



Reclaiming Place through Remembrance: Using Oral Histories in Geographic Research

Ashley R. Ward

*Department of Geography
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

It isn't often that you stare an old dinosaur directly in the face, smell its breath, feel its dry, scaly skin, or sense the way the earth rumbles when it moves. Yet here I was in the midst of the packing room of the old Liggett-Myers tobacco factory in downtown Durham, North Carolina—a real, living dinosaur, ever present on the landscape. It looms over all of the city's core, its smokestacks visible from nearly every point in the downtown area. Today it is silent, in sharp contrast to the echoing hum that once permeated the surrounding area and was so loud on the factory floor that ear protection was required of all who worked within.

Inside, the outline of where machines once stood permanently scar the wood flooring. The machines still in place are in various stages of disassembly with cigarette filters falling out of their mouths. There was definitely a smell; the sweet odor of cured tobacco was present, but it was much faded compared to the smell of dampness, of age. The rooms had such an expanse that even my high-powered flashlight couldn't illuminate the farthest corners, and neither the large windows along the east side nor the gaping hole on the west side where the elevated walkway was once connected came near to providing full light. It was creepy. It was something directly out of an old horror movie, yet I felt lucky to be standing there. I was standing in the midst of the final hurrah of Durham's tobacco legacy before it was to become something its founders probably never anticipated: high-rent apartments and high-end commercial space.

These walls could certainly tell stories—stories of men and women who had come from all over rural North Carolina for the hope of a better future, stories of countless African Americans who found real, if limited economic security in the tobacco factories of the piedmont, stories of labor, of loss, of joy, of created families, and of imagined communities. It was all here. Just as it lived in the individual memories of those that worked here, the collective memory is bound to this place. My training as a geographer compelled me to view this space organically, as a place that is living and evolving, as a site of contested meaning that may have been created by the past, but is imposing itself on the present.

Oral Histories as Geographic Method

Geographers have traditionally examined elements of landscape, human-environment interactions, and spatial distribution with an emphasis on place. The methods employed in their study of place and space have been diverse, and geographers who prefer qualitative methods have looked to other disciplines in the social sciences to enhance established, quantitative geographic methods. For example, ethnographic methods from anthropology and interview techniques from sociology have played important roles for geographers who wish to humanize their research while maintaining academic rigor and legitimacy.

Oral history, however, is a technique that has largely been ignored by geographers. Since the late 1970s, historians have increasingly applied oral histories to study a large range of issues. The approach differs from the more formal, pre-determined interview where participants are asked identical questions with structured follow-up for the purposes of comparing responses. Rather than creating research questions that are then imposed on topics of study, oral histories allow the collective voices of people to guide researchers into occasionally unexpected places. This does not imply that the research methods of oral historians are not structured, but rather that oral historians are open to giving agency to the people they study. Oral history has the potential to move the work of geographers in new directions and enhance current directions. This method is especially applicable to the study of memory and place, but can be useful to geographers in many sub-fields of the discipline.

This paper argues that oral histories can offer geographers the opportunity to examine the complexities and intricacies of place. In order to accomplish this task, I present an example of an oral history while integrating possible points of inquiry relevant to geography. Giving a voice to the voiceless has long been (and continues to be) a goal of oral historians. Interjecting place analysis into oral history is particularly fitting for geography and potentially informative for oral historians.

I begin with an example that illustrates the power of oral history to illuminate complex ideas and relationships. Although a single source would be insufficient for research questions, it is adequate in demonstrating the efficacy of this method. The short oral history is followed by a discussion of the use of oral histories in geography. The few that are available support my argument regarding the usefulness of this method. I conclude with a discussion of the difference between oral histories and other forms of ethnographic research, a distinction that may appear to be minor but is crucial in appreciating the benefit of oral histories over other methods. To these purposes I introduce the story of Verlie Minnie Sue Mooneyham.¹

"I Came Across those Mountains and Never Looked Back"

