

Oral History at the HSTL
with
JAMES R. FUCHS

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by J.T. Curry and P.D. Lagerquist

CURRY: To start, what is oral history?

FUCHS: Oral history is subject to many definitions, but simply, you might say it's the systematic collection of an individual's memories of personalities and certain events in which historians are likely to be interested.

It involves not only the systematic collection, but the preservation and making available of these reminiscences to scholars.

CURRY: Most people have never heard of the term "oral history" before about the last ten years; now you hear it all the time. Why is this?

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FUCHS: I suppose because of the burgeoning of the discipline, the fact that there are so many projects now in existence, and also because of the preeminence given to some of them because of their relationship to United States Presidents, to wit, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower, and, of course, Harry S. Truman. There are, however, many other well-known projects.

CURRY: Do other projects come to mind?

FUCHS: The first that comes to mind is the initial oral history project, as we know them. It might be called the father project, and that was the project began by Allen Nevins about 1948 at Columbia University, which is now, of course, known as the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. It is still an ongoing project with by far the most hours of taped interviews and pages of transcript in the field in this country--probably in the world.

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The Nevins project, as you probably know, began with his taking notes and quickly advanced to the wire recorder and then to the magnetic tape recorder, with which most projects are now equipped. That is, of course, the outstanding and different feature about oral history now as distinguished from earlier interviewing as we know it, the verbatim tape recording, as against the previous method of taking notes which, of course, were filtered through the mind of the interviewer. Now we have total recall by means of the recorded tape.

LAGERQUIST: Didn't the Nixon tapes controversy make many people who probably had never heard of this type of history become aware of oral history?

FUCHS: I think that's a very good point and very true. Within the last five years, let's say, probably many of the people who were not familiar with the

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term "oral history" because of books such as Merle Miller's, that have employed the tape recorder in the writing have brought the term to public prominence. There are as you know certain books that have had the word "tapes" in their title and certain books such as Studs Turkle's Working, which resulted from the use of a tape record in interviews.

But, as Mr. Lagerquist says, the "Nixon tapes" is probably the most prominent usage of the term. In addition, the foundation of an Oral History Association about ten years ago, some ten years ago, has fostered oral history and brought into the press some new notice of the discipline.

CURRY: What are oral history antecedents in this country and elsewhere? Before we had "oral history," as such, what did we have?

FUCHS: Well, oral history goes back in a sense to before Christ. Historians, and oral historians

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especially are wont to speak of Thucydides when he not only fought in the Peloponnesian Wars but wrote his famous History, but conducted interviews with others who fought in the war, which, as you know, lasted a quarter of a century. That is often cited. It is, of course, as old as oral traditions as to antecedents in this country, we often mention the work of Hubert Howe Bancroft in California in writing his voluminous history of the Western states. He not only collected a fabulous amount of original documents and amassed a huge book collection, but sent interviewers out into the field to take notes of interviews with pioneers and others who had participated in events.

LAGERQUIST: Before there was the written word didn't tribes pass their best traditions and histories down from generation to generation?

FUCHS: That is true, the oral tradition. The stories came down through one generation to another and

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you had oral history. When it was finally written down you had, in a sense, a transcript. Yes, there's certainly the oral tradition and folklorists have made great use of tape recorders and the oral history method. There are, as you know, differences of opinion as to just what should be alluded to as oral history, but this can't really be settled. Anything, some say, that is a recording

of an interview, or a meeting, or a telephone conversation, or even of a bull session in a college dorm, if it's recorded, is oral history.

CURRY: When did the Truman Library begin its oral history program?

FUCHS: Well, first discussions, as Mr. Lagerquist knows, began back in early 1959 largely between our then Director, Dr. Philip Brooks and the then Archivist of the United States, Dr. Wayne Grover. There was some exploration of the procedure, but nothing definite was done until about early 1961

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when, rather in concert, the Director and Dr. Grover decided we ought to get started, and for reasons not clearly known to me, I, a Federal archivist with the Truman Library, was selected to begin the project--to "see how it goes," they said, "until we can hire"--and I believe the term was used, "a real oral historian" Real oral historians were hard to come by because of the newness of the discipline and those who had done some oral history were, in most cases, connected with other projects.

I believe the first interview was done in November, 1961, when I was trying to set up the project and also commence interviewing. I was never a full time interviewer and probably devoted less than 20 percent of my time to the project until recent years, after Mr. Truman's demise. By the late 1962, we hired a Ph.D. candidate, a recent Dartmouth graduate, Charles Morrissey, who, incidentally, has subsequently become quite

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quite well-known in the field. He was for a time Director of the Kennedy Oral History Project, and later president of the Oral History Association, as well as directing other projects.

