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Alternative Application of Oral History in the Secondary Classroom

Alan English

Secondary history teachers have long complained that student disengagement is one of the greatest struggles of their profession (Cowgill, 2015; Larson, 2000). In turn, researchers have long theorized and demonstrated that teachers' over-reliance on textbooks contributes to secondary students' disengagement (Crocco, 1998; Engle, 2003; Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011; McNaught, 2005; Reisman, 2012). More recently, Loewen (2018) reported from his observations not only that textbooks remain the central means of instruction in the high school history class, but that it has widely made high school students hate history (p. 11). In addition to being linked to students' disengagement from and aversion to history, textbooks have often been critiqued for their lack of academic rigor (Stern, 2005; Tarman & Kuran, 2015). Despite these critiques, the textbook remains the central means of instruction in high school history classrooms.

One solution that I have found useful in my teaching is the implementation of oral history, in which a student, "collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 19). While oral history can be a more engaging, rigorous alternative to textbooks, it has also failed to emerge as a mainstream means of instruction in the secondary classroom. Here, I theorize that this failure of emergence into the mainstream teaching methodology is due to the fact that many secondary history teachers, undoubtedly accustomed to textbook instruction, find oral history to be unapproachable, intimidating, and too risky for their consistent implementation. With that theory in mind, I offer here examples of alternatives to traditional oral history methodology collected from the accounts of Jim Walch, a WWII, Korean War, and Vietnam War veteran who "retired" as a Red Cross emergency relief worker into his 80's. Walch's accounts were collected from two interviews I conducted with him in his home as well as subsequent telephone interviews and conversations. To augment Walch's accounts, I was able to use his unpublished memoirs, *Horses, Helicopters, and Hurricanes*. My aim here is to use Walch's accounts and the provided alternative oral history activities as a means to encourage social studies teachers to explore strategies beyond traditional textbook instruction in order to increase engagement and rigor in the classroom.

Oral History

It has been well-demonstrated that oral history can be an effective methodology in secondary history classrooms. For example, oral history has been shown to be effective at reaching youth that are resistant to traditional, textbook-centric instruction (Huerta & Flemmer, 2000). It has also been demonstrated that oral history can build a greater degree of student engagement by allowing students to be more active participants in class as opposed to textbook instruction (Busby, 2011; Dutt-Doner et al., 2016; Edwards, 2006; Levin, 2011). Researchers have demonstrated a broad list of other benefits to oral history instruction including bridging cultural divides (Neff et al., 2017), developing connections with community members (Edwards, 2006; Lacourt et al., 2005; Lattimer & Kelly, 2013), increasing the relevancy of content (Lacourt et al., 2005), building information literacy skills (Harhai, et al., 2017), developing a sense of self-

efficacy in students (Lattimer & Kelly, 2013), and the ability to connect students of multiple ages in a single project (Busby, 2011; Dayton-Wood et al., 2012). Despite this promising list of benefits, oral history instruction has not made its way to the mainstream of what secondary history teachers do, and the textbook remains the standard tool of instruction in secondary classrooms (Loewen, 2018; Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011; Neumann 2012).

One reason for the lack of adoption of oral history methodology into secondary classrooms may be that to history teachers which are more accustomed to and comfortable with traditional textbook instruction, oral history can seem intimidating. The structure of oral history projects at the secondary level most commonly consists of introducing the concept of oral history, preparing for interviews by studying relevant historical content, writing appropriate questions based on one's research, conducting interviews, analyzing collected data, and presenting that analysis orally or in written word (Dayton-Wood et al., 2012; Edwards, 2006; Huerta & Flemmer, 2000; Parsons, 2000; Whitman, 2000). Through this process, the educator relinquishes a degree of control and the monopoly over the source of knowledge in the classroom. Less experienced, knowledgeable, or confident teachers, however, may be more comfortable in textbook-centered instruction, where a prepared teacher is in full control over the content, format, and pacing of the course. To a teacher accustomed to textbook-centered instruction, transitioning to a decentralized methodology such as oral history can be a stark, shocking contrast. Therefore, what may be needed are sample activities that utilize many of the positive attributes of oral history instruction in a format that may be more approachable to teachers accustomed to textbook instruction.

In order to provide teachers with more approachable oral history material, standard oral history methodology may need to be loosened. While standard oral history project methodology has proven itself effective, over adherence to methodology can create unnecessary rigidity in the classroom. Whitman (2000) argues that rather than firm theoretical and methodological adherence, teachers' emphasis in designing oral history projects should be on creating engaging enthusiasm for history in their students. Whitman (2000) argues,

Too much theory and methodology, however, can be as mundane to pre-collegiate students as memorizing names and dates in a lecture-oriented class. The focus of any oral history project must continue to engender an intellectual enthusiasm for learning about the past (p. 476).