Sue Mooneyham was raised in a sharecropping family in the small community of Del Rio, Tennessee just over the border from North Carolina. In the early 1900s, Del Rio, in Cocke County, was still not designated by the U.S. Census.² The town is situated alongside Big Creek and was originally a home to the Cherokee. This place, surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains, is majestic and isolated. It is excluded by its geography from the cultural, economic, and social influences of cities such as Asheville, North Carolina, to the east, and Knoxville, Tennessee, to the west. Sue and her family lived in the section of Del Rio known by locals as Slab Town, in Annie Holler. Aside from train tracks, a small whitewashed post office, and a community store, Slab Town is even now no more than a brief setting on the landscape. On school days, Sue would come down from the holler and meet her teacher, Mr. Stokley (part of *the Del Rio Stokleys*),

who, as she tells it, would walk her across the creek to the one-room school house.³ Although Sue enjoyed learning, her experience with formal education ended by the age of eight. She was needed to work on the mountain with her sharecropping family, to maintain the most basic of existence.

In 1944, Sue was fifteen years old and married. She and her husband's family, the Burgesses, ventured over the great Appalachian Mountains on a journey to South Carolina to follow the agricultural season. For unknown reasons, they were waylaid in Durham, North Carolina. Founded in the mid-nineteenth century as a railroad depot, in 1944 Durham was a city made of tobacco factories and cotton mills, its urban landscape dominated by the large brick tobacco warehouses and with the air infused with the sweet smell of tobacco.⁴

Sue found a job at the Erwin Cotton Mill where she worked for about two years until she was able to secure a position at the Liggett-Myers Tobacco Factory. Liggett-Myers was established in St. Louis during the war of 1812 and sold in the late 1800s to the Duke family in Durham. According to Sue, work in the cotton mill was "no good," and a job in the tobacco factory was considered a step up.

When Sue's husband and the rest of the Burgess family were ready to move on to South Carolina, Sue was not willing to go.⁵ The family moved on and Sue stayed—seventeen years old, alone and pregnant. She said, "I had never been to the doctor before that job. And I knew that I couldn't leave such a good job." In addition to health insurance, Sue identified other issues important to her such as paid sick leave, maternity leave, and vacation. Her choice to stay was unusual, made possible by the broader changes occurring in the South at the time.

Under the Roosevelt administration, workers in the United States could be given benefits in lieu of increases in hourly pay. This, along with the unique role of union activism in Durham, created an environment for workers unusual in many industries in the United States. In "From Sickness to Health: The Twentieth-Century Development of U.S. Health Insurance," Melissa Thomasson outlines the catalysts for a boom in health insurance during the 1940s.⁶ The decade between 1940 and 1950 witnessed an explosion in the numbers of Americans who had health insurance coverage, from approximately 12.3 million in 1940 to approximately 75 million in 1950. The factors that contributed to this growth were improvements in medical technology; government policies that encouraged health insurance with employment, causing a decrease in the price of health insurance; unstable demand for hospital services; and competition among health insurance providers.

According to Thomasson, the most effective mechanisms for change were government policies. During World War II, fixed price and wage controls prohibited employers from adjusting wages as a method for competing for labor. The adoption of the Stabilization Act in 1942 meant that while employers could not vary wages, they could offer benefit packages to attract and keep employees. Moreover, union efforts during the World War II era resulted in the provision of benefits for tobacco workers in Durham before these provisions were extended to tobacco workers elsewhere in piedmont North Carolina.⁷

Sue's immediate mention of health care as a primary reason for her desire for employment at the tobacco factory reflects the novelty of such programs during this period. Sue's testimony demonstrates the significance of employee benefits to working-class single woman who had been shut out of the private health care system during the Depression due to a lack of financial resources. Her ability to obtain employer benefits was so important that more than sixty years later, Sue still recalls the benefits as her primary reasons for keeping her job at the tobacco factory.

According to Sue, on a normal day in 1946 she would wake up at 5:30 am and get ready for work. Her job at Liggett-Myers Tobacco factory began at 7 am. At the time, Durham was filled with young GIs who were stationed at Camp Butner, about fifteen miles outside of Durham.

