

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL FRISCH
RECIPIENT OF THE 1988 FORREST C. POGUE AWARD

OHMAR annually presents the Forrest C. Pogue award for significant contributions to oral history, the selection being made collectively by the former presidents of OHMAR. This year the award will be presented to Michael H. Frisch.

A graduate of Tufts, Michael Frisch received his Ph.D. from Princeton University. Since 1969 he has been a professor of History and American Studies at the State University of New York in Buffalo, where he currently chairs the American Studies Department. Among his publications are Town Into City: Springfield Massachusetts and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880 (Harvard Press, 1972) and Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society (University of Illinois Press, 1982), and numerous articles on oral history, public history, and American culture. In 1987 he became editor of the Oral History Review, and together with Linda Shopes he edits an annual oral history section in the Journal of American History.

Michael Frisch will receive the Pogue award and deliver an address on Saturday, October 15, at the special OHMAR session at this year's Oral History Association meeting in Baltimore.

On July 14, 1988, he was interviewed at his summer home in Oquossoc, Maine, via telephone, by Donald Ritchie.

RITCHIE: First, let me congratulate you on receiving OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award. Looking over your vitae, I noted that you had a distinguished academic record in graduate school, with a speciality in Gilded Age America.

What brought you from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, and to oral history?

FRISCH: That's an interesting area to start with because I think I came into oral history not from an explicit professional direction but more as a sideline and advocacy, and only gradually integrated it into my work. Frankly, for many years I had a "schizoid" existence. My formal work was in urban history and my doctoral dissertation was in nineteenth century. Urban history was a way to connect the past to the present, but nevertheless that work was really quite formal and traditional in many senses. In other parts of that work I became involved in what came to be called the "new urban history." I worked with the Philadelphia Social History Project and so forth. So on one side, a sort of left-brain, right-brain of my work, I have been involved in what you might call more traditional or formal type of historical research.

For me, the oral history influence came more out of my politics--not narrowly in the sense of current activism, but I was very involved in our university, and still am involved in fact in chairing an experimental American Studies program at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where I teach, and that involved a good deal of community activism. It was an attempt to bring into academic work the experiences of working people and different minority groups. It was really out of my involvement in that program, and in being challenged to think about very different approaches to contemporary society and to history that I became involved in oral history. The people in the program range from Native Americans, for whom oral tradition is a very real and central concern, to people who are working in working-class studies, people who combine community organizing with academic work, and so forth. There was a great deal of interest in oral history, and I got drawn into it

through that.

A number of people in the program got together at one time and started a small journal, which they called Red Buffalo. They decided to do an issue on oral history, as something that linked the concerns that many of them had. I was asked to do something to help produce this journal. I had just read Studs Terkel's book, Hard Times, and had some thoughts about it, so that gave me a focus for them. I wrote an essay about that. After that, for a number of years it remained almost on a separate track. I did some direct oral history myself coming out of that project, and another project of more contemporary history. I also wrote a lot criticism, in reviewing oral history. It's only been more recently that I've taken the two sides and put them together.

RITCHIE: You mentioned your review of Hard Times in Red Buffalo, which has been reprinted in a couple of places, and I think is how most people in oral history first discovered your interest in oral history. What always struck me about that article is that more than a review of the book, it's a review of the reviewers of the book. It seems that from the very beginning you've had a special interest in how oral history is publicly perceived and used. Am I right in that interpretation?

FRISCH: Yes, that's where I came into it. I think partially that has been the limit of a lot of the work I've done. I always have a certain humility or embarrassment in being taken seriously in oral history, because I really have not been involved in that part of the work, directly, that has been the one of the major features of oral history: I've not been involved in a major historical research projects, and I've not been involved in major collection building or archiving. I've come at it from a different angle.

I suppose this relates to your first question as well, I think one of the strengths of oral history has been that there are probably many people who

have bridged their way into it in one sense or another, rather than have set out to become oral historians, or define themselves professionally as full-time oral historians. That's helped provide, I think, a good deal of the texture of the field, and makes it very diverse and interesting. In my case, my main interest as a historian of American culture (which was really what I was doing in urban history) led to me to be particularly interested in the larger cultural issues that oral history is good at spotlighting.

