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Author(s): Linda Shopes

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# Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities

Linda Shopes

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## Definitions and Delimitations

“Community oral history” is a protean term, invoked by scholars and grass-roots historians alike to describe a variety of practices developed for a variety of purposes. The term “community” itself is vague and conceptually limited, with generally positive associations and not entirely deliberate implications of commonality and comity. A community oral history project typically refers to one defined by locale, to a group of interviews with people who live in some geographically bounded place, whether an urban ethnic neighborhood, a southern mill village, or a region of midwestern farms. Yet “community” also refers to a shared social identity, and so we speak of interviews with members of the gay community, the black community, the medical community. In fact, many community oral history projects combine the two meanings of the term, focusing on a particular group’s experience in a particular place—steelworkers in Buffalo, Chicanos in El Paso, jazz musicians in Los Angeles.

Distinctions exist among broad genres of oral history. One axis of difference is defined by the provenance of interviews: At one end, there are interviewing projects developed by grass-roots groups to document their own experience; at the other, interviews conducted by scholars to inform their own research or to create a permanent archival collection for future scholarly work. In practice, most oral history projects fall somewhere between the two poles: historical society volunteers develop a project to document some aspect of local life in collaboration with the local college; a scholar, working on his own research project, makes contact with the retirees’ group of a union local as a means of entrée for interviews he wishes to conduct about the union’s history and along the way agrees to participate in a union educational program.

The second axis is defined by voice, that is, the extent to which the narrator’s voice or the historian/interpreter’s voice dominates the final product of the interviews. At one end are archival collections of interviews that are almost entirely in the narrators’

Linda Shopes works as a historian at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. She is a past president of the Oral History Association.

Readers may contact Shopes at <lshopes@state.pa.us>.

voices; at the other are scholarly monographs in which the historian incorporates interviews along with other sources into his interpretation of the past. In fact, most oral history projects fall somewhere along this spectrum of possibilities.<sup>1</sup> Thus a filmmaker can produce a film about a community's experience using testimony from participants, contemporary accounts, and scholarly "talking heads" in various proportions; an author can organize evidence from interviews in multiple ways to construct a historical argument; a museum exhibition about a neighborhood can use short quotations from interviews as label text or play extended excerpts from the actual audio- or videotapes.

The multiple ways voice gets rendered in community oral history projects open up a range of interpretive questions. The intersection of voice and provenance further complicates matters—my point here is simply to map the terrain over which this essay roams. In the following discussion, I will address both practical and interpretive issues involved in using oral history to study communities, considering first the use of extant interviews and second the conduct of one's own interviews.

### Using Extant Interview Collections

No comprehensive survey of extant oral history collections exists—the enormous number of collections, their diverse points of origin, and the rapidity with which new projects develop render this a futile exercise. While more specialized finding aids exist, the best tool for identifying interview collections relevant to a particular community study is the World Wide Web. A broadly defined search can easily turn up thousands of references: a quick review of those will generally identify the largest, most important collections; a more systematic review can often turn up more localized or idiosyncratic groups of interviews.<sup>2</sup>

What a Web search will *not* identify are interviews done by a scholar for his own research and retained in his possession or interviews done by local groups that may not have the resources or the know-how to develop even modest electronic finding aids—or even the awareness that the interviews may interest anyone outside their own communities. The former can sometimes be identified in the footnotes and bibliographies of published work on the topic at hand. The latter are more difficult to locate, but as essentially virgin sources of local knowledge, they may be well worth the effort to do so. One may find such collections through personal contact: local librarians, archivists at local historical societies, oral history specialists at state and regional historical organizations, and project directors of major topical collections frequently know of oral history collections that, having never been properly archived or cataloged, have never been used by scholars. Another means of locating collections is a query to H-Oralhist, the H-Net-affiliated listserv maintained by the Oral History

<sup>1</sup> On ways oral history has been presented in written form, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, 1997), 3–23.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to distinguish between online finding aids for oral history collections and online transcripts of interviews. Many oral history collections are listed and described online, but the number of complete interview transcripts online remains small.

