

PROCEEDINGS - ATTI

**35<sup>th</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS  
OF THE WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR THE  
HISTORY OF VETERINARY MEDICINE**

**IV CONGRESSO ITALIANO DI STORIA  
DELLA MEDICINA VETERINARIA**

a cura di **Alba Veggetti - Ivo Zoccarato - Elisabetta Lasagna**  
**Grugliasco (TO), 8 - 11 settembre 2004**

EDITO A CURA DELLA  
FONDAZIONE INIZIATIVE ZOOPROFILATTICHE  
E ZOOTECNICHE - BRESCIA

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CENTRO ITALIANO DI STORIA SANITARIA E OSPITALIERA (CISO)  
SEZIONE DI STORIA DELLA MEDICINA VETERINARIA

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Edited by

A cura di

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Via Bianchi, 1 - 25124 Brescia

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35<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the World Association for the  
History of Veterinary Medicine  
IV Congresso Italiano di Storia della Medicina Veterinaria

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## ORAL HISTORY: EXPERIENCE AND METHODS IN VETERINARY HISTORY

JOAQUIN SÁNCHEZ DE LOLLANO PRIETO, CARLOS BALLESTEROS

### RIASSUNTO

#### STORIA ORALE: ESPERIENZE E METODI NELLA STORIA VETERINARIA

*La Storia Orale (SO) è un metodo di ricerca le cui origini risalgono a circa trent'anni fa. Il suo uso è focalizzato sui seguenti settori: lo studio delle origini e delle condizioni di lavoro di certi gruppi professionali, il ruolo delle donne e della famiglia e l'etnografia. L'impiego di questo metodo, nondimeno, è stato allargato ad altre aree concentrate anni dopo in particolare sia sulla storia locale sia sulla scuola. Oggi, SO può contare su un'ampia gamma di risorse quali una vasta bibliografia, associazioni professionali specializzate, giornali e gruppi di lavoro. Lo scopo di questa comunicazione è di mostrare la rilevanza del suddetto approccio in particolare per la sua potenziale applicazione allo studio della storia della medicina veterinaria. L'attrezzatura richiesta è un registratore ed un questionario ben formulato. SO fornisce al ricercatore dati di prima mano circa le esperienze personali, sensazioni e percezioni dell'intervistato. Le informazioni ottenute per mezzo di questa tecnica devono essere confrontate e completate con fonti alternative di informazione al fine di eliminare aspetti soggettivi e preferenze degli intervistati. Ciononostante, SO potrebbe rivelarsi un approccio molto utile per gli studi di etnoveterinaria, pratiche tradizionali nell'allevamento o nella veterinaria, gruppi professionali, raccolta di materiale biografico di veterinari. Il presente lavoro include la descrizione di differenti tipi di tecniche di intervista e questionari preliminari. Inoltre fornisce dettagli relativamente alla trascrizione dei nastri e dei materiali sonori e le regole essenziali che accompagnano la registrazione come anche la sua validità come documento storico.*

In the 40's, the electronic recording of oral testimonies was devised by the journalist Allan Nevins in the United States, setting the first OH centre in Columbia University in 1948. This centre was a model for the ones created later in the 50's in the United States. The first International Conference on OH was celebrated in Bologna in 1976. From the 70's, the OH spread among historians and related scientists, giving birth to a discussion between with long term effects. Initially, it was embraced by historians and researchers with a clear left-wing political ideology; in fact, it developed mainly in extra academic spheres. Successively, it was included in archivistics, schools, universities and so on, losing political association. In spite of the critiques received, it has strengthened and matured. OH, originally conceived as a historiographic method, has been lately adopted by historians that used it not only as a method but also as a perspective to carry on historical studies. The main objective of OH has

been to record the oral testimony of history makers, either élite members or not. OH or historiographic research with oral sources (OS) is differentiated from other documentation such as a political meeting or a discourse records in methodological terms: oral sources were elaborated through a questionnaire, responding to a theoretical background and a set of hypotheses.

Briefly, the method involves the following sections: relevant questions are designed, necessary and optimum informants are searched and interviews are carried out. These oral testimonies are recorded and duplicated, later transcribed, and all the material and papers are processed, filed, and made available for other researchers. The contributions recorded are analysed and confronted with similar researches and the bibliography (source criticism).

OH as a method has enriched with personal data, living experiences and feelings the contributions on aspects of the

past. The avant-gardist tendency of this method and the focus on the protagonism and discourse of workers, illiterates, marginal groups, non-writing foreign cultures, etc. forced the first researchers into a kind of history basically social, centred in subjects like labour, family, feminism and ethnographic history. Later on, it gradually spread to other fields, intensively focusing both on local and school history. The most valuable studies, anyway, involved reduced communities that lacked previous documentation.