CURRY: Who was the first interview with?

FUCHS: I think it was with Henry P. Chiles, a boyhood and longtime friend of Mr. Truman, once a deputy clerk and later county treasurer. His interview transcript was not the first accessioned, though.

That was with Nathan T. Veatch, a well-known engineer collaborating at that time with Col. Edward Stayton, conducting a road survey for Mr. Truman who was then the top county administrative officer.

CURRY: Why did the Truman Library begin an oral history program?

FUCHS: The Library officials recognized that there is a fund of information, opinions, and anecdotes in

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the memories of those who had been connected either with a particular event or were a witness to that event, and that these most likely would never be committed to paper, because of the fact that most people don't write their memoirs. It was also recognized that progress has resulted in more gaps in the written record. This is because of the telephone, use of the airplane to fly to face-to-face meetings that are often not fully recorded, and the fact that the pace is now so fast that people, in most cases, no longer write long descriptive letters. The keeping of detailed diaries has gone out of usage. Such diaries, as you know, were a source in earlier days of much history.

LAGERQUIST: Wasn't there also the added fact that many periods of Mr. Truman's career, especially his early career, were undocumented to any great extent?

FUCHS: That was another thing we talked about at

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length, Mr. Truman's family had moved much and little was preserved of his early years. There is a lack of early written records pertaining to Mr. Truman up until his terms as Senator.

CURRY: Did Truman encourage the oral history program?

FUCHS: Mr. Truman, of course, was advised of our plan and heartily concurred that such a project should be undertaken, and he permitted us to use his name in our approaches to people to participate in the project.

CURRY: What were the next steps in our program?

FUCHS: Initially, of course, we thought it would be best to develop some expertise, if you will, by interviewing at what we termed the "local level,"-friends, former teachers, business associates, people in the immediate community who could be called upon readily to be interviewed, without a great amount of travel, until we felt we had our

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feet on the ground and had some experience. Then, as I have said, we hired a full-time interviewer in the latter part of 1962 and in a few months sent him to operate from Washington, D.C. This was more economical because of the accumulation of former Truman administration officials there, who were either retired there, still in the Government, or were active in various enterprises based there. It was a saving of funds to have our interviewer based there rather than here in Independence because of the travel involved. There were also, I might add, many former Truman Administration officials then living in New York and other East Coast areas.

Unfortunately, Mr. Morrissey was with us full time for only about a year. With the death of John Kennedy, and the "crash" interview project which the Kennedy people instituted at the time they

had need of a "ready-made" oral historian and Charles Morrissey was quickly lost to their project. By

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March 1964 he was directing the Kennedy project and working practically full time for them, although he didn't officially go off our personnel rolls until later that year.

CURRY: How many interviews did he tape for us?

FUCHS: About fifteen interviews.

CURRY: I have read that he did about 90 interviews for the Kennedy Library.

FUCHS: We were then without a full-time interviewer from late in 1963 until we sent one of our staff members to Washington to be a full-time interviewer for our project in the middle of 1966.

CURRY: Where did you get the ideas for the kind of program you wanted to set up here?

FUCHS: Once I had been assigned to the project, I naturally familiarized myself with the literature in the field. There were quite a number of oral

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history projects in existence and some of their staff members had written articles. We knew, of course, of the pre-eminence of the Columbia Oral History Project and I went to Columbia University and talked with their people. Mrs. Mason was actively directing the office there, and I reviewed their method of operation with her. We sort of amalgamated all the things that I read and heard into our procedures.

CURRY: Was the Truman Library Oral History Project a pioneer effort in some way?

FUCHS: You might say it was a pioneer effort in that it was the first oral history effort, that I know of, which concentrated on the career and administration of a particular President. Of course, Columbia even then had done some interviews with individuals who had served in the Truman Administration; but we were the first, certainly, in the Presidential

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Library system, as we now know it. The Roosevelt Library mysteriously has no project to this day. We've already spoken of the Kennedy and Eisenhower Library projects. Later the Johnson Library began a program. Incidentally, the Truman, Kennedy and Eisenhower projects all began within three years of each other.

CURRY: I've heard that our program is the second oldest such program in this country?

FUCHS: I have heard that, too. It is strange because, as I said before, there were numerous oral history projects, some not so-titled but several at least alluded to as such. There was an early project in American aviation; the Ford Motor Company Archives had a project, and the Forest History Society started a project about 1950, only some five years or so after the Nevin's project. There were others, many projects in existence and several being started

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about the time ours came into business. So, how we came to be talked about as the second one, I don't know.