My way of first getting into that, as your question indicated, was that how people perceive oral history is as interesting and as complicated as what oral history perceives about the culture. It's really a live relationship between oral history and the cultural. That's what first attracted my attention, because that's where I was coming from. I was coming from outside, so I was sort of perceiving oral history rather than being in oral history perceiving the historical objectives that one might study. A lot of my early work developed that kind of criticism.

The first project that I was involved with directly doing interviews myself was this project on unemployment in Buffalo, a documentary on unemployment that we prepared for the New York Times Magazine, partly as a result of that Red Buffalo piece that Studs Terkel had been aware of. When the Times asked him to come to Buffalo to do a thing on unemployment, he knew that people there had been talking about oral history, so he referred them to us. I plunged in because we had to do the thing very quickly, and I think I learned the most about oral history more broadly from the conflict we ended up having over the editing of the piece, which really involved the question of how do you read these documents, what kind of statements are in them, and what kind of social and cultural keys that have, and how can that be variously perceived.

RITCHIE: You were very critical of the Times for eliminating all personal assessments by the "man on the street" as opposed to evaluations by the elite, the officials, as if the average person didn't have anything important to say about events other than to describe their own particular situations. I remember you gave a talk about this at one of the OHA meetings, based on your experiences. Is this a major problem that you've found with the use of oral history, who gets quoted, who gets cited, and who becomes an authority?

FRISCH: Well, I think you describe it correctly. It's sort of like my whole biography that we've been talking about. It began with more contemporary or political movements, but I don't think I began to see the broader issue until we had that fight with the Times. It was an elusive thing to put your finger on at first. We talked about it a lot and we began to get a sense of why we were differing with them so much. At first we couldn't understand it, and yet we knew that they were differences there that seemed to make a big difference in terms of the product that was going to come out, in the form of the selections they were making.

That was there in the Terkel article as well, in the sense that I really found that generally there was not that much sensitivity to--or at least there wasn't at that point, I think there's a great deal more now--to the range of the kind of things one finds in oral history. I guess it's what they were being read to mean, either by these editors, or the public, or by people in historical media, not necessarily by oral historians. Then I began looking more in the world of oral history itself. Even there I found there was not always that much sensitivity to the historical and cultural complexity in the documents. That's become a central concern of mine.

This led me into noticing what I came to think of as the initial

interpretive authority, that in the oral history situation, the dialogue that oral history is, there is a lot of interpretation going on, on both sides of the tape recorder. There is a tendency, not simply in the editors of the New York Times but I think in many historians, and many people in oral history, to see it as an extractive process. You know, where you are collecting the raw materials that later historians can use. There's of course a great deal of truth in that, but that can slide very gradually into a broader attitude which is really quite problematic, that we will do all the interpreting, because people are just providing us with raw material. That was a very powerful reminder, that the New York Times didn't want to print how people thought about things, they just wanted them to tell us how much it hurts, and then let our leaders do the explaining. So I became more and more concerned with this issue of interpretation, and the way in which in oral history this becomes a kind of a shared process, sometimes very implicitly. But in a sense both sides of the tape recorder are providing a version. You can't really even tell your story, as we all know, without shaping it, without doing what it is that historians do.

In a funny way, this became very important to me in working out what really right from the beginning I suppose were some of the tensions involved in the late '60s and early '70s challenge to orthodox academics. If I could go back a bit to your first question, even in my own interests I suppose there was that sort of schizoid sense that one part of me was the formal historian and the other part was challenging the establishment from outside. Of course, a lot of the impulse towards oral history one encountered at that time, a great deal of it was people saying "Well, we've got to let the people speak, from the bottom up, and empower the powerless," and so forth. There was a good deal of romanticism that oral history by itself, by putting the

microphone in the hands of the true people would somehow provide the road to truth. Right from the beginning, in that Terkel article, I felt there was something wrong with that.

