Chapter 4

Oral History and the Presentation of Class Consciousness: The New York Times v. The Buffalo Unemployed*

This article departs from the usual academic form, in ways appropriate to the promise and complexity of oral history. Our concern is with the process by which oral history materials become public historical documents. We explore some aspects of the process generating a particular oral-historical work, and we do this by presenting an informal memoir of our own experience, a memoir similar, in its mix of detail, subjective recall, and reflection, to the kind of information usually produced by the oral history method.

We are aware of the perils involved in being both subjects of and commentators upon the experiences we describe, and so we stick as closely as possible to the narrative of our story, being sure to include as generous an appendix of documents as space permits so that readers may evaluate our impressions, insights, and hunches on their merits. But we expect that an oral history audience will appreciate without apology this attempt to get at precisely those dimensions of a complex historical experience ordinarily invisible in the documentary record. Oral historians are also, by definition, committed to the proposition that larger themes can be studied in and through the particulars of idiosyncratic reminiscences, and it is in this spirit that we presume to interest readers in our story. We offer it, in fact, as a kind of case study illuminating two general issues central to oral history as a method, each of which we found ourselves engaging in a particular form. It might be helpful at the start to say a few words about these, because they not only came out of our experience but have also framed the way in which we will present it here.

The first general problem is the relation between oral history as data, as the collecting and archiving of memory, and oral History—capital H—as intel-

*This chapter has been co-authored with Dorothy Larson.
ligible, communicated knowledge derived wholly or partially from that data. Information alone is not History in any other dimension of historical research, and there is no reason to make tape recording an exception. The question then, as the cassettes pile up on archive shelves and the transcribers pump their pedals, is what happens to oral history beyond the tape—how is it to be used and how is it to become, or be incorporated in, History?

For us, this general question took a quite particular form: communication in the form of a documentary, composed entirely of oral interview excerpts, and a documentary intended for a general public audience, rather than a scholarly one. What happens when transcripts become a public product, not simply material incorporated in a broader work? And what happens in the process of selecting, editing, and ordering, when, to the claims of substantive merit and validity, must be added the demands of dramatic form and effective public communication? As will be clear, our research was not strictly historical in that we were documenting, through interviews, contemporary experiences and attitudes. But we came to feel that in defining our task and its difficulties this mattered less than the more general problem of how to reduce a mountain of interview material to a documentary format. In this sense, our experience should be relevant to all those working with such problems, even if their materials are more directly rooted in history than were ours.

This leads to our second major concern: understanding what, if anything, is unique about oral historical method and the evidence it produces. If the challenge of leapfrogging beyond the tape, of actually doing something with collected interviews, was explicit in our project from the start, the necessity of wrestling with this second concern became apparent only gradually, through a painful process: it was only in the face of almost unresolvable differences about the content of our documentary that we came to see how the conflict really stemmed from divergent understandings of what oral history reveals, and how it is to be read.

Here too, the general problem of interpretation appeared in a particular form: whether oral interviews can be studied for what might be called their social subtext as well as their explicit content. That is, in presenting themselves to an interviewer, do subjects express more about their general social identity and consciousness than is apparent on the surface of the narrative, and if so, how is this to be retained when material is being edited? This becomes especially important not so much when one is interested in reconstructing the details of a particular situation, as in much elite interviewing, but rather when the main concern is illuminating a broader social context through the prism of individual experience.

In modern society, the question of the social ground of personal experience, and the way individuals embody and express this, is the problem of class and class consciousness—its nature and sources, how it is articulated in thought and action, its relation to culture, politics, ethnicity, and so on. Does the evidence of oral history have anything to offer this inquiry? Increasingly, the sense among many of us who work with it is yes—and not only because of the working-class orientation of many bottom-up interviewing projects.

What seems far more important than this is how the particular nature of the oral historical method affects the nature of the evidence produced, and how this becomes a generator of insights into social complexity. For the root, defining fact—curiously mystified in so many discussions—is that oral historical material is produced in an interview situation, one in which the subject is triangulated between the interviewer and the experience being discussed. No matter how controlled the schedule of questions, the information is produced in a dialogue between individuals, each with a social position and identity, engaging in a conversation that exists at a necessary remove, in time or social space, from the experience being discussed. This is, of course, a fundamentally different relationship than usually exists between historians and the mute and frozen documents of the past; it has generally been discussed as an obstacle to objectivity surmountable through care and precision.

Far less generally understood is the degree to which this represents an opportunity to study memory, the process by which the past is received, digested, and actively related to the present, and an opportunity to see how a broader class consciousness is expressed in the ways people communicate that memory or experience in the social context of an interview. In fact, it could be argued that the question of class consciousness is not simply another issue for oral historians to think about, devising appropriate questions and tools; rather, it is an indispensable tool for exploring the nature of that methodology, precisely because it lies so close to the heart of the interview situation that defines oral history as distinct form of inquiry. To struggle with it is to struggle with the question of how oral history can produce broad insights and intelligence beyond the surface of a transcript or the facts of a narrative.

Our two major concerns come together at this point. The problem of the historicality and the social subtext of an interview is engaged less in conducting it than in reading, editing, and presenting it as a part of a larger work. In the experience we now relate, this was the hidden reef on which the first process—moving from data to public communications—ran aground. We would like to show how this happened, and to reflect on what it tells us about the uses of oral history today.

In 1974-75, SUNY-Buffalo's American Studies Program was commissioned by the New York Times Magazine to prepare an oral documentary, in the manner of Studs Terkel, on the subject of unemployment in Buffalo, New York. This was eventually published as the magazine's cover story on February 9, 1975. What we will relate in some detail is a series of conflicts that developed between our group and the Times in the final stage of editing.
conflicts about the basic content and composition of the article. To the Times, the issue was simple: the article had to be cut by a few hundred words. But for us, disputes about particular editorial choices crystallized differences that had been implicit almost from the start of the project. This is because we found, and will try to illustrate here, that the material suggested for excision by the Times was the material in which people interviewed expressed most directly a larger social and class consciousness.

