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NOTE: This is a lucid and informative essay which outlines the interviewer's approach. He succinctly describes the strengths and weaknesses of oral history, and the difficulties which may be encountered in this field.

ORAL HISTORY AND INDIAN ELDERS' INTERVIEWS

Over the past three years, TARR has conducted interviews with Indian elders all over the Province of Alberta in an attempt to pin down what might be termed an Indian understanding of treaty. The basic idea behind this effort is that most of our information on the treaties has come from written sources which either are ultimately derived from the government, or from other parties who had some interest in getting treaties signed. Thus, such sources may be presenting a biased view of the treaties, especially since Indian people often seem to have different opinions on what the treaties meant.

We have gone about our task by questioning elders in all three of the treaty areas in the Province, Treaties 6, 7, and 8, as to what they have been told about the treaties. Since Treaties 6 and 7 were signed in 1876 and 1877 respectively, the elders in these areas necessarily have to repeat what they have been told by their parents or grandparents who were the actual eyewitnesses to treaty signings. In the case of the Treaty 8 elders, though, there are actually still a few eyewitnesses to the treaty alive since the treaty was not signed until 1899.

There have been all sorts of debates among historians and anthropologists as to the usefulness and reliability of these

non-written oral sources. Only recently have historians begun to make use of oral sources in their histories, and then these works are differentiated from what most historians do by use of a separate term such as "oral" or "aural" history. The anthropologists, on the other hand, have always had to rely on oral sources for information, but the data they seek are not necessarily historical or of interest to historians. For the most part, even for the anthropologists, the history of a people is something to be derived from written sources.

The most acceptable way to use oral sources in history, it seems, is only to rely on actual eyewitness testimony in conjunction with the more reliable written sources. This method is fine for dealing with literate societies, but not so helpful when one is recording the history of such peoples as North American Indians. Indians, like many other peoples, have handed down many oral traditions about their past and it seems only sensible to make use of these for the historical information they contain.

There has only been one major study, Vansina's Oral Tradition¹, which attempts to deal to any great extent with the problems one encounters in trying to reconstruct history from oral tradition. Vansina has devised a typology of traditions which

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1. Vansina, Jan - Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology. includes his five major categories of formulae, poetry, lists, tales, and commentaries, with our elders' interviews perhaps most closely resembling his sub-category, "historical tales." Within this sub-category, he distinguishes between tales concerning general, local and family history. Our interviews may be closest to the former two types.

Vansina points out some of the dangers inherent in using historical tales because they are usually official traditions whose aim is to record history. Thus, if they are official traditions, they may be distorted so as to defend public interests, or else be so local in interest as not to illuminate history very much.

However, our interviews may not be so subject to these reservations as Vansina's material on several grounds. First, Vansina has derived his findings from traditions found in a centralized state-type society having many specialists in the telling of these tales. The much less rigidly structured Indians of Alberta were probably not so prone to these problems with their traditions and were less interested in the conscious use of tradition for maintenance of the status quo. Second, our interviews were not designed to simply record traditions but to question the actual content of the elders' speech, thus discouraging any tendency just to narrate tales unchanged as they had been handed down. Finally, the traditions dealt with in our interviews do not really date back very far unlike the

material Vansina used, so it might be said there has not yet been time to "mold" them into approved versions.

In a way it might even be said that we are not dealing with true oral traditions at all, but perhaps only their beginnings. Thus, Vansina's remarks may not have that much relevance to our work in terms of analysis of interview content. However, he does make many useful suggestions regarding ways to gauge the greater or lesser likelihood of any particular information or source being accurate. We have attempted to follow these procedural guidelines where possible so that attempts were made to pin down exactly the original source of information, to get an idea where the interviewees stand in the community, and to compare versions of the same stories as a check on reliability of information.

Perhaps we should not even be worrying about whether the elders have, in effect, told "the truth" about the treaties. Did the treaties signings actually take place just as the elders have described? This is something which can never be known. The point is that Indian people today believe certain things about the treaties because they have been told these things by the

people who were there. Knowing whether the real meaning of the treaties lies closer to "the government version" or "the Indian version" is not relevant. The important thing is to present "the Indian view" of the treaties both because this view is not widely known and because it has helped to shape Indian attitudes and actions regarding the wider society. We cannot hope to understand Indian-white relationships without understanding how Indian people view their treaties.

