

Interview with Ronald J. Grele

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via phone by Donald A. Ritchie
for OHMAR (Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region)

Ronald J. Grele directs the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, having previously served as director of the UCLA Oral History Program. He received his Ph.D. from Rutgers and has taught at Lafayette, California State College at Long Beach, Kingsborough College, and Columbia. He was an interviewer for the John F. Kennedy Oral History Project, assistant director of the Ford Foundation Oral History Project, and research director of the new Jersey Historical Commission. He also served as president of the Oral History Association. He has edited the *International Journal of Oral History* and the *International Annual of Oral History*, contributed to Ronald Fraser, et al., *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt: An International Oral History* (Pantheon, 1988), and published *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Praeger, 1991).

RITCHIE: I'm always curious about how people got involved in oral history, and I wondered if you could start by telling about how you got into oral history, and whether or not you had planned on it, or were these opportunities that you followed?

GRELE: It was totally serendipitous. My first job after I left my residency at Rutgers, while I was still writing my dissertation, was a one-year job at Lafayette. When that year was up I was looking for a job, and incredible as it sounds now, I turned down two perfectly good jobs at universities. This was 1965. One of which I turned down simply because I didn't think we could live in the town--it was too ugly. It's such a different world now. So I was looking for a job, and Henry Winkler, who had been the chairman of the History Department at Rutgers, was then in Washington as the editor of the *American Historical Review*. He was a close friend of Herman Kahn, who was the archivist in charge of presidential libraries, and he called me one day and said, "Are you still looking for a job?" I said, "yes," and he said, "my friend Herman Kahn tells me they're looking for an interviewer

for the Kennedy Library oral history project." And I said, "What's oral history?" He said, "don't worry, you'll learn." [laughs]

I sent in an application to the office of presidential libraries, and I got a call from a guy named Charlie Morrissey. I went down and had an interview, I think in July of '65, because I started August 1st. He hired me as an interviewer and archivist on the Kennedy project. I knew nothing about oral history. And that's where I first hooked-up with Charlie.

RITCHIE: What kind of training did you get, once you got started on that project?

GRELE: Charlie sat me down, and I remember reading what there was of the literature on oral history. I remember there was something by Phil Brooks and Saul Benison, and then various little pieces that Charlie had done about his experiences at the Truman Library. This was before there had been any meeting of the Oral History Association at all. There wasn't really very much of a literature. There was something by Gould [Coleman] and I think something by Louie [Louis Starr], and then just thinking about it and talking about it with Charlie. And fieldwork, we were doing interviews.

RITCHIE: Did you find the interviews satisfying on that initial project?

GRELE: Yeah. It was kind of an ambiguous experience. We were never given access to the papers. The Kennedy papers were still at the National Archives, they had not been moved. Nothing had happened up in Massachusetts. But for some reason, Herman Kahn was afraid that we were going to find out something that would embarrass the Kennedy family. Robert Kennedy was still alive at the time, of course. There was an advisory board for the oral

history project and Burke Marshall, and Robert Kennedy, and Mrs. [Jacqueline] Kennedy were on it. I think Oscar Handlin was the chairman of it. We were never given access to the papers, although we struggled and struggled to get them. And at the same time, other historians were given access to those papers for their books.

The reading we were doing all said that you went to the papers first, and it was very important to complement the oral histories with research in the papers, etc., etc., and we weren't doing that. We were doing the *New York Times* and the secondary literature, and then building on the other interviews. I made a big thing about that at the time, and I don't know whether the interviews would have been better with the papers or not. I assume they might have been. But the kinds of materials that we were getting was very subjective. That's what first alerted me to the fact that this was very subjective kind of stuff!

RITCHIE: From the Kennedy Library you went to the Ford Foundation project, is that right?

GRELE: No, from the Kennedy Library I went out to California to teach. By the end of that experience, I took a very narrow perspective, I think now. The whole experience had not been very pleasant. I didn't like working in Washington, although we had a nice time down there, we had a lot of friends. But it was at the time of the Vietnam war and I had a lot of reservations about working for the government at that point in time. Things were heating up and I wanted to go back to teaching. So I went to California to teach.

