Mexico
A distinguished participant in oral history activities in the United States as well as in Latin America, Eugenia Meyer also delivered a report to the Asheville Colloquium of the Oral History Association. She has added a useful review of work in other Spanish speaking countries to the account of her continuing program at the Museum of Anthropology and the University of Mexico. Published materials from her program are described in the report which follows.

Oral History in Mexico and Latin America

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Oral history in Mexico has existed practically since the beginning of time. There is no doubt that oral tradition of the pre-Hispanic period was perpetuated even after the Conquest enterprise. It was precisely from oral tradition that the cronistas were able to begin producing written historical accounts, yet only a small proportion of the oral tradition of colonial and independent Mexico has been preserved.

Mexico was the first country to experience a national revolution in this century, and there has been an enormous production of personal memoirs, chronological descriptions and political narrations, in addition to the official and nationalistic accounts. These winners' "versions" were produced by the post-revolutionary regimes as part of their effort to explain and justify their status. Although the value of this information is undeniable, as historians we also wanted to know about the groups that "lost" the Revolution.

Many from the generation of Mexicans who participated directly or indirectly are still alive, conceivably making possible a more impartial, objective and realistic analysis of the Mexican experience during those years. Since about 89 percent of the Mexican population at the beginning of this century was illiterate, it seemed quite appropriate to preserve the experiences of these veterans of the Revolution through oral history.

Two key elements were first considered: the advanced age of those who could provide information and their low cultural level. The latter proved an asset since their information was fresh, unsophisticated and uncontaminated by study. Often, as non-elites,
their remembrances provided an incomparable addition to the socio-
-economic history of modern Mexico.

After facing all the endless bureaucratic obstacles common to
oral history projects elsewhere, including the attempt to convince
authorities and the struggle to obtain adequate financial support,
we were finally able to start the Programa de Historia Oral (PHO)
with limited finances in the spring of 1971.

Our dramatic establishment was accomplished by smuggling a
few desks, chairs, and files into a basement office in the magnificent
building of the National Museum of Anthropology before any author-
ity could question the relationship of an oral history project to de-
partmental studies of pre-Hispanic archaeology, ethnology and
linguistics. The obviously considerable challenge has resulted in
tremendous gratification for the team of historians involved in the
work. Although our progress over these past four years has been
sporadic, we have managed to develop a series of major projects on
a national basis which I shall briefly describe.

a) We made a study of the principals of the so-called “other rev-
olution,” a social struggle simultaneous to, but divorced from, the
political upheavals of Mexico from 1910 to 1920. These were mainly
common men, Villistas and Zapatistas, whom we have named the
“small men.”

b) We also developed an oral history project of the cinema in
Mexico, considering this artistic manifestation as a main source of
mass communication and political media, as well as a basic non-
sectarian cultural activity, since, for a very long period of time,
cinema was the cheapest form of entertainment in Mexico. We be-
came more deeply involved in this project during the summer of
1975, when the Ministry of the Interior, through its Cineteca Nacio-
nal, started to subsidize our project.

c) Simultaneously we developed a broad program on contempo-
rary history of Mexico since the twenties, and established regional
deployment centers to feed back material from various local and
regional oral history projects, such as those in Sonora, Jalisco and
Veracruz, conducted under the supervision of our office.

d) We created a joint project with the University of Mexico on
the oral history of education in Mexico from 1920 to 1940, starting
with the post-revolutionary reorganization of the Ministry of Educa-
tion and continuing to the end of the socialistic experience of the
Cardenas regime. Our aim is to delve into the theory, results and
consequences of our system of education.

During these past four years we have obtained more than three
hundred interviews. We have published five bi-annual catalogues, a series of historical essays based on the previously mentioned interviews, and some technical articles on the method of oral history used in our country.

We are now in the process of publishing seven books, which will include the edited interviews of the eyewitnesses of the development of the movie industry in Mexico. Probably by next year, the National Institute of Anthropology and History will publish two more books dealing separately with the information of the Zapatistas and Villistas. We also hope to prepare a much needed manual of oral history in Spanish.

We aim to complete and process the interviews with the Villistas at the end of the present year, and proceed with our major goal, a socio-economic analysis of the structure and motivations of these people. It is our belief that this historical analysis, which would complement already existing written information, will provide the PHO with its major justification.

