing agency to the narrator—something often lacking in social research (Ritchie 104). With the postmodern death of the objective observer, interview data became valued for its intersubjectivity and the windows it gave into the personal experience of the political (Ryan 29). Because of these radicalizing benefits, oral history grew rapidly in popularity.

By the 1980s the freewheeling style that characterized the early forms of oral history entered a stage of introspection. The important book, *Envelopes of Sound*, which collected essays from the leading oral historians during the 30th anniversary of Nevins' first oral history project, is concerned with providing structure for a movement greatly lacking it. For example, Ronald Grele noted in his essay titled "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History" that although the importance of oral history is self-evident, "no history department...would grant a doctorate to one of its students in return for the submission of a set of thoroughly documented and well-conducted oral histories" (Grele 128). This attitude is exemplified by Terkel's claim that his oral history work is "not history, but memory," a search not for fact, but the "truth behind the fact" (Grele 129). Oral testimony was thus valued for the human "truths" it lent to the facts and figures of traditional history.

Despite its rapidly expanding presence in the historical record, oral history was not valued as something that could stand alone. As Grele put it, oral history was widely considered an "ancillary technique of historical study" (Grele 127). Professional historians were distrustful of the validity of evidence produced by oral testimony, citing the vagaries of memory, and the impossibility of an objective interview relationship. The dialectical process created between the interviewer and the interviewee (Frisch's "shared authority") raised issues of detachment. It is impossible for the oral historian to remain outside of the situation, to remain objective. Subjectivity is revealed even in the questions that are asked.

According to Grele, the criticism of oral history as secondary and subjective fell into three types: interviewing, research standards for preparation, and questions of

historical methodology. For the first two, he calls for better preparation of the historian and higher standards for interview technique as established by the academic community.

The third criticism, regarding questions of historical methodology, elicited thick, theoretical discussion. The main issue is that oral history constantly deals with forgetfulness, lies, silences, and distortions. Eye witness accounts are famously unreliable. Narrators who are dissatisfied with their present condition tend to have rosy reminiscences of the past, narrating, what is from an academic perspective, nostalgic drivel.

Oral historians expressed a need to legitimize their craft, as they were attempting to create a respected academic venture. For example, Linda Shopes addresses the concern over nostalgia rather callously: “So many people want to do oral histories in well-intentioned but extremely naïve ways: to get interesting stories, to get the anecdotes, to get the colorful stories, to get the cute things. People don’t want to confront the fact that history is... not a happy little story of days gone by” (Ritchie 15). Significantly, these stories that Shopes berates are more in line with what I have produced for my website. However, since its founding in 1967, the Oral History Association (OHA) has held multiple conferences and symposiums in order to refine and define the craft as a worthy endeavor, including the discrediting of such “happy little stories.” The discussions have maintained that oral historians are more than simply collectors of story.

Consequently, it seems oral history is best thought of as practice-based research. For example, most of the recent essays and reviews of oral history are patently academic, treating oral history material as both source and product of social memory. The interview becomes a multi-faceted record. Scholars look at reflections and silences, what is discussed, what is avoided, or how events are remembered, in order to “indicate”

nameable phenomena. They speak of notions like: “Cultural templates,” being “the imaginative structures which shape and articulate memory and act also as a cognitive shorthand for a set of social values, prescriptions for appropriate behavior, and membership of a... community” (Chamberlain 182). The job of the academic oral historian (according to Grele) is to read the interviews “symptomatically” in order to discover hidden levels of discourse, insights and oversights, and answers to questions never asked. He stresses the importance of discovering the “problematic” of the interview, and delves into issues of hegemony and other such large ideas (Grele 138). The oral historian is charged with the duty to study the difference between the various ways in which history is reconstructed, how myth becomes history, how history becomes myth, and how each is turned into ideology. In sum, it seems the role of the oral historian is both practitioner and researcher, studying life documents with the purpose of contributing new interpretations to the understanding of history.

This is an unfortunate, fairly destructive tendency. The prescriptions that have since evolved from the gatherings of the Oral History Association have stripped the oral history product of much of its potential by requiring a critical analysis of the visceral, emotional potential of the story. José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy articulates the effect these recent developments have had on oral history:

The ongoing institutionalization of oral history has led to a crucial dilemma for the problematic of modern knowledge: what has become of modern oral history? Does oral history belong to academics, who so much insist on theorizing, or to participants in given historical processes, whose explanations rest on memory and in fashioning individual and group identity? (Meihy 7).

These two connected arenas, memory and identity, could be viewed as the essential contents and objectives of a certain type of politicized oral history. However, as has been well-argued in the past several decades, memory is quite distinct from history. Are those who narrate their identity through stories objects of study, or social actors? Academic oral historians have been unable to reach consensus on how to address these issues because it has yet to be agreed upon where oral history fits among the various disciplines.

In this document, I would like to offer an alternative origin of modern oral history, beginning not with Nevins at Columbia, but with Joe Gould of Greenwich Village, whose mission seems to be more exemplary of the recent popular uses of oral history as a site of memory and identity.

Joe Gould was a member of one of the oldest families in Massachusetts and a graduate of Harvard. Instead of becoming a surgeon like his father and grandfather, he became an eccentric, homeless panhandler, dedicating his entire existence to writing a book. Gould caught the attention of *New Yorker* writer, Joseph Mitchell, in 1942 – not because of his bohemianism, but because of the book he was writing. He called it “An Oral History” sometimes adding “of Our Time.” It “consisted of talk he had heard and had considered meaningful and had taken down, either verbatim or summarized” (Mitchell 39). Gould believed the talk might have great hidden historical significance. “It might have portents in it... a kind of writing on the wall before the kingdom falls” (Mitchell 40). He scribbled these notes into composition books, filling hundreds of them, claiming that, upon completion, it would be a dozen times longer than the Bible. The manuscript was never published, and only small sections have survived, but Joseph Mitchell’s profile of him in the *New Yorker* brought Gould considerable fame and many

admirers. Gould's mission to "put down the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude—what they had to say about their jobs, love affairs, vittles, sprees, scrapes, and sorrows" captured the imaginations of the public (Ritchie 22).

The fact that nothing came of Joe Gould's life's work other than the *New Yorker* article is certainly disappointing, but the usefulness of his story is found in the documentarian impulse behind his mission. Gould has been credited by historians at Columbia University for originating the term "oral history," using it a decade before it was coined by Allan Nevins (Mitchell Book Jacket). But through his peculiar undertaking, he could also be credited for popularizing the recording of the everyday story, not for journalistic or social research purposes, but for posterity. What Gould called "bushwa, gab, palaver, hogwash, flapdoodle, and malarkey" might be what we call urban folklore today (Mitchell 13). Gould himself claimed he suffered from "a delusion of grandeur" as he dedicated himself to capturing a place and time, striving for a complete oral historical record to be captured in a single tome. While professional oral historians today would never make such a claim, they nevertheless strive for "as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others" (Oral History Evaluation Guidelines).

