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To Touch Future Generations

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## To Touch Future Generations

I first met Willa Baum over twenty years ago when we sat side by side on a tour bus one Saturday afternoon at an Oral History Association meeting. At this point, I cannot remember exactly the city or the subject of the tour. I have never forgotten my conversation with Willa, in part because I was meeting one of the pioneers of the Oral History Association but even more so because I was impressed by the fervor of her position. She wanted to know about the projects I was working on and who I was interviewing. After I told her what I was up to, she expressed disappointment that I planned on publishing an article based on the interviews. "Why couldn't the words of the interviewees stand on their own without a whole bunch of interpretation?" she wondered, "Why couldn't I work to get their perspectives out more broadly instead of my own?"

For the next hour we debated whether, in order to get the best possible interview, the interviewer needed to be thinking how what was being recorded might translate into material for an article or a book. We both had strong opinions on the subject, and I know that two decades later, neither of us had come around to the other's side. Almost every time I ran into her, she teased me about our first conversation and asked if I was still clinging to my regrettable, and to her, backward-looking, convictions.

During our conversation, Willa was a good debater, making her points carefully and cogently. She was also one of the best listeners I have encountered. She heard what I had to say. Her commitment to oral history came from an intense interest in what others said. She did not abandon her own perspectives, but she knew that in order to learn from another person, one has to start by listening, by asking probing questions that

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help elucidate what one does not understand, by allowing the other person to speak. That we disagreed, even over a topic of such telling importance to the field in which we worked, was perfectly fine with both of us, for disagreement is the starting point for dialogue. Oral history as a movement has been about finding out what people think about things of importance to their lives and why.

I still believe that the most information-filled interviews occur when interviewers struggle with how they will communicate what they are hearing to others who will never meet the subject of an oral history. Synthesizing what has been recorded in a form that reveals more clearly what was said is important for understanding an aspect of the past. That said, Willa's longer view had a great deal of justice and a greater dose of realism about the brevity of historical interpretations. Few readers today turn to what Hubert Howe Bancroft wrote about the more than four hundred stenographed dictations he took in the 1870s and 1880s on the history of California before the U.S. conquest. His interpretation is a curio of the past, but scholars and students continue to return to the words of Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, María Inocente Pico de Avila, Juan Bernal, María de las Angustias de la Guerra, and many others whose words Bancroft had recorded. The testimony of men and women who lived the history ultimately is what still lives and moves us.

Historians and other scholars have made ample use of the 1,600 interviews added to the collections of the Bancroft Library during Willa Baum's tenure as head of the Regional Oral History Office. A century from now, the students of the future curious about California during the twentieth century will still be reading those interviews, but very few of the many books and articles that have drawn or will over the years draw from them. Every generation writes its own history. Willa understood that the dialogues she and her fellow interviewers began would continue over the unknown centuries. Her work has allowed the people she and her colleagues interviewed to touch future generations for as long as there remain human beings interested in finding out more about their past.