Therefore, in order to cast a wider net of secondary history teachers willing to implement oral history strategies, I propose to broaden the scope of what constitutes as oral history methodology. To a certain extent, this has already been done. Woodard (2013) described an oral history project which culminated in an audio/video documentary. Murray (2004) demonstrated the effectiveness of an oral history project that culminated in a "Welcome Home Party" for Vietnam veterans as well as a published class book on the Vietnam War. English (2018) designed a high school unit of instruction on the Vietnam War which collected oral history data and culminated with a student-generated textbook. Luskey-Barth (2008) described an oral history project done on the history of a local high school that was transformed into a live theatrical production.

In this spirit of the broadening of oral history methodology, I offer here sample oral history activities that could be used in a secondary history classroom in a variety of ways. First, they could be examples of activities that students could create after collecting and analyzing oral history data. Students would then present activities, such as the provided examples, to their classmates to complete. Alternatively, in smaller class units, activities could be created by the instructor for students based on data that he/she collected.

WWII Rationing

During World War II, Walch's mother, Anne May Roberts Walch, worked for the Office of Price Administration (OPA), which oversaw the rationing of high-demand items including gasoline. In his memoirs, Walch described his mother's practice of "selling" their outboard motor boat to local servicemen for one dollar (which she supplied) in order to qualify them for additional gasoline rations and allow them to travel to see friends and family while on leave. Soon after the serviceman received the additional ration, the boat was "sold" back to Anne Walch. While her actions were certainly companionate, they could also be interpreted as illegal. The Emergency Price Control Act of 1942, which essentially created the Office of Price Administration, allowed for fines up to \$5,000 dollars or up to two years in prison for violating rations or price controls (Emergency Price Control Act, 1942). After reading the oral history account of Walch's mother's "crime," a potentially engaging and thought-provoking activity might be to stage a mock trial assessing her guilt. Students could be assigned to act as the prosecution, defense, jury, clerk, and judge in determining her guilt or innocence. Such an activity could potentially bring about many of the benefits of oral history including collecting and reading complex text, conducting background research, being an active participant in class, and critical thinking skills. Additionally, an introduction into America's criminal trial process would undoubtedly be experienced. See Appendix A for a potential handout to be distributed to a secondary history class.

The Battle of Luzon

Walch's only combat experience during WWII occurred during the Battle of Luzon. One scene he described took place while on patrol looking for Japanese troops. Walch's unit was on a short break, lying down and eating K-rations. They suddenly saw a group of enemy troops approximately 200 feet away and attacked with mortar fire. The Japanese soldiers returned fire, and Walch and his men were forced to take cover (personal communication, August 22, 2017). Despite its noteworthy role in the Pacific Theater, the Battle of Luzon is absent from many high school American history textbooks. Given Walch's accounts of the Battle of Luzon and its lack of textbook coverage, students could be prompted to research the Battle of Luzon in comparison to other major battles of the Pacific Theater and write letters to the authors of their textbook, making a case for the addition of the Battle of Luzon and Walch's account to the text. Such an activity would take advantage of many of the positive attributes of oral history such as a personal connection to the content, an authentic task that transcends the classroom, active participation in the lesson, and rigorous research into the content. Additionally, it would be an opportunity of civic engagement, formal letter-writing, and introduce another aspect of the history-making process: the writing of textbooks. See Appendix B for an example resource to be distributed to students for the activity. In that resource, I reference *The Americas*, the textbook to which my

American history students had access. In a class that uses another textbook, however, a similar reference could easily be substituted.

Soldiers Coping with War

The most common aspects of soldiers' experience are guilt and regret. There is no avoiding that in war; people die. Consequentially, soldiers struggle in justifying this death and often feel guilt or regret for surviving or participating in it. Walch's experience was no different. During our conversations together, I tried to understand how those emotions manifested themselves for him. For example, when Walch made the comment that he entered pilot training because, "I had seen enough as a ground-pounder." I asked what he disliked about being a "ground-pounder." He resisted talking about his experiences that were uncomfortable or repressed and responded with long, thoughtful pauses, "Well...there's really nothing to like about being a ground-pounder. The infantry...slept on the ground and...none of that...the infantry is not a very enjoyable life" (personal communication, July 29, 2017). In his memoirs, however, Walch did leave one entry that gives a hint as to how he experienced the emotions that are an inevitable consequence of combat experiences. During the Korean War, while on a mission to spot an artillery barrage on a bridge under construction by Korean troops, Walch's artillery spotter regretted not having his camera with him to photograph a beautiful sunset. Walch (1994) was struck by the spotter's comparatively trivial concern while in the middle of a combat mission and said of the experience,

The problem of not having the camera along is one that I thought about then and have thought about over the years. Could we kill with such regularity that we become callous and our actions become robotic? There may be such a thing as dispassionate slaughter. I would like to think that no one hates anyone, and we all just do our job. Things like pretty sunsets may be God's attempt to console us, for much consoling is needed in war.

