ORAL HISTORY IN MEXICO
EUGENIA MEYER AND ALICIA OLIVERA DE BONFIL*

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

Mexico may possess the earliest examples of oral history in the New World: the oral investigations of Spanish missionary Fray Bernardo de Sahagún, who, in the first years of the colonial period, in the 16th century, rode around the countryside gathering information directly from the Indians. Eventually, this resulted in his Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España, one of the most important historical testimonies of the Spanish Conquest in this country.

These Indians today would tape their information, for the development of Mexico’s modern oral history began around 1960 when Professor Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, then director of the

*Dr. Meyer is Professor of the Mexican Revolution at the National Autonomous University of Mexico; Miss de Bonfil is a member of the history faculty at the same university. They are co-directors of the Oral History Program of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.
Historical Research Department of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, decided to organize the Archivo Sonoro. With assistants, he began by recording the memoirs and personal experiences of the surviving witnesses, mainly the veterans, of the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

Due to a series of administrative problems, this project was abandoned in 1969, at which time two historians, the authors of this article who specialize in the contemporary history of Mexico, considered continuing the series as a part of their own research. The result was that we did undertake the task of rescuing material on the revolution, which was continuously being lost due to the age of the interviewees. In addition, the Archivo Sonoro was restructured, and its initial purpose of taping veterans of the revolution was widened into a more general program.

In the beginning two difficulties prevented us from establishing a strictly defined project: some persons were not to be convinced of the relevance of oral history, and some shunned the tape recorder. Therefore, we decided to try to rescue as much as we could of the material provided by outstanding representatives of the current political life of Mexico as well as those who were participants in and could give valuable historic data on changes in the rural or urban areas.

Once this expanded project was underway, we also decided to start a publication series of the more valuable interviews, to appear as small paperbacks. We chose the small individual booklet format instead of a large volume of several interviews because of the wide range of topics; also, the lower price unit of the brief publications would make the oral histories more accessible to both scholars and to the general public.

Each booklet contains a general introduction, a brief biography of the interviewee, footnotes, and documentary appendices. Titles so far available are:

4. Gustavo Baz y sus juicios como revolucionario, médico y
While we have published these selected interviews, we have at the same time recognized that it is very important for the interviewee to feel secure in knowing that the material he tapes can be closed for a specific time or made available only to specific types of researchers. We have tried to make the interviewee feel that in the process of retrieving this valuable information, we are anxious neither to publish it nor offer it for immediate research, should such use in any way cause a problem for him.

Public reaction varied considerably, from total acceptance of the oral history method as a valuable contribution to the social sciences, to a critical rejection of it as a "waste of time," the latter because theoretically the interviewee would say only what he wanted to or what he thought convenient to communicate. A basic problem which we have encountered so far is that we do not have an end product to offer in which the purpose can be clearly understood by the majority of scholars, or by people in general who have not been exposed to what oral history is. The fact that it is a scientific tool, a form of primary material to enrich future investigations, is something quite difficult to put across to the uninitiated.

Linguistic, ethnological, and anthropological taping projects have been going on in Mexico for several years. Because of the multi-ethnic characteristics of the country, the possibilities for such research is infinite; but most of that type of investigation differs from ours in one important aspect: the interviews were structured for a preconceived objective—to obtain information for specialized, immediate research. Our work is aimed at rescuing and preserving data that scholars in any number of fields will find useful both currently and in the future.

Two excellent examples of the former type of taped research are the collection of music and dialects organized by Thomas Stanford for the National Museum of Anthropology, and the invaluable tapes of folklore music collected by Raul Helmer at the National Institute of Fine Arts.

Present Situation and Future Perspectives

The Archivo Sonoro has been transformed formally into the Oral History Program (Programa de Historia Oral, or PHO). This is under the Department of Ethnography and Social Anthropology of the National Institute of Anthropology and History and is now
located in the new Museum of Anthropology. We have now come to
the point in which we serve as co-directors of the general program,
which consists of small independent projects on various major
subject areas. The PHO is catching up on transcribing and catalog-
ing of the tapes to make them available for use from now on.

