

“Long, Long Ago”: Recipe for a Middle School Oral History Program

“Were people more trusting in those days? You could go to town and leave your house open and never think anything about it. In fact . . . we would go to town and the milkman would come in and leave milk inside of the refrigerator.”

-Charlton Pember, a miner from the small mining town of Silverado Canyon.

“The Chinese learned to take abuse during the early 1900s but always with the attitude that they were above anything happening to them. Most of the abuses were taken in silence. They felt sorrow for the people who were abusive because the Chinese felt that they didn’t know any better.”

-James Soo Hoo, a Montebello Unified School District teacher.

“I remember Declaration Day even more than Fourth of July. Everybody’s garden was in full bloom. All of the flowers were free and you would just gather arm loads of them and decorate the graves of your family and of soldiers. The cemeteries were full of color and flowers. To me that impressed me almost as much as the Fourth of July.”

-Simeon Ray, former Arizona miner

I began teaching twenty-four years ago in the Montebello Unified School District. Suva Intermediate School in Bell Gardens, California, serves a multi-lingual and multicultural, lower socio-economic community which faces a myriad of urban problems. The students are, for the most part, Latino with a sprinkling of Asian Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans.

History, which had always been a passion of mine, was not coming alive for my students. Inspired by the intriguing Foxfire work and driven by my own desire to enliven the classroom, the “Long, Long Ago Oral History Project” was born. Through oral history, students have learned about the past from artists, political leaders, and people who witnessed events first-hand.

My fifth grade students are the hub of project activities each year. They are helped out by a cadre of veteran sixth through eighth grade student volunteers. Through the years, students have researched, recorded, published, and disseminated oral histories in a series of student produced, award-winning oral history magazines. There is not a Long, Long Ago Oral History Project class; instead volunteers meet every week after school to write, transcribe, illustrate, and design the magazine.

Our own area is rich in history and tradition. Students, teachers, community members, television stations, and newspapers have all served as resources for interesting people to interview. The El Rancho San Antonio Historical Society and the Bell Gardens Human Services Agency have suggested other old-time residents, who told the students about their lives in Bell Gardens during the 1930s and 1940s. Students

find clues about how to contact people in newspaper and magazine articles; I then contact the people and persuade them to be interviewed. I embarrass my own family, because I use every occasion to search for people to interview. When I learned that my son’s baseball teammate’s grandfather was an ex-Indianapolis 500 racer, I recruited him, and he did a terrific interview.

We have interviewed our neighbors, local political leaders, convalescent home residents, and movie stars like Walter Matthau, who told the students how he got into show business:

I always enjoyed talking, speaking, making faces, making people laugh, and mak[ing] them cry. . . . I always watched the actors in the theater and I was fascinated by the whole idea. Over a thousand people sitting down to watch a dramatic sequence unfold. . . . So naturally I drifted into it. I was able to go to a dramatic school free because I had been in the army for three and a half years; I was entitled to the G.I. Bill of Rights.

Preparing for the Interview

During initial contacts with potential narrators, I determine the main subjects for the interview. I then research the subject and find resources that will give the students background information. For example, the Orange County *Register* ran an article about the demise of a World War I Veterans Club. I contacted the local social services office and found the name and telephone number of the club president who then referred us to other World War I veterans. When he was interviewed, Westy Westerman talked about the 1916-17 punitive expedition against Pancho Villa, and we had to know what he was talking about to ask follow-up questions. For these interviews, students watched “Gallipoli” and “All Quiet on the Western Front” in addition to reading a variety of print materials, which they drew upon to write questions.

Interviewing

Successful interviews happen when you make sure that students are prepared and that students ask the questions. Participation in the interviews is part of the fifth grade student’s social studies grade. Through the oral history project, students learn research skills and how to distill their research into open-ended questions. I check each student’s questions before an interview, and I expect each student to participate to the best of his or her ability. The students practice with follow-up questions to get the maximum amount of information from an interview.