I think a lot of my work over the years that followed was wrestling with the sense that what it is that historians do is still critically important--the act of interpreting evidence, of weighing, of testing, of connecting. And yet, at the same time the exciting thing about oral history is that the process becomes a less exclusive one. It's not something that you do only when you have had graduate training. On other levels, people do all the time when they are talking. It's on a very different basis than the scholar, and yet that gives us a kind of grounded commonality. We have different bases for interpretation, and they come together and provide a good advantage for understanding the meaning of the experience. That to me is one of the more important functions of public history and oral history. I've come to call this notion a "shared authority," that the grounds of authority are very different, and have very different meaning, but there is a kind of sharing in the process of the interpretive authority, which is one of the exciting things about doing oral history.

RITCHIE: You mentioned "A Shared Authority," which is the title of a book that you are planning, a retrospective of articles you've done over the last fifteen years. When you went back and looked at those, did you begin to see themes developing that maybe surprised you when you put them together in one place?

FRISCH: Yes, it surprised me a little bit. /Laughs/ There are not that many ideas, just a couple of hopefully good ideas that I've been working on in a variety of forms. I guess what's happened in my work, and the collection reflects a little bit, is although I started outside of oral

history--and I still don't really consider myself "in" oral history, to the extent that the rest of my colleagues in the Association are, in the creation of an archival collection, or in an office like yours, or in their teaching--I started off coming from outside, and in a way I've continued to be on the fringe. What's happened in my own work is that I've learned a great deal more, and have been reading a lot more in the last couple of years in some of the very, very exciting stuff that's going on in oral history. Rather than starting with a couple of ideas, getting into oral history and going on to other ideas in oral history, I've started with a number of ideas and then just written them into different places. It's been exciting for me in seeing a lot of connections, so that some of these concerns with the interpretive process--for me it's part of how I got into the end of oral history that I'd always been anyway--having to do with interpretation, and the interface between the historical documentation and culture and communication.

Of late that work carried me into a good deal of involvement in a variety of public history projects. First a couple specifically with oral history, with radio documentaries, and a couple of film documentaries, but then in the matter of museum exhibits, and so on. I guess that the main surprise was how similar the questions were and how well fitted I was from thinking about oral history to have something useful to say to situations in museums, or in libraries, or in public historical situations, where we really hadn't thought about those questions. So the translatability of our experience of oral history is another thing that's gotten me so excited about what's worthwhile about it in the first place.

I really think some of the intellectual issues are quite general. It's not coincidental that right now what has most people in English departments so excited is that something that people in oral history have been trying to

think about and write about for quite a while now. It's a big discovery now in literary theory that texts are created in a kind of dialogue between the author and the reader, and the cultural contexts of this are a rather complicated set of interactions. That's really quite resonant with the struggles many of us in oral history to really understand the complexity of that dialogue and that encounter, and the way in which historical meaning is generated within it. So I really think in that direction the work has been very fertile, and at least in my own experience I've found it very rewarding and inspiring how easy it was for me to find applications for a lot of these ideas in dealing with at first seemingly disparate questions that come up when you're thinking about what goes on in a museum exhibit, or what kinds of things are selected for thematic focus or design developers for film treatment, or in a street fair.

RITCHIE: You know, you've described yourself a couple of times now as being on the fringe of oral history, but it seems to me that you're in the middle of the rug right now as the editor of the Oral History Review, and of the oral history section in the Journal of American History, and of a new oral history series for SUNY press. You're in a very important position to be deciding what's published, and encouraging people to write, and bringing together a lot of the new interdisciplinary look at oral history, and how it's used and perceived. What kind of ambitions do you have for the publications that you're editing?

FRISCH: Well, I guess I can say a couple of things that reflect the tension of both being on the fringe and being in a way in the center of a lot of what's going on. I think one of my ambitions in terms of shaping the field relates to the fringe side of it. "Fringe" is not so good a term, perhaps a better term involves a sort of interface, or the notion of conjunction. I'm

particularly interested in the relationship of oral history to things to do with the world of theory, to the larger realm of historical studies, to the world of public presentation, to the questions of documentaries. All the ways in which oral history, it seems to me, not only draws energy from, but can contribute to, as a process and a method, in ways that can go well beyond the particular historical materials.

