Method and Memory in the Midwestern ‘Lincoln Inquiry’: Oral Testimony and Abraham Lincoln Studies, 1865-1938

Keith A Erekson, University of Texas at El Paso
Method and Memory in the Midwestern “Lincoln Inquiry”: Oral Testimony and Abraham Lincoln Studies, 1865–1938

By Keith A. Erekson

Abstract This article narrates the role of oral testimony in the field of Abraham Lincoln studies from 1865 through the 1930s. Collected in the form of letters, affidavits, and face-to-face interviews, this mounting body of “eyewitness evidence” dominated the discourse for two generations and reflective, public practice culminated in the organization of a “Lincoln Inquiry” in the Midwest during the 1920s and 1930s. For a time, practitioners successfully defended themselves against increasing positivist assaults on the credibility of oral testimony. Their interests and efforts resonate with later oral history practice and theory about method, authorship, performance, and memory, and their story highlights the contingency inherent in the development of oral historical practice in America.

Keywords: Oral History, Memory, Abraham Lincoln, Historical Methodology, Eyewitness Testimony

Histories of the modern oral history movement commonly place its origin in the work of Allan Nevins and the Oral History Project he established at Columbia University in 1948. Typically there comes a recognition of oral traditions in ancient Chinese, African, or Greek societies, coupled with an acknowledgement of a few isolated modern practitioners, such as Hubert Howe Bancroft in California, Lyman Draper in Wisconsin,
or Joseph Gould in New York City. Employees of the federal government recorded the music of Native Americans in the 1890s and the experiences of soldiers during World War II. During the Great Depression, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) employed dozens of writers to conduct interviews—those with former slaves have garnered the most attention—but Jerrold Hirsch has carefully and persuasively demonstrated the “disjunction” between FWP employees in the 1930s and oral history professionals of the 1950s.¹ Over the past half century, as Ronald J. Grele and Alistair Thomson have recently articulated, the modern oral history movement has challenged positivist critics, developed in a variety of national contexts, and theorized about authorship, memory, and subjectivity. The transformation has occurred internally through increasing professionalization and externally, in Thomson’s words, through the “[g]radual acceptance of the usefulness and validity of oral evidence.”²

This article narrates the role of oral testimony in the field of Abraham Lincoln studies from 1865 through the 1930s. Almost immediately after Lincoln’s assassination, his friends and admirers—and not a few writers and publishers seeking an easy bestseller—began to gather testimony from those who had known the Great Emancipator, whether during his presidency or his early life. Collected in the form of letters, affidavits, and face-to-face interviews, this mounting body of “eyewitness evidence” dominated the discourse of the first two generations of Lincoln collectors and biographers. In 1920, Americans with personal and ancestral ties to the Lincoln states of Kentucky,

Indiana, and Illinois organized themselves into a “Lincoln Inquiry” devoted, in part, to the collection and preservation of local, orally-presented stories about the early life of Lincoln. However, by the 1930s, the deaths of aging witnesses coincided with an increase in interest on the part of university-trained academics who trumpeted the power of written documents to stamp out the “myths” and “folklore” surrounding the sixteenth president. By the time Nevins got organized at Columbia University, a new generation of Lincoln scholars had successfully banished oral testimony from their consideration—for the time being.

Like their counterparts in the FWP, interviewers in the field of Lincoln studies remained disconnected from the modern oral history movement, so their work cannot claim to push back the date of the movement’s origins. Furthermore, interviewing began in earnest in 1865, so their work does not antedate the reference to “oral history” among the *Vermont Historical Society Proceedings* of 1863 (nor do they seem to have employed the term). The case proves significant not because it challenges timing but because it presents not simply an ancient tradition or an isolated practitioner but an entire field dominated by oral testimony and an organized effort to collect and assess it. For a time, collective, public practice flourished and practitioners successfully defended themselves against increasing positivist assaults on the credibility of oral testimony. Their interests and efforts resonate with later oral history practice and theory about method, authorship, performance, and memory, and their story highlights the contingency inherent in the development of oral historical practice in America.

***

On April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth fired the infamous fatal shot at President Abraham Lincoln. Memorialization began almost immediately (and, of course, continues to this day), and oral testimony became integral to Lincoln studies from the outset. Pious nineteenth century speakers at his funeral—and at

---

memorial services around the nation—emphasized the compelling symbolic story of the poor son of a carpenter, raised to the heights of national power, only to sacrifice his life to emancipate a race. Descending from the speaker’s stand in Springfield, Massachusetts, Josiah Holland (1819–1881) vowed to turn his eulogy into biography. A newspaper editor, popular copy-book writer, and ardent Republican, Holland quickly consulted campaign biographies and within the month made a two-day trip to Illinois. In the mind’s eye one can picture the “dapper, walrus-mustachioed New Englander” listening to the tales of frontier life, and then requesting a letter stating all that had just been related. A few months later Holland’s “instant history” rolled off the press, eventually to sell over 100,000 copies. To Holland goes credit for writing the first comprehensive biography of Lincoln and for seeking, if not recording, oral testimony. He did not interview Mary Todd Lincoln, or her sons, or any of Lincoln’s cabinet members.

