# *David Mollenhoff*

Interviewed by Ruth Doyle on March 14, 1984.

Oral history tape number: 60

*David, having been through it from beginning to end, probably has a lot of ideas about it.*

Well, I have some that I hope will be helpful.

*I should say first that we've been mostly talking to old people and about things that are already passed. But I think we ought to focus on now what we can do to preserve important things and provide them for somebody that comes along to read it.*

Let me begin by sharing with you some thoughts that I generated as I reviewed a lot of the materials that I had to look at for my book. I found it frustrating that reporters of the day missed a lot of things which seemed very obvious to me. Of course, all of us have the advantage of hindsight. For example, they virtually ignored the Indians that were still living a kind of fugitive existence in and around Madison. You know, you just can't help but wonder what a rich portrait of the Winnebagos we could have had, had the reporters up to the 1920s – and even to a certain extent beyond that – taken the trouble of doing some interviews with these people.

By the same token, the people who wrote the newspapers generally ignored a lot of what we would call ethnic studies. You know, if the Germans wanted to celebrate Sunday in some way that violated the Puritan ethic, then that, of course, was a sort of news event. It was a confrontation of sorts. But there's obviously a lot of other ethnic material – questions about how they lived and so forth, how they got along in Madison – that were just completely ignored.

By the same token, lots of little things were ignored also. They never wrote up the story of who shot the last bald eagles out at Eagle Heights, for example. There were instead fascinating stories about flying saucers. You just have to use those words today at various times in Madison. There were stories about giant eels in Lake Mendota, there were stories about exorcisms and [unclear] and all sorts of exotic phenomena that went on that did not have enough interest, it seemed, for reporters to write about them.

As I reflected on some of that, I wrote part of this up in a book called *On Journalism and Dullness*. A lot of things that are interesting to us today were not interesting to people then, so obviously we try to learn a little bit from that. At the same time that that's true, it's almost impossible to predict what future Madisonians perhaps are going to want to know about.

You know, how would we, for example, let's say ten years ago, have predicted all of the interest on women's studies? I mean, that sort of thing has come to the forefront relatively quickly and now it seems clear that some people will want to know a *lot* more about women's lives in Madison as a result of that. Well, I was able to capture that because I knew that was a key point of current interest. When I went back and did my research, there were some things there. But the point I make is that it is, indeed, very, very difficult trying to guess what people are going to want to read about fifty or a hundred years from now.

Having said all of that, I think we can make some very good guesses, and that's what I'm going to try to target my remarks on here this evening.

*How did you find out about the Indians if it wasn't in the paper?*

Well, essentially what I relied on, Ruth, were literally dozens of articles that archaeologists had written. I'm talking now about their lifestyle. Of course, a lot of it can be inferred just from things they would uncover in gravesites and camp sites and that sort of thing. So they, of course, can tell you a lot about how they lived and what they ate from that kind of material. But there were also one or two people who systematically interviewed the Indians. We can all be fortunate that they took the time and trouble of doing this. Had they not done that we would have been without that sort of information. So there were exceptions and, of course, I guess we will hope

that there will be exceptions in some of these things in the future, too.

The first thing that I think we can predict people will always want to know about was what was it like to live in Madison. People, I think, will always want to know what irritated people, how did they dress, what were the problems they encountered in their daily lives, what role did religion play, if any. Questions of that ilk are often called social history, but we're really just talking about the texture of daily life. We're not talking about the big cataclysmic events that "punctuate and illuminate our times," as Walter Cronkite used to say at the end of his program. We're just talking about the little things of day-to-day life. I think people will always be interested in that.

Let me just give you a little detour on that. One of the kinds of details that is rarely available in newspapers are certain personal details about a person's appearance. You know, if you're writing about a mayor, it's much more interesting to be able to say that he was a *very tall* or, better than tall, he was six foot six and he had a very regal bearing. What kind of carriage did he have?

I always look for adjectives, you know, when you want to write about a person. Newspaper reporters – and generally I think we will continue to find them – write the diary of Madison; that's the way they generally function and that's the way we will use them in future. But it's curious how they don't often include very many adjectives when they relate to people. That seems like kind of a strange thing. Some articles are, of course, exceptions to that.

And it's the kind of thing you can very often get from an interview from somebody who knew the man or the woman. If you don't extract it at that point, it's one of those kinds of things that will just not show up in very many other places. Anything relating to people's appearance, I think, is the kind of thing you can very often get most effectively in an oral interview. So the first thing then is: what was it like to live in Madison.