Such a purge was hardly the conscious intention of the Times: surely its editors were sincere in claiming that their only concern was "journalistic" effectiveness. Nor were our differences with them political in the usual sense—in fact, if anything, they insisted that their intention was to produce a more "radical" vision than we felt the interviews supported in their fuller form. But in struggling to restore what we knew to be the heart of the material—although it took us a while to grasp why this was so or what that heart meant—we discovered that the differences were profound, involving explicitly the presentation, and implicitly the existence of working-class consciousness in the material we had collected. We want to suggest that it is far from coincidental that this issue took the form of judgments about the editing of documents generated by the oral-historical method.

The early stages of the story can be briefly related. The Times commissioned the article at a time when the rising unemployment rate was just beginning to be recognized as a front-page problem. The magazine editors wanted a Terkesque bottom-up perspective, using Buffalo—then "boasting" the highest unemployment rate in New York State and one of the highest in the nation—as a case study. When Terkel himself declined, our group was invited to design and submit an article.

From the start, we were under severe deadline pressure, which permitted us the dubious but real luxury of having no time to worry much about method or technique. We assembled a larger group of faculty and students, improvised some quick training sessions, fanned out to conduct as many interviews as we could, developed ways of mapping our progress, redirecting our efforts as needed, and moved from tapes to transcripts to various proposed edits, going back and forth between the larger group and a smaller editorial committee. Finally, we produced a documentary article that we felt reflected accurately what we had heard in the more than eighty interviews conducted and in the many hundreds of pages of transcripts they generated.

The evolution of this process could be an instructive article in its own right, but for the topic at hand a number of points about it are particularly important. In the preparation process, we did not focus all on consciousness as such. Rather, we sought to cast as wide a net as we could in every dimension, and see what we learned about people's experience of and opinions about unemployment. Our approach was, however, guided by a number of critical concerns and assumptions. First, we were anxious not to be trapped by a literal, narrow definition of unemployment and whose experience was relevant to it. Thus we made sure to interview men and women of all ages and backgrounds, not only the male factory workers of conventional imagery. And we tried to gauge the impact of unemployment as a more general crisis in work, family life, and society. We therefore interviewed not only those actually laid off regular jobs, but also the underemployed and the unemployed, whether too old, too young, too unskilled, or too overskilled for existing labor markets. We interviewed as well family members affected by the unemployment of others, officials and civil servants dealing with the problem, and so on.

Second, with regard to the ultimate public presentation of the piece, we were concerned that the article's local focus might overly particularize Buffal o's situation, giving rise less to understanding of a complex problem than to a new wave of jokes and negative imagery, reassuring readers elsewhere how fortunate they were not to be living in Buffalo. This concern was hard to build into the research design, but from the start we were concerned about the way we would handle it in the editing and presentation: it became known to us as the "Sunday brunch problem," in the sense that the magazine article would be a failure if all it did was to present the suffering of Buffalo's people as an object for the detached sympathy of distant, privileged readers—serving it up, so to speak, with the Sunday morning paper and pastry of a sophisticated national audience.

As the work progressed, both of these concerns evaporated. The first proved easy to deal with through the breadth and depth of the selections we made for the article. The second concern proved more or less ungrounded—the people interviewed showed no fear of being exploited, by us or the Times, and neither did they dwell on Buffalo and its particular problems. Rather, they had a lot to say about unemployment in both personal and general terms, and seemed glad that someone was finally asking them what they knew about it. In fact, they rather welcomed the opportunity to talk to the audience for whom the interviewer was a proxy. Perhaps we could say that they saw themselves as guests sitting at that Sunday brunch table, not as the bagels or coffee cake, a point to which we will return shortly.

The article we submitted to the Times had four sections, each introduced by a short paragraph or two of background that we provided. The first section of interviews reflected the breadth of the problem; the second explored Buffalo's particular economic situation and its general setting; the third presented more extensive segments where people discussed the meaning of unemployment in their lives; the fourth offered excerpts in which people reflected on why things were as they were, and what, if anything, could be done about it. This sequence, and the selection and editing of the passages in
each section, reflected our assessment of the substance, tone, and drift of the interviews taken as a whole. Although the voices on our tapes were as diverse as the speakers' backgrounds, and although almost every chord was struck at some point or other, our intensive study of the tapes and transcripts showed that people tended to move from personal, localized experience to more general observations; that they spoke in reflective and analytic modes far more often than in emotive ones; that they addressed their audience directly and even didactically, explaining their experiences and what they had concluded from them. All this we tried to capture in our editing and arrangement, a point that should also be held aside, for the moment, with the bagels and coffee cake, for it becomes central to the story at a later stage.

Until this time, our dealings with the Times had revealed no differences of purpose or approach. The magazine had fully endorsed our early outline, and immediately accepted the submitted piece for publication. We then entered into the revision and production stage where variant understandings of the piece began to emerge. Only gradually were we able to distinguish routine editorial differences from more fundamental ones, and so it is worth examining the process in some detail. Our experience can be organized in three major stages.

Round One

The first suggested revisions seemed to us quite reasonable; as we had been immersed in the research and editing for so long, and so intensely, we welcomed an outside perspective. The Times editors felt that the structure was overly elaborate and academic, and that we needed more explicit, locating discussion about Buffalo to counter the generalized tone of many excerpts. They were not sure they liked the blend of working-class and upper-middle-class voices that we had included, advising more exclusive a focus on working people. In fact, they asked us to submit some additional interviews from the working-class out-takes; more hard-hitting testimonies about unemployment from which they could choose.

We gladly complied. Many in our group, worried that the elite newspaper would undercut the implied politics of a bottom-up focus, were reassured by this request for more proletarian testimony, and we quickly submitted the new interviews. We also reorganized the original submission: now it began with a consolidated introductory section putting all of our own comments in one place, set off from the interviews, in order to reduce the academic presence and to allow our subjects to occupy the center of attention in what was, after all, their article. Excerpted interviews were now presented in three broad sections—one more Buffalo-specific, one expanding the image of unemployment and exploring its personal dimensions, and the final section, as before, stressing the reflective and analytic voice we had found so distinctive in our research.