Because of Gould's commitment to preserving the stories of his time for posterity (and his incidental use of the term "oral history") I think of the field as beginning with him. Thus a brief summary of the development of oral history might go as follows: Joseph Gould begins documenting the thoughts and words of the people he finds in bars, diners, bohemian parties, and the streets with the goal to eventually fill a giant book. Soon afterwards Allan Nevins uses the tape recorder to preserve the words of prominent individuals, but still considers oral history a branch of literature. In the decades that

follow, historians embrace the potential of oral history to supplement the written record and lend voice to the historically silent. Most recently becoming institutionalized, oral history seeks to maintain professionalism, guiding projects in what are generally agreed upon as proper methodologies (recording, storing, responsible interviewing, and analysis). An abstracted version might read as follows: Beginning with its value as simply a celebration of the story and the chance for the voices of the past to reach future generations, oral history gradually moved toward its value as a tool for social research and cultural history.

One more development occurring outside the academic realm of oral history completes the narrative. In the past several years there has been a trend in the United States to record the stories of the “ordinary” person. Examples abound, but here I will focus on three: Journalist David Isay’s StoryCorps, the *New York Times*’ “One in 8 Million” project, and David Lynch’s *Interview Project*.² StoryCorps provides “Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives” (StoryCorps). *New York Times*’ “One in 8 Million” project introduces “individuals in sound and images, ordinary people telling extraordinary stories” (One in 8 Million), and David Lynch’s *Interview Project* is a “20,000 mile road trip [where] people have been found and interviewed,” allowing the world “a chance to meet these people” (Lynch, “Interview Project”). These are just a few of the many projects that have blossomed out of what I see as a timely combination of anxiety over an increasingly anonymous population, and the vast, powerful potential of

² For more on each of these projects, please visit: <http://storycorps.org/>, <http://interviewproject.davidlynch.com>, and <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1-in-8-million/index.html>

the internet. I will spend a moment examining these three endeavors, looking specifically at how the phenomenon they represent fits into the current conception of oral history.

StoryCorps began in 2003 with the intentions of preserving in sound the everyday histories and stories of Americans across the country. This mission is modeled after the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s. Since its inception, StoryCorps has collected stories from over 50,000 people, preserving them in the Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. According to the site, StoryCorps is “one of the largest oral history projects of its kind” (StoryCorps).

In addition to depositing the massive collection in the Library of Congress, StoryCorps makes an effort to bring the stories to the general public. It plays edited versions of particularly poignant interviews on NPR’s Morning Edition. Founder David Isay has also produced several books associated with the project. These radio segments and the book compilations are what have brought StoryCorps wide renown. The radio stories inspire what NPR has proudly termed “driveway moments,” situations where you’ve reached your destination and stay in the car to finish the story. One book titled *Listening is an Act of Love*, was originally sold exclusively at Starbucks and contains moving, emotionally charged stories (Teicher, “Collection of Stories from Everyday People”). David Isay explained why these stories are moving in an interview with jawbone.tv, a website dedicated to showcasing digital narrative: “The stories of everyday people provide a rare source of authenticity in our celebrity-obsessed culture. They allow us to celebrate individual lives and to examine the day-to-day trials and triumphs that are so often overlooked and underreported” (Denis, “StoryCorps: Can Technology Preserve

Oral History?"). It is clear that Isay has grasped the public's (at least the NPR listeners') penchant to consume emotional stories derived from oral testimony.

The next two projects are examples of a brand new and rapidly expanding movement referred to as "digital storytelling." According to the Center for Digital Storytelling, a digital story is one that tells "A short, first-person video-narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds" (Center for Digital Storytelling). The movement is an internet-inspired way of dealing with the desire to know strangers.

New York Times' "One in 8 Million" is a digital storytelling project that presents two-minute audio slideshow profiles of characters in New York. The format for all the profiles is the same. Like StoryCorps, the project focuses on "everyday" people. Similarly, they are allowed to "tell their story," as the interviewer's voice is never heard (although it could be successfully argued that the editing process really makes it the interviewer's story). Finally, the person's story is not couched in analysis. Some of the pieces are stories of something from the past, but most are present-day profiles, more in the spirit of Joe Gould or Studs Terkel.

As I investigated the project, I found material from a question/answer page between viewers and the creators on the *New York Times* website (Talk to the Times: One in 8 Million). Sarah Kramer, series producer of the project, articulated the populist vision behind the idea:

The pieces in this series will be reflective, amusing, informative or surprising. They will not be about accomplishments or facts but instead about a person's passions, dreams, struggles and the stories that make up a

life. The collection will capture the spirit of the city and its residents, spanning age, borough, race, religion and economic class.

She even acknowledges the oral history roots: “The project draws from the traditions of oral history and narrative portraiture cemented by such greats as Studs Terkel and Joseph Mitchell.” A viewer’s comment helps exemplify why these short profiles are widely consumed:

Thank you for this wonderful collection...[The stories] are a reminder of beauty in ordinariness, they teach us how all kinds of lives — old and young, learned and unlearned, strange and mundane — have an intrinsic value and deserve to be honored. They also urged me to look beyond the surface of people's lives and find hidden there an individuality and an authenticity that is quietly heroic. In this world of hyper-achievement and celebrity status, these vignettes help to validate what is real.

The stories are not only poignant, but intimate. The professional black and white photography and the rich audio give the impression that you are having a private and vulnerable interaction with a person. Because the characters are hand-selected and the interviews are expertly edited, these narratives stand out as the most affective (and effective) use of digital storytelling that I have come across.

In terms of multimedia, David Lynch’s *Interview Project* is another publication with incredible depth and intimacy. However, instead of using photography, Lynch has a film crew. This fact lends the product an enhanced ability to capture the intricacies and mannerisms of the person as she tells her story, but detracts from the simple elegance achieved through still photos.

The method by which interviewees were chosen is different from the other two projects. Whereas in StoryCorps, narrators make the choice independently to enter the “story booth,” and the creators of “One in 8 Million” work hard to find characters who will be entertaining, or gripping narrators, *Interview Project* finds its subjects at truck stops, on the side of the road, or in a diner. This fact helps the stories avoid a rehearsed quality found in many of the StoryCorps interviews. Overall the strength of *Interview Project* is in its connection of story and place. The film work coupled with the way one navigates the stories (through an interactive map of the crew’s journey across the country) provides a Federal Writers’ Project-style representation of the diversity in the American experience.