Holland presented a Lincoln who was virtuous, valiant, and Victorian, concluding that “the almost immeasurably great results which [Lincoln] had the privilege of achieving, were due to the fact that he was a Christian President.” That conclusion launched a debate about Lincoln’s religiosity and spirituality that continues to this day, and it became a particular obsession for one of Holland’s interviewees. Holland asked Lincoln’s law partner William Herndon, “What about Mr. Lincoln’s religion?” to which Herndon replied, “The less said the better.” With a wink, Holland replied, “O never mind, I’ll fix that.”

Even before being interviewed, Herndon (1818–1891) had aspired to write about Lincoln, and, having known his partner professionally and politically for over two decades, he felt himself supremely qualified to present Lincoln “in his

---


Examining court records, back copies of the local newspaper, and campaign biographies, Herndon encountered irreconcilable statements to which he decided to apply his experience gained from practicing law—he would rely on his “mud instinct” and “dog sagacity” by seeking “to see the men’s & women’s faces when they talk,” to “read their motives” and see “to the gizzard.” Dusty, written documents from the past concealed too much he felt, so Herndon adopted face-to-face encounter as a research methodology that opened the study up beyond chronicle toward analysis of motivation.

Around 1980, some Lincoln scholars began to promote Herndon as “a kind of proto-professional oral historian,” but that characterization is not fully accurate. Herndon did spend nearly two years traveling to speak with those who had known Lincoln, and when finished, he ordered all of his materials copied and bound as a protection against loss of the originals. However, most of his collected materials were letters or prepared statements signed by the informant. He approached potential informants haphazardly, often without recording anything: “Some I conversed with on the roads and other places and had no chance. Things which I did not deem of importance I paid not much attention to, but now I regret it,

---

6 Herndon to Holland, June 8, 1865, quoted in Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 169.
as I have often wanted the very things I rejected.” Herndon’s biographer notes that

When he did come upon a more rewarding source of information, Herndon tried to arrange a formal interview. Herndon’s memoranda of these interviews are, for the most part, clear and informative. He began by asking the full name, age, and personal history of his informant; he ascertained what opportunities the subject had had for firsthand knowledge of Lincoln; and then by skillful questioning he proceeded to evoke detailed reminiscences. Terminating the interview, Herndon on many occasions apparently read back to his subject the notes he had made and asked for amendments and for approval.

Of the face-to-face encounters, Herndon confessed, “I did not take down in writing 100th part of what I heard men and women say, they talked too fast for me, not being a stenographer.”

Herndon’s methods can be illustrated by his interview with Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln. Lincoln’s mother died when he was nine years old and Sarah joined the family the following year. She helped rear Lincoln for twelve years and he visited her occasionally throughout his life, the last time being in 1861 before he left for Washington, D.C. Here, Herndon the questioner is absent, but his presence can be felt in the return to his favored topic (the books young Lincoln read) and in the abrupt changes of subject:

Friday—Old Mrs Lincoln’s Home—8 m South of Charleston—
Sepr 8th 1865 Mrs Thomas Lincoln Says—
I Knew Mr Lincoln in Ky—I married Mr Johns[t]on—he died about 1817 or 18—Mr Lincoln came back to Ky, having lost his wife—Mr Thos Lincoln & Myself were married in 1819—left Ky—went to Indiana—moved there in a team—think Krume movd us. Her is our old bible dated 1819: it has Abes name in it. Here is Barclay’s dictionary dated 1799—: it has Abe’s name in it, though in a better hand writing—both are boyish scrawls—
When we landed in Indiana Mr Lincoln had erected a good log cabin—tolerably Comfortable. This is the bureau I took to Indiana in 1819—cost $45 in Ky Abe was then young so was his Sister. I dressed Abe & his sister up—looked more human. Abe slept up stairs went up on pins stuck in the logs—like a ladder—
Our bed steds were original creations—none such now—made of poles & Clapboards—Abe was about 9 ys of age when I landed in Indiana—The country was wild—and desolate. Abe

10 Herndon to Jesse Weik, December 13, 1888, quoted in Wilson and Davis, Lincoln’s Informants, xxi; Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 172.
was a good boy: he didn’t like physical labor—was diligent for Knowledge—wished to Know & if pains & Labor would get it he was sure to get it. He was the best boy I ever saw. He read all the books he could lay his hands on—I can’t remember dates nor names—am about 75 ys of age—Abe read the bible some, though not as much as said: he sought more congenial books—suitable for his age. I think newspapers were had in Indiana as Early as 1824 & up to 1830 when we moved to Ills—Abe was a Constant reader of them—I am sure of this for the years of 1827-28-29-30.

