

Collecting Words and Weaving a “Living History” with Dr. Harvey Frommer

As a student in the Globalization track of MALS, I did not expect to find myself in a class from the Creative Writing track. I heard great things about the Creative Writing professors and their classes, but I doubted my skills as a creative writer and my flexibility as a student in a completely different field. Of course, I was wrong on both fronts. Creative writing is definitely a skill, and not everyone masters it, but *everyone* should try it. Now that I have taken classes in all of the MALS tracks, I can say that the interdisciplinary nature of MALS is one of my favorite things about the Program.

I signed up for the Oral History class without really knowing what to expect. I had never read or created an Oral History in the past, but I thought it would give me a chance to practice my interviewing skills. On the very first day of class I was dubbed Haley “the Comet” Johnston, and just like that, I felt like I belonged there as much as anyone else. Harvey and Myrna do excel at making their students feel like they are “part of the club”. They gathered with us at local restaurants after class, and showed impressive dedication to our ongoing projects. It was easy to see how they convinced so many interesting people to sit down with them and share their stories. When you live your work as they do, one can imagine how many stories they must have collected over more than two decades in the field.

As for me and my brief career as an amateur Oral Historian, I certainly did get a chance to hone my interviewing skills. In fact, I did so while documenting the stories of a group of people I care for deeply. If there is one thing that Oral History gives you, it is a chance to connect to or re-connect with people, and to empower them by treasuring their words. Creating an Oral History is gratifying but exhausting. I was surprised by how emotionally invested I was in the project once it was finished. To weave so many amazing voices into one narrative, to balance it, and to make it both nuanced and clear, is truly a labor of love. To do it over and over again, at the scale that Harvey and Myrna Frommer have, is nothing short of passion.

I had the pleasure of reconnecting with Harvey Frommer to use his expert voice for this faculty feature. He will share his insights and, hopefully, inspire some future Oral Historians to join him for future classes:

My first question is an easy one. Would you share your definition of an “Oral History” for those readers who are unfamiliar with the genre?

Oral Histories are basically stories -- information and observations gained through recorded interviews with people. Many people have said to me “I never knew I had these stories within me until you asked”. So, it’s getting the stuff that people always wanted to say, but were never asked about.

How did you and Myrna first get involved with Oral History creation? Was it always a team effort?

I had always been writing sports books, since way back when. I had an agent who claimed she had won a beauty contest in the Catskills, and she thought that a book about the Catskills would be a great book for us to write. So, we went out to the Catskills and we met all of these zany, incredible, funny characters. We had no training in Oral History, but we decided, instead of making a book told by *us* about them, it would be a book told by *them* about them.

The first interview we did was with a guy named Robert Towers, and this guy had been the director of social activities at the Concord Hotel, which was a famous place at this time. He took us out to a restaurant in New York City where folks from the city’s underworld used to meet, and we sat at a table where Frank Sinatra had sat! We used everything he gave us, virtually word for word. He regaled us with all sorts of stories about how he brought “night tennis” to the Catskills by lining up cars next to the court and turning their headlights on. So that’s how it began, with *It Happened in the Catskills*.

After that book, we collaborated on six books. We had *It Happened in Brooklyn*, *It Happened on Broadway*, *It Happened in Manhattan*, etcetera. The last one was *It Happened in Miami*. It has been a pleasure interviewing so many people -- literally hundreds. The two of us have done hundreds of travel articles where we went all over

the world using Oral History, which gave them a new dimension. I have also done, in my own right, sport books that are also Oral Histories, such as *Remembering Yankee Stadium*, *Remembering Fenway Park*, and *The Ultimate Yankee Book*.

You say that using people's voices adds a "new dimension". I do think that some people going into the Oral History genre tend to believe that using other people's voices is almost an "easy way out", like you can just have someone do it all for you. Can you counter that misconception?

Well, I and hundreds of students who have taken our course and who have worked with Myrna and me on Independent Studies and Theses will tell you that it is much harder to deal with this incredible amount of content that you get from people. I mean, you're taking "orality" and turning it into written language, so it is not easy at all. I have six students working on theses this term and they've all been working hard. It's hard work.

Well there you go, now your future students have been warned! Speaking of which, what made you shift from creating Oral Histories to teaching others in the MALS Program?

Myrna and I had never taught together. We had both taught at the City University of New York, but she taught speech and I taught writing. I actually began teaching a class called Sports and Culture at Dartmouth back in 1992. I had a class of fifteen or sixteen students. It was all men and one woman, but you know, the woman was actually my best student of all; she knew all about sports! At that time there was a fellow in Don Pease's position named Gus DeMaggio who was the director of the MALS Program. Anyway, when the semester was over, I wrote a nice letter to him saying that I would like to return, but that I could also teach Oral History with my wife because we had been working in the genre. He wrote back to me saying, "someone broke a leg, so we'll have an opening." I said, "well what's it worth?" And he said, "If you work all weekend and get me a proposal, you should have the position." So, we worked about, I would say twenty-nine hours over two days and sent it off to him, and that's how the MALS Oral History class began.