These three projects have much in common with each other. They are representative of the newest movement in America’s long legacy of celebrating the ordinary. They exemplify the rising popularity of narrative projects, and the new possibilities afforded by modern digital recording devices. They all expressly state their goal of capturing our national character, seeking to honor the mundane. In this way, they understand the personal to be universal. Their use of audio recognizes the importance of hearing the narrator’s voice. In the spirit of Joe Gould and Studs Terkel, they are not interested in analyzing their material. Unlike Gould and Terkel, however, they shorten their recorded content into brief, several-minute segments, picking and choosing how to represent the people. This calculated decision caters to the average American’s attention span on the internet. As a result of these decisions, all of these projects are very popular, emerging in the last seven years. Yet one can only speculate as to *raison d’être*.

Although not all of the recent story projects deal with stories of the past, they serve a similar function as the modern quest for heritage. In a world where interpersonal exchange is fleeting, stories offer a surrogate for face-to-face communication, a shortcut into knowing. I don't invoke the notion of heritage to argue that digital storytelling is the heritage form of oral history. Rather, I mention heritage because it provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between contemporary oral history and popular digital storytelling.

Geographer and scholar of Heritage Studies, David Lowenthal identifies some of the sources of this rather selfish use of history. He notes a departure from the traditional stewardship of history and an embrace tending toward self-indulgence. This trend, he contends, has to do with weakened family bonds compounded by uncertainty of the future. The ease of (literal and metaphorical) mobility that technology allows society has caused many families to disperse and lose the bonds of kinship. These are also dangerous and uncertain times. As a result, heritage is becoming a thing to consume rather than conserve (Lowenthal 52).

One of the foremost concerns of the emerging field of Heritage Studies is the use of stories of the past for present identities. The fact that we live in a time of quickened obsolescence and increasing alienation, a time when we are bombarded by media and distraction, leads us to yearn for something solid and unchanging. Interestingly, history is often found as something fixed – material for forming an identity. In service to this ambition, “heritage bends history in its creative comingling of fact and fiction” (Lowenthal 128). And once history becomes used for presentist purposes, it becomes heritage. I take interest in the way heritage is used as a stage for social relations, and how

people rely on stories of the past in order to understand themselves and one another. As Lowenthal puts it, “thoughts handed down to us [are] tokens of times remembered and of lives linked with ours” (Lowenthal 31).

This new obsession with telling the stories of ordinary citizens can be thought of as an effort to understand. It allows anonymous faces to become knowable. It comforts us to know that those people bustling around us every day are experiencing the same realities of life as we are—that common experience connects us to strangers more than anything that might divide us.

At their roots, heritage and oral history are quite similar. They both deal with preserving aspects of the past to shed light on the present. They are both tools helping to bring representation to underrepresented social groups. They both involve personal claims to events of the past, processed through an individual’s own lens. And sometimes as Geographer David Lowenthal states, “heritage mandates misreadings of the past,” and these interpretations of one’s past can become “cherished myths” (Lowenthal 129). Oral history also tends to collect such “misreadings” (whether scholars value them or not is another question). The publication of stories on the internet is a clear example of how heritage and oral history can become commodified, reflecting the current consumer demand for it.

The question that must eventually be asked is: Are these projects oral history? The answer is not simple and the question is only beginning to be addressed. The Oxford Journals’ Oral History Review has published two articles dealing with the new prevalence of public consumption of oral narratives. One, published in the fall, 2009 edition asked, “What is StoryCorps, anyway?” The other, not yet available in print,

reviews the *Interview Project*. Both of these articles acknowledge the likeness these story projects have to oral historical methodology, but decline to include them in the annals of oral history.

In *What is StoryCorps, Anyway?* Nancy Abelmann et al. contend that the StoryCorps interviews are not oral history, but “highly sculpted” interviews that last only 40 minutes—too short for the current practice. Furthermore, oral history projects typically produce transcripts that “reveal the tracks of the investigator.” Rephrasing and editing out the false starts and stutters leave certain elements lost in translation (Abelmann et al. 256). Therefore StoryCorps is less an oral history and more a “highly ritualized performance” that inserts the narrator into a “public culture of affect and remembering,” producing “poignant moments of self-conscious gifts to the future” (Abelmann et al. 257). This is considered distinct from the mode of the oral historical record.

The “ritualized performance” the authors describe is a “deliberate transmission of wisdom and feeling from one generation to the next” (Abelmann et al. 259). As two people enter the story booth, an intimacy is instantly constructed. As such, StoryCorps offers “the dream of communication,” a concept of John Durham Peters’ that connotes a communication where “nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited” (Abelmann et al. 258). Therefore the value of the project, according to the authors, lies not in the historical content produced by the interviews, but in the experiences created for participants as they sit in the recording booth.

For this reason, one might think of StoryCorps as a community service more than an oral history project. While the collaboration that occurs during an oral history

interview often has a as a byproduct a therapeutic effect, StoryCorps seems to elevate this effect as a central goal. As such, the article considers StoryCorps as constituent of the current “era of self-publication,” and public testimony (Abelmann et al. 260). The project is lumped into the category of Facebook and blogging, an endless flow of self-documentation. The question then arises: If our records of ourselves are endless, how can we decide what is enduring? StoryCorps has not given any sign that it intends to slow down its collection. In the ephemeral and immaterial digital world, what is enduring is simply a matter of Darwinian fitness.

The review on *Interview Project* is similarly condescending, albeit slightly more forgiving. Bryan provides a succinct and blunt answer to the question: “Is the project oral history?” that it is worth quoting in full:

One might be inclined to ask if this project is oral history. Surely not, so far as oral history is defined by an extended reflection between a prepared interviewer and a narrator on a particular historical circumstance. The amount of biographical information published in each video portrait varies; the full interviews are not available, and the project overall is not oriented toward a historical question. Further, the loosely structured interview style is not singularly grounded in oral history methodology (Bryan, “Interview Project”).

Clearly Bryan doesn’t consider the *Interview Project* oral history, however she sees value in the way it represents a new “arena for the application of the discipline’s theoretical lens.” The modern publication of reflective narrative is useful as long as the oral historian can impart “considerations to collecting and navigating” them. In other words these stories can be considered useful to oral history because they increase “the relevance of the discipline's theories and call for their further application.” This attitude suggests that

modern oral historians are not ready to embrace the value of the story without subjecting it to theoretical (re)interpretation (Bryan, "Interview Project").

The most recent developments in the use of oral narrative bring oral history full circle; the more recent theoretical discussions on the proper forms of oral history have weighed down the practice and have not yet dealt with the greater problem of modern oral history: should it be a tool and methodology to support other fields of study, or should it have status as a discipline of its own? Perhaps it would be too radical to propose it become its own discipline, however, oral historians should move forward in a way that liberates their work from the analytical necessities of the social sciences. Such a direction would enable it to be reconsidered as a more public practice, allowing projects that are useful to broader society and not simply theoretical exercises in the academic sphere.