Most of the interviews take place in the school cafeteria or library at Suva Intermediate School because we can involve many more students; often several classes will attend an interview. Students make audio

recordings and sometimes videotape the interviews. They ask each interviewee to sign a release form to publish and archive the interview.

With no travel budget, we rely on private automobiles for the rare interviews away from school. For off-site interviews, the school requires all sorts of forms and proof of the driver's personal insurance, but the experience is often worth the trouble. When an interviewing team went to meet Harry Webb, they found him lame, almost blind and deaf, and in a house filled with mementos from the "Old West." When he spoke, the team was transported back to when he went to work for Buffalo Bill Cody.

Students also heard Billy Stryker talk about the old days at the Red Mountain-Randsburg Mining Camp; sitting in his miner's rock cabin overlooking the El Paseo Mountains and surrounded by mining tools and abandoned hoists, Stryker said he would do it all again. However, miner Simeon Ray described the environmental devastation resulting from mines around Jerome, Arizona, at the turn-of-the-century: "The sulfur smoke from the smelters killed all of the pine trees and all of the vegetation on the tops of the mountains. When you look down from the town of Jerome into the Verde Valley, you would have to look a long way before you saw any vegetation."

From Tape to Type

Project participants work in a special area on transcription, editing, and illustrating. Students transcribe the tapes by working in shifts and writing down small segments at a time. The final transcripts are prepared on the classroom computer. The transcription process polishes spelling, grammar, word usage, and listening skills. After the transcription is completed, student editors check for errors, and teachers double-check the text.

Assembling the magazine involves organizing, writing, outlining, and visual composition skills. When the transcriptions are complete, student editors write the introduction to the magazine, and, in doing so, they learn how to analyze and synthesize information. This practical exercise also teaches students how to read for context.

Next, we search for visual materials that will illustrate the text with the minimum of legal copyright restrictions, and the staff artists convert the available visual materials into drawings or illustrations for the magazine. With the introduction, art work, and transcripts done, the students lay out the magazine and send it to the printer.

The issues of *Long, Long Ago* are distributed to students, schools, and community groups in the district as well as to oral history organizations and programs in California, in the United States, and even around the world. Students handle requests for publications, exchange information, and keep up correspondence with other oral history groups, thus learning valuable letter writing skills.

Funding and Resources

To start an oral history project, teachers must be outgoing and opportunistic; they must be eager to share their passion for history with their students and with the community. We invite school administrators to sit in on each interview and include them on the project mailing list to maintain their interest and support. We rely on school fund-raising efforts, but we also look beyond the school for resources. We have found

that awards generate respect and that respect generates money. When we won the California Board of Education's first annual Golden Bell Award, the school board and the district Gifted and Talented program were able to fund the publication of *Long, Long Ago*. We also go into the community to make presentations with service organizations to appeal for support. Local leaders and community groups provide small donations. The City of Bell Gardens has begun to publish our magazine for free and has included the "Long, Long Ago Oral History Project" on its Web Page. Regional institutions like the Huntington Library have made several field trips possible and the library staff have introduced students to their research facilities.

The project has always had to scramble for funding, and we are used to a limited budget. We never pay for an interview, and we use inexpensive tape recorders. What little funding we gather goes for tape recorders, tapes, videotape, research materials, illustrations, publishing costs, and an occasional field trip.

Impact

Oral history has transformed my classroom. Students have discovered skills they never knew they had. My students learn to do research and to ask penetrating questions. They learn to listen, to transcribe, to edit, and to lay out a publication. They learn composition skills and some familiarity with tone, form, and audience. They are able to meet new people with ease and to make their way with confidence in communities, libraries, and other settings far from Bell Gardens. They gain recognition within the community, and they learn to respect the diversity of Bell Gardens as well as the story of their own heritage as it is woven into the community history.