At the end of the transcript, Herndon added the following note:

When I first reachd the House of Mrs Lincoln and was introduced to her by Col A. H. Chapman her grandson by marriage—I did not Expect to get much out of her—She seemed to old & feeble—: She asked me my name 2 or 3 times and where I lived as often—and woud say—“Where Mr Lincoln lived once his friend too” She breathed badly at first but She seemed to be struggling at last to arouse her self—or to fix her mind on the subject. Gradually by introducing simple questions to her—about her age—marriage—Kentucky—Thomas Lincoln—her former husband Johnston her children—grand children She awoke—as it were a new being—her Eyes were clear & calm: her flesh is white & pure not Coarse or material—is tall—has bluish large gray Eyes: Ate dinner with her—sat on my west side—left arm—ate a good hearty dinner she did—

Precisely because of its grounding in oral testimony, Herndon’s published work on Lincoln—a series of lectures in 1866 and a biography in 1889—has proven the “most controversial ever written. Its appearance in 1889 elicited appeals to Anthony Comstock for suppression, shocked cries of indignation, a measure of discriminating praise, and not a little extravagant eulogy.” From Lincoln’s close friends, Herndon learned that Lincoln held unorthodox religious views, from neighbors in Illinois he learned that Lincoln was engaged to Ann Rutledge and descended into depression after her death, from relatives in Kentucky he reported that Lincoln’s mother was illegitimate and hinted the future president might have been, too. Functionally, the evidence Herndon presented served as an “anti-history” to Holland’s Victorian picture and Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life was widely criticized for its

---

author’s lack of propriety. Looking into the eyes of his informants, Herndon discovered things too intimate for late nineteenth century sensibilities. The power of oral testimony had been revealed; message and method proved inextricably entwined.

Even before the final publication of Herndon’s work, Lincoln’s “official” biographers had already begun to distance themselves from oral testimony. With the president still in the White House, his clerks John Nicolay (1832–1901) and John Hay (1838–1905) decided that they would compile a history of his wartime administration. During the 1870s and 1880s, Nicolay interviewed several of Lincoln’s contemporaries in both Illinois and Washington, but by the time their ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (1890) was published in final form they had incorporated little information from first-hand interviews as both became skeptical of human memory. Hay explained to a friend that when they began work on the biography,

we thought we should have great advantage in personal conversation with Lincoln’s contemporaries in regard to the important events of his time, but we ascertained after a very short experience that no confidence whatever could be placed in the memories of even the most intelligent and most honorable men when it came to narrating their relations with Lincoln.

Nicolay considered most reminiscences to be “worthless to history.” The pair also had to negotiate with Lincoln’s only surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, who had inherited all of the president’s personal papers. Robert granted them access on condition that he be allowed to review their manuscript, but the son who removed a reference to young Abe’s having sewed the eyes of hogs shut in order to load them onto a flatboat never would have countenanced the findings of their interviews about Lincoln’s depression in the months preceding his marriage.

---

Method and Memory in the Midwestern “Lincoln Inquiry”

Recently characterized as a “court history,” the work of Nicolay and Hay has languished from the outset.\(^\text{13}\)

Ida M. Tarbell (1857–1944), on the other hand, openly lauded written sources. Still ten years away from her muckraking exposé of Standard Oil, the young journalist was assigned by editor S. S. McClure to dig up unpublished recollections of Old Abe. She began by reading and by visiting Kentucky and hiring interviewers in Indiana and Illinois; however, finding the contradictions that had stymied Herndon, she opted not to face the witnesses but rather to take her stand on material artifacts and written documentation. She combed the country for yet-unpublished photos, speeches, letters, and other documents. Originally, the artifacts and their stories appeared serially in the pages of *McClure’s Magazine*. The articles were compiled into a heavily-illustrated volume on the *Early Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1896). Four years later Tarbell wrote a two-volume *Life of Abraham Lincoln: Drawn from Original Sources and Containing many Speeches, Letters and Telegraphs Hitherto Unpublished* (1900), stripped of illustrations and larded with a nearly 200-page appendix of written documents. Tarbell’s work became an instant success and subscriptions to *McClure’s Magazine* doubled to a quarter of a million. Written in a breezy, eulogistic style, the work attracted readers repulsed by Herndon’s realism and bored by Nicolay and Hay’s solemnity.\(^\text{14}\)

Thus, by the close of the nineteenth century, Lincoln biographers had sidled away from oral testimony. Holland, Herndon, Nicolay and Hay, and Tarbell had all conducted interviews in the earliest phases of their research about Abraham Lincoln, but the rush to publish, Victorian sensibilities, the overseeing hand of a close family member, and an emphasis on written documents collectively cooled their interest.