Sue recalls standing at the bus stop at Five Points watching the GIs and other young women in the cafes dancing the jitter bug and laughing with one another.⁸ Once at the factory, Sue ran a “packer” and a “wrapper.” The packer machines collected the cigarettes into packs of ten, and the wrapper machines wrapped the pack in cellophane. Sue remembers that initially, these functions were accomplished with two machines, operated by five women. At one point, only three women were allocated to operate the machines. Finally, new technologies brought the “GDs,” a machine imported from Germany that could both pack cigarettes and wrap cigarette packs.⁹ After that point, one person could operate the machine that both packed and wrapped the cigarettes. Initially, the workers on these machines were women. Men worked on the “maker” machines, machines that made the cigarettes, or they were “fixers,” who repaired machines. Male maker operators and fixers were paid more than the female packers and wrappers. It was also primarily men who held management positions. Although Sue remembers that there were some women supervisors, or “floor ladies,” they were the subordinates of men. Eventually, in the 1960s, men began working the packers and wrappers, and women were allowed to work on the makers. Sue remembers this as an important change for the women in the factory as it gave them the potential to earn more income.

While the tobacco factory did employ both black and white women in the 1940s, Sue recalls that black and white women did not work together. She claims that after integration and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, black women and men were trained to run the machines. Until this time, blacks were given the “dirty jobs,” as Sue labeled them. They swept the floor, cleaned the bathrooms, worked across the street from the factory unloading the tobacco, and worked on the fifth and sixth floors cutting the tobacco and mixing the blends that would be put into the cigarettes. Sue does not recall animosity among workers at the factory once integration occurred. “When they brought someone to you to train them on a machine, you just did it. And you were nice to them ... if you wanted to keep your job.” Again, Sue’s testimony offers an entry into a larger debate surrounding racial issues in the Civil Rights Era south, and how those issues translated to work-place politics. While there are statistics from various agencies that could support or challenge the process of integration among workers in the south, the accounts offered through the oral histories of workers provide a narrative impossible to retrieve through quantitative data alone. Sue’s perspective on work place integration is an excellent example of one of the strengths of oral histories to be discussed later in this paper.

Sue often thinks about “the good old days.” Her thoughts frequently return to times when Liggett-Myers hired entertainers, such as Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, or Jimmy Dean to perform for the workers on the street outside of the factory. When I asked her what changed, she could not articulate any specific change. Her response was “progress changed. You felt freer back then than you do now, you know? You had...the company wasn’t pushy like it is now. You did your job and they didn’t bother you. But before I retired, the company would have to come behind everybody due to the new crowd. They didn’t carry their weight and do their jobs right. One day I asked a supervisor why. The supervisor said this is a new generation. We worked--we didn’t stand around and talk like they do now.”

Sue’s best memories are those of the people and of her work. She enjoyed her work, and she often thinks about her time in the tobacco factory. She’d love to be there now, working and spending time with her co-workers. She has not yet visited the newly renovated Liggett-Myers factories that are now high-rent apartments and commercial spaces. She hears that Durham is doing a good job with the reclamation and feels that the project is important: “It’s history.” She compares the factory reclamation with the city’s failure to preserve the old train station. “Many a GI went through that train station on their way from Camp Butner – and that’s now gone. They should have never torn that down. That was a mistake. Hopefully they’ve learned their lesson.”

Even though the former factory and warehouses are being used for high-rent apartments and commercial space instead of being preserved in its original state, Sue believes that the project is still worthwhile.