Then I didn't go back to it until 1971. I was in California and then I was teaching at Kingsborough Community College. In 1971 my wife had gone back to library school and she was doing a paper on oral history for a course she had in library school. She was talking to

me about what the bibliography was, and I said, "Why don't you give Charlie a call?" We had kept in touch over the years. So she called him, and she talked to him and then I talked to him. He told me that he had just come back from New York and he had been talking to people at the Ford Foundation about an oral history project there and he was going to take the contract. I think it was twenty minutes later, but it was probably the next day, he called back and said that he had been thinking about it and he thought maybe he'd like to have an assistant director on that project and would I like to come aboard. I said, "Absolutely!" It was a five thousand dollar increase in my salary. So that's how I got back into it. From then on, I've pretty much steadily been doing oral history.

RITCHIE: How did the Ford Foundation experience contrast to the Kennedy experience?

GRELE: I've always thought that Charlie and I should write this up, because the Ford Foundation in many ways was an ideal situation. First of all, we had *all* the money we needed. We had total access to all of the records, except personal records, of course. It was the ideal project in many ways. All of the various barriers that you usually have--you don't have enough money, you don't have access to the papers, you don't have cooperation--none of them existed. We had the full support of the foundation, so it should have been the ideal project. It would be interesting for someone to go and look at those interviews now and make the kind of judgment on them given the fact that we had everything we needed.

RITCHIE: What was the end result of that project?

GRELE: The end result was that I think we did--well, Charlie did most of the interviewing, I did most of the editorial work inside, the office management and things like that, but did some interviews. But I think in over a two-year period we did something like eighty interviews. Some of them were rather lengthy interviews, the transcripts of one or two of them go beyond a thousand pages. Those interviews are at the archives of the Ford Foundation. The problem we faced in the end was the access policy. We had devised an access policy for the foundation, and the foundation toward the end got very skittish about what might be in these things, so they had their legal counsel's office step in, and the legal counsel's office essentially closed that material. I think some of them are open now, but not very many of them. You have to get special permission from the counsel to see them, or something or other. The interviews are terrific, I think, but the foundation has never really made them fully available.

RITCHIE: It's interesting that unlike many other oral historians, you came into the field not doing oral histories for your own specific work, but really through archival oral history collections.

GRELE: Right from the start.

RITCHIE: Do you think that affected your views, and your ways of operating as an oral historian?

GRELE: Yeah. Oddly enough, because I've been so critical of the narrowness of what was the archival perspective, that has been my experience. It has affected it. Recently,

Linda Shopes asked me to do something on oral history for a special issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History* that she's editing. I was fiddling around with something about the differences between archival oral history and those who use oral history for their books, just that kind of distinction. I've come to now argue that unless the interviews that someone does are placed in a repository and made open and available to the public, and become part of an on-going reinterpretation, where other people come and look at those and then reinterpret them, that it's not oral history. That interviewing for a book is fine, but then just squirreling the interviews away someplace isn't oral history. It's something else. It's interviewing. But in order to be oral history it has to enter into an on-going historical debate.

RITCHIE: And become available for verification.

GRELE: Right. I don't know if you saw the article that Jon Weiner did for the American Historical Association's newsletter.

RITCHIE: On Allan Weinstein and his book on the [Alger] Hiss case.

GRELE: Yeah, that would be the distinction. If Weinstein places those interviews with the Truman Library, then they are oral history. As they are now, they're just a set of interviews.

RITCHIE: And a suspect set of interviews.

GRELE: Yeah. So I think that that thinking is a result of my experiences.

RITCHIE: You did become an early critic of oral history. As early as the 1970s you wrote about oral history as "movement without aim." Now with two decades of development since then, do you think that the aim has improved at all?