As Lincoln biographers moved away from oral testimony, public interest seemed to pull the other direction due to the convergence of several cultural and technological factors. First, a host of new periodicals sprouted up in the decades after the Civil War, providing many additional outlets for aspiring writers. Simultaneously, the success of Ulysses S. Grant’s bestselling Memoirs (1885) spawned dozens of magazine serials recording the recollections of other Civil War era figures. And the publication of one reminiscence seemed to beget untold others. Two volumes of recollections about Lincoln rolled off the press in the 1880s, followed by another volume every thirty years or so until the end of World War II. In the wake of Reconstruction, the theme of political and national reunion gained increasing poignancy, especially when told from the intimate perspective of veterans who now exchanged handshakes instead of gunshot. Additionally, improved photographic technology allowed magazines to publish photographs for nearly the same price as woodcuts. As a result, a generation of readers found themselves looking—for the first time, and then regularly—into the faces of the witnesses to the vanishing past.

Whereas writers of memoirs and reminiscence tended to be literate and to seek an audience for their memories, the sheer volume of recollections prompted others to seek out individuals who were illiterate and without access to publishing venues. In many communities, “old settler” meetings brought together old timers who regaled audiences with tales of life on the frontier. Newspaper reporters regularly filled their columns with stories related by elderly residents. One of the hottest public

---

Method and Memory in the Midwestern “Lincoln Inquiry”

historical issues of the late twentieth century—the story of Thomas Jefferson’s sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings—involves just such an interview in a Midwestern newspaper.16

What newspapers did haphazardly, some Lincoln students began to do on a more organized, though decentralized, basis. A Wisconsin educator sought out statements from Lincoln’s family, friends, bodyguards, telegraph operators, and biographers. An Iowa preacher journeyed to Lincoln country to speak with “persons who personally knew Mr. Lincoln” and to visit the places “where the feet of Abraham Lincoln pressed the earth.” One researcher tracked descendants of Lincoln’s mother’s family to Arkansas to interview them. In Indiana, a teenage boy collected stories from former Lincoln neighbors, a schoolteacher interviewed locals and commissioned photographs of people and places, a Methodist preacher from New Albany collected stories from those on his southern Indiana circuit, the newspaper editor in Boonville gathered and published over two dozen affidavits of the Lincoln family’s passage through their village, and scores of individuals and families told stories about ancestral connections to the Lincolns.17

Such activity might have remained isolated had not a retired lawyer from Evansville, Indiana, organized many of these people—over 500 in all—into the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society (SWIHS). Most of the members descended from pioneers who had lived in the same communities as the Lincoln


family and membership drew from across the nation, but particularly from the Midwest, and especially Indiana. Upset with Herndon’s characterization of frontier Indiana as “a stagnant, putrid pool,” society members launched a “Lincoln Inquiry” with the explicit rationale that Lincoln could not be understood without his fourteen Indiana years, that his time in the Hoosier state could not be appreciated without understanding his neighbors, that the evidence for those neighbors resided in the lives and family histories of the aged folks still living, and that their testimonies must be recorded and preserved now or they would be forever lost with the deaths of the witnesses. State institutions and government had shown no interest, cherry-picking biographers had gotten the story wrong, and no outsider could ever hope to acquire the authority or rapport required for this vital task. In short, society members articulated a cogent argument for the validity of local knowledge and the authority of insiders.

Local and familial pride energized society members to address challenges that remain fundamental to oral history work—records management, evaluation of data, and definition of audience. They identified sixty-two families contemporary with the Lincolns and systematically set out to preserve their family stories. The society met three times a year, established an archive in connection with the local library, and eventually produced nearly 300 biographies, scores of newspaper articles, five pageants, and a reconstructed pioneer village. Members read the New York Times review of books, followed current trends in history work, and corresponded with Lincoln biographers and academic historians, including Frederick Jackson Turner and Milo Quaife. They critically appraised their findings, noting for example, that if Lincoln had actually made all of the wood cabinets attributed to him he never would have had time to be president! Frequently employing a searchlight metaphor for their work, they aspired to publish their findings “to the world,” in the hope that future historians would use them.

