

# *Oral History and Evaluation*

*A paper presented by*

***Win Haseloff***

at the

Australian Evaluation Society (SA Branch)

7 December 2006

My trilogy of oral history studies with the ageing has sought to trace how older men and women reacted to the challenges they faced in their life, what they learned from their experience, and how profound an impact those hardships had on the way they saw themselves

I often speak of the value of implementing a collaborative partnership with the participants – whose average age was 85 years. I must now confess that it was only during the preparation of this paper that I began to ‘dig deep’ and to identify (and evaluate) some of the specific factors which are important in my interaction with older men and women.

- The first discovery I made was that I had unknowingly incorporated the same interaction components in all my research projects – *regardless of whether they related to studies with children of 4 or 5 years, with parents of young children, with teachers, across a wide range of professionals in the 50 and 75 year history of a hospital or with my older friends in this current trilogy.*

Then I wondered why I focused on a structured collaborative approach – rather than a method that incorporated the ever popular questionnaire with 2 to 3 pages of questions.

- I was reminded of a profound comment made by famous sculptor Henry Moore that, “There is no end to life. Everyone is different. Each is a variation of life.” *Over and again my experiences have verified Moore’s view. Few of the hundreds of children and adults I have interviewed would have been able to record their vitality, their unique personality and their wisdom on a list of boxed questions which had been prepared by someone they neither knew nor felt they could trust. — a situation they had often experienced during their life.*

So then I was forced, as my 15 year old grandson would suggest, ‘To get real’!

About 15 years ago, while doing some research at the Cambridge Institute of Education, I was invited by a playgroup leader in a nearby village to join her and five 4-year-old children as they visited Bill, who was one of their special Village F friends that they visited. The only information I was given about Bill was that he was 93 years old, very deaf and with failing eyesight.

The room we entered was dark and smoky. In the corner, in front of a small fire, was an elderly, rather bemused, gentleman surrounded by 5 very excited 4 year olds. Jenny, the Playgroup leader leaned close to his ear and said very loudly, 'Bill, I have brought an Australian to meet you'.

'A what?' said Bill. 'An Australian', shouted Jenny.

His face lit up. 'I haven't seen one since Palestine in '16'. His excitement was palpable. Does she know and Third Light Horsemen? He turned to Jenny, 'I've never told you any of the things they got up to. I taught them our game of Crown and Anchor and won 300 pounds from them – enough to build this cottage. They always had more money than us'.

Then raising his arm slightly with some difficulty and making a small flicking movement with his thumb and pointer finger, Bill said with a chuckle, 'What was that game they always used to play?'

Bill turned to me and said, 'But you know, she left me before the cottage was completed, but it has always been my home.'

I told Bill of Douglas, former Third Light Horseman, who in later years played cards several times a week with his friend 'Mac', A British veteran of Gallipoli. At 9 pm the two old soldiers would be found in front of a tattered calendar picture of 'the old Queen' raising their glass of whisky and toasting, 'Absent friends'. Bill understood. He paused and commented quietly, 'Yes'.

As we talked, his memories took him back to the Palestine of 1916 and the Diggers, and of being nursed by Australian girls. When I told Bill that the opponents in the card game were two of those 'girls' who had nursed boys from the Gallipoli and Palestine campaigns, his delight was complete. Then he chuckled, 'Did those chaps cheat? I bet they did'.

My Australian identity was the key that unlocked Bill's special memories of other years. In return Bill offered me a special fragment of our Australian heritage.

This unexpected informal interview isolated for me my first principle for oral historians:  
*Our prime task is to find means to unlock memories.*

But Bill also reminded me of the richness of our heritage that older people can offer –if we allow them

As a child I had had been surrounded by family members who told stories of Wales, of sailing ships, of the 'Original 8 of BHP, of nursing the boys in Salonica in WW1, of the battlefields of France, of winning the Melbourne Cup in 1886.

It was folklore at its best. I never tired of, or forgot, those shared memories from yesteryear.

Indeed my meeting with Bill and his World War 1 story made me realise that the more you may try to distance yourself from the memories of your childhood, the stronger and more secure they become within your memory as you find many were true. So, I felt the need to find out if older men and women today may indeed hold the key of our Australian heritage.

The identification of human needs has been part of my career paths in nursing, teaching and in research, but nothing prepared me for the insight and the strength of the responses of the 240 or so older men and women who have participated in this trilogy of studies. What has emerged is the richest learning experience possible

You see, oral history is not just interesting stories or amusing anecdotes. When Margaret relives the night when, as a young child, she had to bathe her mother's injuries with kerosene after she had fallen onto barbed wire while tending thirsty cattle, we come to understand the experiences, emotions and memories that shaped her life, and probably the lives of other people and, ultimately, the nation.