We felt our second submission was a distinct improvement, due in part to the suggestion from the Times. We were therefore not overly alarmed when, upon receiving it, the editors told us that although we had met the word limit they specified, the piece might still have to be reduced. We awaited this next round of editing, confident that the piece could remain faithful to our subject and our research even if truncated.

Round Two

Shortly after receiving the second version, the Times informed us that they wanted to eliminate entirely the thematic sectional organization of the interviews. They argued that the various levels and dimensions would come through clearly enough in a montage format. We were unsure of this, but we could not argue strongly against the notion that the words of the people, rather than our intervening structure, should carry the burden of communication. The clinching argument was the Times's point that their regular format would be fatal to any other mode of presentation because the article was being led by two or three full pages up front, with the rest of the piece marching in single columns through the jungle of high-fashion lingerie advertisements in the back of the magazine. To entice readers to finish the article, they argued compellingly, we would have to capture interest on those opening pages with our most effective material, whatever its place in a thematic arrangement.

The editors wanted to lead with the Rosie Washington interview. (All interviews referred to in the following discussion will be found, in alphabetical order by subject, in an appendix at the end of this chapter, pp. 71-80.) Although this is perhaps the most moving and dramatic—and longest—of our interviews, the choice made us uneasy; we felt it important in our editing to have the more emotive material set in context, for this is how it had emerged out of far denser and more complex interview transcripts. Beginning with such volatile material might create a misleading sense of the overall article, obscuring as well the complexity of Washington's interview itself.

Our uneasiness increased when we received the Times's full rearrangement. The order was not the problem—we conceded that the strong lead and the mixed montage were effective and probably appropriate. However, several of the substitutions and omissions made concerned us.

The contrast between working-class and middle-class voices was almost entirely eliminated. We had felt that the contrast underscored, rather than diluted, the working-class focus of the piece, as much through the vivid differences in language as anything else. Without that contrast, a certain social dimension in the interviews was diminished. This is illustrated by the omission of the brief but representative excerpts from the Ed Hausner and Gerald Kelly segments.
But the issues here were hardly major, nor was the impact on the article very substantial. They would have been less bothersome were it not for some other ominous hints in the Times’s suggested arrangement: they wanted to insert all of the new interviews we had sent them, at the expense of several others—well beyond the few nonworking-class excerpts we included. At this point, virtually all the proposed cuts came from what had been, in our revised thematic framework, the first and third sections—where people such as Della Love and Stanley Lewandowski discussed and analyzed the Buffalo situation or reflected generally on the meaning of their personal and social situations. But the second section—which tended to emphasize, more descriptively, the personal “impact” of unemployment—was untouched. Then, too, three of the four new working-class interviews accepted by the Times were relatively more personal and emotive, and relatively less socially grounded, than the working-class interviews now proposed for omission. This emerging pattern seemed confirmed by a request for an expansion of the Lewis Hawkins interview, the angriest one we had, a segment close to a lumper cry of pain and a call to violence, quite unrepresentative of the bulk of our collection. Nevertheless, none of these seemed insurmountable differences, and we were reassured by their inclusion of the fourth new interview—“Steelworker”—one that in its control of detail and reflective focus lay close to what we thought to be the heart of the piece. As it happened, however, this was the exception that proved the rule, so far as the emerging contrast between our understanding and that of the magazine’s editors.

Round Three

While we mulled these changes, the Times informed us that the article needed further editing in order to fit the magazine, but we would be able to retain all the interviews. As the publication deadline approached, the article had been typeset. If, upon inspecting the proof sheets, we had no objections to the final editing, and they saw no reason to expect any, the article could then move directly to layout and publication.

The excitement of seeing our scrawled-over typescript set into the clean columns of actual print diffused our editorial apprehensions. But not for long—on a first full reading of the new version, the tone of the article seemed strange and unfamiliar. Reading more closely, we discovered why: the new cuts were far from simply occasional prunings. In one interview after another, crucial sections, often quite extensive, had been excised, in ways that substantially altered the meaning of the words that remained.

Comparing proofs to draft, we began to see a pattern in the Times’s editorial judgments, a pattern not only responsible for the article’s new complexion, but one that threw into sudden perspective the magazine’s earlier responses to the material, from the initial call for more hard hitting working-class interviews to be presented in an almost random montage, to the removal of the middle-class viewpoint, to the justified fascination with Rosie Washington and the not-so-justified fascination with Lewis Hawkins. We offer both versions in the appendix to allow readers to determine what patterns they detect in the excisions documented there. But hopefully the following reading is more than an idiosyncratic interpretation of the process, in that it is informed by our familiarity with the full range of material and by the insights into the nature of the editorial process obtained in the long struggle to edit miles of tape and pounds of transcript into a meaningful public representation.

We detected at least three distinct dimensions to the Times’s implicit selection criteria. First, in their search for unnecessary verbiage, they tended to settle on passages where people, having made a point or expressed a feeling, went on to explain, support, elaborate, justify, or apply the point. However necessary this might have been editorially, the effect was to undercut or even eliminate the authority with which people spoke, making their statements seem arbitrary and ungrounded, exclamations rather than the products of conscious reflection. This can be seen across class lines, as evidenced by the Fred Koester interview or the “Job Counselor” segment. It becomes more problematic in the working-class interviews, of which the Della Love and especially the “Steelworker” excisions—the heart of the interview we had been so reassured to see them accept—are the best examples.