At the same time, the more people in oral history become aware of how exciting their method is, and how open-ended these relationships are, then the field will be enriched by what's going on in ancillary disciplines: what's going on in public presentation and documentary, what's going on in public discourse, what's going on in the world of theory. Not that everybody needs to be doing theory all the time, or documentary, but I think these things make us all more sensitive about the value of the material we're collecting, and what we're going to do with it, and how work in oral history can in that sense make it come alive engage with the very broad content of the work. This is one way I want to really push things, and I think that is important to do, in continuing to develop what it is that oral history can mean.

Oral history ends up, as it has been for me, being an increasingly important pivot point. Everybody always talks about interdisciplinary stuff, but here's a real activity that the more you become aware of it, you can't not be interdisciplinary. You can't even turn on the tape recorder without sooner or later thinking about a number of these issues. So that's one general way of talking about the questions that I'm dealing with, simply because of where I'm situated.

More particularly, I've been saying in the journal and a lot of the other things I'm doing that I want there to be more focus on what we do with oral history; that's where it seems to me a lot of the problems are encountered.

I'm sure we've all had the experience that it's much easier to start collecting interviews than working with them, whether that means transcribing and indexing, or digesting, or actually incorporating in research or documentaries or anything else. Many people have no idea how to begin working with that, and ultimately it leads to a great deal of frustration or worse.

It seems to me that there's a lot of value in giving this end of it as much intellectual attention as the conducting of the interviews. That's been treated very, very well in the literature. The issues of documentary, of editing, of public presentations, tends not to be so well developed. A lot of new work can be done in that direction. These are some of the pushes that I hope to make.

At the same time, I think I'm trying, by the choices I'm making, the people I'm working with, the responsibilities I feel as an editor, to realize that there's a lot more going on than any one person can get involved in, and that I'm coming from where I'm coming from. I have never done the kind of real archivally grounded political interviewing, for instance, such as something like you have done, or like people who have done a focused project on unions, or this or that, where they really have done historical interviewing about historical topics, with the idea of a focused piece of research in which oral history is the central method. There are lots of issues that I'm interested in when I read about them--right now I'm reading Robert Caro's book on Lyndon Johnson, with its fascinating use of oral history for its research. But while I'm interested in the research use of oral history, that's not an area that I have been personally involved in. So it becomes very important for me to make sure that I continue to recognize this material appropriately in the things that I publish.

The real strength of oral history I've always found is its catholicity of

interests. Of all the meetings I go to its the most enjoyable precisely because its the least predictable, and it continues to be so. As editor of the journal my challenge is to try to serve all of the needs the people have professionally and intellectually, and to make it coherent and readable.

RITCHIE: Tell me, as you go back to your earlier field and write on the nineteenth century now, do you find that your thinking and writing about oral history has changed the way you look at sources, and the way you look at the period you started out writing about?

FRISCH: Very much. It's never been my sole period. I got into urban history as a way of avoiding periodization. But it certainly has affected that, and in a way in the introduction to this collection of essays I talk a lot about that. For me it's a kind of homecoming--a lot of the public history work has increasingly brought me back to urban history. My whole approach to what goes on in an exhibit was one step back, and then it comes right back to the sources itself. I did an essay on municipal biography picture books, sort of coffee table books, which I found the oral history approach that I've been working with was very, very helpful in seeing in what sense a photograph can be used in these books to carry a narrative.

In fact, in my work at the Philadelphia Social History Project, Ted Hershberg's project (which to many people would seem to be the furthest possible extreme from oral history, the mega-use of quantification run amok), both in my actual research there, in the computer data they had, and in the way we used that in developing a community history project for the city of Philadelphia's three hundredth birthday in 1982, and in realizing how their census data and other related archival documents, most of them statistical, could be used as the basis of an interactive public experience of history, I mean it was just remarkable to me how much it really wasn't different at

all. That sounds curious, but it really was true.

I think since then this idea of how people interpret history has become a major part of my own thinking about American intellectual history. Oral history is going to be very helpful in pushing us to the notion that intellectual history isn't just what intellectuals do. We really have to ask how do people construct a sense of the world, how do they carry that around in their heads, how do they interpret, what are the bases of their political or their cultural assumptions. These are things that working in oral history makes you much more sensitive to. I think you read those sources with a great deal more clarity.

RITCHIE: Well, thank you very much for a thoughtful survey of your ideas about oral history. It will be a nice introduction for many OHMAR members to your work.