

THE TAPE RECORDER AS HISTORIAN

By JOEL LIEBER

THIRTY YEARS AGO, while conducting his research for a biography of Grover Cleveland, a young historian was struck by the fact that he was able to locate only a few people who could still supply an anecdote or two about Cleveland; most of Cleveland's associates were no longer around and the memories that they could have offered of the President were lost forever.

Purely from an academic viewpoint, the historian wondered, why couldn't men in public life, most of whom would never write their memoirs, simply talk to an informed interviewer for the sake of history? They could be encouraged to speak candidly by having the right to check their remarks for accuracy and determine whether the material could be made public during their lifetime or several years after their death.

The whole idea was kind of a historian's pipe dream—that is, until 1948, when the historian himself, Dr. Allan Nevins, established the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University. The tool that transformed Nevins's idea into reality was the tape recorder. Now, eighteen years later, without much fanfare, Columbia's Oral History office has interviewed 1,529 "significant people" over a period of 8,515 hours. In manuscript form, the research comprises 225,000 pages.

In this great reservoir of recollection is found information that exists nowhere else, and from it writers and historians have drawn anecdotes and details that form the bulwark of some forty or fifty books. The subject matter ranges over political conventions, peace treaties, big business deals, and the Black Sox scandal; disparate recollections cover Sigmund Freud and Henry James, as well as the occupation of Japan, the history of the Book of the Month Club, Alaska pioneering, early radio work, and the lore of the Flying Tigers.

The massive Columbia project and others that it has spawned are academic in approach, as contrasted to a plan which would benefit an individual questioner. Guiding the selection of subjects is the theory that the failure to record first-hand experiences results in a great waste of human knowledge and that the collection of reminiscence, through talk, can add a meaningful dimension to historical research. No matter that the late Supreme Court Justice

Robert H. Jackson, U.S. Prosecutor in the Nuremberg Trials, stipulated that his 1,600 pages of taped material couldn't be opened till 1980. Fourteen years from now, his recollections will undoubtedly shed revealing light on that period of history in which he was a controversial figure. Without the right to stipulate closure, Jackson's memories would have been permanently lost.

Less academic, however, is the attitude of popular historians and journalists toward the tape recorder. Writers of non-fiction have come to rely increasingly on the machine, since the verbal-interview method is fraught with problems: the interviewer can't keep up with the rate of speech, he misunderstands and misinterprets, loses nuances and subtleties while taking notes, and slows the interview by interrupting and backtracking, a defective technique that not only disturbs the spontaneity but causes the subject to become ill at ease as well.

Harrison Salisbury, assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, reports that as a matter of policy the paper often uses tape recorders in political campaigns "in order to get the text of informal or impromptu remarks." The tape recorder, he notes, is especially valuable in cases where there may be controversy over what a candidate has said, or where the newspaper wants to record in order to have its own text. The *Times* will also use the tape technique in Washington, particularly when a battery of reporters spends a couple of hours with a high government official. On the other hand, *The New Yorker*, known for its encyclopedic nonfiction quotes, notes—some-what surprisingly, perhaps—that so far as it knows, none of its writers use tape recorders in their interviews.

A. E. Hotchner, whatever the propriety of details in his book, *Papa Hemingway*, nonetheless drew much of his material from tape recordings and thus has reliability and candor on his side. The same technique was used by Jeremy Lerner for his book on drug addiction. Several of the writers of contemporary, popular history adhere to the tape meth-

odology (though they prefer not to make it public). Barbara Tuchman, however, whose specialty is a more remote period of modern history, "never uses" a tape recorder.

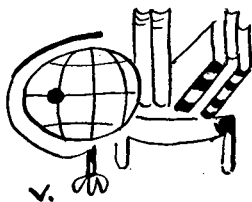
Thus, the tape recorder has served the communications of research in two principal ways: as an instrument promoting accuracy and candor in journalistic endeavors, and as a collector of sometimes *abstract* experience for posterity. Ultimately, subtleties of use make the latter category more interesting than the former.