Some might argue that what Indian elders have to say on the treaties probably does not accurately reflect what the eye-witnesses thought the treaty was about. Rather, the elders would tailor their statements to fit what they perceived were present-day needs. For example, an elder might say today that the Queen had promised in the treaty that there would be a school on every reserve because his reserve lacked one.

There may very well be such examples of "modifying" the traditions in our interviews. Yet, there are also some striking examples of continuities with much earlier testimonies to be found. For example, Hanks and Hanks interviewed people on the Blackfoot reserve in 1938, 1939, and 1941, many of whom very likely witnessed the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877, and discovered that the Blackfoot understood the treaty very much as the Treaty 7 elders describe it today -- as a peace treaty or a promise by the Indians to keep peace, and a pledge by the Queen to take care of the Indians. There was no notion that the treaty had anything to do with giving up land.² It may also be the case that the more general, overall view of the nature of the treaty has been preserved, whereas smaller details are more likely to be forgotten. This is a subject which needs further investigation.

To return to the subject at hand, documenting the present-day

Indian understanding of treaty, a few words should be said on the methods which TARR used. About 250 interviews were conducted in all on various reserves and settlements throughout the Province and just about all in the native language. A few interviews were also carried out in Saskatchewan since the Treaty 6 area extends into that Province and the actual sites of the treaty signing, Forts Pitt and Carlton, do lie within Saskatchewan rather than Alberta.

In many ways, the project was almost too large to handle in terms of being able to "cover everything." Because of financial and personnel limitations, many shortcuts had to be taken. These shortcuts involved concentrating on the two main language groups in Alberta, Cree and Blackfoot, sticking more or less to the recognized "authorities" on the treaties in

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2. Hanks, Lucien M. and Jane Richardson Hanks - Tribe Under Trust, p.II, 12.

terms of who to interview (or else to relatives or friends of the interviewer), and perhaps too heavy a concentration in certain geographical areas because of greater population concentration or abundance of informants. In short, although TARR's research design for collecting interviews on the treaties has been less than scientific, it has allowed for a great deal of flexibility and ability to get to the sources of information on short notice.

As the oral interviewing project progressed, refinements in our methods became necessary, partly because of our findings from the interviews. For example, we started off by having various respected elders interview other elders. The interviews which resulted were certainly intriguing, though not particularly informative to English speakers because of the presence of so many shared implicit assumptions and ideas about the treaties which simply were not made explicit for the non-Indian. Using younger interviewers helped somewhat in the sense that they would try to pin down the meaning of statements a bit more.

Another problem which emerged in the course of the interviewing was that each treaty area seemed to have its own "version" of what the treaty was all about. In some ways this finding was welcome in that it indicated there was probably no "connivance" among Alberta Indian elders to produce an official treaty policy statement. Although one might expect a divergence between Blackfoot and Cree speakers on the nature of the treaty (if only on the basis of traditional rivalries), the fact that versions of Cree speakers from the Treaty 7 and 8 areas differed indicates that perhaps it was really a difference in the treaties or the negotiations themselves which was responsible for the split.

Our problem was, then, a technical one. Although our interviews were never intended to be highly structured, we did want to at least make an attempt to ask generally the same

questions everywhere to make comparison of interviews simpler. Obviously, no one questionnaire would be relevant in all three treaty areas since each treaty was thought of as something very different in each area. Thus, each treaty area came to need its own set of questions.

Another matter which had to be investigated was the possibility that we were obtaining fairly standardized accounts of the treaty within any one treaty area because all the interviews there were being conducted in the same language, either Cree or Blackfoot. Would Chipewyans or Stoneys have a different view of the treaties? There was not time to pursue these questions

in depth, nor to cover all language groups in Alberta but we were able to carry out a few interviews in Chipewyan for the Treaty 8 area, four interviews on the Sarcee reserve for Treaty 7, and the Stoney Cultural Education Program at Morley in the Treaty 7 area were kind enough to permit us to read translations of interviews they had carried out in Stoney.