Association; its more than thirteen hundred subscribers constitute a collective storehouse of useful leads and contacts. H-Oralhist's Web site is also a useful gateway to numerous collections.<sup>3</sup>

Having identified a cache of community interviews, how might the historian approach them, with what sorts of questions in mind? What might one expect to find? What strengths and weaknesses are typical of such interviews? To understand what is said and not said in interviews, it is important to understand their provenance: Who conducted them, when, for what purpose, under what circumstances? What broad assumptions and specific questions informed the inquiry? Answers to those questions may lie in a project's administrative records, including the schedule of questions developed for the interviews, biographical data amassed for both interviewers and interviewees, and the interviewers' research and interview notes. They can also be teased out of descriptive, promotional, and published materials issuing from the project. Placing extant interviews in the intellectual and social context of their generation allows the researcher to read them more astutely, to understand how the context unavoidably shaped the inquiry.

For example, some twenty years ago I was involved in a community documentation project in Baltimore, Maryland, that attempted to assert the viability of blue-collar urban neighborhoods against a host of contemporary threats. The goal was worthy, but in our eagerness to identify the social networks and institutional ties that held the communities we were documenting together, we interviewed few former residents, and when we did, we shied away from questions about why they moved away, about what they found unsatisfactory about the neighborhood. Nor did we interview those whose actions directly or indirectly threatened neighborhoods' viability: business people and employers who had relocated, directors of lending institutions, developers. Not surprisingly, our inquiry proved our point; it was also intellectually impoverished by our failures of historical imagination.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, locally generated oral history interviews frequently rest on naïve assumptions about what properly constitutes history and how to approach it. Interviews are typically structured around the life histories of individual narrators, rather than around critical questions about broad themes of social life that cut across individuals' experience. Questions probe the details of everyday life and the peculiarities of place; answers are replete with stories about ritual events and local characters and endless information about "what was where when." In such projects there is often little understanding of how the details might add up, little obvious coherence within a group of interviews, little understanding, in the end, of history as anything more

<sup>3</sup> It is important to remind colleagues of their professional obligation "to deposit their interviews in an archival repository that is capable of both preserving the interviews and making them available for general research." See "Statement on Interviewing for Historical Documentation," *American Historical Association* <[http://www.theaha.org/pubs/standard.htm#Statement on Interviewing](http://www.theaha.org/pubs/standard.htm#Statement%20on%20Interviewing)> (June 10, 2002). To post a query or view the listing of oral history collections and projects, go to H-Oralhist <<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>> (June 10, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Linda Shopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, 1986), 249–63.



Raymond and Eunice English stand next to the remains of their home near Wallace, North Carolina, destroyed by floods in the wake of Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The Englishes were interviewed by Charlie Thompson of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for its community history project, *Voices after the Deluge: Oral History Investigations of the Great North Carolina Flood*. *Photograph by Rob Amberg. Courtesy Rob Amberg and the Southern Oral History Program.*

than an accumulation of facts. A celebratory impulse also inflects many community interviews, both those that fall within what might be termed the “genteel tradition,” which views the past as a benign refuge from the unsettling present, and those akin to interviews conducted for the Baltimore project, motivated by the activist, history-from-the-bottom-up impulse of 1970s social history. The causes of this are manifold and reflect the deeply social nature of oral historical inquiry: a community insider, interviewing a peer, does not want to risk disturbing an ongoing, comfortable social relationship by asking difficult or challenging questions; a community-based history project is part of an initiative to encourage economic development, and interviews become a means of putting the community’s best face forward; a project seeking to affirm a group that has been socially marginalized decides that it would be disrespectful to air problematic or unsavory aspects of the community’s history that reinforce stereotypes. Even when interviews probe difficult aspects of personal or social history, the impulse is to celebrate the interviewee’s ability to prevail over or survive difficult circumstances, not an especially surprising tendency, given how deeply this trope is embedded in our national culture.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the limits of local oral history, see Linda Shopes, “Oral History,” in *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth*, ed. Randall M. Miller and William Pencak (University Park and Harrisburg, 2002), 549–70.