This passage is by far the closest Walch ever got to discussing his struggles being around death and destruction that I have had the privilege to witness. As in many soldiers, that struggle seems to have been, to at least some degree, hidden or repressed. This account, however, represents an opportunity to talk about struggles soldiers experience when coming back from war. One option is to present Walch's account, along with literary accounts. In the activity, students would be asked to read provided passages and find or collect another account of a soldier's experience with guilt, regret, or other similar emotions. Students could then analyze the sources for relevant themes, outliers, and lessons that can be learned from such accounts. Such an activity would embrace many of the benefits of a more conventional oral history project and would allow students to be active participants in the lesson, reading primary sources, and creating personal connections to the material. Additionally, the integration of literature into the activity would potentially interest a wider audience of students. See Appendix C for a handout that could be presented to a class on such an activity.

The Vietnam War

Walch was called again to serve overseas in Vietnam as an aviation advisor to the Joint Operations Center of the South Vietnamese Army. He was in Saigon during the overthrow of

Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, and his description of that day was one of the most powerful accounts of his memoirs. Armed with Walch's account and a digital map of Saigon at the time, students could identify the locations of many of the landmarks Walch refers to and trace his path that day. Such an activity would take advantage of many of the positive attributes of oral history including making the content interactive and reinforcing reading skills. Additionally, it would be an opportunity to incorporate digital literacy skills and basic geography into a history lesson, both worthwhile goals. See Appendix D for an example handout of such an activity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Secondary history teachers have long combatted their students' boredom in the classroom. Although textbook-only instruction is often a major contributor, the textbook remains centric to many classrooms. Oral history instruction has been demonstrated to increase student engagement, but it has failed to supplant the textbook as the primary means of instruction. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate alternative means of utilizing oral history in hopes that such methods can become more widely used among secondary teachers. My goal is not to replace textbook instruction entirely. Although Crocco (1998) argued that textbook instruction was to blame for history students' boredom more than twenty years ago, she also noted that it was unrealistic to expect history teachers to put down their textbooks any time soon (p. 22). The situation has not changed today. Loewen (2018) looked to the future of high school history instruction saying, "The textbook will not disappear from class. But no longer will it move the class from topic to topic" (p. 34). Textbooks can play an important role in high quality history instruction. As Huerta & Flemmer (2000) stated, "The inclusion of oral history projects does not replace textbooks and other secondary sources. Undoubtedly, textbooks and other sources serve an important function, presenting facts and ordering specific events" (p. 106). It is not realistic nor practical to seek the complete, immediate removal of textbooks from secondary history classrooms. The solution must therefore be to find ways to improve upon textbook-only instruction and provide specific and practical implementation strategies for teachers wishing to use methods, such as oral history, but are unsure how to do so.

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Appendix A

Walch Mock Trial

Introduction: Anne May Roberts Walch worked for the Office of Price Administration (OPA) during WWII in rural Minnesota near Annie Battle Lake. The OPA was responsible for overseeing the rationing of many goods, including gasoline. Her son, Jim Walch, later described Anne May’s method to get servicemen on leave extra gasoline. He said,

We owned an outboard motor that was sold to every friend who happened to be home on furlough. When they showed up at the OPA for their gasoline ration stamps, my mother sold them the outboard motor. The motor sold for one dollar. The same dollar likely was used over and over for three and half years. I can picture Mom being so glad to see my friends she would give them a dollar to buy an ice cream sundae at Bridgmans and then suddenly remember I wanted to sell an outboard motor for a buck. Did they want to buy it? If so she could give them extra gasoline stamps. The motor had the same twelve owners. Each owned the motor a different time once or twice a year. The motor never ran throughout the war but stayed in the cabin on Annie Battle Lake. Many bills of sale exchanged hands. The letter of the law was kept, though the spirit was bent beyond recognition. (Walch, 1994)

While Mrs. Walch continued this practice throughout WWII without consequence, our job is to determine if the “letter of the law” was indeed met. As a class, we will conduct a mock trial of Mrs. Walch, supposing that she was indeed charged with violating the Emergency Price Control

Act (EPCA), which could bring up to a \$5,000 fine or two years in prison. Roles for the mock trial will include:

Defense Attorney(s): The defense is responsible for researching the EPCA, representing Mrs. Walch, and trying to present a case that results in a verdict of “Not guilty.”

