

## Value and Use of Oral History in Business

*Phyllis Jean Wente\**  
Eli Lilly and Company

In considering "The Potentials and Pitfalls of Oral History for Business Historians," two major pitfalls need to be contemplated. First, the business historian must recognize that the taped interview itself is not a history, but a tool, a method, if you will, of generating material for archival purposes which may be of value to him in his research for his manuscript. Second, the historian in his interviews must realize that he is dealing with memory and, therefore, should constantly recall the wise statement that "The palest ink is better than the clearest memory."

What potential, what value then, does the taped interview have for a business historian? Oral history can be a very useful tool. Although archival records may contain basic details about events or occurrences, supplemental information may be lacking -- very often is. Through a series of interviews the historian may obtain details that will provide not only the supplemental information, but the perspective needed for his work.

Details supplied by one person in an interview do not always match those presented by another individual. Each has his own viewpoint of a given situation. In the interface of these recollections, in the convergence of testimony, so to speak, a balanced picture of an event may be revealed. By gathering various views of occurrences, the overall perspective is gained.

Eli Lilly and Company, a 105-year-old pharmaceutical manufacturing concern, started its oral history program for archival purposes on a very small scale in 1967. It is still a moderately small-scale program which has been put in charge of the corporate historian, who not only views it as a means of generating raw material for archival purposes, but also uses the interviews as a source of research material for his history manuscript.

The company was started by a Civil War veteran, Colonel Eli Lilly, a pharmacist who decided to open his own small pharmaceutical manufacturing business in May 1876. The colonel believed in scientific pharmacy and rational therapeutics and began his firm at a time when the medical sciences were becoming established. At the start there were four employees, including himself. He was research-oriented, took part in production operations, packaged

and marketed his own products, and was even known to take a buggy ride into the country on a Sunday afternoon to search in the woods for roots and barks which were used in the galenical drugs of the day. In short, the company was started as a vertically integrated operation and has continued to be so as it has grown.

The colonel's son, who at age 14 was one of the original employees, and two grandsons all became pharmacists and played active roles in the expansion and development of the company into the multinational corporation it now is. We still research, develop, manufacture, and market our own products. There has been some diversification in recent years; and, in addition to products for human use, animal and agricultural products, cosmetics, and items in the medical instruments field, such as electronic thermometers and cardiac pacemakers, are also provided. Though there is great diversity, all of the products in some way deal with health or betterment of the human condition. The diversity also makes for an extremely complex economic and social organization, since there are now some 28,000 employees worldwide.

Where does one start, or how does one go about, picking and choosing candidates for oral history interviews in such circumstances? The first step is development of a master list of prospective interviewees. Obviously the interviewing of hundreds of people would not be feasible; therefore, a more selective, primary list of interviewees is compiled from that master list. Since active employees may be too closely involved with operations to have much overall perspective of management and its policies, we prefer to interview retired employees for the most part, retaining the names of active employees on the master list for future addition to the primary interview listing.

A few other people who have participated in developments significant to the company have also been added to the lists. Dr. Charles Best who, with Dr. Frederick Banting, was a codiscoverer of insulin in the early 1920s, is an example of a person in the "other people" category.

We set up our primary list by choosing people who can tell us about a given area of the company in a particular period. We also take into consideration the need to look for the oldest surviving memories. Because our history project is a study of management over the years, a representative cross-section of retired employees is selected across all corporate functions, from top to bottom in order to gain perspective on the evolution of policies and practices, to learn about the whys and hows of the decision-making process, as well as to fill the gaps in the documentary evidence. Consequently our tape collection contains interviews with production workers as well as with management personnel.

We find that some individuals have spent their entire working time in one area of the company, while others have worked in many areas. While the individual who has been in only one area can

give a long-term view of it, the person whose work experience includes a number of areas can most likely give a comparative viewpoint. Therefore, we want both types on our prospective interview list. However, an individual's entire service career, not simply the time he spent in a specific area, is discussed during an interview.

Not only do we seek information about a department or a division during a particular period, but we also search for information about certain events which affected the area. Rush shipments of products to places ravaged by earthquakes or floods might be examples of such events. The development, production, and distribution of Salk polio vaccine would be another important example of an event that affected various departments and many workers, researchers, and management personnel. Information gleaned concerning a project such as polio vaccine would show the effect of policies and practices and give perspective on the decision-making process.

We are also concerned with people -- the characteristics and feelings of workers in an area, their attitudes about their jobs and the company, about management, as well as how management personnel perceived their function. Both viewpoints are important in order to obtain the perspective for a balanced account of the history.

Just as a review of documents, correspondence, and literature is a necessary starting point for background information in writing a business history, a review of personnel records, documents, and company publications is a necessary step prior to setting up an interview. When an interviewee recognizes that you have done your homework before your meeting with him, the openness and the quality of the discussion is expanded, producing a much more satisfactory interview.

In summation, through development of a master list of interview candidates, narrowed down to a selective primary list of interviewees, resource material can be obtained through oral history which may have potential use, particularly to give perspective, in the writing of a business history.

#### NOTE

\*For sources of this paper, contact Ms. Phyllis Wentz, Eli Lilly and Company, 307 E. McCarty Street, Indianapolis, IN 46285.