Marsden: A Case Study in Oral History Handout

I

Interviewing: Some Thoughts

I made a presentation last year in which I talked about some aspects of collecting oral history as the means to flesh out genealogical findings. Included with that presentation was a handout which suggested interview questions that the researcher would like to ask. I said at the time that if you could get answers to most of those questions you would be set to write a good biography of your research subject. The questions themselves were general in nature and the sort usually found in any book or article concerning interviewing, such as names, dates of birth, educational attainments, marriages, employments, anecdotes, nicknames, entertainments, etc.

But so much more can be done.

It may be recalled that I talked about seeing a fireball (meteor) when I was a boy so large that it was seen in five states and Ontario and how I remembered so many details from that day, as opposed to any other day in 1966. Seeing it elicited in me the emotions of wonder and fear, because I thought it was an airplane which exploded and was crashing near me. These emotions are a large part of why I remember the fireball.

Our remembrance of the items in the first paragraph above, such as employments, marriages, birthdates, are often only remembered because of the social necessity of knowing them. So for instance, when my niece was born in 1973 I wasn't present, wasn't emotionally or personally connected to the event; I look it up every year to send her a birthday card. I have a list of birth dates for many of my relatives but I haven't memorized them, and I would have to formally memorize them.

But the birth of my own son at 4:01 AM on December 28, 1998 at St. Joe's Hospital is something I didn't have to make an effort to memorize, because it involved me emotionally and personally. It was the culmination of a project, a hope, a dream and would be a life-changing experience.

As for the fireball I was very interested in science when I was a boy and I lived a good part of my childhood in rural Wisconsin where I could see the entire Milky Way at night. Seeing a meteor was commonplace and looked just like the pictures in my schoolbooks. The fireball I saw in 1966 lit up the entirety of Edgewater Amusement Park where I was, and all the people saw it, and it made a loud noise, and as the speed of light is greater than the speed of sound it didn't make a sound at first. I had never heard of a meteor making a sound. I believed it was a crashing airplane; as I said above, I felt a combination of wonder and fear, and that is why I remember the events of that night.

So, to go beyond the standard interview questions we must find the *emotional triggers* of the innumerable memories we actually carry around with us.

II

Emotional Triggers and Standard Stories

When we first come into the world our brains are very alert and absorbent as we seek to make sense of it. We mentally record the objects and experiences we have, looking for patterns that will explain the world to us. We also come to associate emotions with objects and experiences, and when we do this our ability to remember an occurrence is heightened. Compare:

Sitting at the dinner table	**Proposing marriage at the dinner table**
Eating	**Eating my wife's incredible amaretto-chocolate cheesecake**
Saying goodbye	**Saying goodbye to your father at his funeral**
Falling down	**Falling down and breaking your knee**
Reading a newspaper	**Reading a newspaper on December 8, 1941 (day after Pearl Harbor)**

In the first column we have everyday actions. In the second column we have the same actions but of special significance – the difference being a change of *emotional state* consequent to the actions. We remember actions in the second column and forget actions in the first column. The exception to this is long time repetitive action – "Father always came home from work at 5:30 PM", or similar.

As we grew up, most of us lived in stable environments with other people involved in our lives. We had many shared experiences and shared memories with these people. When we are having a conversation with such people, there are always subjects that needn't be explained, because everyone in the conversation knows about them. There were always things that were understood because they were shared.

The day comes though when we go out into the world and find our own lives, leaving behind in some capacity those with whom we started. As the years go by people die, move away, and end relationships, but we create new relationships with people who have no experience with our life before.

So, if you have known me for two years in the workplace and I happen to say that my cousin Mimi got married, a person I've never talked about with you, that simply registers as a fact, as you have no reference to her. But my friend in my hometown knows that Mimi has been married four times before, and so has a very different reaction, as in rolling his eyes.

To explain these earlier experiences to the people we know now, we typically pull out five or six stories that we always go to when explaining a certain person or situation. The more we go to these stories the more they are reinforced and they become the only ones we think about. Some of these become quite polished.

So, when you record your first interview, these are the stories you will typically hear. Of course, there is much more known by the interviewee, but this is not immediately apparent, either to the interviewee or to you. Many people, if they interview at all, are satisfied with these initial results, *but not you*. You'll look for emotional triggers.

