

**An Examination of “Extended Community”
An Oral History of the
Community Environmental Monitoring Program (Cemp), 1981 – 2003**

S. DeSilva
Desert Research Institute
755 E. Flamingo Rd.
Las Vegas, NV 89119
USA

ABSTRACT 7110

From 2002 until 2004, on behalf of the Desert Research Institute (DRI), I conducted an oral history project that focused on the participants in the Community Environmental Monitoring Program (CEMP). In the late 1970s, Nevada scientists who participated in the response to the Three Mile Island event returned to Nevada with the idea for a program similar to one being implemented in Pennsylvania. That program directly involved local stakeholders in an independent monitoring effort. As a result, the CEMP was established in 1981, with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) providing the funding and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) providing technical and scientific direction, maintaining instrumentation and sampling equipment, analyzing the collected samples, and interpreting and reporting the data. Initially, DRI was largely responsible for identifying and hiring community participants and organizing annual training workshops, later assuming complete responsibility for technical operation of the monitoring network from EPA.

The goal was to establish fixed monitoring stations around Nevada, Utah and California, and directly involve stakeholders in the monitoring process. Local teachers would be recruited to receive training and maintain the stations while reporting back to their communities on the monitoring activities and any risks they, or their citizens, perceived. This active stakeholder involvement was intended to provide communities with an immediate resource for any questions or concerns related to testing. It also created a vehicle through which to educate the public about radiation and testing.

In the early years of nuclear weapons testing, interactions between local residents and the government were often defined by a lack of communication and understanding. The distrust that existed between government agencies and Nevada, Utah, and California residents, was a perspective that persisted for years after the testing moratorium and continues to endure, to a lesser extent, today. It was this distrust that the Community Environmental Monitoring Program was designed to ameliorate, providing communities and ranches with impartial scientific evidence to address their many concerns. A goal of the oral history project was to gain a better understanding of the CEMP by exploring and documenting its origins and allowing the people who continue to make it a part of their lives tell their stories. Within those stories, we wanted to

discover if the program established trust in Nevada, Utah and California communities and ranches; what the program meant and continues to mean to the government, state institutions and local people who participate, and why the program is unique.

In order to achieve these goals, DOE funded a two year oral history project. I interviewed the program founders, DOE, EPA and DRI participants, local station managers, and many people with an interest in testing and the government response to downwind communities. This paper includes the purpose, process, and development of the oral history project; why oral history was chosen as the appropriate methodology; who was chosen for an interview and why; some of the pitfalls encountered; what lessons were learned and what value the project has to DOE and the stakeholders in local communities.

INTRODUCTION

From 2002 until 2004, on behalf of the Desert Research Institute (DRI), I conducted an oral history project that focused on the participants in the Community Environmental Monitoring Program (CEMP). In the late 1970s, Nevada scientists who participated in the response to the Three Mile Island event, returned to Nevada with the idea for a program similar to one being implemented in Pennsylvania. That program directly involved local stakeholders in an independent monitoring effort. As a result, the CEMP was established in 1981, with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) providing the funding and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) providing technical and scientific direction, maintaining instrumentation and sampling equipment, analyzing the collected samples, and interpreting and reporting the data. Initially, DRI was largely responsible for identifying and hiring community participants and organizing annual training workshops, later assuming complete responsibility for technical operation of the monitoring network from EPA.

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What is Oral History?

Oral history is a component of public history that runs the gamut from formal, rehearsed interviews to informal conversations among family members, neighbors, or friends in order to compile stories of the 'good old days.' For generations, history-aware individuals have preserved others' firsthand accounts of the past for the record, often precisely at the moment when the historical actors themselves, and with them their memories, were about to pass from the scene. As David Lowenthal argues in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, since memories are "inherently personal, many memories are extinguished at every death." [1]

Since the 1940's, the bureaucratization of public affairs has tended to standardize the paper trail, the telephone and email have replaced personal correspondence. Because of this, the idea of conducting interviews with participants in recent history to supplement the written record has gained currency.

Early oral histories tended to focus on the "elite" in business, professionals, politics, and social leaders. However, that scope broadened in the 1960s and 1970s in response to both the social movements of the decades and historians' shifting focus on the experiences of "non-elites." Increasingly, interviews have been conducted to capture the lives and view of the traditionally, historically, silent; blue-collar workers, racial and ethnic minorities, women, labor and political activists, and a variety of local people whose lives personify a specific social experience. By including the narratives of people from every walk of life, oral history has, over the past half-century, aided in deepening and democratizing the historical record.

Interviews have enhanced the work of a new generation of historians, supplying information about everyday life and insights into the lives and memories of what are sometimes termed "ordinary people" that are mainly unavailable from more traditional historical sources. The narratives and insights of the participants and founders of the CEMP would have been lost but for the oral history project. Some interview projects focus on very specific topics--like memories of a catastrophe, participation in a war, the career of a famous individual, or a specific program like the CEMP, rather than the more encompassing narratives typical of social historians.