Interviews conducted for scholarly projects, though less likely to succumb to the celebratory and ahistorical tendencies of community-driven projects, are not without their limitations. Typically, interviews with a scholarly provenance are narrowly focused inquiries, shaped by the investigator's very specific research questions. Unrelated areas of inquiry about which the narrator could nonetheless speak in an informed way are not pursued; hints of a more interesting story underneath the story are ignored.<sup>6</sup> More subtly, scholarly interviewers, interested in details and anecdotes that support or illustrate their understanding of the subject at hand, at times fail to perceive that their own frames of reference may be incongruent with the narrators' and so ignore lines of inquiry that could get at the insider's view. Thus interviews conducted by scholars for their own work are frequently of limited value to other researchers with other research agendas. Nonetheless, prior knowledge of the intellectual agenda driving the interviews can help subsequent users assess their strengths and weaknesses.

Given the limits of both community-based oral history collections and interviews conducted by scholars for their own work, the most useful extant interviews for historians researching a community are likely to be those conducted under the auspices of ongoing oral history research programs as archival projects for the use of future researchers or by professionally run historical organizations as documentation projects. While it is important to assess such interviews in light of their provenance, their strengths are often considerable: typically they are framed around questions drawn from contemporary historiography and include multiple narrators, variously positioned within the community; they tend to range widely over individual narrators' life experiences so as to be of value to users with varying interests; they are generally the work of skilled interviewers who are knowledgeable about the subject at hand and unconstrained by the rules of polite conversation from asking hard questions about it.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the provenance of the interviews one has identified and whatever their limits, the next step for the historian who wants to draw upon the evidence of oral history is to immerse herself or himself in the interviews themselves. It is a mistake to rely solely on visually skimming or electronically searching transcripts for a sense of what interviews contain or for specific information and useful quotes. Regrettably, transcripts are all too often inaccurate: some omit sections of an interview, others add material that is not there, yet others include significant errors. Moreover, information conveyed orally by tone, pacing, and inflection is lost when spoken words are translated into writing. So although researchers will understandably continue to rely heavily on transcriptions, it is important periodically to listen to the original tapes. A

<sup>6</sup> On the limits of interviews conducted for individual research projects, see Ronald J. Grele, "Why Call It Oral History? Some Ruminations from the Field," *Pennsylvania History*, 60 (Oct. 1993), 506–9.

<sup>7</sup> Major repositories of community oral history collections include the Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, Tex.; Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; Center for the Study of History and Memory, Indiana University, Bloomington; T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Chicago Historical Society; Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, University of Maine, Orono; Oral History Program, University of Alaska, Fairbanks; and South Dakota Oral History Center/Institute of American Indian Studies, University of South Dakota, Vermillion.

body of community interviews yields its riches only to a researcher with the patience for extensive, careful engagement with both transcripts and tapes. Because narrators generally speak about typicalities and common lifeways, the insights gleaned from interviews are cumulative, obvious only after one has absorbed hours of talk. They also often lie below the surface of the words, and it takes time to get at them. Any given interview can offer specific details and colorful anecdotes for a community study; a body of interviews, thoughtfully considered, can open up an understanding of the local culture, those underlying beliefs and habits of mind, those artifacts of memory that propel individual lives, give coherence to individual stories, and perhaps extend outward to a larger significance.

Let me give a couple of examples, based on my review of dozens of interviews conducted as local history projects throughout Pennsylvania, some generated by grassroots groups, others with more scholarly origins. Working my way through a stack of tapes and transcripts, I began to realize how consistently narrators formulated their stories of the past in relation to specific places. Memories, it seemed, were rooted in places; interviews were replete with references to streams, hills, homes, streets, stores, churches, theaters, farms. In some interviews, local history was defined almost entirely by specific places, quite independently of interviewers' questions. One narrator, for example, when asked at the end of the interview to identify "three of your most memorable experiences in Hershey" (the community under discussion), responded by linking memories to specific places: marrying her husband at the First United Methodist Church, attending the ground breaking for the Hershey Medical Center, and attending events at the Hershey Theater. Recollections of specific places often led to a chain of human associations, again suggesting narrators' need to locate memories someplace. "When we moved back home up the hill from the Bard farm, I was eight years old," one narrator began. He continued:

