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# Oral History as a Tool of Historical Archaeology: Application on the Dolores Archaeological Project

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*Dolores Archaeological Project*

*Information elicited from an oral history program can supplement the data collected by more conventional means of research: archival documentation and archaeological survey and excavation. The use of oral history as a tool in historic archaeology enables the researcher to obtain information not available through other sources. This chapter applies the practical approach utilized by the Historic Sites Studies of the Dolores Archaeological Program to the wider application of this technique in the compilation of the theoretical body of knowledge of historical archaeology.*

The Dolores River Valley in southwestern Colorado is being studied by the Dolores Archaeological Program (DAP) as part of the Dolores Project cultural resources mitigation program. The proposed McPhee Reservoir will inundate about 4,850 acres. With the construction of a pumping station, tunnel and canals, the water from the Dolores River will be diverted for use in the San Juan River Basin (Bureau of Reclamation 1977; Kane 1979). The relocation of 120 people and 45 houses will be required before construction of the reservoir begins, and the removal of approximately 80 graves in two cemeteries will also be necessary (Bureau of Reclamation 1977:A-12, 13).

The oral history program of the DAP is designed to contact any persons in the area who are knowledgeable about the history of the region or who live or work in the valley. The overall historic studies of the DAP are designed to include not only the oral history program but historical research and archaeological survey and excavation. The historic program was begun in the summer of 1978 by a sub-contractor who recorded fourteen historic sites (Baker 1979).

In June of 1979, the DAP undertook an intensive survey and recording of all historic sites in the project area. In addition to the original fourteen sites recorded, forty-two additional sites were found, recorded, photographed and mapped. To our knowledge, there are also at least five to ten more sites within the area to be recorded. As

this property is still in private ownership, these sites will be recorded during the 1980 field season (Duranceau 1980).

The study of oral history has been defined as "the tape-recording of reminiscences about which the narrator can speak from first-hand knowledge" (Baum 1969:7). As the DAP is committed to the cultural mitigation of the resources that will be inundated and the central focus is on the archaeological remains within the study area, the emphasis of the oral history program will not be on "reminiscences." Instead, the overall research goal is to collect information from the archaeological remains and historical records. This information will be used to generate a concise description of the historical events that occurred, the material culture of the inhabitants and the cultural systems in effect and how they changed through time. The information collected through informant interviews will supplement the data collected through archival research and archaeological survey and excavation.

This supplemental data will consist of the written notes taken from the interviews, which can be a very efficient and reasonably accurate procedure of recording interviews. In fact, it can be as effective as tape recording an interview under certain circumstances (Schmidt 1979).

This technique of recording informant interviews is not confined to history. Researchers utilize this method in folklore studies, an-

**Question 1**

- a) What was the area like (vegetation, animals) when first farmed (when you bought it or when you were a child)?
- b) Do you recall any floods or major snowstorms (and their aftermath)?
- c) Has the course of the Dolores River changed? In what way (direction)? When?
- d) Did you use any wild plants or hunt wild game for food? Which species?
- e) Did you plant any flowers, shrubs, etc? Did you have a vegetable garden?
- f) Did you chain, burn or otherwise remove any native vegetation?
- g) What was the amount of acreage bought at the time of purchase? Total acreage owned? Purchase price per acre?
- h) Was this land obtained under the requirements established by the Homestead Act? Do you have the original land patent issued? What is its date?
- i) If you are not the original owner, do you know who was? Any relation to you?
- j) Of your total acreage: How much was farmed? What was planted? Did the plants vary from year to year? What season did you plant wheat? Beans? Rye? Oats? How much acreage was used for grazing? What animals did you raise?
- k) Did any of your property contain rough terrain (e.g., hillsides, cliffs)? Did you use this land for any purpose?
- l) Where did you get your drinking water? Did you add anything (Clorox, phosphates) to make it drinkable?
- m) How did you water your stock? Did you construct any stock tanks or ponds?

**Question 2**

- a) How close was your nearest neighbor?
- b) How close was the nearest town?
- c) How did you divide the area (e.g., Sagehen Flats, River Valley, etc.)?
- d) Was your land located in river bottom, flats, etc?

**Question 3**

- a) How many people were your neighbors (numbers)?
- b) Where did your family come from? Yourself?
- c) In what year did you (or ancestor) move into the area?
- d) Did any of your relatives or friends move out of the Dolores area? Where did they move to? For what reasons?