Creative non-fiction offers a useful example for imagining this direction. Some of the great detail-rich, well-crafted narratives are produced by literary journalists writing in the genre. These authors sometimes spend years with one subject, gathering interviews and close contact with a certain social situation, to attain intimacy with a subject far beyond what is typical for an oral historian. The accounts created by creative non-fiction writers are not stories recorded directly from the lips of the historical actors, but they accomplish a special accuracy in their own right. I am aware of the hazards inherent in associating the work of history with journalistic writing, and I do not privilege one over the other. My intention is to point out that literature is not often subject to judgment of the author's method. A good work is appreciated as a good work. Likewise, the validity of oral history could be found in a well-documented and well-presented project, not in its academic praxis. Bringing the lived realities of a particular social situation or community

to the surface is very much a political goal, with real impacts. Perhaps the value of the oral testimony extends beyond the territory of history and perhaps the value of telling a story is the performance of the story being told. As anthropologist Laura Bohannon found in her experiences described in “Shakespeare in the Bush” a story never has one meaning (Bohannon 25). Every person gets something different from a story and this is what gives story its power. It is for this reason I trace the beginnings of oral history with the non-academic impulse of Joe Gould and the literary approach of Allen Nevins’ to recorded conversation. Oral history does not need to abandon its academic approach, but it would do well to embrace the digital storytelling movement, incorporating it and learning from it.

Contemporary oral history creates useful and fascinating projects, but often fails to reach the public or to inspire. (And I don’t think I am in grave error by assuming oral historians would like to see their efforts more widely appreciated). A solution would be to liberate the methodology from the product. Other disciplines can use oral history methodologies and subject them to critical analysis. Or they can subject already existing oral history archives to critical analysis. But the Oral History Association could be more tolerant than to require a “critical approach...in the use of oral history” (Oral History Evaluation Guidelines). There should be room for projects that simply gather stories and present them for public consumption. Such a move would be rewarding for the vast efforts of those involved in the projects, and would implicitly be a confirmation of their professed respect, and appreciation for, the narrators’ understanding of his or her own history. The idea that oral histories cannot be taken as literal truth has been an issue in oral history since Nevins, but fact-checking does not need to be the job of an oral

historian. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli reminds us, “untrue” statements are psychologically “true.” The “importance of oral testimony may often not lie in its adherence to facts, but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in” (Yow 22). I see the value of stories for their ability to link people to place, convey values, and describe communities. This should be the great mission of oral history.

My project presents a model for merging oral history and digital storytelling. For example, my project almost fits within the evaluation guidelines of the OHA. Take their most basic definition of the practice: “The Oral History Association promotes oral history as a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life” (Oral History Evaluation Guidelines). By this criterion, my project would receive a warm welcome into the community of oral historians. In fact, throughout nearly the entire 5,200 word document, my project would be deemed “up to snuff.” However, there is one subtle, yet fatal qualification that excludes my work: “A critical approach to the oral testimony and interpretations are necessary in the use of oral history” (Oral History Evaluation Guidelines). I would never argue that this is a misuse of the oral historical narrative, but it implies that a story is not enough. A story must indicate something. Or it should exemplify something else. Or it must rouse suspicions when it sounds unlikely. For my project, I hope each story will speak for itself. I hope imaginations will be engaged and memories sparked. Each story contains a wealth of information, either revealed in the details of the narrated events or in the assumptions and implicit features behind it all. My

hope is that, taken as a whole, the collection will provide a holistic portrait of camp at an emotional level.

Another critical exclusion is the fact that my project has not made the full interviews publicly available. In the section on the responsibilities to the profession, the OHA guidelines state: “Regardless of the specific interests of the project, interviewers should attempt to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others” (Oral History Evaluation Guidelines). My interviews were focused, and only lasted about an hour each. And throughout the OHA prescriptions, there is the assumption that the project includes transcripts. While it never explicitly mandates them, they are mentioned as if there is no question that one has them. I produced no transcriptions. For my purposes, I do not view this as a flaw, as my focus was always on the website. With more time or funds I could produce transcripts for the historical record, and I do believe these would be valuable to the Baltimore Yearly Meeting and perhaps the family members of those interviewed. Nevertheless, the fact that I have cut the interviews down to only a few, thoroughly edited audio clips completely takes away any hopes of joining the ranks of accepted academic oral history projects.

While my website would not qualify as an oral history project by OHA standards, it is more oral historical than the journalistic-oriented projects of digital storytelling. From the onset, my concerns were historical in nature, and almost all of the interview questions involved summoning events and memories from the past. The historical nature is further emphasized by the large age range, the past-tenseness of the stories, and most of all, the “histories” section of the site.

Therefore, I view my project as occupying a middle ground between oral history and digital storytelling. It represents a new possible direction for oral history, allowing for the historical materials to reach a larger, more engaged audience. I recognize that the stories I have gathered are not of the same universal appeal attained by projects like “One in 8 Million” or *Interview Project*, but my intentions are not for commercial ends. I wanted to capture some of the histories, realities, and valuable experiences from a place that I and so many others have been nurtured by. I wanted to help remind those who lived it, and help those who did not understand what makes the camp extraordinary. But I also wanted to make the memories accessible, entertaining, and useful. The result is something I believe can help inspire oral history to see the new territory of digital storytelling as something worthy of exploration.

Case Study: Catoctin Quaker Camp

While describing a place like Catoctin seems to be an impossible undertaking, there are ways to approach it. One way to start is from the institutional point of view. Catoctin Quaker Camp is offered by the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Camping Program, whose mission is to “offer extended time in living, functioning Quaker communities that encourage tenderness, loving concern, dynamic activity, laughter, respect, work, honesty, silence, and joyful noise” (Baltimore Yearly Meeting Summer Camps). This mission, while it may sound like a laundry list of feel-good buzzwords, is actually an accurate description of what occurs there. It is the scaffolding behind the challenges of three-day backpacking and canoeing trips every week, the swimming, the arts and crafts, the

informal music and drama, the low pressure athletics, and the chores. It is present in the daily silent worships at the fire circle, the evening campfires, and the continuous supporting, loving environment. This is how the camp might describe itself.