Prosecution Attorney(s): The prosecution is responsible for researching the EPCA, representing the people of the United States, and trying to present a case that results in a verdict of “Guilty.”

Jury: The jury is responsible for considering both the defense’s and prosecution’s representation of the case and determining if Mrs. Walch was indeed guilty of violating the EPCA.

Clerk: The clerk is responsible for swearing in of witnesses, overseeing the jury, being in charge of all forms and evidence relative to the trial, and generally helping make sure the trial goes smoothly.

Court Reporter: The court reporter is responsible for keeping an accurate record of everything that is said during the trial and reading back those records upon request. Transcripts of trials are commonly used during appeal trials.

Judge: The judge position is carried out by the teacher, who will act as an impartial decision-maker and overseer of the trial, interpreting the law in a way that insures that the pursuit of justice is maintained.

Appendix B

Battle of Luzon

Jim Walch was an infantry soldier in WWII and saw combat in the Battle of Luzon. In Luzon, he regularly went on patrols looking for Japanese troops. One day on patrol, Walch described lying down with his unit and eating K-rations while taking a break. They suddenly saw a group of enemy troops approximately 200 feet away and attacked with mortar fire. The Japanese soldiers returned fire, and Walch and his men were forced to take cover. Of the battle he said,

I found that bullets that pass close to one’s head snap as they go by and that digging a hole in the ground with my belt buckle would have gone faster had I been a belly dancer. I ended up with a combat infantry badge that I didn’t deserve. The requirement was two weeks of that kind of stuff. I met that requirement okay, but I was always afraid I would get someone killed. (Walch, 1994)

Although it was a major aspect of the Pacific Theater, it is absent from most American history textbooks. For example, *The Americans* says essentially nothing about it. The closest it even comes to mentioning the Battle of Luzon is a short passage which reads, “The Americans continued leapfrogging across the Pacific toward Japan, and in October 1944, some 178,000 Allied troops and 738 ships converged on Leyte Island in the Philippines. General MacArthur, who had left the Philippines two years earlier, waded ashore and announced, ‘People of the

Philippines: I have returned”” (Danzer et al., 2006, p. 581). When MacArthur gave this famous line, however, the Battle of Luzon had not yet even begun.

Our job is to contact the authors of *The Americans* by letter and make the case that future editions should include the Battle of Luzon, potentially even Walch’s account. You will be assigned small groups, each of which will be responsible for researching the Battle of Luzon and presenting its importance in a letter to the editor of *The Americans*. As a class, we will then compile our respective letters into a class letter, arguing for the representation of the Battle of Luzon in future editions of *The Americans*.

Appendix C

Soldier’s Guilt and Grief

Jim Walch served as an aerial artillery spotter during the Korean War. While on a mission to spot an artillery barrage on a bridge under construction by Korean troops, Walch’s artillery spotter regretted not having his camera with him to photograph a beautiful sunset. Walch (1994) was struck by the spotter’s comparatively trivial concern while in the middle of a combat mission and said of the experience,

The problem of not having the camera along is one that I thought about then and have thought about over the years. Could we kill with such regularity that we become callous and our actions become robotic? There may be such a thing as dispassionate slaughter. I would like to think that no one hates anyone, and we all just do our job. Things like pretty sunsets may be God’s attempt to console us, for much consoling is needed in war.

Similarly, in the semi-autobiographical work, *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien (1990), a Vietnam veteran says,

Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. (p. 171)

Your assignment is to find an additional source of a combat soldier discussing guilt or grief after surviving combat. Your source may be an archived historical primary source, literary, or collected from an additional oral history source such as a family member. Once you have collected, read, and analyzed this source, you are to write a 500-word response to the following.

- What are some aspects of grief and guilt that are common among your three sources?
- What are some individual or unique characteristics of one of your sources?
- What can be learned about the experiences of a combat soldier from these sources?

Appendix D

Saigon Map Activity

Jim Walch was an aviation advisor to the Joint Operations Center of the South Vietnamese Army and was in Saigon during the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. Below is his account of his part in this historic event.

At about 2:30 [A.M.] one morning I received a telephone call from the American duty officer that a request had been made by the Vietnamese for a large number of aircraft. The number, type, and hour of intended use of these aircraft called for me to make a trip to the J.O.C [Joint Operations Center], and the duty officer said he would send a driver and vehicle to the Brink Hotel where I lived. When I arrived at the J.O.C, which was next to Tan Son Nhut airport, it was still dark and the usual telephone calls were made. It was mid-morning before I could go to the Vietnamese snack bar located in the foyer of J.O.C. All they had were tangerines and two of those triangular, aluminum-wrapped cheese slices smaller than a penny box of matches.