Oral history brings the outside world into my classroom. It is one thing to watch a "Little Rascals" short and quite another to interview Hal Roach and to understand how movies were made. Watching a grainy, black and white documentary of D-Day is not the same as questioning an ex-paratrooper and hearing how terrified he was just before he jumped. When students listened to Judge David Carter read the letters that he sent home to his mother from Vietnam and heard his voice break as he cried, the events that he described were recast for them in the intensity of the moment.

The project has brought a steady stream of educational resources to Suva Intermediate School. Suzana Guzman, an opera singer, described her training and operatic career. Joann Falleta, the music director of the Long Beach Symphony, told the students what it is like to conduct music. Cartoonists have told students how comic books are made and taught them how to do cartoons. The content of the interviews has spilled over into the arts, music, and science curriculum, and even to physical education.

The "shining moments" that I have shared with my students beggar any effort to put the project on paper. When a team of students interviewed Alfredo Galea in his violin-making studio, the soft light came in the dirty storefront window, violins and pieces of violins hung from the walls, and the tables were crowded with tools and jars of chemicals. Mr. Galea, a violin maker and a professional violinist, shared his love for music and violins in a rich Italian accent. He was telling the students about Paganini when he suddenly stopped; he took out a two hundred

year old violin and said, "I play some Paginini for you." The studio filled with the soft, sweet sound and then he said, "Now, I've heard that you are musicians. Could you play something for me?" They will each remember their brief performances and Mr. Galea's shop for years to come.

The project has brought the community and school closer together and fostered student social awareness. Oral history takes commitment, but there are people like Harry Webb, Suzana Guzman, Judge David Carter, and Alfredo Galea waiting to be asked into your own classroom, and there are shining moments waiting to happen for your students.

Dangerous Work: Mining

BILL STRYKER WAS A MINER IN THE MOJAVE DESERT UNTIL HIS LAST DAY ON EARTH.

"What was Randsburg like during the 1930s?"

"Randsburg had a dance hall, a butcher shop, and an old cottage motel. It was a nice little hotel and you could board and room there. Lots of people went up there. They came out of the city and stayed for the summer. The hotel was always full. The general store was like the general stores that you see in the movies with a pot bellied stove in the center and merchandise on shelves along the sides of the store. The general store that they had in Randsburg was a little more like a drug store in those days; it had a fountain."

"You have miner's lung, don't you? How did you get miner's lung?"

"Too many years working underground and using bad equipment sometimes. I worked the mines around here, in the Mojave, and in the Mother Lode area. When you spend too many years underground the silica builds up in your lungs and you end up with only partial use of your lungs. I have about one-third lung capacity."

"Was it dangerous underground?"

"It's dangerous working underground. I was lucky; some people were more lucky than others. I have never been around any place where they had anybody killed. All the injuries I ever got were a scratch on the back and two missing fingers because of a rock fall. Two times, I just walked out of a mine section seconds ahead of a little cave-in. It's just luck."

"Do you regret working the mines?"

"No, I would probably do it all over again. It's in your blood, in your veins, and you can't get it out. Yah, yah, I've been wealthy a lot of times, and I made a lot more than the average person. A lot of people couldn't make ten cents at mining but I made a lot more than an average income in the mines."

Dangerous Work: Drilling

JESSIE PRESHO WORKED ON THE TAFT OIL FIELDS AND LATER DRILLED HIS OWN WELLS.

"The derricks were wooden and the equipment steam driven. At the top they had a big pulley or crown block. We used to splice cable, and it was very dangerous."

"Were people hurt?"

"Faces torn away, eyes torn out."

"You saw it?"

"Many times, arms taken off! Now, we were usually as far away as

eight feet. We were sitting by the steam boilers and there wasn't any running around at an oil well, you stayed put. It was very dangerous. The man who ran the pipe was called the driller and was the bossman. He had control of the pipe and the wire cable, and he controlled it manually like you would play a fishing pole. He controlled the tension on the cable on the pipe coming out, and there was a huge load of pipe at the bottom. It was terribly heavy, and part of it was rotating. Dad usually was pretty poor, but had bought the cable new, but it was spliced over and over. There was a man who did nothing but that—splice cable and was called a splicer. If you had a sudden drop or if you hit rock suddenly, or if you were on rock and you busted through, there was a sudden surge of weight on a cable and it was quite common for it to snap and it would break at the well-head and then would jump and whip around like an electric line that has broken in a storm. Instead of sparks, it had a whole bunch of frayed ends. If it wrapped around your arm as it backlashed, it would just tear your arm off."