Others, who have witnessed their children go through the before-and-after stages of the summer have found their own ways of describing it. My mother always called it a place of “controlled disaster,” suggesting camp’s mission to encourage campers and counselors to take considerable risks in activities like negotiating rapids, but always in a safe and supportive environment. “Controlled disaster” also alludes to Catoctin’s credo: “Way Opens,” which is the idea that a need or a problem will be solved serendipitously or through divine guidance. Camp frequently seeks out these moments, such as through “adventure trips” when campers and counselors are driven blindfolded to an unknown location and must rely on their own abilities and the help of strangers to find their way back to camp. My stepfather describes Catoctin as “Saturday Night Live all the time,” focusing on the atmosphere of absurdity and goofiness that results as campers and counselors construct a community where everyone is allowed to shed the inhibitions garnered from competitive and socially segregated institutions outside of camp. Another parent has appreciated Catoctin for the spirituality and self-knowledge it inspires in her son, noting how every summer, “the fire in his center grows larger” (Baltimore Yearly Meeting Summer Camps). Spirituality, however it is expressed through each individual, is continuously encouraged through silent worship, admiration of the natural world, and deliberate reflection on the impact and meaning of different experiences. These parental descriptions are based on observations of the impact camp has on their children. From

someone who has been personally influenced by these experiences, satisfactory descriptions are difficult to summon.

For example, ever since my first summer spent at Catoctin when I was thirteen, camp has been a place I have referred to simply as “my favorite place in the world.” To try to describe camp in any other way would take a long time, and ultimately do it an injustice. At the same time, I have never had the words for it anyway. For me, camp is a feeling, a place, a bundle of memories, even an identity. As I have grown older, I’ve come to see the ways that camp has written itself on me and my life. Calling Catoctin “my favorite place in the world” was like a short cut for letting people know what it means to me, a quick attempt to get the nod that said: “Oh, I see... it’s more than just a summer camp for you.”

In time I have come to find that the most powerful way to describe it is through narration—stories from the myriad experiences afforded by the camp activities and atmosphere in general. That I found this to be true makes sense because one of the great projects of camp is to provide experiences that become internalized through their recanting. Not all of the camp stories I find myself telling actually involve me—a fact that points to the central role stories play at Catoctin. Indeed there is a strong oral tradition at camp that helps give form to the community identity of Catoctin.

The oral traditions of Catoctin are some of its most powerful assets. A facts-and-figures description of the camp achieves little more than a basic understanding of the materiality of it. What fills in these bits and pieces are the intangible parts of the camp culture. As a former camper from the 1980s put it, “camp is not so much a place as it is

an attitude, a way of interacting with each other.” As I will illuminate shortly, these ways of interacting are profoundly envoiced.

But first, a note on terminology. Orality is a term generally reserved for societies with little or no knowledge of writing. While camp is certainly not an illiterate culture, it is very much an oral culture—especially in comparison to the technology-obsessed social structures outside of camp. In this document I will use “orality” to describe Catoctin somewhat inaccurately because I have yet to find a better term to describe a community in which oral testimony and song shape the internal experiences and external interactions more than chirographic, or written communication³.

I found this orality of Catoctin to be a perfect candidate for an oral history website. Because a great part of the experience is verbal, an attempt to depict it in a written form would be inadequate. The songs, the stories, the emotional and spiritual dialogues; they are the stuff of camp. The best way to experience them, aside from actually being at camp during the summer, is through audio recording. And the non-linear arrangement of a website allows for individualized navigation through these recordings. A better understanding of the different performative traditions and oral rituals of camp will help to reveal why I have chosen Catoctin for my online oral history project.

The orality of camp falls into three broad categories: song, storytelling, and open and continuous dialogue. These verbal events are enacted through performance and ritual, and each serves a valuable function in the community and individual experience alike. It should be mentioned that the description of camp that follows is from my own experience and understanding of it, and is necessarily from the point of view of someone who has

³ Walter J Ong’s work of the 1980s, particularly, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* pioneered the investigations between orality and literacy.

been a counselor and staff member. While little about the structure and operations of the camp have changed over the decades, the experience of camp is deeply personal and might be variously interpreted by different people. Thus, what I present below is what I hope to be an adequate, albeit greatly limited and translated introduction to camp and its orality.

At the end of every summer, it is asked of the camp community, “How can we bring camp into our regular lives?” Inevitably someone will suggest the importance of singing throughout the year. This is because for most campers and counselors, summers at camp are times when they sing far more than any other period of their lives. The reasons song figures prominently in camp are many, but Barry Morley, former director for over twenty years suggests, “Familiarity with our songs helps us be us. They are the songs we sing together over a period of years. They give us identity. They are part of our celebration of ourselves” (Morley, 13).

In most cases, singing is a performative activity. The beginning or ending of mealtimes can sometimes be a cacophonous clamor of different songs being shouted in friendly competition. Perhaps a camper will stand on a bench and initiate a round of *Little Tom Tinker*, a song during which everyone leaps up in shots and mimed pain at different points.



Ex. 1. Little Tom Tinker; (Morley 10).

The performance of song occurs in a more organized fashion throughout different parts of the day, offering opportunities for campers, and especially younger counselors, to become a focus of attention as they act out or dance parts of the songs.

Sometimes singing is an accompaniment to other activities. Whether passing the time while hiking on a trail, or distracting oneself during the different chores all must participate in after meals, campers are often found singing. The current director, Linda Garrettson recognizes the unifying effect of this: “If you’re a nine year old and you know the same songs that a thirteen or fourteen year old knows, then when you’re doing dishes together...you’re definitely not having the same experience in terms of what you’re thinking about, but if you know an hour’s worth of songs together, it’s something that creates a commonality” (Linda Garrettson). In subtle and prominent ways alike, the performance of song is important for defining a camp communal identity.

Song is also used prominently as ritual. For example, every evening in camp (as opposed to when units are out on trips), units⁴ are sent off to bed, one at a time, youngest to oldest, with the singing of “Goodnight Irene,” except for the unit number is sung in place of “Irene.” The most important application of singing occurs at the beginning of each Thursday and Sunday night campfires. On these evenings, the camp gathers around the fire circle just before dawn, and a fire is lit at the center. Singing is led by the director. For these occasions, songbooks are distributed to those who want them; however, many campers take great pride in knowing all the songs without them. These moments around the fire have provided me with some of the most lasting images of camp. A few

⁴ Unit consist of consisting of generally 5-10 boys of about the same age matched with two older male counselors, and 5-10 girls of the same age matched with two older female counselors.

counselors usually walk around the circle between the fire and the rest of camp, helping to lead the songs—performing during the rowdier songs, and pausing to lead during the rounds. As a camper, this was a time when I would admire the counselors and dream of one day getting to run around the fire myself. As the surrounding woods grew dark, the songs tended to become slower and gentler, leading ultimately to silent worship. It wasn't until this last summer that I learned from Linda Garrettson that there was a deliberate progression:

I can bring us up. I can go high energy song, high energy song, high energy song, and boom: we are flying high. And then I can bring us back down into a calm and centered place. And that's just by song choice and how we're leading those songs...That sounds like a power trip, but there really is a method to how I imagine the singing every day (Linda Garrettson).