My mother raised turkeys. We used to carry them all the way from that hill, down across the old covered bridge to East Middletown and she sold them for eight cents a pound. . . . We'd cut back by Sam Seiders's farm and then we'd cut across old Ev Booser's farm in back of where Detweilers lived to the dam. . . . The Sam Demy farm later became Sam Seiders's farm and is now Simon Grubb's, Seiders's grandson's farm. Mrs. Seiders had a retarded brother. When [Sam] Hess [her father] sold to old man Bard, there was a \$2000 dowry set aside for this boy and the interest used for his keep. Sam Hess, before he died, had the stone house where Matt Seiders lived built for this boy. This was his home and the old mother's after the father died. When the mother died and he got worse, the relatives took turns with him and Matt bought his house.

Here information about a woman's contribution to the family economy, the transmission of property, and the care of the disabled in a turn-of-the-century community is embedded in a chain of associations about a specific piece of property.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For the Hershey story, see Betty H. Baum interview by Monica Spiese, May 1, 1991, transcript, pp. 26–28, Hershey Community Archives Oral History Program (Hershey Community Archives, Hershey, Pa.). For the Seiders's farm story, see Clayton Heisey interview by Mrs. Herbert Schaeffer, Feb. 1, 1972, transcript, p. 6, Middletown Oral History Project (Middletown Public Library, Middletown, Pa.). There is a growing number of studies on the relationship between place consciousness and local identity. See Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A*

While the profound attachment to place revealed in these interviews is hardly unique to Pennsylvania, it is suggestive of broader themes in regional culture—the deep strand of conservatism, tending in some toward parochialism; the localism evidenced by the division of the state into more than five thousand separate jurisdictions; the difficulties bedeviling efforts at regional planning. Although the place consciousness of these interviews may simply be the artifact of their creation as local history projects—local history is de facto about some place—I submit that the nearly automatic equation of local history with locale suggests how deeply place matters in individual consciousness and that a shared sense of identity, a sense of community, often includes a shared set of spatial referents. More to my point here, only by working through many interviews did I come to this insight.

The same exercise alerted me to yet another dimension of local culture, one that gives hints of how memories of the past give meaning in the present. Not surprisingly, given the dominance of industry in Pennsylvania's economy in the past two centuries, many oral history projects in the state, though ostensibly about specific places—Homestead, Nanticoke, Pittsburgh—really are collections of life-history interviews with (predominantly white and male) industrial laborers in those communities. If there is a single theme running through the interviews, it is the importance of “hard work” in the shaping of a person's life and identity. “Our people . . . they're the ones who built the steel mills to what they are today!” the union activist Adam Janowski stated proudly and emphatically in a 1976 interview with the historian James Barrett for the Homestead Album Oral History Project. “They took everything in stride, I'll tell you,” he continued. “I seen them myself. I was a young man and I seen how hard those fellows used to work.” This observation is repeated in one way or another in interview after interview, and narrators' consciousness of “our people,” in Janowski's words, as hardworking undoubtedly reflects the material conditions of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Most of these interviews are utterly silent on issues of race, itself evidence of the way community has been conceived and talked about. Here Janowski is unusual, for he revealed an explicitly racial dimension to his understanding of “our people,” whom he defined this way:

After the [1919 steel] strike they wanted to lay [black strikebreakers] all off. At least they laid off ninety percent because the men was experienced in their jobs and the foremen could call the white man a goddamn hunky and tell him to get that goddamn thing moving! But they couldn't say that to a black man. He would pick up a bar and hit him over the head, you know? Our people took that all the time. They're the ones who built the steel mills.

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*Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley, 2002); David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst, 2001); and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

<sup>9</sup>Adam Janowski interview by James Barrett, June 14, 1976, transcript, p. 12, Homestead Album Oral History Project (Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.).