**Question 4**

- a) Were your fields plowed by horses or tractors? In what years? What other types of farm equipment did you use? Any specialized equipment?
- b) Did you use a silage pit? How did you construct it? What did you use as feed?
- c) What did you feed the animals? How? Any special buildings, pens, etc., needed to hold or feed them?
- d) How was your house built? Did you employ others to help? What materials were used? Where were they obtained?

- e) Any additions or improvements made to the original house? Or is original house used for some other purpose? Or torn down, and when?
- f) What size house, how many rooms? Can you draw a floor plan?
- g) When was electricity added? Indoor plumbing? Other modernizations?
- h) Who designed your house? Was this an original design or used by others also?
- i) Did you ever build a dugout to live in, or as a temporary shelter? Do you know of anyone that did?
- j) What buildings do you remember that are no longer standing?
- k) What other outbuildings were on your property? What were their uses?

**Question 5**

- a) Did you have any source of income besides your ranch? Did your spouse?
- b) What other occupations have you had?
- c) Where did you shop? Did you obtain goods through mail order? From whom? What types of goods did you order through a catalog rather than from a general store?
- d) Where was the market for the sale of animals?
- e) Where did you sell your grain or beans?

**Question 6**

- a) How did you store food?
- b) How did you wash your clothes? When did you obtain a washer (electric or other)?
- c) What food did you mainly eat? What were special foods or delicacies?
- d) Who were your neighbors (location)?
- e) What neighbors did you associate with? Did you do favors for one another (without exchange of money)? Did you employ local people or outsiders as hired help?
- f) What forms of entertainment did you enjoy? Where was the local movie house? Bar? Any other places of entertainment? When did you purchase your first television or radio? What type of entertainment did you have at home?
- g) What is your ethnic origin? Do any traditions exist in your holiday celebrations, day-to-day activities, etc?
- h) What was your religious affiliation? Did your family participate in church activities (Sunday services, picnics, care of the sick, etc.)?
- i) What other social activities did you participate in? Were they organized by anyone or any group, or were they impromptu?
- j) Did you share equipment or other services or goods with your neighbors? Whom?

**Question 7**

- a) What changes in the way things are done have occurred in the time you have lived in the area?
- b) What roads do you remember that no longer exist? Any new ones?
- c) Where were your seasonal ranges for cattle/sheep? How many acres.
- d) Did you ever buy or sell produce, etc., at a farmers' market? Was there a weekly market? Where?

Figure 1. Historic questionnaire

thropologists use informant interviews in their ethnographic studies, and psychologists use the interview technique in their research. The use of informant interviews is a multidisciplinary methodology (Dundes 1968:37).

Folklorists probably have the most refined approach to this technique of informant interviews. First, the researcher must formulate the problem to be defined. Secondly, several objectives must be maintained to ensure accurate recording and analysis of the data collected. These objectives are, first, to establish rapport with the inhabitants of the area and to maintain this rapport during the study. Next, the privacy of the informant must be respected. Third, the interviewer should avoid any factionalism that may exist in the community. Finally, participant fatigue or overidentifying with the informant should be prevented (Goldstein 1968:26-29). This last point should be emphasized: "If the collector overidentifies with his informant, his scientific observation, evaluation and analysis may be impaired" (Goldstein 1968:29).

The development of this scientific aspect of the collection of oral traditions is described in the preface to Montell's study of the Negro community of Coe Ridge in southern Kentucky. Montell concludes that oral historians and folklorists had realized that these oral traditions may not be historically accurate. However, these folk narrations are believed by the people who perpetuate them and therefore "articulate the feelings of the group toward the events and persons described" (Montell 1970:xxi).

Harris, in her introduction to *Envelopes of Sound*, notes that oral histories offer "a glimpse into the lifestyles, belief systems and values of ordinary people....This kind of material...paves the way for a new social history which asks questions not about what happened, but about the historical processes of complex societies.... These exciting possibilities have narrowed a once enormous gap between history, and folklore, and folklore and anthropology...." (1975:3).

Although the techniques of oral history used in these disciplines may be similar, a gap still exists in their theoretical approach. Anthropological archaeologists are less concerned about the folk traditions of a people than about how the material culture of a group is defined. It is this approach to oral history that is utilized by the DAP.