We've been teaching the course now for twenty-one years, and we are constantly changing and improving it. It is different from other courses because we've created a thing called "After Hours." It is totally voluntary, but after the course ends at nine each night, we are hungry and tired from teaching and the students are hungry and tired from listening. So, we like to go out for a pizza or a beer at some place in Hanover. It has become a really nice custom where some students come all of the time and some come every few times. You get to know the students in a social setting and that's what I pride myself on.

We also have the Oral History Circle, which is now staggered to every two or three years, where students from the past, students from the present, and even students from the future come to a gathering in someone's home or on campus. Everybody brings "something", as the New England tradition demands: some bring dogs, grandparents show up, some people bring significant others, but it really becomes another extension of the course. Some of the old timers get to meet the new students, and it makes for a really nice time.

Another thing that I think makes the course especially interesting is the Oral History Reader. The Reader takes a variety of Oral History projects from a term and compiles them so that students in each class can use it as a textbook and see what other students have done. They aren't copying the projects from the Reader, it is just a way for them to learn what they like and don't like.

We also have office hours. We put in a lot of time and effort into the face-to-face interactions with students. From my point of view, I think all of this is very useful because there are so many professors who show up, teach a class, and get out. We try to interface with students as much as possible. We even have "phoners" on Sunday mornings for students who want to call us when they couldn't make it to the office hours. I'm pretty sure you called a few times.

Ah yes, you're probably right. I also still have my copy of the Reader somewhere. So, in addition to the student examples that you provide for the class, you also require a few longer texts. Could you talk about the reading selections and what made you choose certain pieces in addition to your own?

Sometimes we use *It Happened in Brooklyn*, which is one of my favorite books that we've ever done because Myrna and I are from Brooklyn. We are actually both in the book using pseudonyms, so we got to tell our own stories. You'll have to figure out who we are in there. We have switched to using *It Happened in Manhattan* now for quite awhile. It really works well because some students have never been to Manhattan so we get to delve into the whole history of that area. We also use Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, a great book about events in World War II, *Plain Speaking*, which interviews people who were close to President Harry Truman, and *Voices of Freedom*, which is about the Civil Rights Movement. So we have a lot of reading.

Yes, lots of great history! Now, Oral History is a compilation of different genres, but it does have "history" in the title. Perhaps there are students that think "I don't like history, so I don't think I would be interested in an Oral History Class". What does an Oral History class bring that other history classes cannot?

This is *living history*. I have never gotten bored by this kind of history. One of my recent books, called *When It Was Just a Game*, is an Oral History of Super Bowl I way back in January of 1967. I was fortunate enough to be able to interview the people who played in the game, who saw the game, and who worked for the media at the time. It's a great book-- not because I did it but because the people who had the experiences and who shared their voices made it great. I reached back, and I got about fifteen people who were *at* the game as well as a few of the key participants. They were the living history of that event. That's the excitement of Oral History.

Even when you write about a concrete event from multiple perspectives, you're never worried about contradictions or factual truths?

As Studs Turkle said, *In their tellings are their truths*. That's a slogan that I live by when I create Oral Histories. If a guy says that he ran twelve yards when in reality he ran fourteen, it is not really a scientific thing. He ran for a short period before scoring his touchdown.

It wouldn't be a true interview if I didn't ask you to provide at least a sample of your *Frommer Rules* that you always give to the class.

Ah yes. As you came up the hill on this chilly March day, you might not have seen the walls that we have at the bottom of the property which I built with my own hands. I use the analogy that creating an Oral History is like creating a stone wall. You collect the stones and then you have to figure out which ones can be used and where you are going to place them. So that is one of the big rules. The other one that I'm sure you'll remember is *Kill Your Dawlins*. That simply means that even as you fall in love with your content, when you think you can't get rid of anything more, you have to cut the fat to make a stronger final product.

So, is there anything else you'd like me to fit into my own brick wall that I'm building here?

One thing I would like to mention is that there are students that we've had who have gone on to bigger and better things, making money through Oral History. One of them got an assignment for a good sum of money to become the Oral History Coordinator for the Upper Valley Jewish Center. She is directing a project that will highlight the Jewish Community in the Upper Valley and at the Synagogue. Around five others have gone on to become the Directors of Oral History in different towns in New Hampshire and Vermont. A few have also gone on to work for major institutions to do an Oral History of those institutions. So, great things can happen after Oral History Class. This is Oral History "Plus".

I would also like to say that it has been an honor for Myrna and me to work with the MALS students. In the library at Dartmouth, there are Oral History theses. Those theses are the legacy that MALS students leave here. We also have copies of the Oral History Readers, and each one that we have is in there. So, in a way, we have left behind a larger Oral History that future students can still be a part of.

For more information about the Frommers' Oral History publications, including their upcoming 2019 books *It Happened in Israel* and *Members of the Tribe: An Oral History of*

Jewish Communities Around the Globe, and details about MALS 191, visit their website:
<http://myrnaandharveyatdartmouth.com>