At 12:30 [P.M.], a firing pass could be heard as someone made a strafing run the length of the nearby airport. The only other American on duty was on the second floor. At this time it was not known who was shooting so I went up to the second floor and made the suggestion that any classified material that might be out of the safe be returned and locked up. Rumors started that there was an attempt by the Vietnamese Army to oust President Diem. The sound of large shells exploding in the vicinity of the palace could be heard.

President Diem had his own palace guards. Forces loyal to him gathered around the palace, while those attempting to oust him from power took up positions along the river and outside the zoo several blocks east of the palace. It was past lunch time, and a trip to the shack [sic] bar resulted in the purchase of two tangerines, but the cheese was all gone. The gun fire at the airport and in the downtown area became louder and more frequent. My replacement came on duty at five p.m. But it was after six before I was ready to leave.

Had this been a normal day, I would have ridden my bicycle to and from work. The bicycle was back at the Brink Hotel. A radio announcement informed Americans to remain inside, and if they had to move within the city to contact navy shore patrol for transportation. They also stated that the chief of staff of the Vietnamese army had assured the American Ambassador that the Americans were in no danger. When I called the shore patrol they informed me they would pick me up at seven. They were on time and we left in their gray carryall truck. When we reached the zoo, a fire fight was underway, and the shore patrol said they would take me back to the pickup point. I thanked them and said I was within three blocks of where I was going and left their vehicle. A Vietnamese tank commander took exception to my attempt to pass behind his tank so I walked one block west and then started walking south. The radio had made announcements that Americans were not to be interfered with. This was of little comfort as I proceeded at right angles to the palace guard and the Vietnamese army as they disputed each other's authority by pouring machine gun fire back and forth. They were colorful in their endeavors and made use of tracer ammunition that would streak west to the palace then east to the zoo with an occasional round striking the pavement then ricocheting into the black sky.

As I walked between these two disturbed groups many thoughts went through my mind. First, I was hoping I wouldn't get hit. Second, if I did get hit there would be all kinds of hell to pay because they weren't supposed to shoot Americans. Third, I am not a brave person, but I was hungry. And fourth, there was something that I could do to let them know I was an American. I could whistle. The thought of why I wanted to whistle crossed my mind. Was I to whistle because I was frightened or to let them know I was an American. Before I resolved that question, another question came up: what to whistle. Less than a block away, the spires of the church prompted me to whistle a church hymn: "The Way of the Cross Leads Home." As I whistled, I thought, "Now if you shoot me, not only will Uncle Sam getch'a but God'll getch'a too." I was desperate. About a hundred yards from the church, a two and a half ton truck came roaring out of the dark with its lights off and snuggled up to the side of the church like it was late for confession. It came from the side defended by the palace guard.

A short block further south, about the time my heart had sunk down level with my eyeballs, a Vietnamese officer and a squad of riflemen popped up from behind a stone wall. There was a dim street light at that corner, and I could see that the riflemen had selected me as their target of the day. The officer was shouting at me in Vietnamese. I let him finish and then, with no attempt to make use of the Berlitz Vietnamese language course taught at the special forces school at Ft. Bragg, I proceeded to tell him in plain English just what he and his squad could do, and that I was going to cross the street and pause under the street light so that they could see who I was, then I was going down to the Brink Hotel and get something to eat. Any profanity associated with my remarks was sincerely and forcefully spoken, and if he didn't understand a word I said, I think he gathered the impression I was in no mood for chit chat. The remaining walk of two blocks was notable only in its absence of people.

Directions:

1. Find a 1965 street map of Saigon at: http://virtual-saigon.net/Asset/Preview/vcMap_ID-1063_No-1.jpeg.
2. Take a zoomed-in screenshot of the map.
3. Using a digital method of your choice, mark and label all landmarks relevant to Walch's account including the Tan Son Nhut Airport, the Saigon City Zoo, Diem's palace, the American Ambassador's residence, and the National Cathedral (he generically refers to it as "the church").
4. The Brinks Hotel, where Walch lived, is not labeled on this map. However, it was just northeast of the Hotel Caravelle, which does appear on the map. Locate and label where the Brinks Hotel must have approximately been using a digital method of your choice.
5. Using a digital method of your choice, label the approximate position of the two opposing groups at the time of Walch's encounter with them.
6. Using a digital method of your choice, trace as accurately as possible Walch's path in this account.