



Linking Photos and Oral History

by Lauren Pille Robinson

Marie: "We went to the river — the English River bridge — and threw flowers over the bridge. We'd throw bouquets off into the water, which was symbolic of the sailors."

Grace: "The hardier ones — Mother would never let us go — would go down to the river and they'd have saved some [flowers] and [would] put some in the river for the people who were lost at sea."

Delbert: "They'd have a speaker at St. Mary's Hall and get everybody wound up. They'd usually get some politician . . . or some would-be politician . . . it'd be an *oration*, you know. . . . Somebody'd give the Gettysburg Address. I think Hazel Blythe'd be there to play the piano and sing a few patriotic hymns. Then there'd be a big ball game in the afternoon."

Grace: "They'd have the veterans up on stage . . . each year there'd be one or two less."

Delbert: "I think that they had something that we don't have now. They had different feelings. More of a sense of duty maybe, you might say. I don't know — were those the good old days?" □

SEVERAL YEARS AGO my friend, Grace Dautremont of Riverside, Iowa, gave me a collection of old photographs. (Some of these appear on the previous pages.) The photographs pictured Riverside during the early years of the century. Most were signed by the photographer, William Crozier. Besides other subjects and events, there are pictures of Memorial Day parades in which nearly every man, woman, and child in Riverside appears to be taking part.

Commenting on the tendency to read meanings into photographs, oral historian Paul Thompson writes in *Edwardians in Photographs*: "The camera may not lie, but what kind of truth does it tell? . . . Photographs are silent, but we cannot rest with that: we need to see meaning in them. And where no message is given, we invent one. Most old photographs, therefore, are half pieces of history, half out of our own minds. . . . Photographs do not convey the consciousness of the people in them — why they were doing what they were doing and what they felt about it."

I wondered about the people in Crozier's photographs — and about Riverside. Were the people as comfortable together as they looked? Did everyone actually take part in the Memorial Day festivities? Was their sense of community really that strong? Or was that something I saw there because I wanted to see it? The photographs, of course, could not answer these questions by themselves.

Establishing Context

In spring 1986, I started formulating an idea for a master's project in journalism based on the Riverside photographs and my questions. I began my research with written sources, including such general overviews as Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*. This book looks at the events of the 1920s as they affected the daily lives of ordinary men and women. The general history in the book was useful, too, in helping me establish a historical context in which to work. I also read about Iowa, Washington County, and Riverside. I obtained microfilm copies of the *Riverside Leader*, the newspaper that was published in Riverside throughout the decade. Thompson cautions historians about relying too

much on newspapers as a source. In *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, he writes, "Few historians would deny the bias in contemporary reporting or accept what the press presents at face value, but in using newspapers to reconstruct the past much less caution is normally shown. This is because they are rarely able to unravel the possible sources of distortion in old newspapers."

"Thus the evidence which historians cite from newspapers suffers not only from the possibility of inaccuracy at its source, which is normally either an eyewitness account or an interview report by the journalist," Thompson continues. "It is also selected, shaped, and filtered through a particular, but to the historian, uncertain, bias."

With Thompson's caution in mind, I carefully scanned the newspapers for information that would help me establish a background from which to seek more detailed information. In spite of its obvious pro-Riverside bias, the *Leader* was helpful in two ways. First, it pointed out for me the community events it considered important. Second, the *Leader's* stories and advertisements suggested the economic temper of the times.

Finally I turned to oral history as a way to find more answers. By "oral history," I mean simply the interviewing of a source in order to find out — and record — information about past events that may not be available in any other form. I decided to ask three long-time Riversiders to help me. Marie Havel, Delbert Flynn, and Grace Dautremont were excellent choices. They are articulate and intelligent people, keen observers with excellent memories. They were physically well enough that the interview process would not be a hardship for them. And they seemed genuinely interested in the project and wanted to be a part of it. I had another, more personal reason for choosing Marie, Delbert, and Grace. They're three of my favorite people and lots of fun to be with. I wouldn't have missed their acute observations and witty comments for anything.

Before I began the interviews, I read several books and articles about oral history techniques and procedures. The most helpful was Willa K. Baum's *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Thompson's *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* was also very helpful in this regard. Initially, I tried to use more open-ended, statement-type questions, rather than asking specific, information-seeking questions. For example, I would say, "Tell me about Memorial Day," not "What did you do in the morning on Memorial Day?" I felt that the first type of question would be more likely to elicit a wide range of freely chosen detail than the second type of

question. I expected that additional topics for questions would then arise as I talked with Marie, Grace, and Delbert. They did. Band concerts led into bootlegging and downtown Saturday night stories. Downtown Saturday night stories, in turn, became reminiscences about Riverside's business district. Remembering Memorial Day sparked interesting details about clothing and family customs.

Using Photographs

I conducted the first interviews with each source without using William Crozier's photographs. I held the pictures in reserve until later rounds in the interviews, hoping they would elicit more details. I wanted to see for myself how much memory was dependent on the prompts provided by the pictures. Here, though, I was disappointed. While some additional details were recalled when interviewees looked at the photographs, the photographs also seemed to hamper memory. The free recall that a relaxed source enjoyed while talking with me seemed to vanish and be replaced by a furrowed brow and a serious effort to remember as the same source looked at photographs. If I were to continue this project, I think I would try to determine how I could have presented the photographs differently.

After the interviews, I spent much time transcribing, editing, and arranging the material into a readable and interesting format. This *Palimpsest* presents only a small selection of the photos, interviews, insights, and methodologies from the finished project, *They Didn't Play No Jazz: An Oral History of Riverside, Iowa, in the Roaring Twenties*. (Copies are in both State Historical Society libraries.)

And now that it's all done — what do I think is the value of oral history? Oral history can record information about the usual and the commonplace and often investigates those who have no important public accomplishments — people who have lived unexceptional lives. Oral history records a personal view of public events. Family anecdotes and traditions may be recovered in an interview and be committed to printed form. Finally, recording voices often conveys information about the speakers, about the quality of their memories and their reliability.

Historians will long argue whether oral history provides accurate information. But for me, the point of oral history is that it strengthens our tenuous webs of connection with other human beings. Besides, it's a lot of fun. □