Oral Histories in Geography

There have been very few examples in academic geography of the use of oral histories as a methodology. In his 1992 book, *Wagering the Land: Ritual, Capital, and Environmental Degradation in the Cordillera of Northern Luzon, 1900-1986*, Martin Lewis used oral histories to help him understand important local developments that were otherwise absent in scholarly reports and newspaper articles.¹⁰ In *Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence, and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya*, Stanley Stevens agreed with Lewis regarding the use of oral history, and employed the method in his discussion of environmental change.¹¹ Eric Perramond's article, "Oral Histories and Partial Truths in Mexico," discussed directly the challenges and benefits of incorporating oral history into geographic research.¹² According to Perramond, one of the most significant challenges to oral histories is that, "data recovered from oral methodologies are not easily shaped into firm quantitative measures of the past, but, instead, reflect current perceptions and memories." Perramond's second concern, which referred to the incorporation of oral histories in geographic research, is well taken: "The danger lies in attributing rationales or explanations to events and people, or in blindly accepting them, in the face of contradictory evidence." This point is particularly applicable to attempts to reconstruct past geographies, a process that is vulnerable to the imposition of modern perceptions. However, the temptation to reconstruct the past may be no more related to oral histories than to any historic document.

In 1998, Altha Cravey employed oral histories to understand work-place politics, race and gender among current labor populations. More specifically, Cravey's study focused upon women's work in Mexico's maquiladoras, and how this work has changed over time. In *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras*, Cravey examines how changes in gender roles translate into larger community changes, using personal narratives from female workers.¹³ Cravey's work illustrates the usefulness of personal narratives in considering day-to-day impacts of wider social changes. The example given in this paper offers several points of interjection to illustrate local or individual impacts of wider social change, among them the role of female migration and urbanization in the American South with respect to the current identity of former factory workers. A second point is the modern perceptions of the period of integration of the work place. Both of these instances allow us the benefit of small-scale reflection of large-scale phenomena.

David Harvey and Mark Riley have written specifically about the role of oral histories in geography with regard to heritage management of landscape and landscape archaeology. In *Country Stories: the Use of Oral Histories of the Countryside to Challenge the Sciences of the Past and Future*, Harvey and Riley look to oral histories to "animate...landscape narratives of the past, and to challenge and problematise" narratives that inform management policies in Britain's rural areas.¹⁴ Relevant to the oral history example offered in this paper is Harvey and Riley's discussion about the recreation of heritage landscapes and risk of constructing new landscapes whose meaning is removed from the social, economic, and cultural context in which it was created. These ideas followed their call for the use of oral histories in landscape archaeology.¹⁵ By placing members of the public in the role of "knowing agents in the construction...of archaeological knowledge," Harvey and Riley claim that previous knowledge can be "destabilized" in ways not possible through positivist methods.¹⁶

In 2006, Andrews et al. reiterates the points made earlier by Perramond, Harvey, and Riley regarding the tendency to impose current perceptions on oral histories, but they assert that the ability of oral histories to represent cultural constructions is of important value.¹⁷ In fact, the authors state, “these narratives provide...recollection about self, about relationships with others and a place, insights rarely provided in such depth by other methods.” They also point out that oral histories provide a unique perspective on the “geographies of everyday” as well as the changing “perceptions of place,” giving researchers an avenue in which to understand the relationships between identities and place at a variety of scales.¹⁸ As a final point, Andrews, et al. identify a quality inherent in oral histories not previously articulated as clearly: oral histories are taken from the living, who are able to contemplate both the past and present, exposing how the “past is located in their present.”¹⁹ This point has long been appreciated by oral historians, but outside of these few examples, geographers have yet to fully realize this potential in their own research.

Finally, in *Talking Geography: On Oral History and the Practice of Geography*, Riley and Harvey articulate a key role for geographers in the practice of oral history.²⁰ According to Riley and Harvey, oral historians have only slightly engaged with traditional themes of scale, place, memory, and identity. “The issue of scale is important here, as place-specific, local, personalized and practice-based oral accounts are used to disturb the longitudinally expert-driven metanarratives...”²¹ This possible intervention by geography into the well-established field of oral history is compelling. Geographic perspectives on space and place can further critique “hidden histories,” a key component of oral histories while reminding geographers of the significance of the “lived experiences of individuals.”²² Therefore, while geographers are in a position to gain depth in their research using oral history methods, oral historians are in a position to gain depth through the incorporation of geographic theories. Geographers have largely unrealized their important contribution to another field.