Dangerous Work: Cowboys

PHILIP CROSTHWAITE WAS A CHAMPION ROPER AND A WORKING COWBOY ON THE SANTA MARGARITA RANCH BEFORE IT BECAME CAMP PENDLETOWN. HE DESCRIBED THE REGION WHEN OCEANSIDE AND SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO WERE STILL COWTOWNS.

"When I hit Oceanside, there were horse rings along the sidewalk so that you tie the horses and buggies up. There was one restaurant, one hotel, and very few houses. It was a cowtown, and it was the closest town that the Santa Margarita cowboys could go into. They would go into town to see the Sunday afternoon movies and buy a few things."

"How did the townspeople treat you when you came into town?"

"They did a lot of staring at us and all that. They looked us over. In those days, when you saw a person wearing boots and a cowboy hat, it was a cowboy."

"Was your life ever in danger while horse breaking?"

"Yes, I have been hurt several times. I have had horses fall over backwards on me. I have had my leg broken two times. I am really lucky to be the way that I am now without being crippled up bad."

"Have you ever seen a cowboy dragged by a horse?"

"One time a cowboy's horse was bucking and bucked him off. His foot got caught in the stirrup. He couldn't shake loose of the horse and the horse ran off. It started to drag him under the horse's belly. Any gentle horse will run off and kick if a man is being dragged underneath his belly. He got kicked in the head and the kick killed him. There ain't much that you can do. If you have a gun, and if you move mighty quick, you can shoot the horse and save him. You can lasso the horse, but he will still be kicking the top of the man's head. That was the only cowboy that I know of that died on the Irvine ranch."

Dangerous Work: Reporting

GEORGE RAMOS IS A REPORTER FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES.

"Have you ever been in any dangerous situations covering a story?"

"When I was working for the newspaper in San Diego in 1977, there was a situation going on in Tijuana, which is just across the street from San Ysidro. (I am sure that all of you who are Latinos are aware of the situation in Central America and the emigrants who are leaving that area and coming here to live.) There were people who pay 'coyotes'

to bring them across the border illegally. In 1977, I posed as someone who wanted to come across the border, and paid a 'coyote' to bring me across, in order to find out first-hand what it was like to be scared, to have to pay money to come into the United States illegally. That was rather dangerous. The other person who paid to come across the border with me ended up by being shot and losing an arm. I was shot when I was a reporter in Vietnam, and also when I was a soldier. There are dangerous situations which go with the territory. Sometimes it is dangerous to be a reporter, and sometimes not so dangerous; it all depends."

Quake

MIRIAM GAME, A SCHOOL TEACHER, LIVED THROUGH THE 1933 LONG BEACH EARTHQUAKE.

"Can you tell us about the earthquake?"

"I was 12 years old at the time, just about the same age that most of you are now. I lived in Long Beach and I was in the seventh grade at Jefferson Junior High School. The quake happened on a Friday. On this particular Friday, we had a professional stage group come to give us a play called 'Little Women.' I had gone to see the play, and it was running longer than expected. It was getting dark. I lived two miles from the school, and I usually took the city bus home. My mother had a funny feeling that she wanted to get the whole family together; she knew where I was, but she wanted the whole family together. My sister was playing on the church steps across the street with some neighborhood kids when my mother said, 'Come on, we are going to the school.' My sister said, 'No, I want to stay and play.' (If she had stayed, she would have been killed; the church was completely wrecked.) My mother said, 'No, we're going to get your sister.' So my mother got my sister into the car and came to Jefferson Junior High School. She went to the auditorium and found me and took me out of the audience and took me home. I told my mother that I wanted to get my roller skates from my locker but she said, 'No, we're not going to get your skates tonight." I told her I wanted them for the weekend; she said, 'No, you're just going to have to wait and pick them up on Monday. I want you to come and get in the car.' So we got in the car. The man who was putting on the play decided to cut parts out of the play a few minutes after I left because it was getting so late. So he let the kids go. There had to be 500 kids in the auditorium, and if they'd stayed, they would have been hurt. The auditorium was flattened in the quake.