The second thing that I think people will continue to want to know about would be the state and the national – and maybe, in some cases, even the international – backdrop. One of the things I tried to do in my book was to put local history in some kind of meaningful perspective, meaning if there was some sort of an important state story, then you have to provide that as a kind of backdrop on a stage. For example, when Andrew Jackson issued an edict in 1837 he caused Madison to go into a ten-year Depression. Well, that's a pretty important fact. And so there are many cases where that bit of background is important. If we're talking to somebody who had a role in affairs that is somehow related to a state or national event, then it seems to me that we should try to get as much information of that kind as we can – especially if that person can give us that kind of backdrop.

I was thinking, on that subject, Ruth, about the 1969 riots and the things that your husband could talk about, the kinds of cases that came before him. I was chatting with him the other evening and he was saying, for example, that not a single one of the people that came before him were what he would call "bad" people. They were all people who just differed on a matter of value or principle and that's why they were being charged with a draft violation. It was interesting for me to just pick up that little bit of detail. Maybe somebody will wonder, well, what kind of people in Madison got arrested during this tumultuous period in that draft area. Well, here's an opportunity where he could answer that in a very unusual and unique way.

The third thing that I think people will always want to know about is what I call "public policies" in my book. By that I simply mean the cumulative decisions that relate to community character. The city is always changing and it's a very complex, multifaceted entity. You can see these things, you can track them. But you have to identify certain strands if you're going to

capture the reader's interest. So I think you can generally do that under the aegis of public policy. You can break that down into various components, if you like. But people do want to know about that part of our lives that was sufficiently important to warrant a policy. It's not everything, obviously, that reaches that plateau.

I would be talking about ordinances, I would be talking about oh, golly, just the way newspapers handled things, for example. You could call those public policies – the kinds of things they chose to write about. Usually I'm talking about it in the sense of things that are processed through city government: budget, zoning, taxes, punitive ordinances of various kinds. I just happen to think that reading ordinances is one of the most revealing ways of finding out what people thought was important. It tells you how much nudity they will accept in terms of bathing suits, that they will have to come down to below the knee and up to the neck, and where swimming would be allowed, a mile off shore and only after the hours of six in the evening. Those are all very revealing. It seems like you're reading a lot of fine print when you do that, but you never know.

But again you've got to find people who can give you background on these things. That's the point that I'm getting at. I always probed for connections between the individual's life and what was going on in the city at large. It's especially important when you're talking to what we generally call decision-makers -or some such pompous term – to make those connections between their life and what was going on in city government, that type of thing.

Have you talked about the strategy of getting people to run through the process, so to speak? Has that been something your committee has done?

*We've been really sort of feeling our way, and I guess we really do have individual styles. Mostly our tapes have been recollections of older people and, of course, they're delightful to hear. But we don't have any threads.*

It depends on who you're doing.

*Florence Zmudzinski. She was the person who was hired to get places for the people that were going to be dislocated in the Bush. That's what actually decided the city that they had to head on with open housing, because when she went around town finding places for these people to move to…*

Well, that is clearly an example, a good example, of what I would be talking about here as public policy. I do have something I'm going to pass around here in just a moment.

Back in 1977 I developed something that I called a "preliminary outline for quantitative research." It's just a long, complex thing. Remember, it's *quantitative*. I'm going to pass it around.

I think the fourth thing that we can be reasonably sure that people in the future will want to know about is something that I call "values." I don't have any sophisticated definition of that. I just mean whatever people think was good or bad, you know, when they were living. That changes. That, too, is very revealing. It's the kind of thing that's relatively easy for people to talk about, because those strong memories tend to be value-encrusted. It's very often useful, I've found, to just focus on values sometimes. You know, you can talk about that in an ethnic context or in something simple like a swimming suit debate. Or open housing is saturated by values. Again the list goes on and on.

The subject of values, I think, is one of those things that we can isolate and break down into various components and which will surely be a matter of keen interest to people many years from now. Just as that same factor is when you look at our earlier history. How do you escape values?

Values are sort of the engine that power the enterprise. It just seems to me that values are really very important. I tried to do that through my book and I'd like to think it will continue.

I have a few other thoughts here that are not quite at the center of the target you defined for me. You asked me to try to identify those things that would be of interest to people fifty or a hundred years from now, and I've done that, I think, in kind of a general way, with four basic ideas here. But I also have some ideas that I'd be willing to give you, on technique, a little bit. Would that be of interest to you?