Second, is the Times’s indifference to the self-reflective quality of many of the statements, those passages where the speaker is self-consciously looking at him or herself, often locating that self in a social and class context, implicitly or explicitly. We had been struck by the prevalence of the self-reflective mode in the transcripts, and by its importance for the understanding of what people had to say. The Times, however, while approving and, in fact, encouraging personal statements, seemed to find more reflective self-consciousness to be a kind of unnecessary personal static, interfering with the “real” transmission, and they cut such passages wherever possible. The Bill Phillips and Frank Martinez interviews are good illustrations of this, the former in particular: this had seemed to us one of the most revealing of all the interviews we had conducted, which is why we included relatively more of it and placed it very carefully near the end, so as to maximize its capacity to draw the article’s themes together. The Times editing, however, removed almost all of the self-consciousness that makes it a moving expression, one filled with complex social comment. In confronting the gutting of the Martinez interview, we finally began to understand that differences with the Times did not trace solely to our journalistic naiveté, or to matters of taste, but implied rather a fundamentally different sense of what the people had to say, and what it was important for the article to allow them to say.
Finally, the *Times* editing seemed to select for omission those passages suggesting that the text had, in fact, been generated in a direct dialogue; this, too, they tended to see as extraneous to the text-as-statement. By paring the quotes in the interest of economy, we felt the editors had excised or drastically suppressed the definition and expression of personal style, the mode of self-presentation to the interviewer that can embody the complexity of personal identity and social relations in a word or phrase. Such expression, we had found in the transcripts, occurred most often where the interview was most conversational, where the subject addressed the interviewer directly. Because we were not working in a dialogue format, we tried to capture this sense of style and personal dialogue in our editing, as the most economical way of suggesting the texture and social subtext of long, complex interviews.

In this sense, for instance, we had thought the consistent pride and the redundant irony of the Chester Midder selection anything but superfluous; similarly important to us, but not to the *Times*, was the embarrassment that surrounds but does not obstruct Frank Martinez' discussing with a college-educated interviewer his own study of current economics, or Della Dove's unembarrassed analysis of Buffalo's decline and potential resurrection, the confident advice of experience offered without any confidence that it is going to be heeded or appreciated. The *Times*, the reader will recall, had earlier sought to rewrite this interview entirely, as well as Stanley Lewandowski's resurrecting of Dr. Townsend's economic prescription, another interview that evokes a sense of communication across substantial social and experiential space. Now, the overall editing made it clearer to us that in its search for the essential minimum in each interview, the *Times* was interested in the process that had generated the "statements," was in effect flattening to the point of elimination the sense that people were speaking to anyone in particular, much less across a class line clearly sensed and occasionally articulated. Where we saw such references as providing a crucial context, the *Times* saw superfluous aside distracting attention from the basic story each person had to tell.

We hasten to acknowledge that each editing decision does not necessarily support the weight of these interpretations; together, however, the excisions do suggest the patterns we detected. Sculpture, someone once said, is the art of removal, a statue being simply the residue of myriad small decisions about what to take away from a block of stone. This well describes the editing of oral transcripts for documentary use. What the *Times* sought to remove revealed a very different vision of the meaning enclosed in the block of material we had collected: their sculpting would have resulted in the core being emotion and exclamation rather than the reflection and intelligent discussion we found so central in the evidence; it would have emphasized the revelation of experience rather than its instrumental, even didactic communicational and it would have tended to sever that experience from the social and class context with which it had been invested by our subjects, implicitly or explicitly.

This vision seemed to us unacceptable. Fortunately, given how deeply our group felt about this, the *Times* grudgingly accepted our immediate demand to the right of editorship, as long as we managed to meet the word limit they were forced to specify. In fact, they were more puzzled than provoked, claiming to detect, sincerely, we believe, no differences between our ultimate selections and theirs. The final editing then proceeded without incident, although not without hard choices. We restored as much as we could of what seemed absolutely crucial; we cut one or two interviews entirely; and we proved able to find passages that could be cut because the points they had to make were, at least, expressed to some extent or other elsewhere in the article. We were far from satisfied with what this did to a number of interviews, and the appendix gives some sense of how much important material still had to be sacrificed. But having earlier become somewhat steeled to this inherent frustration in editing, and accepting the compromises inherent in our particular magazine format, our group felt that the integrity of the editing had been restored and the larger meaning of the collected material successfully captured in the article.

Lest it seem to readers—as it did to the *Times*—that we were making oral historical mountains out of routine journalistic molehills, a curious coda to our story helps clarify the substantial gulf in sensibility involved, showing as well how this bears directly on the question of the relation between oral history and the exploration of class consciousness.

As finally published, our article bore the title "Down and Out In America." This should seem strange given our argument to this point—nothing we have said about the material or our struggles over its editing suggests that our portrait was of the "down and out." The excerpts in the appendix, it will be readily seen, hardly support this image. It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that the title was the original contribution of the *Times*. After tolerating our editorial idiosyncrasies, they announced impatiently that titles were, as an aspect of layout and production, under their sole control. They rejected our best title, "America Not Working," at once a play on the words themselves and a reference to the then-current and widely discussed *Working* by Studs Terkel, to whom our efforts owed so much. Admittedly not a perfect title, it had the minor virtue of being consistent with the content of the article. But even after the editorial history just related, we were still a bit staggered by the inappropriateness of the *Times*’ creation. It had been crafted, so we were told, by the editor-in-chief, Max Frankel, himself, and was, therefore, unquestionable. The copy editor replied to our protestations by pointing out the reference to George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* as a compensating virtue, apparently indifferent to the fact that this portrait of *lumpen* outcasts was a curious referent indeed for a study supposedly con-
cerned with the way working-class people perceived the problems they faced as integral members of a troubled community in a troubled society.