The most sacred song is sung to signal the end of the silent worship. It starts with the director whose solitary voice sings the first line of the three-part round, "Oh light abide with us." She walks around the circle, singing the first line twice more, letting the section of people she passes know which part of the round they are to sing, and then continues with the last group, "For it is now the evening. They day is past and over." The round is sung three times filling the circle with rich harmonies. The last chord is allowed to linger in the air during the brief silence that follows. This song, "Oh Light Abide with Us," is of such importance to me, that I was almost unable to get a recording of it. I felt sacrilegious being silent during its singing and guilty trying to capture its immediacy and esotericism on recording. The use of song at camp, whether in performance or ritual, allows for

meaningful communication and celebration of community, and nowhere is this seen more than at the Thursday and Sunday night fire circles.

The Thursday night fire circles are also an especially verdant environment for the telling of stories. While “campfire stories” generally suggest a degree of manipulation, such as in their most common application as fear-provoking spooky tales, the stories told at camp are intended for reflection and appreciation. These stories come from campers and counselors who have spent the last three days on an adventure. Thursday fire circles are dedicated to stories from these important experiences, and Linda walks slowly around the fire, signaling to those who are closest that they are welcome to speak. She explains at the beginning that this is a time to think about what happened during the camping adventures: What was beautiful? When did the “way open?” Who were your heroes and sheroes? A hero or shero is a person who did something special to help another person on the trip, or who made a significant effort to overcome a challenge or limitation of some sort. The stories are about learning, helping, experiencing new things, and accepting one another. They promote review and reflection on personal experiences and appreciation for the actions of others. Through the narration of these stories, the values of the camping program are internalized by the campers and counselors—values of community, self-esteem, spiritual growth, openness to challenge, helpfulness.

Furthermore, the trips and the fire circles are mutually reinforcing. When you know that you might be honored at fire circle for certain behaviors, you are more likely to take opportunities to help someone or welcome experiences that allow you to surpass your own expectations. And from the experiences furnished by such reinforced behavior come the stories that inspire and enrich those at the fire circle. In other words, because of

the prospect of being heralded as a hero or shero in stories, people become heroes and sheroes in their lives. By allowing all to participate in the public honoring of certain actions, this ritual helps give meaning to the experiences of the camp community. And just as oral history makes public the heroic actions of a narrator with no historical witness, these fire circle stories provide a source of self-satisfaction and pride for the camper who is lauded (Yow 16). Linda Garrettson puts it this way:

We send children out and we push them...out of their comfort zone because we know that growth happens outside of your comfort zone. Well sometimes it feels like it's too much, and yet, when you come back from a trip and you hear all of the [stories], realizing that, yeah it was hard, but that conversation that kept me going, or that person who took care of me when I was sick... And sometimes as a child, you don't have that really clearly in your mind. So then you go to fire circle, you sing some crazy songs, and then you hear those messages, and you go 'Oh, right. I *did* make it and I *am* proud of myself, and it *was* hard.' That's genius (Linda Garrettson).

Understanding this powerful ritual of relating stories from the trips is crucial to understanding how the camp helps change lives.

Another nucleus of camp stories is found in the informal exchanges amongst counselors. This is the source of some of my greatest stories, and ultimately the inspiration for choosing Catoctin for the focus of my project. Such exchanges occur primarily in two different scenarios. One is during lodge nights⁵, and the other is during

⁵ Lodge nights are the night hours that counselors have to themselves. While those with the rotating position of "night counselor" are staying out with the cabins, the rest of staff is together in the lodge.

visits from counselors of summers past. Together, these gatherings provide the great unrecorded oral histories of Camp Catoclin.

If the mood is right, a lodge night can be a groundswell of narrative. A group will gather on the couches in the lodge or stand together snacking in the kitchen and people will take turns telling stories. They can be stories from the most recent trips that couldn't be told at fire circle. Or they can be stories from summers past. Sometimes there are new stories, but very often they are the well-established legends, the stuff of camp lore, retold for the benefit of new counselors, or simply for the joy of the story.

In special circumstances, a counselor from years past will visit during the summer. These are the rare times when someone can provide first-hand accounts of some of the stories that have become legends. These are also opportunities to hear the stories that were told and retold in past generations, or just to hear what it was like to be a counselor in their time. For example, I remember the time I learned that a major aspect of counselor culture used to be going on "drives," where a group of counselors would pile into a pickup truck and drive around the mountain. These are the types of stories I tried to capture in the interviews for my project, but they are intimately connected with people and place, and seem to thrive only in these hallowed moments at camp. This transmission of the oral traditions however, is an important and distinctive way of interacting in the community, and bestows a sense of a rich, continuous history.

The third category of camp's orality is what I call "open and continuous dialogue." This has always been a facet of camp, but its prevalence has increased greatly under the directorship of Linda Garrettson, and its continuation is vital for the community

Depending on the particular dynamics of the group and other extraneous factors, these nights can be anywhere along the spectrum between absurd and anarchic to calm and quiet.

to function as well as it does. Whether through organized staff meetings, regular small-group feedback sessions, or informal conversation, communication is nearly in constant flow amongst the staff. Because we rarely reference written documents such as employee handbooks⁶ or standards of practice, camp relies on frequent dialogue to ensure the summer runs smoothly and safely. The institutionalized forms of dialogue can be organized into three categories: the Quaker commitment to consensus, “check-ins,” and the processing of community issues. All three of these depend on honest and responsible dialogue to focus “our careful attention to the community that we want to create and how to be that community on the trail and at camp” (Linda Garrettson).

My experiences at camp have furnished me with an intrinsic penchant for consensus. Nearly every decision made at camp is through “Quaker process,” or the commitment to reaching a group decision such that all differences are discussed and considered until the group is able to reach a point where unity is felt. In this way, camp achieves its own version of the kind of “dream of communication” strived for by StoryCorps. Sometimes, however, a crisis situation arises at camp and consensus is not a reasonable goal. In these situations, a decision is made by the director and those directly involved, and then processed as a staff until a “sense of the group,” or understanding is reached. This commitment to consensus can lead to uncommonly long staff meetings, but the process is vital to the community and the standards set forth by the program.

The “check-in,” another important form of communication, encourages self-awareness and emotional literacy. A check-in is essentially a conversation that asks the question “how are you?” expecting, a thoughtful and honest answer. Informal check-ins

⁶ Just last summer I learned camp does have a written policy for its staff, however, it is only used as an outline to guide discussion at the beginning of the summer.

happen constantly between people throughout the summer. They are a vital part of the way individuals care for one another. As an entire staff, camp has five mass check-ins: One at the beginning of the summer (sometimes lasting up to six hours), one in between each session, one at the end of the summer, and a more focused, drug and alcohol check-in before camp begins. These are intended to let the whole staff know how each person is doing, and what is going on in his or her life. They are important trust-building rituals, and help to bring the community closer together.