Using and Interpreting Oral Histories

Sue and women like her could not leave behind diaries or other written records. Their life stories do not find a place in traditional archives. Oral history, however, can partially fill that void, and indeed is often the only way to do so. Therefore, the documentation of such histories offers an important resource that can inform research in new ways. Oral histories present the possibility of an alternative view of the past, one that is inclusive of groups of people who may not be represented in the written record. Oral history also expands the possibilities for researchers, making possible new questions, especially when traditional sources and oral histories are combined. In *The Voices of the Past: Oral History*, Paul Thompson argues that oral histories provide “a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account... [and have a] radical implication for the social message of history as a whole.”²³ Assuring the inclusion of multiple viewpoints does not only serve a reconstruction of past, as already demonstrated by geographers, it can also inform understandings of identity and place in the present.

Alistair Thomson asserts that while oral histories do present current perceptions, these can sometimes be considered a resource rather than a problem.²⁴ Memory, Thomson states, can be used to understand how people make sense of their past and how people interpret their lives. In like manner, geographers can use oral histories to understand how memory shapes ideas of place, as pointed out by Andrews et al., and Riley and Harvey. For example, Sue’s memories regarding the value of her job at the tobacco factory, and the factory’s continued presence downtown can be used by geographers to understand one aspect of historic preservation projects, such as factory

and mill reclamation, that are often ignored in the development process. Does the narrative of downtown revitalization projects offered by developers coincide with the narrative of downtown residents? If not, how are they different? While this example focuses upon a particular region, geographers can contextualize this information to determine how this knowledge informs research outside of the American South.

The division of place into different, potentially competing experiences is described by Sue when she talks of standing at Five Points watching GIs and their dates dance in corner cafes. While this highlights an important concept of place often described in geography, the use of oral history exhibits the theory in practice. In "A Global Sense of Place," Doreen Massey says, "If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both."²⁵ The complexity of place can be appreciated in Sue's account, recognizing that the construction of networks, social meanings, and understandings exist on a larger scale than what Sue defines as this particular place – of Durham, of Liggett-Myers, of Five Points. The narrative offered by the two groups only serves to enlighten the understanding of each groups' memory and identity as it is tied to the physical landscape, again demonstrating the usefulness of oral histories to geographer's study of memory and place.

Building further on Massey's work, implicit in the recognition that place can have multiple identities is an assertion that as localized as place can be to the individual, there are political, social and economic elements that connect individual places to a wider network of activity present at a larger scale. As seen here, the use of oral histories can demonstrate this recognition and reveal in more specific terms the differing players that construct the multiple identities of place. In this example, the people in this particular place at this particular time are also impacted by larger structures. The GIs are part of a nation-wide war effort that increased connectivity and encouraged mobility. Access to wages and benefits resulted in autonomy for female workers who had migrated from the countryside where patriarchal structures prohibited such independence. Black men and women were able to create a working middle-class in Durham due to economic opportunities made available through employment in the tobacco factories, a phenomenon rarely seen across the piedmont.²⁶ In each case, structures at the local, regional, and nation-wide scale combine to create a uniqueness of place and identity.

One demonstration of the need to critically analyze oral histories is Sue's discussion of the division of race in the workplace. Sue's memory regarding integration in the tobacco factories is unexpected in that Sue does not recollect any contention in the work place with regard to integration in the 1960s. While this may indeed be Sue's personal experience, we should not assume a tension-free transition as blacks moved into positions previously held by whites. Further discussion on integration in the workplace can be found in Korstad's work.²⁷ However, Sue's perspective has been duplicated in other situations. Most recently, NPR's "Weekend Edition Saturday" aired a story about mine workers in Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights Era.²⁸ "Hiking the Mountain that Made Birmingham" by Al Letson focuses upon the experiences of black and white mine workers in Birmingham, AL during the 1950s and 1960s. The objective of the story was the recollection of race relations between mine workers, most of which were positive. The narrative revealed in the newscast is at times counter to the national narrative offered of integrated work place experiences during this particular time period. Additionally, the author states that this narrative is contradictory to his own experience. Perramond's concern regarding the blind acceptance of information provided through oral histories is legitimate, but can be overcome. It is also worthwhile to point out how Letson's demonstration supports Thompson's assertions, outlined earlier, that current perceptions are a source for analysis as well.