The *Times*'s fascination with this title crystallized, to us, the values we had sensed in the editors’ treatment of the documents. For all of the prosessed concern in commissioning the article, the *Times* seemed comfortable viewing the working class only at a safe moral distance, which their editorial judgments tended consistently to exaggerate. Those who are down and out, to put it simply, do not sit at the breakfast table of those who are up and in. It does not seem unfair to suggest that the *Times* sought to offer its readers stimulating fare, not unexpected guests. While the magazine editors were quite willing to serve up the pain and suffering of the working class, they were less inclined to open their pages to the ideas, values, reflection, advice, and social consciousness of these people. Nor were they interested in sharing the right to interpret this experience. Tell us what happened and what you feel, the message seemed to be, and our readers will worry about what it means and how to think about it. It is not inconsistent with this spirit to note that the *Times* had been sincerely proud of its intention to include the working class in its magazine. It was the content of that concern that proved problematic, a paradox best summed up in perhaps the single most distressing moment in our relationship with the *Times*, when in the midst of an editorial wrangle the copy editor claimed that the real problem was our inability to provide angrier material. “Can’t you give us more stuff,” he said, “where, you know, they say how the system’s fucking them over?”

The system, indeed. We hope it is not indeclicate to suggest that one might learn more about the “system” by studying closely what the *Times* tended to see and not see in these oral historical materials. Surely it is not coincident that they were drawn to the pain of the working class but not to its subjectivity and consciousness. Nor is it insignificant that they edited our documents so that authority, judgment, and historical self-consciousness tended to remain in the hands of those already controlling the culture, and its mediation through journalism, literature, and history.

More is involved here than merely throwing brickbats at the *Times*, an easy target, after all. We think there are positive lessons in our story, lessons we began to discover with some surprise, and to understand only gradually. These involve editing as a general matter, but they are especially relevant to those concerned with the study of class, and the special place in this inquiry that oral history is often presumed to have. As we suggested initially, our struggle, in the sense, was not really with the *Times*, but with the larger problem of understanding how class consciousness can be found in oral history—lower case “h”—and how as historians and editors we can help it to become visible as we move from the tape to the public table—Sunday brunch or otherwise.

The three dimensions described—the self-reflective voice, the social grounding and location of that voice, and the self-conscious engagement of an implied or prescriptive audience—seem to be a good starting point in such a search. As oral historians, we must be sensitive to these dimensions, however implicit they may be in the tone, stance, and voice of a speaker, or however hidden they may be in the interstices of a conversation. We have to explore the power of this methodology itself, one that is unique in its essential dialogic nature, in its bridging of the historical past and the temporal present, and most fundamentally in its capacity to generate the very documents it then wishes to study.

The lessons can be put in another, more sober way. Nothing is inherent in the oral historical process that guarantees that its documents will be sensitively understood, much less used to create a version of history accurately informed by their unique perspective. The crucial issue is not import, but authority. Those truly interested in a history from the bottom up, those who feel the limits of the historical reality defined by the powerful, must understand that presuming to “allow” the “inarticulate” to speak is not enough. We must listen, and we must share the responsibility for historical explanation and judgment. We must use our skills, our resources, and our privileges to insure that others hear what is being said by those who have always been articulate, but not usually attended to. Only in this way can the arrogance of the powerful be confronted by the truth of another reality, by those historians whose consciousness provides the record of that reality and the measure of its challenging power.

**Interviews**

Space does not permit the simple reprinting of the entire article on which this essay is based, “Down and Out in America,” an Oral Documentary by Members of the American Studies Program, SUNY-Buffalo, *New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 1975. We have, however, tried to include in this appendix enough material to give readers a sense of the way that article read, as well as illustrations of the editorial out-takes discussed in the essay. Our decision to place all the “evidence” for our argument here in the appendix, rather than in the text, is deliberate, and, we hope, consistent with the points we are making about the integrity of oral historical material. By handling it this way, we intend to offer readers a greater chance to react to the material directly, rather than through our argumentative mediation. This also permits the words of our subjects—already heavily edited from the original transcript—to remain as close as possible to the context that informs their meaning, both within the interview and as they appeared as part of the final article.
The interview excerpts are arranged alphabetically by subject to ease of reference while reading the preceding essay. Several different kinds of material are included, however, that are important to distinguish for those reading this appendix separately as a way of approximating the original article.

Some of the interviews are reprinted exactly as they appeared in the eventual article. Of these, some were part of our original submission, and some were part of the second group, submitted at the request of the *New York Times Magazine* staff as discussed in the text. Together, these represent approximately 50 percent of the final text of the article. Other excerpts represent interviews submitted to the *Times*, but eliminated by the editors in the final revision. Finally, we have included a number of illustrations from the galleys, whose inclusion were greatly debated during the final round of editing decisions.

The editorial illustrations are presented in the following manner: *Italicized passages* represent material the *Times* excised in preparing the proofs, but which we were able to restore in our editing. *[Italicized passages in brackets]* represent passages cut by the *Times* that we were unable to restore due to the word limit.

At the time of publication, our group prepared reprints of this article, under our copyright, for distribution to community groups in Buffalo and to individuals requesting them. A number of these reprints are still available, and interested readers may obtain free copies by writing to the Coordinator, American Studies Program, SUNY-Buffalo, Buffalo, New York 14260.

1. Ed Hausner: Farmer, interviewed while selling vegetables from his truck at the Broadway Market. (Interview cut by the *Times*. Cf. interview with Kelly, for contrast, as discussed in text.)

It ain't the way it used to be, for sure. Yeah, they're leaving, like birds migrating south. Seastest is closing. Hewitt-Robbins, we got a number of customers who work there. They closed it down. All your feed mills in the last few years have been going out of business. Agway is out of here. Wayne Mills is out of here. Farina, Allied Mills, all stuff that used to be in Buffalo, they're all gone.

2. Lewis Hawkins: Concrete finisher, twenty-eight; in the unemployment line. (Interview submitted in the second batch and selected for inclusion by the *Times*.)

There's going to be a lot of stealing, a lot of mugging and everything ... People are going to get tired, tired of coming down here and standing in line. And when they finally get unemployment, a person who, say, only gets $45 or $50 a week might have three or four children; before a man's going to see his children and his family go hungry, it seems he's going to go out there and do something.