Perhaps still bitter about black strikebreakers more than a half century later, undoubtedly mindful of the way “his people” indeed “took that all the time,” perhaps reading the black militance of the 1970s back a half century, Janowski suggested how white workers’ sense of themselves as “hardworking” is deeply racialized.<sup>10</sup>

Almost twenty years later, Theresa Pavlocak, an elderly resident of the anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania, implied a similar connection between hard work and racial identity in an interview for the historian Thomas Dublin’s study of deindustrialization in the region. She remembered the Great Depression this way: “If you didn’t have job in the colliery, the men had no work. So they had WPA. They worked on the roads. You didn’t get welfare. We never got the welfare. We did it the hard way.” Further into the interview, she reflected on her generation’s lifetime of labor: “People were proud; they didn’t want no welfare. Not like now; people look for it. In those days, people were proud; they didn’t want it.” And toward the conclusion she commented on the success of her own and her friends’ children and contrasted it with the situation of some newcomers, often a euphemistic way of referring to recent black and Latino migrants to the region:

It seems like [our] children are all [moved] away from here and it’s just a new generation coming in here—different people. We have quite a bit of welfare. There’s a lot of new people moving in on welfare—in order to help them, for them to pay the rent. They get their rent and a few dollars, whatever they get. If they’re happy on welfare, I guess they stay there. Most of them don’t want to, though. No. Like all my friends’ children, they’re all educated or they’re away, they all have good jobs. My son, he has a good job.<sup>11</sup>

Like Janowski, Pavlocak reveals an identity grounded in a generation of people who indeed worked hard and in a sense of difference from newcomers, who are sometimes not white and who presumably do not work as hard as they themselves did. For her, as Dublin has observed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects of the 1930s, as well as the Social Security and black lung compensation benefits (for coal miners disabled by years of inhaling coal dust) that have more recently sustained many older people in the region, are not forms of “welfare”; nor is the difficulty of obtaining work in an era of deindustrialization understood as an explanation for newcomers’ apparent lack of ambition.<sup>12</sup> If we take Janowski’s and Pavlocak’s ways of viewing the past as fairly typical of their race, generation, and class, their interviews suggest how identity and memory are implicated in contemporary racial politics. Perhaps to overstate my point: Such insights, however modest, do not come from quickly scanning interview transcripts. Only slowly do underlying strands of a community’s culture reveal themselves, as interview after interview sounds the same themes; only occasionally does an interview provide a flash of insight that enables us to read the culture outward and make connections with broader historical concerns.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca, 1998), 208, 214, 216–17.

<sup>12</sup> For Dublin’s commentary on the Pavlocak interview, see *ibid.*, 30–31.

## Conducting One's Own Interviews

Perhaps, however, a search has turned up no interviews on the community under study or extant interviews do not adequately address the questions driving the inquiry. Perhaps the notion of engaging with people who have lived the history one is researching is intriguing; perhaps the broad theoretical questions about historical memory, narrative construction, and popular notions of history that underlie oral historical inquiry seem relevant to one's work. Perhaps too getting students involved in an oral history project seems to be a creative way of linking scholarship to teaching. For any of those reasons, a historian may want to undertake a community oral history project. My comments here are necessarily briefer than those in previous sections. There are numerous credible how-to guides to oral history, and anyone beginning an interviewing project should consult them.<sup>13</sup> Here, I wish to address two points: ways of structuring community interviews to avoid common problems and oral history as an occasion for public history.

Having noted the problematics of community as an organizing principle for an oral history project and the limitations of many interviews that adopt it as a frame of reference, I offer the following suggestions for avoiding pitfalls. First, conceptualize a community history project around a historical problem or issue rather than a series of life-history interviews. A community is formed around the intersections of individual lives: What are the points of connection, tension, or alienation? What historical problem defines the community, and how can this problem be explored through questions to individual narrators? I find the latter question especially challenging, for how does one address an abstract concept or issue through the medium of lived experience? Suppose, for example, the problem is suburbanization, the development of a distinctly suburban community on top of what had previously been farmland and woods. What questions can the interviewer ask that connect an individual's experiences to the broad theme of suburbanization in ways the narrator can understand and address meaningfully? How is an individual's experience part of something bigger, and what sorts of questions make that connection, if not for the interviewee, then for the researcher?