In Jerusalem, at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry (a department of the Hebrew University), Oral History projects have created documentation in fields virtually devoid of written sources. One project involved a series of interviews on the status of Jews in the part of Poland under Russian rule from 1939-41. It was a subject about which so little was known that, without the taped interview project, a scholar approaching the topic thirty or forty years from now would have found a total blank.

NEARBY, the Yad Vashem Institute—which supplied most of the research material for the Eichmann trial—has been involved in similar projects, concentrating on subject-arranged testimonies relating to the Nazi period. Interviews with more than 100 Lithuanian partisans and survivors of the Kovno ghetto led to the publication of a book on the subject—which would have been impossible without the Yad Vashem project. Another Jerusalem effort was devoted to the wartime rescue of Jews from Western Europe via Spain and Portugal. This involved recording dozens of interviews with former members of the underground in France and other European countries; with Jews who escaped across the borders into Spain; and with representatives of Jewish organizations working in the Iberian peninsula.

According to one Israeli source, the reason for all the taped history activity in Jerusalem is largely because no people has undergone such fundamental changes in this century as the Jews, and it was felt that the Oral History technique was the most thorough and sensible way to document these changes.

Commenting on the Jerusalem project, Mrs. Elizabeth Mason, acting director of the Columbia Oral History office, noted: "We have a lot of inquiries for advice from young countries. Oral His-



tory seems a particularly good approach for a new nation."

It is, in fact, to Columbia that almost every library anywhere in the world has turned when considering setting up an Oral History office. Thus Columbia's office, recently expanded to the second floor of Butler Library, has been a kind of mother hen to more than 100 tape libraries that have emerged within the past decade. Among the most active, along with Columbia and the Jerusalem project, are Oxford and the University of California.

Dr. Louis M. Starr, who succeeded Nevins in the Columbia office in 1958, admits that there are many fine points of methodology in the technique. The selection of the interviewer is most important: it must be someone knowledgeable about the subject's specialty field but, on the other hand, one who must never appear over-informed—who can create trust and a relaxed atmosphere.

Equally important, according to Dr. Starr, is the approach made to a subject, the psychological barrier that may be created by the implication: "You've led your life, now tell us about it." Reports Dr. Starr: "Absurd as it may seem, a good many subjects reply 'Tomorrow,' as if to postpone what sounds like a Day of Reckoning."

(General MacArthur, Dr. Starr points out, was one of the few who flatly refused an oral history bid. The nearest thing to an explanation was that he was preparing his autobiography at the time.)

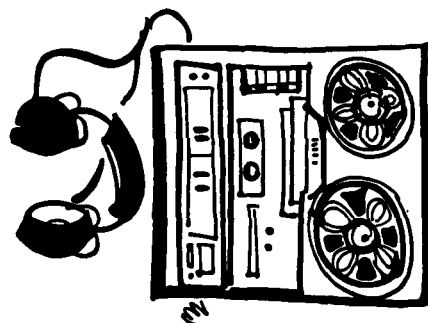
One of Columbia's rules of thumb is that, except for a few fragments, tapes are erased and reused—"much to the horror of psychologists with their interest in speech slips and inflection." Dr. Starr's reasoning is that this transferring from tape to typed page gives the memoirist a chance to edit and correct. He believes it is also better from the scholars' viewpoint, since they would rather have material in black and white and know that the memoirist has read over what he said. (One that can still be heard is a 1950 recording of Herbert Hoover relating his battles, as Secretary of Commerce, with Aimee Semple McPherson, who considered it a God-given right to broadcast her message over any wavelength she chose. Hoover's sense of humor, to those who have heard this tape, comes as a revealing surprise.)

An equally important concern is ensuring the subject's security: he can speak in detail with frankness both because he can review the transcript and because he can restrict the material's use—for five years, during his lifetime, or for a stipulated number of years after his death. These latter options were exercised, at the time of their interviews, by such Columbia subjects as Daniel Bell, Chester Bowles, Bruce Bliven, Senator J. William Fulbright, Henry Wal-

lace, Learned Hand, Felix Frankfurter, Nathan Straus, and Nelson Rockefeller. Memoirists who chose to leave their recollections "open" during their lifetimes include Maxwell Anderson, Roy Wilkins, Frank Lloyd Wright, Norman Thomas, and Upton Sinclair.