Method and Memory in the Midwestern “Lincoln Inquiry”

Most of the Lincoln Inquiry encounters between interviewers and witnesses were recorded not in verbatim transcripts but in note or shorthand form. For example, in 1881 eighteen-year-old Will Fortune (1863–1942) traveled from Boonville to neighboring Spencer County, Indiana, to “talk with the survivors.” In “a much faded little notebook” he recorded “notes, mere fragments of information” at times, but at other times he “wrote in my notebook word for word.” “They were intended at the time to be mere reminders,” he explained, “except that a few of the interviews were rather fully noted in the language of the persons who were interviewed.” As a result, the interviews generally were presented as “reported conversations.” These narratives featured both word-for-word and words-to-the-effect material from the interviewee, and permitted the interviewer to frame those words with descriptions of setting, sounds, and body language. Sometimes Fortune recorded only sentences: “The testimony of the survivors was without exception, as I recall their words, that ‘he was a great reader’, ‘he wasn’t like other boys,’ ‘he didn’t take much part in the social pleasures of the time, but he could nearly always be seen reading a book.’” On another occasion, Fortune introduces an interviewee “[o]ut of the blur of impressions that come with the lapse of time”: “Mrs. Crawford was a very bright woman and quite vivacious. Her memory seemed quite clear and definite. She talked rapidly. She was a woman of more than usual refinement of speech and manner, and yet, in her conversation, there was a good deal of the dialect that belonged to the early days of Indiana.” The reference to dialect set up her telling of Lincoln’s having borrowed a book from her husband, but when he left it where rain damaged the pages he returned looking the “awfallest plagued boy she’d ever seen.”

---

Such framing presented the audience with a mental image of the interviewee, but visual cues also informed the assessment of testimony. In 1895, school teacher Anna O’Flynn (1855–1938) met and photographed half a dozen women who claimed to have been Lincoln’s boyhood “sweetheart.” But, with the passage of seven decades, how could one know? A Lincoln Inquiry interviewer resolved the issue this way:

[First interview:] A Mrs. Oskins who enjoyed smoking a cob pipe, frequently came to the home . . . and often spoke of having known Abe Lincoln. On one occasion, Mrs. Oskins said, “Well, Abe used to go with me . . . But law! He was so onery and shiftless, I wouldn’t keep company with him.”

[Second interview:] An old lady named Lukins, who also loved a cob pipe, was sitting in a chair tipped against the wall. During the course of the conversation, Mrs. Lukins removed her pipe from her mouth and said, “I could a’ been Abe Lincoln’s wife, if I’d wanted to, yes siree, I could a’ been the first lady of the land.” [Interviewer] “Now, Sarah, what are you talking about, you know you couldn’t.” “I could, too,” said Mrs. Lukins. [After being pressed further she said.] “Well, Abe tuk me home from church once.”

Here one small visual detail, repeated in both incidents proved the key to assessing validity—the corn cob pipe. Prevailing academic historiography of the time argued for three classes of pioneer society, with the lowest being ruffians and scoundrels who were popularized by Edward Eggleston’s novel, The Hoosier Schoolmaster (1871), in which the nasty, old, conniving, lying character Mrs. Means was never without her cob pipe.

Presenting interviews as “reported conversations” foregrounded the fact that interviewer and interviewee shared in the encounter. In the early 1890s, Alice Hanby (1852–1933) visited the home of the aged Judge John Pitcher. Pitcher practiced law in Indiana when Lincoln was a teenager and owned two volumes of Blackstone’s Commentary in which the boy had

---

22 The interviews were conducted by Kate Armstrong in 1887 and reported in Ida D. Armstrong, “The Lincolns in Spencer County,” Indiana Historical Commission Bulletin, No. 18, Proceedings of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society (October 1923): 59.

23 Logan Esarey most coherently laid out the contemporary case for pioneer classes in “Pioneer Aristocracy,” Indiana Magazine of History 13 (September 1917): 270–87.
penned his name. Hanby’s frame sets up a tense moment in which she challenged Pitcher’s past judgment:

An instant later and Judge Pitcher had risen to greet me. For the moment he stood, a somewhat majestic figure in the dim light, yet he was not tall, scarcely taller than the average. As I shook hands with him, I said with perhaps a touch of reproach, “And you advised Lincoln not to study law! Why?” He answered quite promptly, “Yes. He was nothing but a long, lean, gawky country jake. In fact, I didn’t think he had it in him.” This last was spoken hurriedly, yet with such emphasis as to leave a keen sense of Pitcher’s opinion of Lincoln—in those days. Also, that last sentence sounded to me almost a defense of such opinion. However, before I could venture a reply, Pitcher changed to personal matters, and no more was said on the subject of Lincoln.24

Without audio recording devices, without transcription methods designed to indicate tone or velocity, Hanby illustrated Alessandro Portelli’s recent characterization of oral history: “the narrator is now pulled into the narrative and becomes part of the story. This is not just a grammatical shift from the third to the first person, but a whole new narrative attitude. The narrator is now one of the characters, and the telling of the story is part of the story being told.”25