Recently, we have begun training interviewers. The most avail-
able participants are university students, since Mexican law has
established that all candidates for a professional degree must give a
minimum of six months of their time as “social service to the coun-
try.” By obtaining the consent of the university authorities, as well
as officials of other high level educational institutions in Mexico, we
can have the students approved to work at the PHO as their social
service contribution to the country. It is our hope that especially
those university graduate students interested in the area of con-
temporary history of Mexico can become valuable participants in
the various projects of the PHO.

In planning the general program of oral history projects, we are
confronted with a country that is very rich in the oral tradition,
and with vast opportunities which imply an obligation to rescue
this natural wealth. Therefore, we have decided to continue on an
open-ended basis and maintain a growth pattern in which the
original purpose—to document the Mexican Revolution—will not
be a limiting factor. The 1910 struggle was only the initial movement
toward a series of many social changes; therefore, we can always
enrich the data which refers to this historical process on an unending
scale.

One large project in the planning stage is on the history of rural
education in Mexico. In early years of this century more than 90
percent of the population was illiterate, and in many cases some of
those did not even speak Spanish. After the revolution, mainly as a
result of the new Constitution of 1917, the difficult task began not
only to make the Mexican people literate, but to educate them as
well. Since the twenties is the first effective decade of this effort,
many of the participants in and witnesses of these changes are still
alive: rural teachers, for instance, who can offer their valuable
commentaries from personal experiences and their evaluations on
the failures and successes of the whole project. The information
thus gathered will be of value not only to the field of history but also
to pedagogy, anthropology, sociology, and many others.

We have also taken into consideration that the Mexican govern-
ment has invested the majority of its budget in education and that,
therefore, in the past thirty years there have been widely differing, controversial, and sometimes dramatic approaches to the educational problems. There were the socialistic experiences of the 1930's on one hand, and on the other there were programs intended to safeguard our "national values"—emphasizing the national background, pre-hispanic cultures, and so forth—all of which could be orally documented. Altogether, this is one of the most transcendent chapters of our national development. An oral history on it would seem to be of the first priority.

Also programmed into PHO is an oral history of the movie industry in Mexico, based on our contention that the cinema is a cultural manifestation through which the daily life of a country can be projected. Someday historians, sociologists, and social historians will become interested in writing about Mexico's movie industry as an expression of the national culture; the information that we can preserve now from the founders, technicians, actors, and others who participated in its development will become of first importance for this research. The areas of inquiry will draw information from both the participants and the persons who attended the movies and will include documentation on such subjects as their reactions toward different types of movies, the acceptance of the cinema versus the legitimate theater, and whether people imitated what they saw at the movies or whether the movies were a mirror of Mexican society.

A third project is planned to research the dynamics of political development of the country, based on six-year periods, since that is the length of a presidential term, with no possibility of re-election. Included in this study will be state ministers as well as deputies, senators, union leaders, and bureaucrats; in Mexico each president creates a very personal type of government with its own intrinsic characteristics. This series should enrich greatly the knowledge of our political development since the revolutionary period.

In the political project, we have decided not to use an elitist criterion—i.e., taping only those who themselves were in significant historic positions in government—but to include interviews from any workers or government employees who might offer valuable information even though he was not a member of cabinet. It may be that one spin-off from this policy will result in enough personal experiences and information from union workers for a history of the development of the union in Mexico.

Finally, we must mention one project that we prize very highly,
and one that is of definite interest to historians. We have titled it "The Historical Task"—a series of interviews with the historians and history teachers who have become outstanding in different fields of our national history and who themselves have created a "school" of historians. Probably everyone has had the experience of reading a work which obviously enriches our historiography, but which triggers questions one would like to pursue further, or points of view one would like elucidated, or ideas one needs clarified which the author touched upon lightly. It is this sort of material that we are going after; this, and the message these historians will want to leave for future generations. It has not yet been written, nor will it be written by these busy scholars.

One can see that even though the PHO has a brief life span so far, the enthusiasm engendered by the valuable future perspectives indicates that the time and money invested in the project, no matter how modest the initial result may seem, are likely to be very worthwhile. Oral history fills a unique need in a country that has undergone great social changes in the present century.