Instead of collecting diverse personal reminiscences, answers to selected questions are sought. These questions are designed to elicit responses about the technology, economy, social system and spatial patterning of the community. The historic questionnaire (Fig. 1) serves as a guideline to the interview. Specific questions range from inquiries concerning vegetation, farm-

ing practices and water supply, through defining the neighborhood and family history, to eliciting descriptions of spatial patternings of the physical surroundings.

There are several sources regarding how to contact informants, arrange and conduct an interview, and transcribe what is recorded. Davis, Back, and Maclean have written the most concise description of how to set up an oral history program in their book, *Oral History: From Tape to Type* (1977).

There are several ways to obtain the names of potential informants. One way is to check land records for ownership of property within the study area, and another is to check with the local grocer, postman or service station manager. The most fruitful way of obtaining potential informants is from other informants. Once rapport is established, one contact can give you the names of half the people in town.

The oral history program of the DAP is designed to collect the most information in the simplest manner. The initial request for an interview is usually over the telephone. The interviewer is identified and the purpose of the interview is explained.

At the first interview, the informant is provided with a letter of introduction that again identifies the person who will conduct the interview. The informant is also requested to fill out a biographical form (Fig. 2) and a release form (Fig. 3). This re-

Figure 2. Biographical Form

Dolores Archaeological Program  
Historical Section Biographical Information

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Maiden Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
 Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Marriage Place \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Spouse's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Children (Names and Ages) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent's Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Mother's Maiden Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Marriage Place \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Father's Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Mother's Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Where did they live and dates \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grandparent's Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grandmother's Maiden Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Marriage Place \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grandfather's Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grandmother's Birthplace \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
 Where did they live and dates \_\_\_\_\_  
 List any other relatives who resided in this area and their relationship to you \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 3. Release Form**

I hereby give and grant to the Dolores Archaeological Program as a donation, for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Dolores Archaeological Program determines, information and/or tape recordings whose contents are listed below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of narrator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address of narrator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address of interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of agreement

CONTENTS:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

lease form is needed legally to protect both the informant and the DAP, especially when materials are to be donated. The form states simply: "I hereby give and grant to the Dolores Archaeological Program as a donation, for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Dolores Archaeological Program determines, information and/or tape recordings whose contents are listed below."

It is sometimes possible to obtain all the needed information during the first interview. The usual procedure, however, is to double-check the information received on subsequent visits. This procedure eliminates any misinterpretations and clarifies the data.

The information obtained from informants varies. This information may range from hazy childhood memories to letters and pictures describing a particular place or event. For example, several of the informants contacted by the DAP have provided the historic crew with pictures of buildings that had been destroyed. These pictures help to pinpoint the location of original buildings, especially when no foundations were built or when remains are obscured by vegetation or have been destroyed by fire or floods.

Certain objectives need to be formulated before any interview is conducted. These objectives must observe the following cautions:

1. The interviewer should be fully prepared and all research completed before the interview.
2. Establish and maintain a rapport with the informant.

3. Avoid any factionalism that may be present between informants.
4. Avoid participation fatigue and overidentification with the informants.
5. Cross-check all information given by informants.
6. Set time limits for the interview and keep them.

The last point is very important because most informants are elderly and tire easily. Also, the interviewer will get fatigued and may miss some of the information discussed.

The person conducting any oral history program must retain his scientific objectivity or the program could suffer. If the above steps are followed, any oral history program should be successful.

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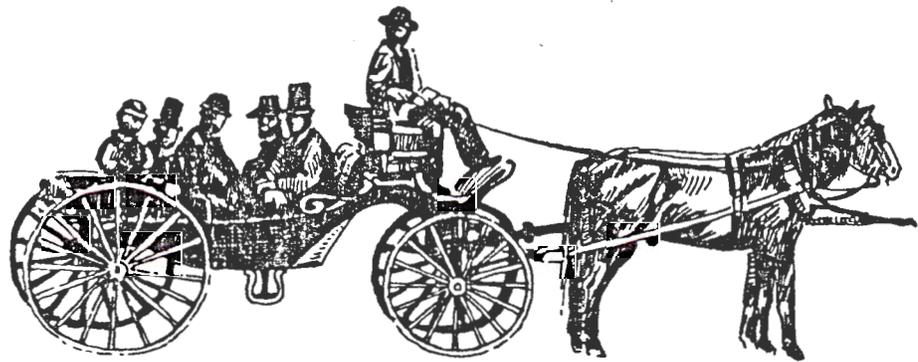
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Handwritten note: *Handwritten note: "This is the same wagon as the one in the picture."*