GRELE: Oh, yeah! Boy, for those of us who were around in those days to look at the field now, it's absolutely incredible. You caught me just in the process of organizing my course for this year. And it's really incredible the things that one can assign. I'm going through making up xeroxes, and there is [Alessandro] Portelli's book [*The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (SUNY Albany Press, 1991)] and there's [Michael] Frisch's book [*A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History* (SUNY Albany Press, 1990.)], and there's everything that you've done in the Twayne series, and there's Sherna [Gluck]'s book [*Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Routledge, 1991)]. There's all kinds of material, and that just wasn't there.

I think that most of that material also points itself in a certain kind of direction. I think that there's a consistency in what is being turned out in the oral history field, and I think that more and more it's treating it as historiography, rather than as empirical data. I think that's a real jump.

RITCHIE: One of the trends, it seems to me, in the things that you've written about and spoken on, is the tension in oral history between the desire to democratize, to include community interviews and people who are non-academics into oral history, and at the same time the need to create standards and to encourage analysis and interpretation of the material. How well do you think that that tension has played out in the oral history field?

GRELE: Ah, I think the place where you would have to look for that, the way it's played out, is in community history projects. Because they're the ones who are self-consciously attempting to bring people in. Sometimes I sit here at Columbia and I say, "I'm writing all the time about democratizing oral history, and what does Columbia do to democratize oral history?" I mean, other than the fact that we're advisors to community history projects, we don't do community history. So Columbia would not be a place to look for that tension. Things like the Chinatown History Project, or Jeremy Brecher's project up in the Brass Valley [Connecticut], or the California Odyssey. Some of the projects that are self-consciously community history projects, the projects of local libraries, or small groups all over the country, I think that's the place to look, to see what they're doing and the way in which they combine the enthusiasm of community history with some kind of self-criticism, or some kind of critical faculty applied to what they're doing. I don't know, I think a survey like that would generate a lot of mixed results. Some are doing terrific, and some are doing terrible.

RITCHIE: You raised the point about now that you're directing Columbia, that you've been the director of two of the largest oral history projects in the country, at UCLA and now at Columbia. When you took over these offices, did you see ways in which you wanted to change the directions they were going in?

GRELE: Well, more so at UCLA than here. I don't know if you want to put this in, but when I went to UCLA, I fired everyone!

RITCHIE: What were the problems there?

GRELE: There were very real problems at UCLA. There was such a heavy emphasis on editing and re-editing that they weren't really turning things out. There was a terrible back-log and a kind of slowness about it. It's nothing that Joel [Gardner] hasn't talked out many times, I think it was one of the things that drove Joel from UCLA. They were doing very good interviews, but there was a terrible back-log. Essentially, it was--I don't want to say increase the pace interviewing, but just to move it off of dead center. It seemed to have just stopped. Part of that had to do, well, see, Bernie [Galm] had left and there was no one there for a while, and there was an interim director, so there were a lot of reasons why nothing much was happening. But that was a very exciting time for me. Jim Mink just gave me all the support I needed to do that.

Then coming to Columbia, when I first took the Columbia job I said, "At last, what I'm going to do is focus it." Many of us had complained that it was all over the place, it was so amorphous, they did everything. I was going to bring a focus to it, to make it a little sharper, and be surer of what our goals were. We weren't going to do everything. We weren't going to be everything to everybody. But then I realized as I watched people use the collection that the very vastness of it, the way it encompasses so much, is exactly what they come here to use it for. Because there are all kinds of strange connections. There is all kind of political talk in the movie interviews; and there is all kind of cultural talk in the military interviews. [laughs] There are so many kinds of cross-connections that a scholar can make, that I realized that's really the joy of this collection, just the serendipity of finding things.

Louie used to talk about "little nuggets." You know, I used to be very critical of Louie for some of the words he used, like "little nuggets." I guess Studs Terkel does the same thing. But it's quite true. People do come in here and they'll be looking for a discussion of something

having to do with America in the Second World War, and they'll find some kind of a note to the Fred Astaire interview. [laughs] And it's just the kind of thing that they want.