The history offered by Sue also coincides with earlier work by geographers Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson in "Gender, Class and Space."²⁹ The authors challenge the traditional arguments about the social reproduction of class that rely on census data and "standard models of residential structure" to show a homogenous social geography where in fact strict divisions of labor that occur along gender lines encourage a more complex social geography than traditionally believed.³⁰ The purpose here is not to argue for or against the Pratt-Hanson thesis, but to demonstrate how the use of oral histories can provide a comparison to quantitative data in investigations of social geography. The comparison provides researchers with a breadth that is not available by using only quantitative data.

As discussed above, a common critique of oral histories has been the reliability and usability of the information provided. So far, this debate has centered upon the person offering the narrative, but like in all areas of research, the burden to properly analyze sources remains with the scholar. A final, but notable point is that scholars can impose assumptions on documents as easily as on oral histories. In *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Valerie Yow argues that many sources used for historic research are suspect.³¹ For instance, data offered on marriage, birth, and death records can be skewed when people attempt to conceal ages or time intervals to avoid public scrutiny. Thus, the burden of properly analyzing data is similar in both instances. Similarly, current debates about external influences on data, such as Census records, indicate that scrutiny is required not only for historic sources, but for all source material. The structure of questions and the method of survey distribution or interviewee selection can influence the results of even more quantitative data gathering techniques. Therefore, by approaching oral histories in the same thorough and critical manner that scholars approach all sources, the possibility of unreliable or misleading data is diminished as much as possible.

Oral History versus Ethnographic Methods

The study of memory and place has a long tradition in geography. Geographers' attempts to understand spatial arrangements are typically framed within the context of how the environment shapes people, and how people shape the environment. But geographers also seek to understand how place is perceived and understood. For Sue, the mere presence of the factory on the urban landscape is a testament to her own history and that of Durham. The function of the physical structure matters little to Sue when compared to its importance for her remembrance. This perspective requires further investigation through the expansion of oral histories. Like traditional ethnographic interview techniques, oral histories offer the "disciplined conversation" between the interviewer and interviewee.³² However, unlike traditional interview techniques, oral history is a methodology that uses recorded interviews for the purpose of historic reconstruction. It is both time and subject specific.³³ Capturing memories through the collection of oral histories can serve as an invaluable resource to geographers as we strive to increase our understanding of place.

Micaela Di Leonardo specifically addresses the differences between ethnographic research methods and oral histories in her article, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter."³⁴ An anthropologist teaching Women's Studies at Yale University, Di Leonardo is well acquainted with both methods. According to Di Leonardo, both methods share in the desire to give voice to the often underrepresented in research as well as a willingness to connect on a more personal level through face-to-face interaction with interviewees. However, there are several points on which the two methods differ. First is the nature of the encounter between oral historians and ethnographers. Di Leonardo describes oral histories as "dyadic," while anthropologists typically

consider life histories within the context of a larger group (she does note that there are exceptions in both cases). Second, ethnographers “emphasize artifacts and focus on a combination of narrative and behavioral evidence” while oral historians do not document behavioral evidence.³⁵

Third, an essential difference between the two fields is the protection of privacy usually given to interviewees in ethnographic research that is specifically counter to the purpose of oral histories, which is to provide a historic record intended for public use.³⁶ Privacy protection is very much a part of anthropological methods. This does not mean that oral historians are careless in their recognition of privacy, but it does point out a difference in intent between the two approaches. Again, Di Leonardo recognizes that there are exceptions to this practice, but overall, anonymity of sources is a key component in anthropological studies. In comparison, oral histories are often part of an archive wherein contributors are identified. Interviewees are given the option to place restrictions upon when their oral history is made public in the archive, which provides access to the oral history, or if their oral history is in fact recorded at all in the archive. But the point remains that the intent of oral histories is disclosure for public use with the purpose of illuminating the greater historic narrative that remains hidden, except through the accumulated oral histories of individual participants.