3. Florian (Pete) Horvath: Wire cutter, fifty-five, unemployed since 1972 when GTE Sylvania closed its Buffalo plant; he had been with Sylvania for thirty-one years. (Interview published as submitted.)

Whenever they had visitors, they always took them right in our department. They were so proud of that. Big Wheels would come in and, people from different parts of the country. Even foreigners. They would take them in and show them that machinery. Even the school kids; they had a tour like that, too, for the kids. I used to get a kick out of that. They'd all mill around you, and then you explain to them what's going on. The guy that brought them in there, he'd shut up, because to him it's a machine; he didn't know a thing about it, so he let me talk . . .

I was laid off just before they closed the plant. I had a feeling, anyway, like one guy said, "This place is going down." They had been threatening us for years that they would move, especially after they moved TV production out of Buffalo in 1952, to the plant in Batavia. That's on the way to Rochester. Now just before they finally closed down here, they were also threatening the people there. They talked the people into taking a pay cut in Batavia. But when they were taking the cut, we were getting our raise. Just before we got the news of our pay raise, we had an idea they were moving out, 'cause they were getting rid of a lot of odds and ends, like desks and cabinets and all sorts of things.

I think another reason why they closed up—all these people, including myself, were getting up in our years. It seemed like just about every other week there was someone who was retiring, and as far as the company was concerned, that was running into a little bit of money. This group that was retiring about the same time they closed up were all the ones that started in the thirties from way back in Colonial Radio days, even ahead of me . . . I feel as though we got the short end of the stick, let's put it that way.

4. Job Counselor, New York State Employment Service. (Illustrates editorial out-takes.)

I'm a Pollyanna, there's no getting around it. I gravitate to what looks like hope, and I do believe there is hope. The thing I want to stress is this: even though there are 10 percent unemployed, there are 90 percent that ARE employed, so somebody is flourishing. And even if a plant holding firm, someone is resigning, somebody is dying. [They're not completely lowering their work force by attrition.] Openings are there. No matter what the unemployment rate, there are still some businesses that are flourishing. And identifying those is part of the job. And that's why I say to the job-seeker, 'Beat all the bushes. Go to the private agency. Read the want ads. Talk to your neighbor, for Pete's sake—look it, nothing drops in your lap anymore. The idea is to pursue and pursue.'
5. Gerald E. Kelly: Executive Vice President, Greater Buffalo Development Foundation. (Entire interview cut by Times.)

Interviewer: What is your view of the national economic picture?

I just have to get a bit philosophical on that, and say, everybody has that problem. I really don't have time to worry about that. I'm involved in very specific things in Buffalo, and to the extent I sit back and worry about the big picture nationally, I'll get so depressed I'll lose all my energy and won't be able to work on the specific projects I'm trying to work on. I think it's bad. I think the economy's in trouble. But I can't do anything about it. And so I try not to burden my feelings with that problem, and I try to get involved with the things I can have some influence over.

6. Fred Koester: President, United Rubber Workers of America, Local 188. More than 500 members of this local were laid off when Hewitt-Robbins, a Litton Industries subsidiary, was closed last May in the midst of a strike. Litton held the union responsible: many observers felt this was a pretext for Litton's liquidating what it took to be an unfavorable position. (Illustrates editorial out-takes.)

I tried to run this union just like a family. And with the company, everybody's happy, picnics and the whole bit. There was a time when I knew everybody in the plant. But then Litton came in, in 1965, they loaded the plant with salaried workers; these out-towners would be walking around there and we couldn't even find out what their jobs were. . . .

Most people knew that Litton is a holding company. They get in; they make a buck; they get out. [I don't think it's fair. I don't think it's right to the community. You're not only talking about 750 jobs. Add their families, warehouses, and other interests all over the country, there's truckers involved, there's railroads involved, people getting cut back all over. Now, when you're talking 750 jobs, you might be talking 10,000 people before you're done.]

7. Stanley Lewandowski: Retired steelworker and former president of United Steelworkers Local 2603. (Interview initially excised by Times and restored in its entirety in our final editing.)

To start off at the starting point, you have to come back to Dr. Townsend. [Francis Everett Townsend, 1867-1960, author, in the 1930s, of the Townsend Pension Plan.] He's an old-timer. He originated a kind of social security. Hey, they called him a nut. I was amazed; I used to think he was the greatest man out, I really did. Laugh all you want, they said that Social Security would never work. So look, I think we ought to look at his proposal again. You give everybody $200 a month in money that becomes worthless at the end of the month, so you got to spend it. But the thing is, when you're on a guaranteed national income or something, you can't have Rockefeller, and Hughes, and DeL Web. Because they'll have the money eventually, they'll take it away from you. To keep it, you'll have to distribute it evenly, and break it off every month. You want to save? You're a miser? You just lost some. Dr. Townsend. I don't know, maybe you need somebody that's a so-called nut like that to come up with some solutions.

8. Della Love: Does part-time house cleaning to supplement her pension, sixty-five. (Interview excised completely by Times, restored at our insistence and subject to further editing as illustrated.)

Interviewer: What's the problem with Buffalo? What do you think could help the city?

It's something about the people. They got the wrong type people for the wrong type job to make Buffalo come up. Buffalo could be number one, it could be done. If they put the right type people in, they'd see how Buffalo would bloom. You have to spend to make, that's all there is to it. In Buffalo, it seems like they don't want to put out money, they just want to hold money, and they're just killing it. If we could put our money in something good, why we could get something out of it. But we got to put it in first. [They're going to have to do something, people can only get hungry but so long. I don't know what the cause is, but it's something other to think about. I'm telling you.] It looks like people, we pull against each other so much now. We're not like we used to be: more together. We're divided, and it looks like all we care for is: if I live, I don't care what becomes of you. [But we can't be like that. Until we get together we're gonna be this way, and farther apart, in worse shape. That's true in Buffalo. You could come out of that, though, but you're not going to bloom overnight; when you're into something so deep, you got to gradually work your way out of it.] But I feel like if we had the right kind of leadership, and all, we could come on out. But we ain't got it, no kind of way.