RITCHIE: Always the great thing about Columbia was the cross-reference index.

GRELE: Yeah, the master biographical index sends you all over the place.

RITCHIE: And your collection has been going on so long that it's now really an oral history of the entire century, far more so than any other collection.

GRELE: The first memory in the collection--Elizabeth [Mason] told me this--goes back to the Draft Riots of 1863. Charles Burlingame as a young boy was taken out by his father the next day and talks about seeing bodies hanging from the street lamps and the destruction. That's the first memory in the collection.

RITCHIE: That's remarkable.

GRELE: Isn't it? Somebody came in and they wanted Grover Cleveland, and we have a fairly sizeable amount of discussion of Grover Cleveland! [laughs]

RITCHIE: Well, that might have been the Allen Nevins connection [Nevins was the author of a biography of Grover Cleveland].

GRELE: Right! [laughs] Well, you know, in those days they did the people who would talk about Grover Cleveland.

RITCHIE: Have you been trying to branch Columbia into some new directions? I know that at one point you were thinking about doing some interviews with AIDS patients and others. Do you see some new paths for the Columbia project?

GRELE: Well, the general proposition is that we build the collection where it's the strongest. It's very strong in the New Deal, so if a New Dealer comes along we jump at the opportunity to interview. It's very strong in the Eisenhower years, so if somebody from those years comes along we jump in. The other proposition is to build it where it's weakest. And it's been weakest in ethnic history and women's history, etc. All of the kinds of "new histories" like gay history, we're trying to expand it in those areas.

RITCHIE: Do you find that funding is a determinant in what gets done?

GRELE: Oh, yeah, to a real extent. We don't receive any support from the university. People are quite surprised when they hear that. We receive a little bit of support that Nevins secured through the Bancroft gift to the university, and then our space, and light, and things like that. But we don't receive any general support from the university. So everything we do, we have to raise the money for it. Louie over the years built an endowment, so there is some basic support in that endowment. But everything else we have to generate the support for, which means that money determines the nature of the collection. People will call and say, "You should do the oral history of such-and-such." We say, "Yes, but we need the

money." They say, "Well, I'll give you the money." So we do the oral history of such-and-such. We try to do the oral history of something else, and we can't find any funding, it just doesn't get done.

RITCHIE: So therefore the changes in the politics of the funding agencies affects the project.

GRELE: Oh, absolutely.

RITCHIE: One other area I wanted to touch on was your work in international oral history. You've been so associated with it, editing the journal and planning the meetings, how have your international connections affected your outlook on how oral history should be collected and pursued?

GRELE: Well, in terms of collection, I think that Americans do a much better job at collection than other places. The Germans are pretty good at it. But what surprised me when I first made all these connections was that there was so little real collecting going on, and so little concern about collecting. There was much more of a concern about doing interviews in social history and using them for publications, and not as much of a concern for building an archive and making it available to others. There were some efforts at that, Paul Thompson was beginning at Essex, and the Germans were doing a little bit of it, but most people were not building collections. I think that what the Americans give to the international movement is that sense of collective responsibility, that these are documents made for public use, not just private documents for the private research of those connected with a particular center.

But in another sense the Europeans in particular were so much more sophisticated about theorizing about what it is that they were doing. Especially the Italians. The work of Luisa Passerini and Anna Bravo just bowled me over when I first heard it. Wow! There were so brilliant, just so introspective, and so self-critical.

RITCHIE: Do you think that's that changed your work, in having associated with them?

GRELE: Oh, yeah. It's changed my work in the sense that I have tried to incorporate that into the essays that I have written, and that kind of perspective. It's also changed my teaching a great deal. The way in which I teach the course is now mostly directed toward having students think about documents, and the special nature of these documents, and thinking about language and morality in general, questions about memory. It's still a fieldwork course, but very much an application of the theory to the fieldwork experience.

RITCHIE: Well, the oral history workshop that Columbia operated last summer was on two tracks, wasn't it? There was a theoretical and a much more of a fieldwork approach. Do you see the field in a sense going in those two directions, or are you trying to tie them together?