Among the society’s records is one account of oral history performance. John Shanklin Ramsay joined the Union Army in Evansville at age seventeen, but before he reached the field a cannon ran over his foot and he was reassigned to provost guard duty in Washington, D.C. There, on April 14, 1865, he slipped away from his assigned duties to attend Ford’s Theater and became a witness to Lincoln’s assassination. Discovering that Ramsay, the “only known survivor” of the local unit, still lived in the region, society members invited him to speak at one of their meetings, but age and ill health prevented his acceptance. On April 18, 1930, John E. Morlock interviewed the octogenarian and the next day presented a framed report of the

---

conversation publicly as Ramsay listened approvingly. The following year, the performance was repeated for the entire society at a meeting held on Lincoln’s birthday. Woven through the performance of Ramsay’s memories are strands of contingency, unfulfilled desire for vengeance, modern patriotism, and the tangibility of death:

Booth jumped to the rail of the box and sprang for the stage. As he sprang his spur caught in the big American flag and he fell, injuring his leg. I was in a position where, if I had had a gun, I could have shot him two or three times, but I had nothing. I was in the theatre without permission from my commanding officers and so I began a hasty retreat, knowing that an immediate call would be sent out from my company. As I went through the narrow lobby of the theatre, Lincoln’s body was being carried out. His head brushed my sleeve and when I reached the barracks, I found my coat sleeve was covered with the president’s blood.26

By drawing together many people interested in interviewing witnesses to the life and death of Abraham Lincoln, the Lincoln Inquiry created a community of practice that had been unavailable to the isolated work of biographers Holland, Herndon, or Nicolay and Hay. The concentration of interviews also allowed for theorization about memory and silence. In a talk titled “Preservation of the Knowledge of Old People,” local judge Lucius C. Embree (1853–?) shared a story about a pioneer mother and children who heard “a wild and piercing outcry” one night just before dusk. Fearing an Indian attack, the mother armed herself with an ax and her eleven-year-old son with a rifle and charged the eleven-year-old daughter to watch the baby—“they remained at their posts throughout the long night, believing all the time that the next moment would bring to their ears the savage yells of the enemy.” Nothing happened. The next morning the mother sent her boy to reconnoiter and

he found the neighbor’s cabin intact and nothing seemed to be disturbed. After questioning, the family recalled that their cow had stepped on the bare foot of their eldest daughter: “Cow-like she just stood there, while the girl slapped her sides and screamed.” The girl’s brothers gathered around and laughed, imitating the screams of their sister, until the cow finally moved. Embree observed: “The effect upon the defenseless family a mile away was somewhat different. This was an Indian massacre in which no lives were lost, but it made an impression upon one family which remained vivid to one of its survivors for more than eighty years. Does it not throw light upon the life of early Indiana?” Speaking nearly a century later about his work with experiences on another continent, Portelli similarly noted, “We’re not so much interested in reconstructing the dynamics of those days as we are in reconstructing the life stories, the subjectivities of those who were there, and the impact on their lives afterward.”

***

Not everyone shared the Lincoln Inquiry’s excitement for oral testimony and only a few years after the society’s organization, rival Lincoln students in the Midwest publicly criticized both their motives and their methods. At the annual meeting of the Indiana historical societies in December 1924, Louis A. Warren struck first. A former minister, Warren (1885–1983) had increasingly spent his time researching local courthouse records in Kentucky; a few years later he would be selected to direct the Lincoln National Life Insurance research library in Ft. Wayne and would found the widely-circulated Lincoln Lore magazine. In a speech to a packed house of local history workers from throughout the state, Warren laid out a general typology of historical method with specific reference to work on Lincoln. He categorized inferior Lincoln work as being performed by two classes: “interviewers” and “interpreters” who relied, respectively,

---

on personal and bibliographical sources. While the latter never left his library, the former

was a social being and, above all, a conversationalist. He was adept at learning every detail of a dramatic story. In pumping his auditor dry he often caught in his bucket of information much matter that was spurious. This foreign substance found its way into his text. While we shall always be under a great debt of gratitude to the interviewers for preserving the early traditions and folklore of a race, we wish that they might have been more discriminate in the use of much untenable traditional matter which they released.

Warren then heralded the day when true and objective Lincoln Studies would be carried out by “investigators” who relied only on written documentary evidence. He closed the talk with a nonchalant “word about ‘The Lincoln Inquiry,’ an expression coined by [society founder] John E. Iglehart. Most of the material gathered under the inspiration of this slogan, and much of it very valuable, has been contributed by Interviewers, or Interpreters.”