Finally, Di Leonardo asserts that the position of oral historians place them in a less “God-like” position than anthropologists tend to portray.³⁷ This difference is largely due to the lack of behavioral analysis in oral histories, but it also has to do with the intercultural versus intracultural nature of each. According to Di Leonardo, ethnographers tend to approach their study as “cross-cultural” while oral historians perceive their work as the “excavation of ‘our history.’”³⁸ This results in differing methods of data collection and interpretation, but does not imply that certain issues (like the need to be aware of power differentials between researchers and informants) do not exist. In addition, researchers in both fields need to be sensitive to how texts are constructed so that “specific personal collaborations that produced the narratives that we present” are as honest as possible.³⁹

Lewis and Stevens also specifically address the difference between oral history and oral tradition, cautioning readers about the difficulty of assessing information acquired through oral tradition. Stevens offers a clear distinction of the two, writing that oral traditions are “legends and hearsay” passed down from one generation to the next while oral histories are “personal reminiscence about one’s own lifetime and experience.”⁴⁰ This specific component of oral histories is part of what Alessandro Portelli refers to in his article, “What Makes Oral History Different.”⁴¹ According to Portelli, a basic distinction between oral histories and other methods is that oral history “tells us less about events and more about their meaning.”⁴² The speaker’s subjectivity is a unique benefit to oral histories, but one that raises questions of credibility. Like the earlier debate about Sue’s experience with integration in the tobacco factory, Portelli states, “the importance of oral testimony may lie not in the adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge.”⁴³

Viewing memory not as a receptacle for factual information, but as a working process that constructs meaning is one of oral history’s great, potential contributions to geographers who already view place in like fashion. Ultimately, oral histories offer greater subtlety in geographic research. Geographers can address the traditional questions of place inherent in the discipline, and situate the complex components of memory, identity and place at an intersection with theory. Geography maintains its focus on place, but the flow of information would be multi-directional, from both the subject of study and the researcher. In the end, I believe it is a combination and recognition of these components that best serve the research.

NOTES

¹ Interview, Verlie M. Sue Poole, 26 July 2008. Sue is the maternal grandmother of the author. She is referred to by her maiden name, Verlie Minnie Sue Mooneyham. Poole is her married name, the result of her later marriage to James Poole.

² The term “designation” is used for consistency with the terminology of the U.S. Census Bureau for Census Designated Place (CDP). Places, according to the U.S. Census Bureau Geographic Area Description, are composed of CDPs, consolidated cities, and incorporated places. CDPs do not have a population size requirement, but instead are used to identify settled concentrations of populations that are not legally recognized as incorporated by the state in which they are located.

³ Born in Warren County, North Carolina in 1747, Jehu Stokley was the first Stokley to settle in Tennessee in 1797. He brought with him a wife, Nancy Neal from Charleston, South Carolina, and six children, Royal, John, Thomas, Susan, Nancy, and Polly. Jehu’s great grandsons would later found Stokley Van-Camp’s, famous for their pork and beans. This information and much more on the Stokley family can be found in “Genealogy of the Stokley’s from East Tennessee” by Gordon Stokley Jr. (<http://home.cinci.rr.com/stokely/>)

⁴ The total population of Durham County in the 1890 Census, the first year it appeared in the U.S. Census, was 18,041. By 1940 the total county-wide population for Durham County was 80,244, and the total urban population for Durham was 60,195. Historical Census Browser (2004). Retrieved 28 September 2008 from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>

⁵ While Sue is willing to discuss her work in the tobacco factory and some of the circumstances that led her to Durham, North Carolina, she is not willing to discuss her marriage or pregnancy in any detail.