III

Asking Questions in the Interview and Looking for Triggers

The first thing you must do is select a person to interview – the *interviewee*. This should be someone who seems open to talking, is positioned to know something, is able to be discreet, demonstrates good observational skills for the social and environmental aspects of the world, is reasonably intelligent and knowledgeable, likely truthful or at least open, willing, and lastly, finds interviewing enjoyable.

You would like to interview people one on one, usually in the comfort of their own home, where they feel secure, and to record the interview with a smart phone or similar device. Recording frees you up from having to write notes, the context of which you may not remember later. Often a testimony makes for a very interesting story, the transcription of which will make your family history sing.

In this past year I have written articles for *Family History Capers* on "triggers" of memory. There are many of these and they are not always obvious.

I wrote an article about radio programs in their heyday of the 1920s – 1940s. We have forgotten what a cutting-edge technology radio was then and how many households had the radio on all day long. Just as with television in the 1950s onward, who listened to what tells you something of the tastes of the individuals in and the organization of the household.

I also wrote about the floor plans of houses and buildings we inhabited over time and how we can all remember approximately the rooms. Each room was the backdrop for some events that you will remember. You remember the floor plan as a consequence of repetition, also because of emotional events that occurred in a particular room. My mother had a playroom in her home as a child, but that is where her father's bed was set up when he was ill, because it was close to the kitchen and bathroom. He died in that room. The dominant memory my mother had of that room was not play; it was her father's death. The moment you mentioned playroom that is the memory that shows up.

Finding the subjects that will trigger memory is what oral interviewing is all about.
I will take this up again in a few minutes.

IV

The First Interviews

The most important goal of the first interview is to *sell yourself to the interviewee*. You want them to enjoy the process, to feel comfortable talking to you. You wish to establish a relationship that will allow for multiple sessions. What do we hope to do with multiple sessions?

It is very typical that when you sit down for the second and subsequent interviews that the interviewee will say, "You know, after you left last time I got to thinking, and then I remembered (that incident, that name, that song, what my dad said about Herbert Hoover)", and that is often where you will begin, because when the interviewee remembered what their father said about Herbert Hoover, that is the gateway to their father's employment, living conditions, aspirations, failures, always the Great Depression which always will lead to Franklin D. Roosevelt, etc. It is important to let the interviewee roam where they will because for many stories *there is a unique pathway that no other interview session will uncover.*

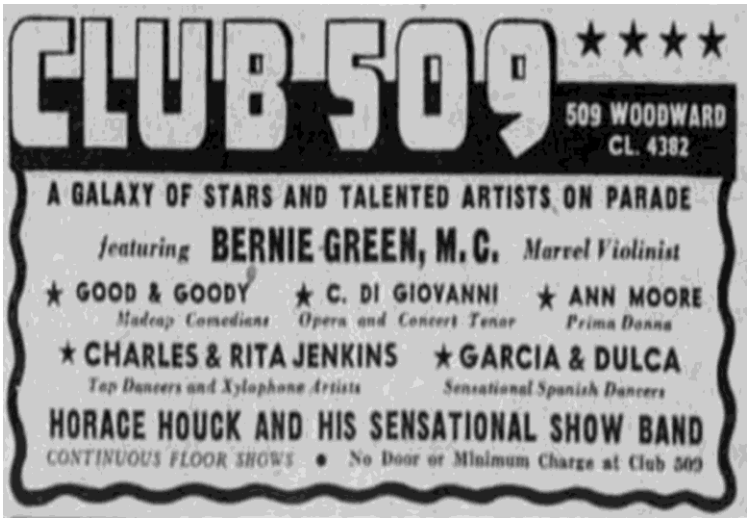
You will also notice there are forks in the road, such as "When I was in high school I asked George to the Sadie Hawkins Dance." Let the interviewee decide if they want to talk next about high school, George, or the Sadie Hawkins Dance. When you are transcribing your interview later you will note the fork and you can go back to the topic undiscussed next time. If you interrupt the interviewee's flow, you may never be able to get back to the unique pathway.

Very gently prod along the interviewee when necessary to get them out of a rut but stay away from "leading questions". A leading question introduces an element which will likely color the response, such as "School dances were so much fun. I bet you enjoyed the Sadie Hawkins Dance didn't you?" or "It must have been love at first sight with George, right?" The interviewee is now under some pressure to say she enjoyed the dance to please the interviewer, or that she asked George to the dance because she fancied him, when really she asked him to the dance because she didn't want to appear to the other girls as someone who couldn't get a date to the dance. *Clarifications* "Is this the same George that you married?" and *Summations* "So you and George went to the Sadie Hawkins Dance." are *value-neutral prods*, as are the general question words of *who, what, when, where, why, how.*

Between interviews as you are listening to the interview recording playback, go back over the recording and note the forks you didn't follow. You can do this now because you already let the interviewee run as far with the other fork as possible, perhaps to new topics.