CURRY: How did our project differ from the Columbia Oral History program?

FUCHS: Well, the principal difference would be in the approach. We have a project which is directed towards interviewing in one special area, although the subject matter is diverse. Our interviews are concerned with the career of Harry S. Truman and the events, problems, and personalities of his administration. Columbia's oral history project interviews in many areas of human knowledge, the arts, the sciences, social science, government--almost any area that you can name. They interview people who have something to add to the history of many areas of interest. Our project also differs in a more technical aspect. Columbia started with staff interviewers, but quickly found that it

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could operate better with interviewers more or less on a stringer basis--to use newspaper parlance--who did interviews for a fixed rate per hour of recorded interview. Interviewers are contracted for who are knowledgeable in the field of the interview. Whereas, we, although it was first proposed--and I think it might have been better in some ways--that we have specialists conduct our interviews in the various areas, we settled for staff interviewers, who would become members of the Truman Library staff.

LAGERQUIST: Haven't we placed a little more emphasis on background research than some other projects have?

FUCHS: Very true. We have emphasized more research, especially in the papers here. Of course, there was the added factor that being a Government agency, it would have been somewhat difficult

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to secure the type of arrangement used by the Columbia Oral History Research Office.

CURRY: Do you keep the tapes of the interviews?

FUCHS: No, we do not. That has, as you may know, been subject to criticism. Many feel that the final product of an oral history interview should be the spoken word on tape. Even if a transcript is made, some feel the tape of the interview should be retained. We don't do that.

CURRY: Why not?

FUCHS: It was not principally because of costs. Although there is a problem of space and proper care, the cost of the tapes is not an important factor. We based our approach, to gain ready acceptance by interviewees, on our assurances that they could leave to history their reminiscence as they wished it to be worded. Also our decision was based in part on a statement made by former

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Secretary of State Dean Acheson at a conference he attended here. As I remember it, he rather vehemently responded to a political scientist who mentioned interview to him, that he had been interviewed to death, and had always been told that he could edit the transcript and could leave it to history in words he chose, but he said that they kept the tapes which could be re-transcribed at any future date. We thought a great deal about this and decided that it wasn't exactly honest to tell prospective interviewees that they could leave their statement for history as they wishes it to be, have them sign an agreement as to its use, and then keep the tape that people would want to listen to and which could be transcribed later by other people you wanted. We do save an innocuous passage of each tape, which underwent no major change in the editing, to enable us to satisfy individuals who would like to hear the voice of the interviewee.

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CURRY: In your opinion, do you think much is lost because the written transcript will not reveal each nuance and inflection?

FUCHS: Oh, I think that inevitably--and this is one of the built-in disadvantages of the oral history transcript--you can't reflect in a transcript all the eyebrow lifting, the sarcasm, the knowing looks, and so forth, that is present in the face-to-face interview. Certainly things are lost, but all these things aren't reflected in a tape either. Weighing that against other factors, we felt that the transcript is by far the most usable product. It will be exceedingly difficult until they've refined electronics beyond its present state to use a tape for research with facility equal to that of a transcript. This, I think, is evidenced in part of the Nixon tape controversy. You well know how there were differences of opinion about what was actually said,

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and how much was really unintelligible. Only the interviewee, in our case, can resolve this and fill many of the unintelligible gaps. Different scholars, writing from the same tape, I think would get many different versions as to what was actually said. So, in my opinion, tapes are just not practical for efficient research. Citing is another problem. It can be done by timing and tabs and so forth, but it's impractical, at least at the present time.

CURRY: Getting back to the fact that there are things in the interview situation that are lost, do you try, when you go over the transcript, to remedy this? As you listen to the tapes and review the transcript you may remember that the interviewee said something in a certain way. Do you try to indicate that in some way?

FUCHS: We don't change the text or even structure sentences to much extent. The interviewees,

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however, will in their editing try to clarify their meaning. So there is not as much lost as one might suppose.

CURRY: How many interviews has the Library recorded?

FUCHS: We have taped to date probably close to 350-400, that is different individuals. Of course, the number of actual taping sessions exceeds that. For instance, one former Truman official has been taped more than 40 sessions, and the hours of taping, of course, exceed that number.

CURRY: Primarily in what areas have you done the interviews?