Warren’s conference session was chaired by former Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge (1862–1927) who planned to spend his retirement years preparing a definitive biography of Abraham Lincoln. On that occasion, Beveridge spoke generically about the fact that “local pride has a great influence in distorting history.” Beveridge had successfully courted Herndon’s literary partner, Jesse Weik of Greencastle, Indiana, to obtain unprecedented access to the notes taken by Herndon and inherited by Weik. Already committed to using oral testimony, and having publicly praised Herndon for “carefully, thoroughly and impartially” collecting “facts,” he quickly took a position contrasting his interview sources from those of the Lincoln Inquiry. Two months later, Beveridge made his challenge more specific. Writing to Bess Ehrmann (1879–1963)—a local high school drama teacher, Lincoln Inquiry worker, and author of a summary of their work published in the Indiana Magazine of History—he complimented her on a “delightful paper” but then dismissed the entire endeavor in a single stroke: “I am, of course, 28 Louis A. Warren, “Unused Sources for Modern Historians,” Indiana History Bulletin, Vol. 2, Extra Number, Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Indiana History Conference, December 5–6, 1924 (February 1925): 30, 37.
writing exclusively from sources—nothing less is permissible.”

The following month he repeated the categorical rejection of their work in a book review published in the *Indianapolis Star*. In short order, Warren and Beveridge had challenged the rhetorical and methodological grounding of the entire Lincoln Inquiry.

The Southwestern Indiana Historical Society responded by calling its members to the witness stand at their public meeting in November 1925 to address two related questions: the “best evidence” and the “best witnesses.” Iglehart (1848–1934) conceded that “the witnesses who knew Lincoln and whose memory was of historical value are all dead,” but—he was a lawyer by profession—“there remains what from the standpoint of the rules of evidence is called the best evidence which can be produced at the time of the investigation. We are now entering a new field of inquiry.” This field encompassed “all persons living available who have . . . in the past interviewed men and women who knew Lincoln . . . to give us a description of these people with a view to show that they were a respectable class of people.”

Iglehart proposed to turn the interviewers into interviewees to publicly answer for their qualifications, methods, and findings. Authorship and authority blended as experience with aging pioneers provided interviewers with authority to stand as the “best witnesses” to the “best evidence” of pioneer life. Here, in a public crafting with stenographer at hand, interviewers became interviewees, “narrators and historians, preservers and creators of memory.”

---


30 John E. Iglehart, dictation, November 17, 1925, John E. Iglehart Collection (Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana); John E. Iglehart to J. Edward Murr, October 2, 1925, box 2, folder 4, Iglehart Collection (Indiana Historical Society).

Among the interviewers who appeared at the meeting were Bess Ehrmann, who had grown up in Spencer County; Will Fortune, who, as a young man, had interviewed Spencer County residents in 1881; Anna O’Flynn, a school teacher from Vincennes who had conducted the interviews that Ida Tarbell decided not to use; and J. Edward Murr, a Methodist minister who had grown up with Lincoln relatives (cousins) in Harrison County and whose circuit in 1898–1902 had included Spencer County where he frequently interviewed his aging parishioners (Herndon’s partner Weik turned down the invitation). Each witness emphasized the fact that she or he had descended from pioneers who lived in southwestern Indiana. Their current reputation also came under scrutiny; for example, Murr was found to be “very well known through entire southern Indiana, especially in southwestern Indiana, having been the pastor of a prominent church.” Murr also spoke for all witnesses when he contrasted his qualifications with those of Herndon who “spent five days in and about Lincoln’s old home,” and with Tarbell who “spent one and only one night in Spencer County and interviewed but one associate of Lincoln.” After describing their work, the witnesses were questioned by each other and by the audience. For example, O’Flynn answered questions about precisely when she did her interviewing (asked by Fortune), the “personal appearance” of the people interviewed (by Ehrmann), how long she worked with witnesses, who, specifically, she interviewed, and how Tarbell “edited” her work. The interviews were recorded by a stenographer, archived with the society’s proceedings, and later published in edited form.32

Society members felt confident about their defense. Iglehart predicted that the records of the meeting “will be the crowning step in this work.” In his memorable imagery that played both on Warren’s ministerial training and on the era of prohibition, Iglehart believed that “this testimony of Phillip Sober as compared with Philip Drunk will cry out, trumpet-tongued,

against the deep damnation of Warren’s taking off when he was put forward at the head of this little firing squad.” Indiana University history professor Logan Esarey confessed that he “would place much greater dependence on these witnesses of Murr’s than on Lincoln himself.” In April 1927, Beveridge died unexpectedly, leaving his biography unfinished and his critique of the Lincoln Inquiry incomplete. A few months after Beveridge’s death, Warren slipped quietly into southern Indiana to conduct his own research, but when the local paper announced his presence, Iglehart exulted: “Of course it is like searching in last year’s bird’s nest. The nearest we can now get to that field is filling out and putting in proper form the work of interpreters [in our society] who were nearer to the living witnesses.”