Second, define the universe of narrators broadly. Historians are generally sensitive to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, and one would expect a group of interviewees to reflect this sensitivity. But who else may have a meaningful connection to the problem at hand? We tend to interview insiders and people with a long-term relationship with a community. But what about outsiders and newcomers? What about people external to the community whose actions impinge on it? Ask: Whom am I missing? Using the example of suburbanization, it might be appropriate to interview different cohorts of residents, that is, people who moved in at different times; those who moved away from the area as well as those who lived there before it became a

<sup>13</sup> Two of the best guides are Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York, 1994); and Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, 1994). See also Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, *Using Oral History in Community History Projects* (Los Angeles, 1992); and Rose T. Diaz and Andrew B. Russell, "Oral Historians: Community Oral History and the Cooperative Ideal," in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, 1999), 203–16.

suburb; those whose decisions led to the development of the suburb, including local officials, developers, and bankers. Including a range of narrators simultaneously deepens the inquiry and extends it outward, helping us understand both the internal complexity of the community under study and its relationship to a broader historical process.

Third, approach interviews in a spirit of critical inquiry. In part this means asking the hard questions that may cause discomfort, that address difficult or controversial topics, that may reveal ruptures in the community. More generally, it means defining an interview as a mutual exploration of the problem at hand, an opportunity for an informed interviewer to talk in depth with a knowledgeable participant about a subject of mutual interest. In an investigation of suburbanization, it may mean asking questions about money, mortgages, and taxes; expectations and values; achievements and disappointments; racial segregation or exclusion; gender dynamics; social divisions within the community. The conversation may not be easy, but the result may well be to foster a more nuanced and humane understanding of the way individuals live in history—which is what oral history does best.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, an oral history–based community study can quite logically become an occasion for public history, understood broadly as doing serious history for and with nonspecialists outside an academic setting. Insofar as an oral history interview requires formal engagement with a person who typically lies outside the scholarly world about matters that are nonetheless historical, oral history is de facto a kind of public history. And insofar as an oral history research project involves more than one narrator, there are built-in opportunities to expand the conversation outward, into a public discussion about history. This can take the form of a modest public program or history workshop, in which several narrators talk with scholar-interviewers about broad interpretive questions, or more extensive projects such as museum exhibitions, radio and film documentaries, and community publications in which those interpretations are presented to others. Two strong caveats, however. First, oral history is long-haul work. Making contact with community representatives, gaining entrée, cultivating trust, and then doing, analyzing, and presenting a body of interviews cannot be accomplished in one or even two semesters. It requires a commitment of years. Second, working with a community group to develop a public history project or program is complicated and at times contentious. Although oral history provides outstanding opportunities to democratize the practice of history—to “share authority,” in Michael Frisch’s resonant phrase—as interviewer and interviewee, scholar and community work together to understand the past, in practice the process requires negotiation, give-and-take, and considerable goodwill.<sup>15</sup> Scholars do not get to exercise critical judgment quite so forcefully or conform to current historiographic thinking quite so deftly; laypeople do not get to romanticize the past quite so easily. Scholars can learn that local people often have thoughtful if haltingly articulated

<sup>14</sup> For a thoughtful essay on the difficulties of doing local history, see Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York, 1993), 79–88.

<sup>15</sup> See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1990).

understandings of how change happens; laypeople can learn how what is local has links to national and international developments. While there are fine examples of the process working well, at times negotiated history can be unsatisfactory to all parties—too critical and de-localized for community members, too uncritical and narrow for scholars. The tension points to a deeper issue: the essential disjunction between professional history and history as it is popularly understood. While it may at times be necessary to decline participation in a community project on principled grounds, it is precisely the opportunity such projects provide for opening up dialogue with the public about the nature of historical inquiry that, to my way of thinking, makes them eminently worth doing.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On the development of community history in dialogue with communities, see Barbara Franco, "Doing History in Public: Balancing Historical Fact with Public Meaning," *Perspectives*, 33 (May 1995), 5–8; and John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, 1992), 285–326.