The range of material among the quarter-million typed pages in the Columbia file is nothing short of exciting. It may be Ben Shahn talking about his early life in Lithuania, Freeman Lewis discussing the founding and economics of paperback books, or Faubion Bowers recalling an episode when he was the translator who landed in Japan with the advance party that set up the surrender negotiations prior to the ceremony aboard the *Missouri*.

The Bowers tape amply illustrates one of the curious aspects of this taped history technique: how well it lends itself



to the recollection of the intriguing anecdote and conversation. Interpreter Bowers tells how the advance party landed at the wrong end of the airport, flustering the Japanese Imperial General Staff, and how the leader of his group hesitated to drink a glass of juice offered him by the Japanese. Some in the group were nervous, some terrified, and everyone awkward.

Bowers, when it was realized that he spoke Japanese, found himself surrounded by a group of Japanese reporters. Feeling sorry that things weren't going well, Bowers, for some reason, recalled that he had spent many prewar nights in the Kabuki theaters of Tokyo, and it occurred to him that he hadn't heard anything about Uzaemon, its great actor, since the start of the war. He nonchalantly turned to one of the reporters and asked, "Is Uzaemon still alive?"

His question became utterly historic and made every headline in Japan the next day, "because here the Japanese were expecting to be treated cruelly, to be overrun by barbarians." Asking whether "their greatest Kabuki actor was still alive . . . caused quite an uproar and made our entire stay absolutely one of the greatest pleasure and the greatest enjoyment."

To say that the Columbia project is purely academic would not be fair. Its mountain of information has provided the raw material for many notable books,

which, according to their authors, would have been impossible without the Oral History interviews: the Schlesinger *Age of Roosevelt* books, *Felix Frankfurter Reminisces*, Lansing Lamont's *Day of Trinity*, and John Gunther's book about Albert Lasker, *Taken at the Flood*.

Still, the Columbia effort is intended to serve history, not the immediate publication of books, and the work goes on continuously and unobtrusively. (The present big project involves a history of the origins of the Social Security system.) Equally unobtrusive are the office's efforts to advise universities and businesses (Ford, McGraw-Hill, and Time, Inc., who are compiling histories of their companies) about the technique.

From either the journalistic or academic viewpoint, oral history has its limitations. It is largely an extension of research rather than an innovation, but it *extends* in a practical, facile, and—most importantly—reliable manner. It can be an invaluable supplement to books and government records. And it can be of great value in teaching the responsible historian and journalist to be critical of written records, to the extent, as one tape-oriented historian said, "that written records may often be drawn up to conceal as much as to record what was said and decided."

Not the least reason for the "necessity" of oral history is the nature of present-day communications, Dr. Starr further points out. When one person has something important to say to another, he merely phones or takes a plane and visits him. Or he may send a "juiceless, modern business letter that begins, 'In confirmation of our telephone conversation . . .'"

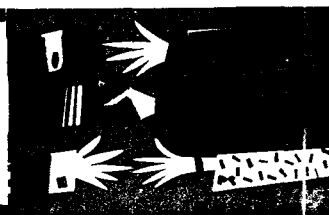
Had these conditions prevailed during, say, the Civil War, historians' resources certainly would be more limited. As it is, since there were no airplanes and telephones, a cornucopia of correspondence and intimate diaries is available. This change, according to Bruce Catton, is of no small significance, and indicates why Oral History may be only in its infancy.

"I suspect most people never give a thought to the importance of source materials," says Catton, "for after all, most people don't use them. The simplest way to put it is that civilization is built on them. The building keeps going on as knowledge expands, is stored, evaluated, refined, redefined, and passed along through myriad channels from generation to generation."

Or, as Dr. Starr put it: "Most people are too busy, too lazy, too modest, or simply incapable when it comes to writing a memoir—but how much easier to talk one!"

Joel Lieber, a free-lance writer, is author of *Israel on \$5 a Day*. His first novel, *How the Fishes Live*, will be published this fall.