⁶ Melissa A. Thompson, “From Sickness to Health: The Twentieth-Century Development of U.S. Health Insurance,” *Explorations in Economic History* 39 (2002): 233-254.

⁷ Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁸ Five points is a neighborhood and business district at the intersection of Cleveland, Mangum, and Corporation Streets in the downtown area of Durham, NC.

⁹ “GDs” refer to the G.D AUTOMATISCHE VERPACKUNGSMASCHINEN GmbH, manufactured in Langenfeld, Germany. The machines were initially brought to the U.S. in the 1970s. For more information, see the corporate website: http://www.gidi.it/gd/english/company/gd_world_germany.jsp.

¹⁰ M.W. Lewis, *Wagering the Land: Ritual, Capital, and Environmental Degradation in the Cordillera of Northern Luzon, 1900-1986* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹¹ S.F. Stevens, *Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence, and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹² Eric Perramond, "Oral Histories and Partial Truths in Mexico," *Geographical Review: Doing Fieldwork* (2001) 91: 151-157.

¹³ Altha Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 1998).

¹⁴ David Harvey and Mark Riley, "Country Stories: The Use of Oral Histories of the Countryside to Challenge the Sciences of the Past and Future," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 30 (2005): 19-32.

¹⁵ David Harvey and Mark Riley, "Narrating Landscape: The Potential of Oral History for Landscape Archaeology," *Public Archaeology* (2005): 19-32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45

¹⁷ Gavin J. Andrews, Robin A. Kearns, Pia Kontos and Viv Wilson., "'Their Finest Hour': Older People, Oral Histories, and the Historical Geography of Social Life," *Social and Cultural Geography* (2006) 7: 153-177.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰ Mark Riley and David Harvey, "Talking Geography: On Oral History and the Practice of Geography," *Social and Cultural Geography* 8 (2007): 345-351.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 347.

²² *Ibid.*, 349.

²³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁴ Alistair Thompson, "Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History," *The Journal of American History* (1998) 85: 581-595.

²⁵ Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

²⁶ These events have been well documented by historians. Some useful sources include: Leslie Brown's *Upbuilding Black Durham* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Dolores E. Janiewski's *Sisterhood Denied* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1985); Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

²⁷ Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*.

²⁸ "Hiking the Mountain that Made Birmingham," *Weekend Edition Saturday* (Chapel Hill, NC: National Public Radio WUNC, February 26, 2011).

²⁹ Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson, "Gender, Class, and Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 (1988): 15-36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ Valerie R. Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005).

³² Linda Shopes, "What is Oral History?" *History Matters: The US Survey on the Web*. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>. Shopes is a past president of the Oral History Association and an editor of *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

³³ For other information on collecting oral histories see the Oral History Association: www.oralhistory.org

³⁴ Micaela Di Leonardo, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," *The Oral History Review: Fieldwork in Oral History* 15, (1987): 1-20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ Stevens, *Claiming the High Ground*, 9.

⁴¹ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge: 2008).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cravey, Altha. *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras*. Rowman & Littlefield. 1998.

Korstad, Robert Rodgers. *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Interview, Verlie M. Poole (Sue), 26 July 2008.

Lewis, M.W. *Wagering the Land: Ritual, Capital, and Environmental Degradation in the Cordillera of Northern Luzon, 1900-1986*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.

Massey, D. *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*. Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1984.

Perramond, Eric. "Oral Histories and Partial Truths in Mexico." *Geographical Review*. 91(1/2) *Doing Fieldwork* (Jan-Apr 2001): 151-157.

Pratt, G. and S. Hanson. "Gender, Class and Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (1988) 6: 15-36.

Stevens, S.F. *Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence, and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

Thomasson, Melissa A. "From Sickness to Health: The Twentieth-Century Development of U.S. Health Insurance." *Explorations in Economic History* (2002) 39: 233-253.

Thomson, Alistair. "Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History." *The Journal of American History* (1998) 85(2): 581-595.

Thompson, Paul, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 3rd Edition: Oxford, 1978.

Yow, Valerie R. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2nd Ed. AltaMira Press, 2005.