Currently, some of the means available for this research are a large background bibliography, and some specific associations, periodical journals and working groups. Due to time restrictions it is not possible to enlarge here on the rich range of contents both in periodical and non-periodical publications (either printed or electronic), congresses, meetings, specific seminars and records around the world. In almost any main language there is already a large literature and enough periodical papers (such as *Oral History Review*, *Oral History*, *International Journal of Oral History*, *Memory and Narrative*, *Historia y Fuente Oral*, *Historia Oral*, *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, *Oral History Association of Australian Journal*, *Oral History in New Zeland*, etc.). Apart from these specific papers on Oral History -or Oral Sources, as it is also called- there is a considerable amount of publications of a diverse kind incorporated in journals and bibliography more clearly oriented towards social history, archivistics, anthropology, sociology, demography, etc. (for instance, *Historia*, *Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, *Bios*, *Bulletin de L'Institut d'histoire present*. CNRS, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

As regards research teams, we should briefly mention the pioneer researchers such as Paul Thompson and his emblematic *The Voice of the Past*, *Oral History* (1978),<sup>2</sup> Ronald Fraser, Philippe Joutard, Francois Bédarida, Sandro Portelli, Luisa Paserini, etc. They were later joined by other researchers that have enlarged the

original nuclei or created new ones. For instance, Italy, who is welcoming this congress, has many periodical publications, groups and authors with a name in OH, such as Franco Ferrarotti, Alessandro Portelli, Pietro Clementi, Giovanni Contini or even the group from this Turin University, such as Luisa Passerini, Giovanni Levi or Scaraffia.<sup>3,4</sup>

In the History of Veterinary Medicine we identify some study fields where this methodology could be optimum. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the relevance of this approach and its potential application to the study of such History. The fields we consider could take advantage of the study using oral sources include ethnoveterinary medicine, livestock rearing or traditional veterinary medicines and practices, as well as biographies and certain professional groups or historical periods (such as wars) where the influence of feelings is overriding, etc. In many countries, ethnoveterinary is the only option available and in others traditional veterinary medicine is lost every generation.<sup>5,6</sup> When rigorously and systematically recording these practices and biographies, the professional heritage is recovered from a certain loss.

Although it has been already developed a good bibliography with sourcebooks and guides about research in OH, we want to mention a general outline. Once the topic has been selected, the research strategy should be designed. As a general rule, each OH project requires a specific methodology that should be established according to the topic, the hypotheses postulated and the time available: number and kind of informants, kind of interview, person and method to do the transcription, etc). In the case of Veterinary History, the outcome is very different for a professional aspect or practice, a group, the biography of a specific professional, etc. In this way, interview sessions are planned. In the case of interviewing the same person many times, it is advisory to think of breaks, different meeting days,

etc. In OH projects concerning groups, the criterion about the number and kind of informants is usually qualitative to include different professional categories or representative samples. There are many ways to contact informants (resorting to official lists or institutions, with the snowball technique where an informant suggests another person to be interviewed, etc.).

Previous to the interview, some forms are designed, including the authorisation to use the interview for research. The methodological guides for OH in the different languages include form models. In the authorisation, the research team is entitled to preserve and guard the recordings. The researchers, however, are obliged to guarantee the anonymity of the interview in his/her quotations. There is another form to be used when the informants have no objection to the full communication of the interview and its reproduction, signing the cession of their rights to use, transcribe, reproduce and print them, as well as to present them in congresses, seminars, expositions or the Internet.

Two data record models should be elaborated: one for the informant's personal data and main observations, and the other for the interview itself including an abstract, project title, other details about the informant and the interviewer, duration and place of the interview, sessions series, recorded tapes and topics catalogued, a brief description of the interview and the files attached (photographs, original and copied files, personal files, other objects, etc.)

Between the interview and the previous review of current bibliography about the case study, it is worth to learn as much as possible about the informants. Moreover, a list of topics and sub-topics for the interview should be considered in advance. A first approach to the informants explaining the goals of the research as well as appreciating their participation value is really important. The place, the recording method, the confidential terms, the anonymity, and other conditions must be

agreed. An informal conversation before the final recording is useful in order to obtain biographic data and to present the topics under consideration. The searching for files or photographic albums may stimulate memories. It is always desired to establish a good harmony with the informant from the beginning. A scheme of the interview should be ready.

The basic equipment is a minimum one: a good quality tape-recorder, preferably with external microphone for the interview, and the forms mentioned above. Recently, interview recording has been enriched by adopting videotape recording as some researchers state the informants get easily used to be filmed. Before the interview, a brief text introducing the interviewer and the informant, the date and place, and the topic under study. A previous informal conversation helps to relax the informant and to test the suitability of the equipment.