With Beveridge deceased and Warren pacified, the Lincoln Inquiry faced no more criticism from their local peers. Those who had known Lincoln had all passed away and by the mid-1930s, the interviewers began to pass on as well. Ehrmann compiled highlights of the Lincoln Inquiry findings and projects with excerpts from the public interviews with Murr, O’Flynn, and Fortune. *The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln* came off the press in 1938, the same year that Allan Nevins called, in his *Gateway to History*, for “a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the last sixty years.”

It is tempting to seek a continuous link between the conversation about oral history in the Lincoln field and the work of the Federal Writers’ Project of the 1930s. The temptation grows greater in light of the facts that an FWP recruiter visited a society meeting in 1936, that member Ross Lockridge briefly served as Indiana’s state supervisor, and that several of the society members—including one of the “best witnesses”—are

---


mentioned in the acknowledgements of the *Indiana Guide.* But while the overlap is temporal, regional, and personal, the work of the Lincoln Inquiry does not seem to have informed FWP work. None of the field workers who interviewed Indiana’s African Americans or Native Americans came from the society’s ranks, and the society’s activities never came to the attention of federal planners in Washington. The society disbanded in 1939 and its work ended with the deaths of the witnesses—both pioneers and interviewers—in the 1930s and 1940s.

With the field effectively cleared of both informants and interviewers, academic historians faced little opposition in banishing oral testimony from consideration. Speaking to a joint-session of the American Historical Association and the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in December 1934, University of Illinois historian James G. Randall complained that “the hand of the amateur has rested heavily upon Lincoln studies” and called for a thorough professionalization of the field. Herndon became the target of most attacks, particularly for his interviews documenting Lincoln’s engagement with Ann Rutledge and depression after her death. In his four-volume history of the Lincoln presidency, Randall felt compelled to include an appendix on Rutledge that dismissed the entire relationship on the basis of “the vagueness of reminiscences,” “the doubtfulness of long-delayed memories,” and “statements induced under suggestion, or psychological stimulus.” “When faulty memories are admitted the resulting product becomes something other than history; it is no longer to be presented as a genuine record.” Randall’s student David Donald wrote a biography of Herndon in which he characterized his informants as “the lunatic fringe,” “those who had axes to grind,” or “garrulous old men of long memory.” He warned: “To collect historical data

through oral interviews, though sometimes necessary, is always hazardous. The reminiscences of a gray bearded grandfather have to be guided or they are likely to become incoherent rambling.” Louis Warren chimed in to suggest Herndon’s collection of “recorded traditions, fragments of folklore, and personal reminiscences” made him “the master Lincoln mythmaker.”36 Thus, the methodological critiques deflected by oral historians in the second half of the twentieth century—unrepresentative informants, inaccurate memories, intrusive subjectivity, and social bias—all met, in the first half, with success in the field of Lincoln Studies.37 Forty years would pass before Lincoln scholars would give serious consideration to oral testimony.38

* * *

For sixty years after the sixteenth president’s death, the collection of oral testimony played an integral part in Abraham Lincoln studies, motivating dozens of practitioners from colleagues to journalists to descendants of his former neighbors. Judging from the flood of publications and the large number of people drawn into the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society’s “Lincoln Inquiry,” the words of witnesses appealed powerfully to the

American public. For a time, practitioners theorized about their craft and successfully defended themselves against critics, but the death of witnesses and interviewers led first to the society’s discontinuance and then, within a decade, to the unopposed dismissal of oral sources from academic Lincoln scholarship.

Despite its disjuncture from the modern oral history movement, debates in Lincoln studies about oral testimony clearly resonate with oral history work today. Parallels become readily apparent in their efforts to define method, theorize about memory and silence, and experiment with the power of performance. Their work demonstrates that the genealogy of modern, interdisciplinary oral history practice draws from a wide confluence of journalism, legal deposition, reminiscence, memoir, family history, and popular interest. If, as Mark Feldstein contends, journalism and oral history are today “kissing cousins,” then the flirtation has persisted for many generations.  

Viewing such similarities in an unfamiliar setting highlights the contingencies of our professional history and prompts reflection on modern practice. In a national context in which oral history finds its lodging primarily in government and university institutions, the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society provides a case of a local society that successfully collected oral narratives for two decades. Their sudden exodus from the field hauntingly foreshadows a time when there will no longer be living witnesses to the Holocaust or World War II or the Civil Rights Movement or hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Will modern oral histories be preserved in such a way as to be accessible not only to those who did not perform the interviews but also to those who cannot remember the events? Their interpretive work—performed in an era without sound recording—reminds us that orality cannot be severed from visuality. What are the “corn cob pipes” that influence our judgment of reliability? By what techniques do we presume to “see to the gizzard” of interviewees? What assumptions underlie the decisions of authors and publishers to illustrate their transcripts with pictures of interviewees in blue jeans or in a black suit? Past conversations may end, but they can always be retold to new audiences.