The drug and alcohol check-in is instructive of the type of open and continuous dialogue strived for at camp. The use of drugs or alcohol is not allowed at camp. At the beginning of each summer the staff sits in a circle and each person is given the space if desired to talk about his or her relationship with drugs and/or alcohol, but each person makes the verbal commitment to not use either at camp. There is always a discussion and consensus reached about why they do not fit with the camp culture or mission, and the commitment is followed. Despite the fact that ever since this commitment began several decades ago, drugs and alcohol have not been a part of camp, it is renewed at the beginning of every summer. This example helps to show the degree of camp's regard for the power of candid discussion.

A related ritual of dialogue is seen in what Catoctin calls "apple-onion-apple"—a metaphor for the delivery of feedback that sandwiches an area for growth between two things you appreciate about someone. Apple-onion-apple occurs between the unit counselors and their staff liaison multiple times every summer. It is a true exercise in honesty, vulnerability, and interpersonal communication, and ultimately helps to create a system where we are accountable to ourselves and for those around us. The role of this

community-building ritual is so central to the functioning of the staff unit that Linda Garrettson considers it her greatest gift to the camping program:

Clearly the way we communicate—the apple-onion-apple system which I really helped bring into being my first year here (which is now throughout the camping program), I feel like ultimately if you said, ‘what’s your gift to this program’, I would say that’s my gift; Is helping our counselor community communicate with each other in such an open and intentional way...It’s powerful (Linda Garrettson).

Communication and evaluation are found not only in these intimate, mutual consultations, but also in staff-wide discussions on the bigger pictures of camp.

One of camp’s strongest assets is its commitment to evaluation and reassessment of its goals, practices, traditions, and assumptions. These discussions range from how to respond to camper presence on Facebook outside of camp to why we allow mixed genders to sleep under the same tarp while on the trail. Counselors spend a week before campers arrive in thoughtful dialogue about the different roles they have and how to best care for the campers, their peers, and themselves. The content of these discussions is generally engendered through concerted effort rather than dictated from above. Any issue that affects the community will be processed with the smaller group that was directly involved, as well as the entire staff. After the campers leave at the end of the summer, the staff remains for several days of rigorous evaluation of each other, the past seven weeks, and considerations are laid out for the next summer. I have always marveled at Catoctin’s steadfast commitment to open and continuous dialogue. Sometimes it allows camp to adapt to changes, other times it helps camp remain consistent and true to its values. In

either case, the fact that orality is at its core, allows the camp's mission to continue to flourish.

I have illustrated the three manifestations of camp's orality (song, stories, open dialogue) in order to demonstrate the oral historical potential found in the traditions and rituals that shape Catoctin. I believe the success of Catoctin is a result of the evolution of these different practices and lore, never written down, but passed along experientially and orally. In fact, the entire structure of camp can be understood as a lattice of traditions. Through the songs, the stories, and the intentional dialogue, camp's history is written into the unique experiences of everyone who becomes a part of the community—a community that is continuous, but is different every summer. It is different because it is recreated each time with the unique interaction of the personalities present. I view the memories of people who have been a part of the traditions over the different generations as fertile ground for oral history. Becoming a part of the camp community is a unique and often life-changing experience. The recording of these experiences through story allows past, present, and future campers to know the origins of traditions, learn about the ones that don't exist anymore, and hear about ones that have developed after their time.

As a final note, the slogan of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Camping Program is "Fire at the Center." This notion has literal and metaphorical meaning for Catoctin. Fire circles are always conducted with a fire at the center. These occasions are where the community ideals most fully flourish. Fire at the center can also refer to the one's inner spiritual journey and the Quaker notion of the "inner light." Former director Barry Morley believes that to encourage spiritual unfolding, "a fire at the center is vital. People sitting in a circle around flame form a powerful living metaphor for an individual looking

inward toward the Light” (Morley, 7). “Fire at the Center” locates these fire circles as the heart of camp. During these rituals, vital stories are told. Over time, these stories gather into larger stories and become, for many, a center for the larger continuous story that becomes one’s life story. While I can not speak for others, I know that for myself, I can locate Catoctin in the fire at my center. My project to preserve these stories shows how the Catoctin experience is created through conditions that stimulate story and is then memorialized through story. Thus, story is at the center of camp, and the center of my thesis.

My decision to conduct an oral history on Catoctin was two-fold. One reason was personal. The entire project can be viewed as an attempt to better understand the community and place that has nurtured me into the person I am today; and to see how it has affected others. The other reason, more practical in nature, has to do with camp’s orality described above. As I have learned, however, there is a great difference between deciding to do an oral history project, and actually carrying it out. The process that led to what is now found on cqcoralhistory.org required the rapid acquisition of many new skills. It involved crucial decisions in order to create what I envisioned as an efficient, engaging, and user-friendly oral history website.

Process:

I conducted the interviews over the summer. In the beginning I remember feeling for the first time that I was not a professional when I really should have been. The interviewees had a difficult time getting into the mindset where camp stories came easily

and I was unable to help. Historian Kevin Blackburn calls this the “temporality of testimony,” acknowledging the problem that oral history interviews are almost always separated from the time and place in question (Blackburn 235). Accessing the mindset of camp storytelling was particularly difficult in some situations. For example, at one point I interviewed someone in a New York office building, and much of the recording is taken up by silence and repeated apologies for the failure to think of any stories. This inability to conjure stories is just one issue with the constructed setting of an interview.

Stories are also told in different styles, depending on the audience and the situation. A story told in the lodge with a bunch of younger counselors as an audience will be told much differently than how it would be narrated to me, a veritable stranger to some of the interviewees.

In an attempt to address these issues I went through several complete overhauls of my interview questions. At one point I realized I had been afraid to ask questions I already knew the answers to, and that doing so was necessary to get certain things on record. Another time I realized that I was relying too heavily on my interviewee’s ability to pull stories out of a vacuum.

Over time I became more comfortable with the interview process and my questions were honed. I began to relax and treat the interview more as a conversation. Throughout the conversation, if a possible story came up, I would ask it to be told in story form. This helped me realize the difference a seasoned interviewer makes. Historian Melissa Walker puts it this way:

Oral history is a dialogue...between an interviewer and the narrator. Thus, the interviewer plays a significant role in shaping memory as it is

expressed in the narrative. The questions an interviewer asks help determine the contours of the story... An interviewer who says “tell me your life story” will get a far different set of recollections than an interviewer who says “tell me about life during the great depression (Walker 13).

This quotation also points to the potential power an interviewer has to influence the story. Some scholars have gone so far as to say that given the interviewer’s power to shape the narrative and frame the history, oral history’s benefits of giving the narrator more agency is considered “an illusion” (Chamberlain and Thompson 138).