"My dad was the chief engineer at a big ice plant at the time. It was a big, three-story brick building with an alley out in the back. The plant had a big eight-story storage building all made of brick, in the back of the alley; the plant engines were in the storage building. My dad had worked over that night, and my mother drove through this narrow little alley and drove up to the door of the engine room and tooted the horn. After my dad came out to the car, he bent his head into the window of the car, and we chatted for a little while. Then he said that he had to go back to work and do something to the machinery. He turned to go back into the plant but my mother tooted the car horn again; he came back out to talk to her, and just as he came, the earthquake hit. He would have been killed if she hadn't tooted that horn, because the whole building came down. The car (we had a 1929 four-door Model A Ford, quite a ritzy car in those days) jumped about two feet off the ground and shook back and forth.

"We got out of the car and started to run when the ammonia tanks broke. (The plant was using ammonia to make ice with and the tanks broke during the quake.) Big clouds of ammonia fumes came out and almost choked us to death. We started to run again between these collapsing brick buildings and bricks and glass were flying all over the place. I fell down; my dad turned around and grabbed me by the foot and flung me out of the way just as a steel beam came crashing down. We rushed over to one side of the alley where there was a six-foot wooden fence. I tried to climb over it, but I was so scared and so little that I couldn't make it. So we ran down this long alley, past this building with the bricks coming down; I don't know why we didn't get hit with the bricks. We got out to Anaheim Street in the business district.

"At first, my sister and I thought that the ice plant had blown up and we started screaming and crying, 'Daddy has blown up the ice plant and he has wrecked the whole town. What are they going to do to my daddy?' When we said that, my dad said, 'No, it isn't an explosion, it is an earthquake.' Plaster and bricks were piled three and four feet thick all over the sidewalks. Cars were smashed and there were arms and legs sticking out of brick piles; people were screaming. My grandmother lived in a little apartment about a block away so we went to get her. The earthquake had knocked her down, and she had rolled out of her apartment into the yard."

Quake II

KIMI SUGIYAMA RODE ON THE JAPANESE-AMERICAN FLOAT IN THE 1912 PASADENA ROSE PARADE; SHE AND HER FAMILY WERE INTERNED IN A JAPANESE-AMERICAN RELOCATION CAMP DURING WORLD WAR II.

"What do you remember about the Long Beach Earthquake?"

"I had just left the grocery store and was home cooking dinner, when I heard a loud booming noise. The wives of navy men had customarily run tabs in our store, and their sailor husbands would come in and pay off the tabs when their ships came in. These accounts hadn't been paid off for months because the fleet had been out to sea, and so I thought that the booming sound was the cannon being fired to herald the arrival of the fleet. Then I realized that the whole house was quaking. It was a strong earthquake! I got the children out of the house, and we stayed outside away from the power lines. My husband and my brother came by later on to check on us and they told us that the high school was on fire because of the spilled chemicals in the chemistry lab. Because of the aftershocks, we dragged the mattresses outside and slept on a portion of the driveway by the garage. We used the garage door as a temporary wall and the wall of the aviary as another wall. We enclosed the two sides with rugs and blankets and slept and cooked outside for three weeks in that temporary shelter. My brother brought bottled water because the sewer and water lines had been broken. Unfortunately, my husband had been hurt during the earthquake when some bricks fell on his shoulder, and it strained his heart. From then on, he had heart trouble. We lost the store, and I went to work at a large dry cleaning plant in Long Beach as a bookkeeper." □

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