GRELE: Well, actually we made a mistake. Joel will probably tell you that, because when Joel and I divvied up the turf on that, Joel was doing the methodology course and I was going the theory course, and I said to him, "There's no sense you going into the theory," And it turns out that they all wanted some greater integration of theory and method. Joel could

have done that, but we had foolishly made that separation. I think probably that most people now working don't want that separation any more. They want to combine the two. Especially when they have things like Eva McMahan's book [*Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (University of Alabama Press, 1989)], and they've got the various essays that have come out. Well, you know, even in the Twayne series, the introductory essays are historiographical. I don't think that people are making that sharp distinction that we were making.

RITCHIE: Yes, I think there's more a sense that the doer of the interviews may be the first user of the interviews, and has to think in both ways.

GRELE: Yeah. There was a remarkable quote by Phil Mason, from one of the first [Oral History Association] colloquia, where he is talking about not letting historians do oral history interviews, that they are too biased. He said the only people who can do interviews are archivists who don't have any vested interest in interpretation. I think that's just gone out the window. I think everybody now knows that they are interpreters as well as interviewers. I don't think anybody goes into the field thinking that they are contemplative, objective observers.

RITCHIE: I think the sense of "subjectivity" has become more complex also. It was looked upon in a pejorative sense at first, and now there has been so much discussion of exactly what it is to be subjective.

GRELE: And I think that's one of the influences of the Europeans, and the international conferences.

RITCHIE: As a concluding question, I wanted to ask you what you see is the future role for oral history. What direction do you think it's going in? And are you pleased with the directions you see it going in?

GRELE: Yeah, generally I am. I think it's getting increasingly sophisticated every year. The problem is that we have to be careful that we don't get so sophisticated that we cut ourselves off from the base of the community. Different people are doing community history, local history, local librarians, etc., and we have to be careful that we don't get too academic and cut ourselves off from that. Because that kind of enthusiasm, especially at the Oral History Association meetings, etc., is what makes it a movement, rather than just another academic meeting. If there is a gulf, that kind of gulf has to be bridged, where those of us who are more interested in theory and writing about it reach out to talk to, and find out what other people are doing, and how what we're saying applies to what they're doing. And how we can help them and they can help us. The Oral History Association has always been this strange amalgam of so many different kinds of people [laughs], and that's been its joy in one sense. And so I worry that in our sophistication we might cut ourselves off from that. But from my position on a campus, it's very optimistic.

You know, people have talked about cut backs, etc., in oral history, but oral history has been a boom industry. I think it's weathered the depression fairly well. There have been cuts in programs, but programs have still been funded and more and more people are starting oral history programs. There are more and more of us.

RITCHIE: Well, certainly the titles appearing with the words "oral history" in them seems to be increasing; the bibliography is expanding.

GRELE: Right. I once went to the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*, just to count the number of books using interviews that were reviewed. I figure it something like sixty to seventy percent of all of the books in recent history in three or four issues of those journals--that self-consciously used interviews.

RITCHIE: That's fascinating. I always like to ask at the end of an interview whether there's a question that you would have liked me to ask that I didn't ask?

GRELE: Oh, probably, as I think about it! [laughs] But I can't think of one now. I was intrigued by what you were going to ask. I predicted some of them.

RITCHIE: Well, part of it is not to be completely unpredictable. I wanted you to be ready for it, but I hope it wasn't too predictable! [laughs]

GRELE: Well, I was trying not to be flip, because I've had troubles with being flip in OHMAR publications! [laughs]

RITCHIE: The trouble of course, is that people will print what you say! [laughs]

GRELE: I know!

RITCHIE: And as we know from doing transcripts, things look a little ^{different} in print than they seem when spoken! Well, this has been very good, I really appreciated this.

GRELE: I hope you got what you wanted.

RITCHIE: Exactly. And we'll look forward to your talk at Keane College [New Jersey] in October. That should be a good meeting, I'd say.

GRELE: It should be.

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