One of the original tasks of the PHO was to elucidate the concept of oral history and clarify the differences between oral history interviews and those done by journalists. For years Mexicans have suffered from a surfeit of interviewing techniques utilized and abused by specialists in the social sciences. Linguistic, ethnological and


anthropological taping projects have been going for a long time. Such projects differ from our oral history work in one very important aspect. Those interviews were structured with a preconceived objective: to obtain information for specialized immediate research; our work aims at rescuing and preserving data that scholars in various fields will find useful, both currently and in the future, for their own research.

Establishing the role of oral history involved three different types of problems: preparing historians in this field, creating a pool of information, and convincing historians of the value of this new source material, which was initially received quite indifferently or rejected as a "waste of time" because of its inherent subjective and partisan qualities. Oral history was finally accepted as a primary source useful for enriching further investigation rather than as a substitute for documentary materials. With all the inherent risks of any type of historical data, the original information supplied by oral history provides enormous new possibilities for the historian. Scholars seem happy to use oral history materials, but few are willing to involve themselves in the task of producing this type of source.

In Mexico, oral history is done exclusively by historians. This has both advantages and disadvantages. As historians interested in the topic we are contextually prepared. We are not only gathering material for use by scholars, but are working on historical hypotheses and objectives. As historians we are interested in these individual versions, hoping therewith to clarify a series of ideas and doubts, and we feel that our being historians gives the interviews a more profound essence in data rescuing. At the same time we face the problem of organizing and preparing these materials for archives without the requisite knowledge of librarians or archivists.

A comprehensive organization system was developed here in accordance with the experience of many of the North American projects. Our "finished product" is composed of the transcript, an index to the transcript, complementary documental and photographic materials, and notes on the personal experience of the interviewer. We claim that our work consists not only of collecting dry information, but also includes a conscious desire to transmit, as historians, our personal feelings and pragmatic considerations related to historical subjects.

Many characteristics are involved which could be defined as peculiar to the Latin American people. These include qualities and specific concepts that are in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon mentality. For example, the interviewer must deal with the traditional silence of the Mexican, well described by Octavio Paz, as a series of covering "masks." These unique characteristics have forced us into developing a very specific way of communicating with our potential informants. We are aware of the necessity of creating among Mexican groups an awareness of their responsibility to history. There is
no doubt that the so-called "big man" has acquired it to a certain degree, probably because he is often quite involved in the task of solidifying his future historical image. Thus his approach towards historians is generally an ego trip utilized to reaffirm his role in history. In our opinion these elite have less to contribute to oral history since their perspective of events is already known.

One of the main problems in Latin America, including Mexico, is the limited financial resources; high cost of taping and transcribing apparatus, lack of trained personnel and last, but not least, lack of continuity. Some projects commence with an overwhelming fervor that rapidly declines to the bare survival minimum. The oldest of all the Latin American projects, that of the Torcuato di Tella Institute in Argentina, started with the guidelines of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, has now apparently come to a halt.

Chile's oral history work is a personal task of Peter Sehlinger of Indiana University, who has been able to obtain a considerable number of interviews with outstanding personalities in the political, economic and cultural spheres of the country. Part of his work was done during Allende's presidency and he somehow managed to return to Santiago on his sabbatical to continue with his Chile visto por chilenos.

Peru's interest in oral history was sparked by the course recently taught in Brazil, and the Universidad Pontifica de Lima will soon start its own project. Venezuela, although flirting with the idea at its school of history in the National University, has produced nothing concrete.

Cuba has, for obvious reasons, appeared alienated from the academic and scholarly milieu, despite efforts by political scientists and sociologists from the United States (such as Maurice Zeitlin and Richard Fagan) who have studied in Castro's Cuba and produced interesting works. The special relations that have existed between Mexico and Cuba since its revolution have, however, permitted some revelations of Cuban scholarly development, and through the Casa de las Américas and a series of other publications, we can recognize outstanding progress in contemporary history.

Cuba's decade of isolation has not prevented it from developing its own oral history projects. I specifically mention the effort headed by a North American woman, Margaret Randall, who, with a group of Cubans put together one of the most valuable samples of oral history, Mujeres en revolución. In this volume she included interviews with Cuban women from different walks of life. The interviewees include Vilma Espino, Cuba's first lady and sister-in-law of Fidel Castro, and women representative of cultural life on the island like Cuba's prima ballerina, Alicia Alonso. Other interviewees were guerrilla members, political representatives and members of local brigades.

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Some individual efforts have been made in other Spanish speaking countries of our continent. Among the most notable is that of Roque Dalton, who gathered the recollections of Miguel Mármol shortly before the Salvadorean revolutionary leader was murdered. Despite such individual achievements, however, a vast majority of Latin America still remains unexplored by oral historians.

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