9. Frank Martinez: Auto worker at Chevrolet's Tonawanda complex, in the metal-casting plant; his wife teaches at a nursery school. They have four children, ages seven to fourteen. (Interview illustrates editorial differences with Times.)

Myself, I'm practically in a state of financial bankruptcy. As of two years ago, when wage and price controls went into effect, since that time [my wife] Sally and I have withdrawn a sizable amount from our savings, and see no conceivable way we're going to put it back . . .

Last week, we had a layoff, they laid off a number of men; there were twenty-two in our department, the maintenance department, and three men from our shop, two sheet-metal workers and one apprentice-trainee. What the fore-
man said is, he had no idea there was a layoff at all, and he controls a lot of men. He thought if anyone should know about a layoff it would be him, but he wasn't expecting it. In fact, our department, which is short-handed, he thought they'd be hiring, and instead they laid off. They just sent the word out, with a list of names to lay off these people. Corporations have their way of operating. I have heard this is a big corporation and conglomerate scheme in other words, they have made their profit, they can afford to give the working man the business: let him take a vacation, they could care less.

It looks hopeless, unless somebody really takes hold of the whole situation, reverses the trend, or at least stabilizes it. This is something I've recently read into, and it seemed to be the general thinking when Nixon got into office that we were going to have a lot of unemployment, because the philosophy is, to take the money out of the working people and put it back into the hands of the rich and the corporations. Of course, this is a surefire way to do it. If a man is unemployed, and he doesn't have any money to live on, he's going to draw on any savings he has until it's finally gone. You do this to 100,000 Americans, multiply it by $11,000 apiece, and you are talking about a lot of money. Of course, I've done a lot of reading on this subject, but that means nothing because I'm not an expert. A lot of the experts say that unemployment is necessary. (The economists I've read say that 13 percent is necessary to stabilize the economy, but it will only work with a number of things, systems from government, and so forth and so on. The government has been striving too hard to keep unemployment down by excessive spending.) Some of the people I work with, we discuss these things. We really don't know what it's about because we're not intellectuals. Most fellows just throw up their arms in the air, curse, and walk away, saying, "I've heard enough. I don't want to talk about it anymore." It seems as though they feel hopeless, there's nothing they can do. They're just a cog in the wheel, the wheel's going to turn, the cog's going to go to the other side. and that's the way the working fellows that I work with feel.

10. Chester Midder: Baker, forty-eight, in line at the unemployment office. (Illustrates editorial differences with Times.)

I worked at Loblaws' Supermarkets four and a half years. I'm a baker—bread rolls, pies, cakes, according to what the desk calls for. I'm a mixer, too. I worked upstairs in the mixing part, Local 16 for the National Bakers Union. Can't do nothing else. I never did no construction work; even the construction workers are out.

Interviewer: What are you going to do now?

Get me a brick. Any time I see a meat market, break it in and get me some food. By the rock, sweetie: I don't have the money to buy nothing with.

[Laughs.] Nah. I wouldn't do that. I don't work in that department, no. 'Cause I'm healthy. I'm used to working. I worked all my life.

Now I could work at a lot of places, at some small bakery, but they won't pay me my due. They want to give me $1.95. See, I'm a mixer and a baker; I was making $4.95 an hour, and I'm not going to make all that bread and stuff for those people and they're gonna give me $1.95. Up at Loblaws, the lowest man would get $3.95 and he was only pushing a broom on the floor.

Interviewer: Why did they close the place where you worked?

Big business, you know, big business, big business, you know, chains. Loblaws' chain was in Canada. They open this one, they close that one. Man been there thirty years, they gave us a bonus pay, you know, you take the superintendents, they go with the company, but the workers out the door. And they didn't give us a party. You'd think about all them meals and that kind of stuff. They didn't give us a turkey, or a chicken, or nothing. [Why this is it: the superintendent says, "Nice working with you." But then they go to the warehouse, they go to different stores. But the workers, the man who was doing the things, they didn't get nothing. If you're a superintendent, they take you right along with them. If you're a worker, they don't give a damn if you've been working there twenty years. If you're not a superintendent or a foreman, you're not in the club.]

11. Bruce Nowak: Autoworker at Ford, twenty-two. (This interview, excised by the Times, was restored at our insistence.)

Well, I guess I'm a laborer. I don't know what you call it, automation-tender. I'm working a welding gun. I go all over, but mostly I've been working on the pan line, lately, for the Grenada, the new car. I feel like a robot.

Interviewer: What will happen if you're laid off?

I'll stay laid off. Well, like if it's starting to get close, then I'll start looking. Last time, I was at the bottom of the list, and you know I was one of the last to be called back but now there are 500 guys under me. So I'll get laid off, but I don't think the government would be too long. To me it doesn't matter. I'll work in my house and everything. I'm remodeling my cellar, right now, and painting.) [Nowak was laid off soon after the interview.]

12. Charles (Bill) Phillips: Bethlehem Steel worker, Fifty-eight. (Illustrates editorial differences.)

Well, I marvel, I have to marvel at the Establishment, because they can make a person believe they are at fault for not working. Now I don't know whether
13. Steelworker. Recently laid off at Bethlehem Steel, where he had worked for two years; still active at the plant in a rank-and-file caucus trying to organize workers against what is seen as a company-dominated union; twenty-five. (Interview selected by the Times out of the second set of submissions, but then subject to extensive editing by the Times, as discussed in text.)

[I work in a BOF open-hearth department, and I'd say there's probably been 150 layoffs in the last two weeks, and there's probably another 1,500 around the plant. And this Friday there'll be more because the open hearths are going down. At capacity, the whole plant runs about 21,000; in the last six months, it came down to fifteen and I imagine soon it's going to be running down around ten. It's the highest percentage laid off since 1971, when there was a major shut-down. The company got in a major tax dispute with the city of Lackawanna then, threatening to, you know, shut down the plant if Lackawanna didn't give them a major tax break. Naturally the city, which is practically owned by the steel plant, had no choice. If Bethlehem pulled out there goes most of the jobs.]