FUCHS: In the initial phase we placed emphasis on what we called the "local area" and interviewed people who knew Truman before he was President, and was largely concerned of course with local people and other people in Missouri. Persons such as a former school teacher, former neighbors, buddies, and there, in particular, we did quite a few interviews with

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Mr. Truman's Battery D mates, which as you know, was the Field Artillery unit that he commanded during World War I. From there we naturally wanted to get something into the record about the chairmanship of what was commonly known as the Truman Committee, more properly the Senate Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program. We then, of course, went into, with our full-time interviewer, interviewing on the national level as we called it, in which we interviewed those who participated in or closely observed events of the Truman administration, 1945-53. The Committee, with Truman as chairman dated from 1941, until he resigned in 1944 after his nomination for Vice President. In that regard we made an effort to interview as many as we profitably could about the 1944 nomination, when Harry Truman got President Roosevelt's favor over Henry Wallace.

On the national scene we weighed how we could

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best start there and decided that a White House staff project might be logical. This was one in which we recorded reminiscences of those who were part of President Truman's White House staff. We interviewed the administrative assistants, special assistants, and special counsels, and

many others who held positions in the White House during the Truman years. Then, of course, we got over into interviewing others in the executive agencies, such as the Bureau of the Budget. We interviewed about the campaign of 1948, which led us into interviewing members of the Research Division of the Democratic National Committee that was active in that campaign. We naturally made an effort to interview former executive department heads who were still living and would participate at that time, going down to high-level assistants, such as Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries, and sometimes further. Of course, we went off in other areas, such as interviewing many Washington newspaper

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correspondents, largely about the presidential campaign of 1948, and also about the President's press conferences.

CURRY: Any other areas?

FUCHS: Then, the Truman administration being perhaps best remembered for its foreign relations rather than its domestic activities, we had a special interview project on foreign affairs. We were fortunate to have the Library Institute, with foresight, wisdom, and generosity provide a special grant to pay a part-time interviewer in that area. I wished he could have been a full-time interviewer but we were glad to take what we could get, especially since by this time we had no other interviewer, other than myself as director of the project and available for interviewing only on a very part time basis. Our second full-time interviewer who was with us for less than seven years, having by now been given another assignment in the National Archives as the

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project was de-emphasized somewhat.

CURRY: Have most people you've approached to be interviewed readily agreed?

FUCHS: Most have done so. Surely we have had those who have declined, but they are few in number, and there are those who have put us off to a later time. To this day there are several persons remaining to interview who were on the top of our initial list of proposed interviewees. There are even some executive department Secretaries who have never convinced themselves they wanted to be interviewed, or for one reason or the other haven't yet been interviewed. Generally the desire to associate themselves with what we feel certain is a worthwhile effort, or, in some cases, probably to give their side of something controversial, has resulted in our being able to tape most of the ones we have asked.

CURRY: You've touched on this next question, but just

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who have you had working on the oral history project?

FUCHS: Our interviewing staff has never exceeded one full-time and one part-time interviewer and, as I have said, at least half of the time we've only had a part-time interviewer--for several periods that was the chief of the project who was acting in other capacities as well as administering the project. I should add that initially we had plans to interview, in addition to the local and national, at the "foreign level" in which we would do interviews abroad with other foreign leaders. This never came about except that we had a special project in which our Director interviewed in Europe for three months, conducting some thirty interviews about the European Aid Program, which was better known as the Marshall plan.

CURRY: What have you done in the area of foreign affairs?

FUCHS: As I say, we had a part-time interviewer who

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interviewed, largely in the past three summers, and in most cases, former State Department officials who were involved in foreign relations from 1945 to 1953. He interviewed, for instances, about such things as the United Nations Conference on International Organization in 1945; establishment of the International Monetary Fund and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development based on the conference at Bretton Woods, the European recovery program, the Korean war, and on many other facets of our foreign relations during that period. Interviews with some 100 persons have been recorded in this area, of varying lengths of course. They were done by an historian who has specialized in the area of foreign relations, Prof. Richard D. McKinzie of the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

We also have tapes of about sixty interviews done for a special project, also funded by the Institute, on the foreign aid programs of the Truman

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administration. These were conducted in this country and abroad by Dr. Theodore Wilson of the University of Kansas and the aforementioned Professor McKinzie to produce a book on the subject for the Library Institute. It was agreed that their interviews would be transcribed, deposited in the Library, and made available for research. Certainly they are of importance even though they are largely on a single subject.

Some of the individuals were interviewed about other areas because of their prominence in the Truman administration and the dimensions of their experience with problems and programs of the administration.

CURRY: What did Mr. Hess concentrate on in his interviews?

FUCHS: Well, Mr. Hess continued the work of Morrissey conducting interviews on the national scene, especially on the White House staff. He interviewed people who

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had been in the Bureau of the Budget, participants in the Democratic campaign of 1948, principally with people who served in the Research Division. He also taped numerous interviews with Washington correspondents, with Secretaries of executive departments and with Assistant or Under Secretaries.