Analysis of these additional interviews did not reveal any major differences in interpretations from the other interviews within a treaty area. This finding, as was usually the case, could be interpreted in several different ways. It may be that such uniformities reflect real differences of emphasis in the treaty negotiations between treaty areas, no matter into what language the treaty terms were translated. Or, they may even reflect later agreements among the elders of an area as to what the treaty meant.

The twelve sample interviews which follow (four for each treaty area) can be taken as fairly representative of the views expressed in other interviews from the same area. Thus, the Treaty 6 interviews express the idea that the treaty was an agreement which was made to allow the white man the use of the surface of the land for farming in return for various promises to the Indians. As has already been mentioned, the Treaty 7 interviews stress that the treaty was made to establish peace between Indian tribes and between Indians and whites as well as to assure the Indians that they would always be taken care of. Land was not a subject of the treaty negotiations at all except that the Indians were told they could choose their own reserve lands.

The Treaty 8 interviews are much less standardized than those from the other treaty areas, but in general they seem to be a bit closer to the government's interpretation of the treaty in that they emphasize that the Indians did give up or "sell" their land at the treaty. There is much greater elaboration on the promises made to the Indians than in the other two treaty areas as well as more confusion and contradictions over these. Perhaps these findings are all predictable since this treaty was made much later when its real meaning may have been clearer (if only through the experience of Indians further south). Also, as can be seen from Richard Daniel's paper on "The Spirit and Terms of Treaty 8", the fact that this treaty

was negotiated at different times in different places may have helped to promote more variety in the accounts of the negotiations, simply because different things would be stressed at each negotiation. Also, the traditional lifestyle of the people in the Treaty 8 area may have contributed to the variety of views since communication between these small widespread family groups was not easy.

The Interviews

The basis for choosing the twelve representative interviews included here varies a bit in each treaty area. At first an attempt was made to choose interviews from as wide a geographical base as possible in case there were important local variations in stories about the treaties. This was not always possible to do because of variations in the quality of the interviews, so we had to compromise somewhat and simply choose the best interviews. These tended to be the most comprehensive or else the best conducted interviews in terms of interviewing techniques. Even though this method of choosing interviews did not really take geographical differences into account, we still seem to have included the major variations in the stories which appear to have some regional basis.

The four interviews from the Treaty 6 area, for example, really only include elders' stories from two regions. John Buffalo and Lazarus Roan are both from the Hobbema area south of Edmonton, while Fred Horse and Alexander Metchewais are from Frog Lake and Cold Lake respectively, both located in the easternmost portion of Treaty 6 within Alberta. The Hobbema interviews express the more general view that the treaty was made to enable the whites to use the surface of the land for farming and that, in return, the Indians would be taken care of. The Cold Lake and Frog Lake interviews are a bit more specific in describing the treaty negotiations. For example, they stress that the treaty negotiator only asked for three things from the Indians, the surface of the land, grass for feeding animals, and timber for building shelter. Other facets of the negotiations mentioned exclusively in the eastern interviews are that the Indians were promised the protection of the North West Mounted Police, and, in the Cold Lake interviews, the story that Sweetgrass had sold the land prior to the treaty signing.

It is interesting that there is more detail about the treaty negotiations in the eastern Treaty 6 interviews than the Hobbema ones. This may be due to the fact that Frog Lake and Cold Lake are closer to the actual site of the treaty signing, Fort Pitt, so more stories about the treaty were preserved as local traditions. It is also fascinating that stories about Sweetgrass's role prior to treaty have been preserved, especially in light of the request he made for assistance from the government in 1871 which is discussed in John Taylor's paper in this volume. This story only appears in interviews from Cold Lake, however.

The Treaty 7 interviews chosen for this work include two from

the Peigans (Mrs. Buffalo and John Yellowhorn) and two from the Bloods (Camoose Bottle and Chris Bull Shields). Again, these particular interviews were not necessarily chosen on the basis of fair tribal or geographical representation, but rather as being the most comprehensive examples of the two major "themes" appearing in the Treaty 7 interviews. All the Treaty 7 interviews make clear that the Indians did not feel the Treaty had anything to do with land or surrender of land, except that the Indians would be able to choose their own land for reserves. Rather, the treaty was made to establish peace. Also, just about all the interviews express the idea that under the treaty, the Indians would be taken care of, or as John Yellowhorn puts it, that "The Queen has made the Indian people her children."