Why do historians choose oral history over more traditional forms of investigation?

Historians choose oral history over more traditional forms of investigation for many reasons. Diverse reasons motivate historians to use oral history as an investigative technique to explore the past. Oral historian, Mary Palevsky, described her work on her book *Atomic Fragments* as “a study in memory and meaning, an exploration of the intersection of the personal and public.”[2] Palevsky’s journey was very personal as she struggled to understand her parents work on the atomic bomb and place the memories of other scientists she interviewed within the framework of the nuclear era.

Many historians choose oral history because they have realized that oral history supplements the collective memory in very important ways. As Donald Ritchie suggests in *Doing Oral History*, “As they gradually recognized how collective memory can preserve or distort a community’s past, scholars grew more appreciative of oral history.”[3] “Gaps in written documentation from previous governmental and colonial powers have highlighted the need for, and even increased the demand for, oral history.”[4] Oral history also provides a mechanism to infuse the historical record with observational evidence, anecdotes and experiential insights unique to the individual being interviewed.

There is another reason that oral history is attractive to historians. Oral historians are the only historians who deal exclusively with the living. Although this has distinct advantages for the historian, enabling them to confirm, verify, and check information with the interviewee, oral history also creates a body of information challenged by the impact of loss of memory and revision by the collective memory. Also, the passage of time cannot be underestimated as an important factor since any group of interviewees is an aging population. As the CEMP program began in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, and many of the participants were ‘middle-aged’ when they began participating, timing was critical. Luckily, most of the earliest participants were available for interviews which made the concept of an oral history viable for the CEMP. However, the passage of time became very important for the CEMP oral history project as the interviews progressed over a two year period.

Why choose the CEMP for an oral history project?

The CEMP is a unique program because of its level of stakeholder involvement at the local level and because of its continued value to communities around Nevada, Utah and California. The program continues to use emerging technologies in monitoring equipment and these ongoing enhancements solidify confidence in the program with local communities. Continued community and field monitor involvement at local events, such as parades and fairs, maintains the programs visibility and provides prospects for educational outreach opportunities. Because the CEMP has been in existence for over twenty-five years, with many of the original participants either still contributing or having achieved emeritus status, the programs participants were excellent candidates from which to gather oral history.

Challenges with oral history

Loss of memory, the transmission of collective memory, and popular memory are subjects with which every oral historian grapples. “Collective” memory is usually a code word for what is

remembered by the dominant culture and “popular” memory usually refers to recollections of “ordinary” folks.[5] Many of the interviews for the CEMP oral history were conducted in rural areas of Nevada, Utah, and California which would, perhaps, lead one to assume that collective memory would not be an issue in the interviews. However, the lack of outside diversions in rural settings encourages close attention to the available resources, creating a group of interviewees who are more informed on political, social, and economic issues than their urban counterparts. Historian David Lowenthal also suggests that, “Memory also converts public events into idiosyncratic personal experience.”[6]

Historian, Michael Kammen, argues in the *Mystic Chords of Memory* that memory and amnesia are, “co-ordinate concepts because they remain constant realities.” He goes on to suggest that “all history cannot be remembered: and collective memory must be used with discrimination.”[7] These issues permeate the creation of any oral history. Because of these concerns, both memory and history must merit some distrust. Corroboration from many sources, multiple interviews, other oral histories, photographs, and documented evidence should be used to support any popular histories.

Why can oral history be problematic?

Oral histories also contain components that are often removed from a printed text, emotion, emphasis, and nostalgic bias, that may lead to a need for interpretation or placing an interview in context. Lowenthal asserts “if the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it ‘the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all.’”[8] Nostalgia may be brought on by swift change but also by the passage of time. Since the CEMP began in 1981, and nuclear testing stopped completely in 1992, twenty years had transpired between the programs inception and interviewing the program participants. The tendency toward nostalgia was mitigated, however, by the continuation of the program and a yearly refresher conference for program participants. The program participants viewed the program, not as history, but as an enduring process.

That very immediacy generated by the continued participation in the program must be critically viewed when considering a person’s narrative. Critical judgment must be exercised when assessing interviews. Just because someone asserts something is true, however convincingly or colorfully, they say it, the facts may be faulty or need corroboration. An eyewitness account may still contain flawed information. A persons interpretation of what happened will not necessarily be correct just because they were there.

Several aspects of a narrators account may require critical scrutiny; what was their physical and mental condition at the time of the event; how reliable are they and how verifiable is their account; and how consistent is the account? Also needing consideration, is whether or not an interviewee has a personal stake in an event, or an interest in rewriting their own personal history.

Conflicts or inconsistencies among individual interviews and between interviews and documented evidence is a common challenge in oral history and demonstrates the subjective nature of the endeavor. To combat this challenge, the oral historian much consider all interviews as raw data to be verified and cross checked. Interviews are based on memories and individual

memories may be less than accurate, complete, or truthful. However, the failings, vagaries, or myths of memory may be almost as instructive as the memories themselves.