CURRY: How do you prepare for an interview? For example, with a Battery D buddy?

FUCHS: We would prepare by doing as intensive background research as we could. In preparing for some, such as Mr. Truman's wartime associates who may not have achieved sufficient prominence in later life to become a subject of a biography or to have written an autobiography there might be little in the written record. One had to build the interview upon knowledge of Truman's experiences in World War I and familiarity with his association with this individual from what few written sources there are. For other interviews you'd research the papers,

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we have, or, if in some cases available elsewhere. If the subject still had them and would make them available to you, you might review them just prior to the interview. We saturate ourselves as much as possible with information from the secondary materials, as well, and use such things as the potential interviewee's Who's Who autobiography, his write-up in Current Biography, if any--in other words know as much as possible in the time available about the individual and the problems, events, and personalities with which he dealt. That, in short, is the basic preparation for an interview.

CURRY: In a way an interviewer's job seems an impossible one. You're trying to discover detailed information from people who may have spent months and years in a job about which, it would seem, you could only hope to have a very superficial knowledge. Is it overwhelming to prepare for one interview after another, quickly trying to gather information

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on often entirely different areas?

FUCHS: Sometimes you do feel overwhelmed by the amount of material you should be familiar with. Fortunately after having done a number of interviews in one area you become conversant with the personalities and the problems, and often, having done more recent review of the matter than the interviewee has, you seem to be more familiar with the subject in his view than you really are. So, it is not quite as difficult to at least seem knowledgeable and to establish rapport as one might think. You go to the interview with some assurance that you can ask incisive questions and elicit good information, and be on some par with your interviewee about the matters of concern.

CURRY: Sometimes you're dealing with conflicting stories from different people? Do you try to reconcile them in the later interview?

FUCHS: We, naturally ask interviewees who dealt with

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matters in the same area, some of the same questions. The corroborative information or contradictory information, obtained as the case may be, gives those who ultimately use the transcript something as a basis to form a conclusion as to the validity of the interviews. Determining the validity of the transcript as historical evidence is not so easy or precise as with contemporary documents, but by the use of a number of interviews about the same subject matter one can more nearly come to an accurate appraisal as to their validity. We do not, however, play off one interviewee against another. We might let the interviewee know there is a conflicting story or opinion. That is often a good way to get a man to speak candidly, pointing out that someone else does have a different opinion about this, "as you may or may not know."

One of the ploys we've used to keep from indicting anyone else, is to say "it's been said," or "it has been written," and then let the inter-

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viewee take it from there as to whether he wants to revise his statement or add additional information which seems to give further validity to his initial response. We don't resort to many tricks. We establish rapport and impress upon the man our interest in adding to the fund of historical knowledge and fact that we are not searching for information for personal reasons.

CURRY: Does the tape recorder tend to inhibit many of the people you interview?

FUCHS: I wouldn't say "many." I've found only a few that after a few moments of being interviewed pay much attention to it. Of course, there have been those who were very conscious of it. They tell you when to turn it on and when to turn it off. They use motions and speak in whispers, hoping the tape recorder won't pick it up. There have been those who began by declaiming, as though they were giving a speech, but then eventually

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lapsed into a more conversational tone. I've even had those who said "paragraph" "period" "comma," and so forth, in the manner of dictation. They didn't continue that for long, after they gradually realized that wasn't quite what was expected.

CURRY: How do you get an interview started?

FUCHS: Well, you may have had a pre-interview with your subject in which you have gotten acquainted and discussed your program, and, perhaps, what you are going to talk about in general. Any papers he retained may be discussed. All of these things help to establish rapport with the individual and help acquaint him with what you're doing and what you plan to do with the tapes. We discuss the agreement and that he will have an opportunity to review the transcript and to close it or portions of it to research for a certain stipulated time. Then you finally turn

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the recorder on for the taping session.

CURRY: Usually how long is a single session? Is there any particular length of time that seems most productive?

FUCHS: Generally, it is felt that an hour to an hour and a half is a good length of time for a man to talk. Beyond that there is a tendency toward tiredness, although this varies from person to person. I've interviewed persons at length who did not even want to stop for lunch, and continued for as much as six or seven hours. That is not the usual thing nor would it produce the best interview in most cases. Many interviewees are very busy individuals and if they can devote an hour or two to taping in one day, why, you feel extremely fortunate. We frequently have more than one session with an individual, amounting in some cases to many hours of interview, and literally hundreds of pages of transcript.

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