Yet in the end, the interviewee has the most control over what goes on recording, and, as I found out, for most people, it is easier to talk about past experiences descriptively or reflectively. The interviewees wanted to tell me what camp meant to them, why it was important. Ideas were often spoken in generalizations rather than in details. What I was looking for, the lively camp stories told in the lodge and kitchen at camp, is apparently something that happens only in these special informal, group settings. As a result, each interview only contains one or a small few of the stand-alone stories I was trying to get.

This fact was lost however as I edited the interviews during the fall. Looking back through the folders I created for the different interviewees, I can see a change over time: I increased the number of clips as time went on. The first interview I edited, I picked only three stories out of over an hour-long interview. By the last few interviews I was creating 16 or even 20 audio clips. Yet only a few of these were actually stories. It is clear to me what happened. The more inundated in the minutia I became, the more I lost sight of the

original intention. As the editing process progressed I became increasingly unable to declare certain things unworthy. All seemed precious—everything worth listening to. I somehow forgot that I was looking for stories about camp and started keeping anything that could stand by itself. In this discovery, I got a glimpse into why historian Barbara Tuchman complained that “over-documentation” was causing those who write contemporary history to drown in “unneeded information” (Ritchie 132).

And this same gradual shift occurred during the interview process. I started off with the idea that I would never ask about the significance of camp. I recognized that affective descriptions or reflections on the significance of the experience have their place, but in general are not engaging to the average listener. However, as mentioned before, the interviewees seemed to be most comfortable talking about why camp was special to them. Therefore, the fact that the preponderance of edited audio clips is descriptive rather than narrative is a consequence of both the natural tendencies of the narrator and the fact that the deeper involved I became with the content, the less I was able to see the forest for the trees.

Because of this, I had to go back through and pick out the *camp stories*. These cherry-picked narratives are the chosen few. There are about 90 clips taken from over 270 several minute-long clips that were gathered from over 24 hours worth of interviews. These specially selected stories, each liberated from the “likes,” “ums,” misspeaks, pauses, and other undesirable aural elements, were mastered and converted for the web.

Upon completion of the editing process, I entered the period of teaching myself web design. I did not realize the naïveté of my intentions until I actually began this process. The details are uninteresting, so I will only mention that I had to abandon my

aspirations to learn Adobe Flash, and use basic html and CSS via Adobe Dreamweaver instead. As a result, the original vision for my website was necessarily revised. The principles however remained the same: The stories are organized by the individual, thus mitigating the complications of overlapping topics or themes while simultaneously emphasizing the individual's unique experience of camp and understanding of his or her story. There is also a map of camp, featuring short clips that describe the way life at camp has been over the past 50 years. These clips allow me to use some of the audio I edited over the semester that were not included in the final cut of stories, as well as provide an interactive historical aspect to the site. The only real difference is that the website is not as sleek and flashy as I had dreamed of.

Conclusion: Technology, the Man behind the Curtain

The entire process, from the beginning to end, has had technology as the “man behind the curtain”—buttons, knobs, and all. Oral history, in its contemporary form, is founded on technology. Recall Allan Nevins' disciplined efforts to record oral testimony on archived tapes. As technology has advanced, it has widened the scope and possibilities of oral history projects. From wax cylinder to reel-to-reel to audio cassette to digital formats, oral historians have been increasingly liberated from the constraints of place and equipment. They are able to take on projects that document the experiences of events in their “immediate aftermath,” such as Steven M. Sloan's Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project (Sloan 182). The tools required for a successful oral history endeavor have become so compact that I was able to carry everything I needed for my project in a

backpack. In fact, within the same month of this document's writing, there has been the release of an iPhone application⁷ that enables full-feature audio editing, such that a conversation on a bus ride can be recorded, edited, mixed down, and published all on one device; all without leaving one's seat.

Now that these tools and publishing platforms have become more widely accessible, some oral historians are becoming wary. We now live in an age where the amateur can compete with the professional. The result has been destabilizing for many. Just as journalists must sometimes distinguish themselves from bloggers, oral historians must draw lines between their historical mission and that of the growing fascination over online human interest stories. Oral history is fundamentally dependent on technology, and yet it is technology that now strikes at its carefully constructed foundation. The oral history community is justified in struggling to define its role in the consumption of oral testimony, and my website is a conversation starter for how oral history might not only use, but even capitalize on the developing technology.

Oral history is rich with irony—much of it a result of technology. From a broad standpoint, oral history endeavors to make permanent an inherently impermanent form of communication. Spoken language is often valued for the immediate and ephemeral interactions that occur between speaker and listener. It is distinct from, and often in opposition to written language. When oral history records these communications, it creates a stable record of a rather spontaneous human exchange, often compromising the richness of it.

This irony of oral history was especially evident in the intrusion of technology into the camp setting. Aside from the difficulty of recording the spontaneous stories of

⁷ www.monleapp.com

camp, I found the presence of electronic equipment in the camp setting to be problematic. Camp is a place frequently treasured as a sanctuary from the constant specter of digital devices that typifies most of our daily lives. At camp, the use of technology is explicitly minimized. The sleeping structures are without electricity, cell phones are unable to receive signals, and all forms of electronic entertainment are prohibited on the camper packing list. To my knowledge, none of the sounds of camp had heretofore been recorded. My experiences over the summer helped me understand why. Carrying around recording equipment demands a level of removal from the immediate situation, requiring one to consider its value for the permanent record. Furthermore, in a technophobic community such as Catoclin, any digital recording device will draw skeptical glances and can serve as an abrupt reminder of the continuous documentation of our modern lives. I am well aware of the irony in using technology to record the ephemeral moments that are typically allowed to happen because of its absence, but the benefits of preserving the stories and sounds outweigh the rather awkward moments of the process. In this case, the ends justify the means.

Thus the presence of paradoxes is not reason to discredit the pursuit of oral history. However, bringing them to the fore is useful, not so much to highlight the theoretical problems, but to illuminate their bearing on their real-world application. Recorded interviews are sometimes uncomfortable, artificial interactions. The desire to record can bring unwanted technology into the natural world and other incompatible situations. Finally, the use of technology can result in infinite levels of mediation between representation and reality.

Technology brings about many ironies in our lives, but so much, including oral history itself, is made possible through its development. It has allowed for this entire project. It has allowed me to present the interviews in such a way that my presence is eliminated. All marks of the process have been removed. It has allowed for these manipulations, rendering special prescience to the notion, “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.”

My desire to learn the skills that would enable me to create online content indicates an acceptance of the ascendancy of technology for communication in our current digital environment. And the fact that I was able to produce a finished piece even remotely close to my original vision is owing to the technological advancements in both digital devices and software programs that enable the execution of sophisticated programming and editing without professional training. The digital storytelling community has recognized the vast potential of online and multimedia narratives, and the oral history community has much to gain from their examples. My website presents a method for bringing oral history outside of the limits of print and into the unlimited possibilities of the internet.

Speaking of which—this has been enough chirography. Let’s go back to the website.

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