The Blood interviews place more stress on the idea that the treaty was made to establish peace, both among Indian groups and between Indians and whites, perhaps reflecting the participation of many Bloods in U.S. treaties whose terms strongly emphasized peace. There is also much more emphasis placed on description of the negotiations themselves in the Blood interviews in terms of citing sequences of events and actual dialogue.

The Peigan interviews tend to be more general and to discuss a greater variety of topics but this may only reflect the fact that they were done more recently with more questions asked in the interviews. Also, they tend to be less clear both on what the elders felt the nature of the treaty to be and on the actual negotiations themselves, giving rise to speculations that such lack of clarity reflects the less prominent role played by Peigan leaders at the negotiations. In any case, there is more emphasis in the Peigan interviews on the periods before and after treaty.

The Treaty 8 interviews, again, are only from two areas, the Sucker Creek Reserve on Lesser Slave Lake (Jean Marie Mustus and William Okeymow) and from Fort Chipewyan (Felix Gibot and Francis Bruno). However, both these locations were actual sites of treaty signings and considered to be important by the commissioners, particularly Sucker Creek (or Grouard) as it saw the first signing of Treaty 8 (see Richard Daniel's paper on Treaty 8). So, it is not surprising that especially good accounts of the treaty would survive in these localities.

William Okeymow gives the best of the actual eyewitness accounts of Treaty 8 and he recalls the long discussions the Indians had prior to signing the treaty because of their worry

that their way of life would change thereafter. Jean Marie Mustus, whose grandfather was a chief who signed the treaty, also relates how difficult his grandfather's decision to sign was. The fear the Indians felt that their hunting, fishing and trapping would be restricted if the treaty was signed is a constant theme in most Treaty 8 interviews and shows up again in the two selected from Fort Chipewyan. In fact, many interviews make the point that without reassurance by the

commissioners on this matter, the treaty would not have been signed at all.

The question of whether the treaty concerned surrender of land is unfortunately not as clearly answered in these four Treaty 8 interviews as in many others. William Okeymow, like the Treaty 6 elders, feels that the Indians surrendered only the surface of the land while Jean Marie Mustus states that his grandfather "sold the land." Francis Bruno, a Chipewyan elder, feels that the treaty meant the Indians were at least to share the land with the whites, though he is not certain whether this involved surrendering land. Felix Gibot, an eyewitness to the treaty, is not certain that the government bought the land, but feels the commissioners thought they were doing so. In any case, it is clear that Treaty 8 elders feel the treaty did concern land, whether the Indians were being asked to sell it or share it.

Another prevalent idea in the Fort Chipewyan interviews is that the treaty commissioners had heard the Indians were starving and part of the reason for the treaty was to prevent this from happening again. In this connection, it is interesting to note in Richard Daniel's paper that the government had been informed many years previous to Treaty 8 that the Indians of the region were in dire straits and yet had delayed making a treaty with them.

One idea which is fairly prevalent throughout interviews in all three treaty areas is that the treaty set up some sort of relationship between the Indians and the government, or Queen, by which the Indians would be looked after or taken care of by the government. This may be part of what John Foster has termed the "compact" relationship which he feels best describes how Indians would have perceived their relations with whites. The emphasis in the Treaty 7 interviews placed on the treaty as a peace agreement and in a few of the Treaty 8 interviews, especially that of Felix Gibot, on seeing a new friendly, helpful Indian-white relationship stressed in the negotiations may also be indicators that Indians viewed treaties as defining or reaffirming new or existing relationships between two peoples.

PROBLEMS IN DOING NATIVE INTERVIEWS

In preparation of this transcript, many interviews done in the native language, namely Cree and Blackfoot have been included which make up a small portion of the transcript. It seems appropriate therefore that the reader becomes acquainted with the basic fundamentals the interviewer encounters in preparing and completing these unique interviews, unique in terms of the native language and conversely, transcribing the material to English. The content of this article is information gained through my own personal experiences, therefore it would be unfair to conclude that all interviewers whether Cree or Blackfoot are faced with the same problems. Another point of interest would be that our format is not standardized. It is difficult to utilize the standard procedure used when doing

interviews in English.