Because of these challenges, it is important to approach oral history, not so much as a fact finding mission, but rather as an interpretive event. Interviewees often present a “storied account of the past,” conflating years of life in a narrative that is replete with unconscious meanings. Meanings may also be found in an interviewees speech patterns, linguistic conventions and cultural assumptions. Systems of trust and belief, be they kinship, religious, or political, permeate any oral history interview. Assumptions about the interviewer also contribute to the many layers of meaning that may be included in any interview.[9]

What does oral history give us that written history does not?

Oral history allows us to include viewpoints and information in the historical record that might never be captured in any other way. The written record of newspapers, diaries, census data, photographs, memoirs, and other primary and secondary documents, leaves out the more personal and private experiences of a chosen subject. By collecting an oral history, the interviewer can ask those questions that, perhaps, we wish we could go back and ask of historical figures and people who have been left out of the historical records, such as women and Native Americans, learning about their feelings, hopes, aspirations, and disappointments. [10]

Who were the interview subjects chosen?

The interview subjects for the CEMP Oral History project were chosen from an existing pool of community monitors. Also included, were the program ‘founding fathers,’ other people who participated in the nuclear testing industry, and field monitors from both the Environmental Protection Agency years and the Desert Research Institute years. As the program is ongoing, interviews were conducted with both the senior community monitors, many of whom started in the early 1980s with the program, and their younger counterparts. These ‘custodians of memory’ live all over Nevada, Utah and California. Many of them live in areas that still fit the description provided by Mark Twain upon his arrival in Nevada in 1861, “...*the countryside looked something like a singed cat. Even the birds, when they flew over, carried their own provisions.*”[11]

The interviewees cannot be considered cultural missionaries for any single point of view. They brought to their interviews extremely varied opinions and experiences relating to nuclear testing. Often, a community monitor’s frame of reference would be demonstrated by a joke, such as the following told during an interview:

A manager from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) wanted to go out and speak to some of the ranchers. He talked to his staff and his staff said, “Well, to empathize with the ranchers, talk to them about what they’re doing and, look at their places, talk about what activities are going on and that way you’ll develop a rapport with them and then you’ll be able to talk to them

about atomic energy.” So, the manager went out and he went up to a rancher and, in the interest of developing empathy, said to the man, “So, what are you doin’ here?” The rancher replied, “I’m spreadin’ manure.” And the AEC manager said, “So what exactly does that do for the land?” The rancher looked him up and down and answered slowly, “Well, it puts nitrogen in the soil and that helps the plants to grow.” They talked awhile more about the manure with the AEC manager asking several more questions. Finally, the AEC guy, after a little bit of a break, said, “I want to talk to you about atomic energy,” The rancher looked at him for a minute and without batting an eye said, “You don’t know about manure and you wanna talk to me about atomic energy?”

This joke, told by one of the CEMP Station Managers, epitomizes the lack of communication and understanding that existed between government agencies and Nevada and Utah residents in the early years of atomic testing, a perspective that persisted for years after the testing moratorium. It was this distrust that the Community Environmental Monitoring Program was designed to remedy, providing communities and ranches with impartial scientific evidence to answer address their many concerns. How the program established trust in Nevada, Utah and California communities and ranches, what the program meant to the government, agency, state institution and local people who participated, and why the program is unique, may be better understood by examining its origins and the people who continue to make it a part of their lives.

In other cases, an anecdote related by someone else illuminates the perspective of one of the community monitors, in this case, Ken Giles, a DRI Field Monitor, talked about a rancher from the middle of Nevada at Stone Cabin Ranch, Roy Clifford:

Roy doesn’t have a very good working relationship with BLM and the Forest Service. BLM came out here about three or four years ago when they had so many wild horses on the range and told Roy, “if you’ll take a hundred head of cows off the range, we’ll take a hundred head of horses off.” And, Roy said, “like a damn fool, I went along with the deal,” he said, “I took a hundred head of cows off,” and then, he said, “they never took any horses off.” So, he said, “now, I’m short a hundred head of cows, still got all the damn horses,” and he added, “couple of years later they came by with the same deal,” and Roy said, “I told them what they could do with them horses.”

Conclusion

As the above anecdotes demonstrate, “Oral history derives its value not from resisting the unexpected, but from relishing it. By adding an ever wider range of voices to the story, oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex-and more interesting.”[12] Although the oral history process and outcome is not perfect, it continues to improve with the advent of sophisticated recording equipment and the increased professionalism of its practitioners.

Americas poet laureate, Robert Penn Warren wrote that “to be an American is not...a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea - and history is the image of that idea.”[13] A more complete

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image of history, one that includes the oral histories of the Community Environmental Monitoring Program, provides value not only to the projects sponsor, the DOE, but also to the local community stakeholders for years to come.

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