You will also want to research subjects between interviews that came up in the last one, to understand the subjects or to expand on them. You can do this by reading about the history of that time and/or googling events and terms. "Sadie Hawkins Dance", for instance, may not be familiar to you.

My parents, when they were dating in 1939 - 1941 liked to go to clubs with entertainment. A particular one my mother mentioned was "Club 509". I have an ad for the club which details what the upcoming entertainment would be in the week ahead, and you can google the acts and a surprising number of them can be found described on the Internet if you search long enough. As in the case of my *Family History Capers* article on Radio, entertainment that your research subject went out of the house to see gives you an understanding of their tastes and provides fodder for new interview subjects.



Club 509 Ad appearing in the Detroit Free Press October 20, 1941 p.17

When you're interviewing, I would suggest, at least if you believe you will get more interviewing opportunities in the future, that each session run 2 ½ hours – that is, two one-hour interviews with a half hour break in between. In the break socialize and make small talk and get refreshments, etc. but the break is also an ideal time to ask about heirlooms and mementos.

V

Heirlooms and Mementos

***Heirlooms and Mementos* are in the same class as *Radio Shows* and *Floorplans* –they are gateways to stories you might not be able to access from any other starting point. They are often on display in whatever room performs the "parlor" duty, which is likely where you will set up for the interview. In the living room of my house, which is our parlor, there are many heirlooms and mementos. Two of these are an owl incense burner and a metal statue of a dog that rest on the top of my bookcase.**

Owl Incense Burner **Whippet Dog Statue**

"Oh, what is that Owl pottery? That's so cute." You could say this to start a conversation about the Owl. Suppose we talked about the Owl-shaped Incense Burner. That burner was a souvenir brought back for me by my mother which she purchased in Tacoma, Washington in 1969. Some of the subjects connected to this object might be:

My first attempts at cooking.
My sister's husband and the draft.
The birth of my mother's first grandchild.
My mother's attitude towards children.
What my mother wanted to do with her life if she could have gone to college.
My mother, as a child, living in poverty.
Why kids my age thought incense was desirable.
The Beatles going to India to study Hinduism in 1966.
Visiting a Yoga student retreat outside Petoskey, Michigan in 1967
Petoskey as an artist colony in the early 20th century.
My aunt's girl-friend who practiced Yoga.
The purpose for which I used the incense burner.
Why the burner features an owl motif as do other objects in the living room.
My family's move from Livonia to Lapeer in 1968.
My transition to junior high in a new town.

I could honestly go on ad infinitum with subjects related to this incense burner. It is one of my prized possessions that has traveled with me all these years.

But it's a different story with the Whippet Dog. This faux bronze-finished "clock topper", manufactured by the Ansonia Clock Company, was always the first thing seen when walking through the front door of my Aunt Rosemary's house in Detroit. It sat on the ledge of a small window in the anteroom where the coat closet was. The window was made of patterned yellow glass and so the statue always had a glowing appearance. I had always admired it and inherited it in 2001. That's the main story.

The Whippet Dog, not being my property nor having been part of my life, doesn't have my personal stories and memories attached to it; it has few triggers and pathways for me.

If you continue to apply these principles to your interviews you find a great deal of information you could have found in no other way. A family history that remains unread in the back of a closet defeats your purpose. Write logically and accurately, add color and pizzazz, and flesh out as best you can your ancestors to generate interest and to do them justice.

Remember too, it's good practice to offer the interviewee the right to edit or delete their information if they decide at the end to want this, so you should share their part of the family history with them for this purpose before publication.

VI

Important Points

Select a credible and knowledgeable interviewee.

Record interviews one on one in private.

Do not share interview results with anyone.

Develop a relationship with the interviewee to earn multiple interview sessions.

Identify memory triggers concerning people, places and things as a path to memory.

Between sessions research people, places, and things to understand what they are and where you might find information for further questions.

If possible, between sessions, search for accounts in a similar place and time to suggest what you may wish to search for and as a substitute for testimony.

Identify paths not taken (forks) in the last interview for exploration in the next interview.

Transcribe select passages for inclusion in a family history.

Offer interviewee final edit of their testimony – you develop a reputation for trustworthiness by being trustworthy.