I know, now, why it was so important:

- To be sensitive to individual needs,
- To be constantly mindful of the shared wealth of knowledge and experience that we can all learn from,
- To be open to correction and prepared for unexpected queries and comments,
- To be consistent and maintain a continual willingness to share something of yourself with the person or the small group being interviewed.
- To know when to encourage, when to listen, when to gently probe and when to pause, and to ...
- Never forget who owns the story that is being shared.

These factors come together to form my second principle: *The project will only be fully successful when the participants have had the opportunity to get to know me, and me to know them. The participants need time to develop their trust both in me and the project.* After all, in

asking participants to share their memories with me, I am seeking from them a personal and precious favour.

That, in turn, leads to my third principle. *To focus my attention on the participants, and to gain the benefits of an objective scrutiny, I always seek approval from the Human Ethics Committee of UniSA prior to beginning each study.* This ensures that I have put in place all the protocols to protect participants, project and me.

My fourth principle is to *ensure the accuracy of the stories that are published.*

I meet participants either individually or in small groups. When shared humour emerges, then, too, does the confidence and the repartee – also the insightfulness of their stories. Many of the participants in their eighties or nineties retain their ability to express a definite, informed opinion on a wide range of contemporary issues – but this will rarely emerge at our first meeting; more frequently this begins at the third.

I encourage participation by posing questions to enhance curiosity and by providing resource material to act as bridges between past memories and different facets of today's world. One constant responsibility is to be alert in finding an interest key that will unlock the curiosity and open up the memory bank.

The ageing have little opportunity to share and play with different ideas, different opinions and past memories of different topics relating to our history. Each needs opportunity to focus attention, set goals, to offer feedback, to learn from others and, very importantly, to experience a feeling of control within the discussion –an experience they rarely have.

The participants often ask for additional reading on different topics or may bring their own resources to share with others – Cliff brought the small brass paper weight from his home that he had carried in his swag for the 5 years 'on the road' during the Great Depression of the 30s. From the adversity of their experience there emerges one constant – a heightened sense of humanity.

All discussions are recorded, transcribed and checked with the participants. During the co-editing phase, I work closely with each person to amend or expand their contribution, often visiting them several times and exchanging letters and phone calls. It is during the shared editing of their story, in preparation for the publication that further confidence and astute editing skills emerge as they refine and edit their story.

Perhaps one of the most challenging demands is in creatively re-exploring fragmented memory details with astute questioning, but the demands are no greater than one faces in many areas of consultation.

I make extensive use of a field diary to record observations of significant reactions of the participant during a visit e.g. frailty, eagerness to learn more of some issue, excessive tiredness or some distress, or a golden gem. I also record some evaluation of group dynamics and a self- evaluative review of researcher performance!

Perhaps I should add a fifth principle: *While it is important to be efficient and business-like in the administration of the project, I have found it essential to retain plenty of flexibility in my plans to cope with the, unexpected.*

It is the unforeseen responses, the unexpected events and the 'improbable comments that are an essential part of the vitality any discussions. They offer valuable insights of individual integrity that not only leave a deep impression - but sometimes create an unexpected dilemma for the researcher!

For example, one morning during a small group discussion one of the participants said, 'Oh Win, I have some pains in my chest!' And as I moved to her side I heard an unsteady voice saying, 'I hope she isn't going to die on us'. Sometimes one needs to reflect before making a response!

It is even more important to have space in the program for listening!

When meeting another participant one day, she said: 'Win, I have no story. I have had no ordinary life. My story ended when I was ten when I was admitted to hospital with polio. My life has been spent in an iron lung for many years, many, many operations and endless pain. You know I have listened to "Macca on a Sunday Morning" since it first began. His program takes me to places and people all over the world that I would have never known about. But now I have to go to breakfast between 8 and 9 o'clock, and I miss that program terribly.

Muriel — in her mid nineties — challenges us, with great clarity. She expresses the yearning need of many older men and women for intellectual insights.

“Why is it that people don’t realise that the greatest challenge we face in life is when we, or someone we dearly love, change from what we or they were. It is our mind that needs to be lifted above the sometimes crippling challenge. We need something new to think about.”

## CONCLUSION

I suppose oral historians and evaluators work towards quite different ends, but it’s possible that some of our methods will be remarkably similar. If so, I trust that the perspectives I have offered this evening will prove valuable in some of your work.

It is fair to say that I have marched to a different beat for several decades, now. I have felt affirmed and strengthened in my research by the recent publication of David Snowden’s *Aging with Grace: The nun study and the science of old age*. May I close by quoting the instructions Sister Carmen gave Snowden before he began his extensive and world-renowned study of aging and Alzheimer’s Disease with the School Sisters of Notre Dame:

“No matter what you do, I want you always to remember who these women are. They are real people. Very dear to us. They are holy people, too. I don’t want you to treat them as research subjects.