*We'd love it.*

Okay. When I go to talk to somebody, I always think of them on a kind of two-dimensional grid, with one of the axes defined as all the knowledge that one could probably have about something and then the bottom axis being that knowledge that this individual has. Then if you were to plot that, you could have like little objects that would look like a protozoan or an amoeba or something kind of squiggly. Some people have a lot of knowledge across a political spectrum, some more in a certain social area, for example.

What I try to do is find out what that person's strength is, where that person's knowledge is greatest, and then try to plumb that to the extent you can – particularly if it lines up with the topics that you're targeting as important. Sometimes if I don't know the person that well, I would devote just a few minutes and just kind of do a little snipping, so to speak, to find out what the salient characteristics of their life were. That in turn can sometimes give you a quick agenda. Another thing that I found is that it's easier for people to talk about qualitative things than quantitative things.

*What do you mean by that?*

Well, they don't remember what the population of Madison was in 1930, but they can tell you about what it was like to live in Madison in 1930. It's just a lot easier for them to frame their answers if you don't require numbers. The truth is, the numbers are very often available from other sources. In fact, this document I'm passing around, I think, will show you what a rich array of quantitative sources there are. So I guess I see a distinction, at least in the interviews that I've done, between quantitative on the one hand and qualitative on the other. I've just found that it's more productive to focus on the qualitative side.

I've also been *amazed* at how many of these people have photographs, scrapbooks, or graphic materials that don't really have a future. They don't have them earmarked for any place. I just feel that one of the roles that those of us in this vineyard can play is to cause as many of those materials as possible to go into some central, responsible place, like the public library, the collection that they're beginning, or the State Historical Society option. Some people prefer having things go one place or another. I think the more important point is that the stuff gets earmarked to go some place. Arrange for a follow-up letter. I mean, you can almost pick up the phone and have Donna Whatever-Her-Name-Is at the Historical Society... no, there's a Donna Somebody who works in the archives division. I don't know her last name.

I don't remember her name. Sereda, is that it? I think that's the name. In any case, she's the one who's in charge of this. It seems to me that that is a kind of fact that you might want to have handy when you go into these interviews. Then they can write it down and they can call the person up or you can call up Donna Sereda. But make arrangements, if you can. It's a wonderful public service for you to perform, in addition to extracting the oral interview, is to make those arrangements to have the stuff get saved. There's a lot out there and you would be among a very small group of people who could be instrumental in causing that to happen.

I've already mentioned briefly this business about go for details that are nowhere else available. We talked about things like eye color and how tall a person was and so forth. I was so struck by one fact that I learned after one of these oral interviews that was on the tape that I got for the State Historical Society. The fact related to the way a man dressed. The man was [F. W.] Montgomery, the man who owned the streetcar company. He wore white spats. Now, that simple, seemingly unimportant fact turns out to be a very important fact in the way the streetcar company in Madison fared relative to people's attitude toward it. Nobody in Madison wore spats – except Mr. Montgomery. It was viewed as an utterly haughty, patrician, overbearing, ridiculous thing to do. Some men wore them, don't misunderstand me. But in Madison they were *extremely rare*. Just extremely rare. It was thought to be just a very imperious symbol.

Yes, a uniform is different. But now here was a man who in routine daily dress wore white spats. Boy, that was strange. But it symbolized all that was bad. Really.

That doesn't seem like a very important thing. Yet, as I talk to people, they remembered that more than any other fact about Mr. Montgomery. "Oh, I remember him! I can just see him in those *terrible* white spats." It was thought to be very patrician.

*Is it your conclusion that he was, in fact, a snob, a patrician snob?*

He was arrogant. There is little doubt about that in my mind. And he acted very imperiously through his company. He forbade women from taking on little fold-up baby carriages unless they were wrapped in a kind of sack. He would jump on the cars and wave off the motorman and drive the car himself, as if it were a giant plaything. But he owned it. In his defense, you can say "That's okay, because he owned it." Anyway, he did things like that. That did not endear him to the populace. But the spats, the point I wanted to make was: simple things like that sometimes turn out to be very important.