Public Relations



Cowles Knows How

RARE IS THE NEWSPAPER publisher who has any real conception of the importance of good public relations. His idea of PR is usually colored by the publicity man who stands before his city editor with a press release in one hand and his hat in the other. And since the newspaper is one of the media essential to a publicity program the publisher tends to believe that because he controls a newspaper he has a sound public relations program. The newspaper has to be a good employer, an active participant in developing the community by work and leadership, a builder of good will by deeds, but this escapes him. He would no more participate in the hard, often dull job of working on committees to renew his city or improve its schools or attract new industries than he would stand on corners to sell cookies to aid the Girl Scouts.

Newspaper publishers are always

ready to mount or intensify a campaign to sell more papers or more advertising. They are not as anxious to develop better newspapermen, to pay them better, to initiate pension plans, to keep their own employees informed on the progress of the paper, to take leadership in improving the cultural lives of their readers by building symphony orchestras, or developing local theaters, or joining in efforts to build better colleges.

There are exceptions, of course. And a notable one is John Cowles, president of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company, which publishes the Minneapolis *Tribune* mornings and Sunday and the Minneapolis *Star* evenings. He is a first-rate example of what a publisher who has a sense of public obligation and public relations can do.

Today many publishers wring their hands and cry out at their meetings because college students are not flocking into newspapers. The shortage of editorial newcomers indeed is serious. The Minneapolis Star and Tribune, recognizing the trouble, has acted. Last year it announced a five-year, \$100,000 scholarship program for the nation's top journalism students. Under this plan, which went into effect this year, an award of \$400 goes to the student in each of the country's fifty accredited journalism schools who is rated the outstanding journalism student at the end of his junior year. There are no strings attached other than merit; journalism deans and directors pick the students.

Today many newspapers do not have employee retirement plans. The Cowles papers started a formal program back in 1949, improved it in 1959, and again in 1963. In addition, they keep their employees informed on the status of the newspapers, the business volume, the new projects, and keep steady internal communication through the monthly twelve-page paper, *Newsmakers*. Management believes that all the newspapers' employees have a right to know.

The Cowles newspapers do more than publish editorials and feature stories in support of the performing arts. Executives of the company were the driving force in founding, and raising funds for, the Minnesota Theater Company, which led to the establishment of the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis—and John Cowles, Jr., took the leadership as the top fund-raiser.

In top civic leadership positions for the years 1940-64, the Cowles papers had twice the representation of the next-highest company. This was revealed by a survey of presidents or chairmen of the city's summer festival, Chamber of Commerce, United Fund, Downtown Council, Citizens League, Orchestral Association, Minnesota Theater Company, and the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre Foundation. The other companies in the survey were two major banks, a major department store, five manufacturers, and a grain-handling company.

Executives of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company were the catalysts in getting a major league baseball franchise for the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area in 1961. Members of the marketing staff of the newspapers even prepared the original sales presentations used in trying to bring the New York Giants, the Cleveland Indians, and, finally, the Washington Senators to the Twin Cities.

The list of public services the papers provide is long. Included are world affairs school programs; sciences reading programs; newspaper workshops; scholarships to newspaper workshops; high school journalism clinics; open houses; films on newspapers and the Upper Midwest; a speaker's service; soil conservation programs; world affairs competitions; voters' guides; fashion shows; veterans' dinners; high school athletics awards; junior golf tournaments; boys' baseball clinics; state fair services; and scholarship programs for carrier salesmen, which have been in existence for a quarter of a century. The Cowles papers have undertaken programs that have proved themselves effective for industry, and found them valuable.

All this is no accident, but deliberate policy. In an unusual speech the senior Cowles made in September 1963, titled, "The Newspaper Business Is A Strange Animal," he outlined the functions of a first-rate newspaper. In the course of it he said: "Just as we try on our editorial pages to encourage our readers to support worthwhile projects, we believe that our executives likewise have an obligation to work actively in the support of major projects that will improve Minneapolis and the Upper Midwest."

The whole newspaper business is in a state of flux today. Unless encrusted newspaper publishers learn, as the Cowles people did a long time ago, that newspaper publishing is more than turning out a newspaper, their troubles will increase, not lessen. That Cowles can publish two profitable newspapers while spending time, money, and energy on public service ought to be proof enough to others that reform is essential if they are to survive in the struggle for readers and advertisers.

—L.L.L. GOLDEN.

Space Age



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