What's happened recently with the layoffs where I work is that there is a stipulation in the new contract of last August saying that if the plants have to cut down and people are laid off due to a shortage of raw materials, like coal, then it alleviates the company's obligation to pay SUB pay (SUB pay is the money paid by the company as a supplement to unemployment benefits, to bring the laid-off workers pay up to about 95 percent of normal. The duration of SUB pay depends on seniority--eds.) At this point, it's pretty obvious the economy's down, that construction's down that auto's down, so what they've done is to create the facade that the plant has to cut down because of the lack of coal and the coal strike. [It works out perfectly for them. And this layoff came conveniently two weeks before Christmas pay, and we generally have about a $200 bonus Christmas week and a $100 bonus New Year's week. By being laid off now, we lose both of them.]

Theoretically, if a union was a union, and really worked as a fighting body representing the working people, it would fight back against this. But the United Steelworkers of America, in most cases the only response we've drawn from them is that you've got to look at the company's side of things. And with the no-strike clause we have right now, it's an illegal wildcat if we try to pull people off from inside ourselves. The union has sold us out so badly that there is nowhere to go.

[Our group, we put ourselves together on a loosely knit basis. Right before we got sent out we talked to workers around the plant, and brought literature to show it wasn't the miners on strike that caused our layoffs, that the miners aren't even making as much as the steelworkers and WE can't make it on what we earn now, so they deserve anything they can get. It's the companies giving them less, and fighting to maintain, you know, (laughs) total control over people, and make more money at any cost, and create these divisions at the same time.]

14. Rosie Washington: Unemployed and on welfare, 27, she lives in the small apartment she shares with her daughter, 6, and another woman, from which they are about to be evicted. (Unchanged by the Times, although differences concerning placement, and their significance, are discussed in the text.)

You look in the paper, see all these jobs in Cheektowaga, Williamsville, no way to get to them, bus don't even go that way. You go up and go looking for a job; the jobs they send you to, 50 percent of the time there's not a job anyway. "Well, we're not hiring now, but we'll take your application." Then they send you out to jobs that they know you're either underqualified for or overqualified for. I was an administrative assistant at a community center; I've been an employment coach on a federal program, then a counselor. I've done all this, and I really like it. But my biggest problem is that I don't have that piece of paper that says I'm qualified, so now, well, I went to the restaurants, hotels, plants. I've said I never wanted to work in any plant. I wish I could get a permanent job now—I have applications in at Bethlehem, Cheeky Ford. You can't get any answers, you can't get any services, just sit around and wait, just to be told to come back and go through it again. Honest to God.

And the welfare system. Isn't that a design, a design to fail? They give you just enough money so you don't starve to death, so you're always hungry. They don't give you enough to live on, just to exist. You know, I think these clerks, they look at me as an imposition on their paychecks. They're paying for me: "If it wasn't for her I might have a nickel or a dime more." But you know, they want us here. They always got to have somebody on the bottom so they know they're closer to the top. A crummy welfare recipient chewing up their tax dollar, you dig it? With me here, I can make you feel better.

I'm tired, I really am. I have a child, and she's part of me. She sees me doing nothing, never going out to work, depressed, worried, sometimes crying. I mean, I try. I try to play with her. When I have some money, we even go out
together. We can't afford the movies, but I take her to Harry's and buy her a hamburger. I do love her. I do care, but with all the pressure, sometimes I can't even talk to her--you know. She comes home: "Hi, Mommy," "Hi, how was school today?" "Fine." She wants to play, but I can't. I think it's going to affect her emotionally. I went to school with her and the teacher said, "She's a good, bright child, but she's so sad. Why?" I said, "Because that's all we got in our home. Sadness. No hope, no future.

And this country thinks it's so damn great. It's NOT. It's hard to believe, but I really feel we're going to have a revolution, because this government ain't doing it, not to say any other kind is better. What I'd like to know is, what am I supposed to do with my life? I had my goals, but no means to make them. I'm just at the breaking point. And when I break, what am I going to do? You're just never right for anything. At first you're too young; then you don't have experience. By the time you're thirty-five or forty years, you're too old. So all through your life you were never right for anything. You know, it's nothing--job and experience; no experience, no job. To get a job you gotta have money, you gotta have a job to get money. So it's just a vicious circle of nothing. And you're all locked up in this thing, cross in it all your life. One circle that leads nowhere. That makes you pretty angry. Angry isn't even the word for it. I don't even KNOW how to describe that feeling.

Chapter 5

Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication: A Line-by-Line Illustration of the Editing Process

Doing something with oral history materials, beyond collecting and cataloging them, necessarily involves substantial editorial intervention. The most elemental transcription and even indexing requires a range of important decisions about how the spoken material is to be represented, and how complex content is to be summarized or categorized. To use oral history extracts in research, especially in combination with other forms of evidence and documentation, is to confront additional questions of context, selection, representativeness, and verification. The incorporation of substantial interview material in documentary works, especially those intended for broad public audiences, turns even more centrally still on editorial decisions about what is to be included and how it is to be arranged and presented.

Given this importance, it is surprising—or perhaps not so surprising—that the process of editing transcripts for publication is shrouded in considerable mystery. A rich literature surrounds transcription, of course, but most of it is focused on the transfer of sound onto paper for archival purposes, rather than the editorial issues involved in refining these transcripts into a meaningful and publicly communicable form. Anthropologists and linguists have worked hard at devising elaborate and compelling systems of notation and arrangement by which the texture and cultural meaning of speech patterns can survive in printed form. But this approach assumes a self-conscious focus on the oral discourse as such, as a cultural expression and an object of study and research; the approach is distinct from what I take to be the more casual way in which oral historical materials are usually engaged by those of us who confront the problem of digesting a long and complex interview transcript into a meaningful, readable, form that can be incorporated in historical documentary.