The difficulty one is faced with becomes apparent when he is attempting to formulate a questionnaire. There is such a vast difference in grammatical structure between Cree and English that a prepared questionnaire often becomes useful only in obtaining personal vital statistics. Questions which follow a pattern are often disrupted by unavoidable answers covering the same topic. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to maintain a chronological and coherent interview as much as possible.

It has been stressed by professional people that time should be taken in approaching the interviewee, however this may be practical [only] in urban areas. When flying in and out of isolated communities every minute must be put to good use. Often there is only limited time and it becomes a major factor, hence, it is important to bear in mind what approach or technique the interviewer must apply to each situation. It is not a simple matter of locating the interviewee, introducing yourself and saying "let's get on with the interview." If possible a visit prior to the interview must be arranged -- this is essential if time permits. It allows one to outline the purpose, intent and results of the interview. By this the elder becomes acquainted with and feels relatively relaxed about what is to take place. This will in return provoke thought and usually co-operation is evident and overwhelming. It should also be pointed out that the ability to speak the native language is a key factor. Again it should be stressed that the approach is of great significance when initial contact is being made with the elders.

Often the elders will commence conversation with great depths of historical background information, which inevitably follows the pattern of general storytelling. Although this is authentic information which is requested of them, they in turn

have to be reminded that the interviewer is to return at a later date for a more detailed discussion.

It is at this time that the questionnaire breaks down. In some interviews it is noted that often only one or two questions are put forth, and the response can be very lengthy. Native leagers are not accustomed to being bombarded with questions, coupled with the technological progress of man are unfamiliar with tape recorders and are greatly intrigued by them, a playback of the interview is also greatly appreciated. Then orientation of equipment becomes a necessity. Many towns and historical sights are known to Indians by native names and if the interviewer does not fully understand the name, it breaks the train of thought of the interviewee when asked to repeat and explain what he has said.

In doing native interviews the dialogue on the part of the interviewee often becomes repetitious, this is to indicate the emphasis which the elders place on the topic being discussed.

Another aspect of the Cree language is that there are two

distinct dialects spoken in central and northern parts of the province. The basic conversational grammar is parallel, however some words are totally unknown to either group depending on where the person is from. Kinship is apt to be very general amongst native peoples and often it is discovered that somehow there are distant family ties and consequently new relatives are discovered. I mention this point because when this program was initially formed several interviewees made their formal introductions by saying, "I am now talking with my cousin, uncle, or grandfather." It must be clearly defined as to whom the interviewee is talking.

Also very often key words from the Cree language related to historical events are misconstrued and one must be careful as to how the interpretation is made. As in any other language, some Cree speaking natives are well versed and possess a high calibre vocabulary which is seldom used in daily conversation. What the non-native reader does not visualize are the expressions and hand gestures which tell a story of their own. The tone of voice also carries emphasis not from bitterness but the sincerity the elders place upon relating stories of past events. Mostly it is the man who relates the interview, but the elder's wife plays a major role in remembering dates if the elder has a momentary lapse of memory. Ages, dates often are given within a month or two and will require clarification. Names too are forgotten, but recalled vividly when mentioned in Cree.

Translation is another obstacle which can create difficulties, as the transcribing must be accomplished with one listening in Cree and writing in English. This may appear to be a minor detail, however to translate Cree literally would be totally unreasonable as many of the Cree words and expressions are reversed in English sentence structure. Again there must be some form of word juggling in order that the interview will be comprehensible to the reader.

It is a known Indian custom to exchange gifts while visiting other Indians or friends, so often tobacco or cigarettes have been given to elders not as a form of payment but as a gift. They also appreciate the exchanges of information and social visit. It has been our policy to return a copy of the interview to the elder who will check for errors and proper translation.

In conclusion, I might add that the minor details and few obstacles that have to be overcome are minimal and it gives a tremendous feeling when the elder shakes your hand and says, "Come and visit again." They are more than pleased to be able to contribute in such a manner their time and vast source of information to us that it gives you a feeling of accomplishment, not alone but with the able assistance of an elder.

Richard Lightning