As regards the place for the interview, some scientists prefer avoiding the informants environment, such as their home or workplace, in order to prevent possible interruptions, moving to the researcher's office or a neutral place. Interviewing the informants at their own place, however, provides information about their environment, life-style, etc. The decision making depends upon the main topic under study, the informant's age, and so on.

Briefly, we can identify four methods for interviews: 1) closed questionnaires following very well designed and standard items; this type is highly determined by the operational hypotheses. 2) Semi-open or semi-guided questionnaires, where the informant determines the rhythm of the interview, allowing a guided or almost free monologue. 3) Open questionnaires outlined by the topics agreed by both actors as the interview develops, and 4) life story questionnaires, a special subtype where the informants describe their biographies. Beyond the chosen type of questionnaires, in OH it must be avoided to record only irrelevant information. The equilibrium between the defined schema

and the new aspects suggested by the informant should be achieved.

Short, easy and straight questions are useful to help the informants express themselves without prejudices or interruptions by the interviewer. Moreover, the question should be an open one avoiding "yes/no" replies. Questions such as "Is it true that...?", leading to implicit replies, should be discarded in advance. In general terms, it is better to start with pleasant topics and then move into more problematic ones. Pauses should be respected because they sometimes mean a hesitation about what is going on. When the informant enters into non-relevant topics, the conversation should be led to significant themes using diplomacy. During the retelling of certain facts, the emotional status of the informants is crucial to study the impact of their memories when the transcription is done.

More than two hours of interview is not appropriate, preferring meetings of half and hour and arranging more appointments if necessary. The informant may be asked about other possible informants or files, photographs, or objects to be photographed or copied. The recorded material is identified in terms of the topic, place, informants, date, etc. filling in the technical form mentioned above.

As regards transcriptions, there are many alternatives: 1) literal, advisable by most authors, which transcribes absolutely everything, including hoarseness, interjections, silences, repetitions, laughs and other feelings, etc. 2) corrected by the person interviewed, and 3) corrected by the interviewer, where hoarseness, repetitions, pet-phrases are eliminated. If any correction is carried out, it should be stated in the record. The quality of the transcription is important because it will be the source for further researchers. If the person transcribing is not the researcher, it is advisable to adapt writing details to make the transcription more representative.

The tapes, papers, authorisations and transcriptions used must be recorded in the li-

brary previously stated to enter its heritage and international databases (Research Libraries Information Network or others). Nowadays it is advisable to record the interviews in more durable CDs. Some countries count on National Sound Archives. Moreover, the sound files in the libraries has been largely increased; for instance, since the 90's, several guides were published with available data (cf. Barrera, Martini and Mulé, 1993; Perks 1990) and were enlarged periodically in publications by official institutions dealing with filing. Some institutional web pages linked to OH allows the direct access to transcriptions and oral recordings, such as, the virtual sound file of the California State University, Long Beach (<http://back.acs.csulb.edu:8080/oralhistory/index/html>).<sup>7</sup>

Among the disadvantages of the research with oral sources are: A) the reliability of the testimonies due to different reasons, such as memory loss. B) The subjectivity of the testimony, and C) the silences, the so-called ignored history that the person avoids. These silences are also important as they reveal certain aspects feared or troublesome.<sup>8</sup>

Personal partialities and subjectivity should be confronted with more informants and documents. There are authors that demand a more pragmatic point of view, giving away the concept of OH and its political-ideological connotations and prefer the term *use of oral sources in historical research*. These authors resort to the pragmatic and unprejudiced use of oral sources just as another documentation, such as traditional files, statistics, the press, literature, images, etc.<sup>9</sup>

A current challenge of OH is the incorporation of new technologies for storing and recovering of data. Actually there are efforts to design webs for the exchange of methods, visions, transcriptions and recordings, the scanning of previous oral sources, etc. In this sense, the Internet implies a great advantage increasing the possibilities of communication.

In our experience in Veterinary History,

this kind of historical research has been planned in two areas: a) as another method or view of historical research in History of Veterinary Medicine, kind of supplement of interviews, oral sources and documental records, and b) as an assignment for the students of the Veterinary College. The latter has facilitated their contribution of new recordings and materials for veterinary history and their introduction to historical research with a view visibly different to the traditional research in bibliography and documents. Slowly, year after year many records of professionals or professional practices are added. They are previously trained in interviews and participate in the selection of informants among acquaintances and relatives. In some cases, two or three students make many interviews writing a biography or short research about the profession based in oral data. We can also consult an important number of data about pedagogical experiences on oral sources research carried out by students of History and related subjects.

Contemporary historiography has considered research based on oral records as a fundamental element, and Veterinary History, as a constituent part of historiographic research, should incorporate the improvements on this field.

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