One of the most successful things I ever did in oral history was quite by accident. I was trying to get some information on ice boating from the man who knew the most about it, Carl Bernard in California. Now, the man was getting up in years and his mind was very good. I wasn't able to go to California so I sent him some tapes and we had a deal. He had a recorder and he sent me, as a result of this arrangement, three of the most magnificent tapes that I could ever have expected. And it was all done by long distance, so to speak. Every week or so I would get a tape. Here's what he would do. He would simply sit down. I could just see him in his living room. You know, as you're listening to these tapes, you have a strong feeling of place, like February makes sap flow from a maple tree. It works.

Anyway, I suspect that there are lots of opportunities to maximize your effectiveness, let's say, by doing that sort of thing. You don't have to be sitting right there in order to do a good oral interview. A lot of times people are intimidated by your presence and they do a lot better if they have that little machine which they can control; they feel like they're in charge. It doesn't always work, but I'm offering that as a technique.

I could hook this thing up so that it would pick up a telephone conversation. I had one of those devices. That, too, can save a lot of time. Very often that last interview is a very targeted interview anyway, where you're going back and trying to fill in gaps.

That gets to the question we were talking about earlier upstairs: whether these things should be transcribed or not. That's a question I won't get into, unless you want to pursue it.

Well, I know that if other researchers are at all like me, time becomes almost the single-most important thing: You just don't have the luxury of listening to a forty-five-minute tape, so you end up going in to parts of it and just kind of spotting it here and there, if a transcript is not available. You can almost always goes through a transcript very quickly and you can do that at

about ten times the speed – maybe even more than that. Many times these people are speaking very slowly. To sit there listening to that, as a researcher you're tapping your fingers like this, and sometimes you're turning the little knob on the machine that makes it go faster. It sounds like Donald Duck, but you can at least hear it faster and it doesn't take so much time. So what I'm saying is, I wonder whether it might be possible to get a grant from the Evjue Foundation. They're pretty well heeled and they've done a lot of things in history. A five thousand dollar grant – just think of the thousands and thousands of pages of cassette tape recordings that could be transcribed for that amount!

If you have a really good index that's probably just as good. Here's the problem that you come up with on that. If you come across a segment lasting two minutes that is full of really good stuff what are you going to do? You're writing, you're the researcher now. Do you play it back several times so you can get all those words right? Probably you'll skim it like that, unless you have the luxury of going to a transcriber. Ultimately you want segments of this work to appear as a part of something else, to give background, flavor, or as an illustration or something like that. It is hard to pull that off and go from an oral form to a written form, unless you go back over it several times, or unless you have a transcription machine where you can vary the speed. I happen to have one of those. They help, but they're not the whole issue.

Everything is in the index? Now, that index will be more valuable to a future researcher than one that is done in a more general way. It gives me the advantage that I can target what I want with the aid of a more precise index.

You know, I did get a letter yesterday from a ninety-year-old woman named Gurney, from the Gurney family here in Madison. She's in California now. She had just seen the book and she read it and really liked it. She was writing to say thank you, that it triggered a whole series of recollections of her time in Madison. The one thing she said was "I wish you had written more about social history and the families and the good times in Madison."

Now, my book wasn't designed to do that, unfortunately. I mean, I had to give the overview. But I dipped into that rich material some times and I would talk about the [unclear] family and this type of thing. But I had to do that selectively. That's the kind of thing that is a function of the material that you have available. I had so little of oral interviews available to me, you see. During that period up to 1920 it was not easy to pull material together in the first place. Now, somebody could do it, it could be done. But the point I was making is that people really want to know about what life in the city was like – that day-to-day texture stuff. That is what she wished I had written more about in the book. I've had others tell me that.

Ruth, when you were talking about your interview, I couldn't help but think about a way of doing several things, namely getting some of it published and thereby calling attention to the enterprise itself and getting more people involved in it. That would be to publish excerpts from all of your interviews, sort of a microbook you could put together for a Christmas gift or something of this type of the richness of the stuff you have on those tapes. I think there would be some way of accessing segments and weaving it together with little introductions perhaps, to describe who this woman was, is. I think that idea would be a winner.

If you get somebody like the Evjue Foundation to underwrite the whole thing and get everything transcribed, it would be one way of just kind of testing the waters. Once you do something like this I think it would whet appetites. The title would come out of it.

It isn't quite the same focus. It's not the same. I know the project. In fact, our Rotary Foundation gave some money to them a couple of years ago, and it's different, quite different.

Well, I think that there is a lot that could be done with the movers and shakers in the

downtown Renaissance. If you look back just ten years ago the Civic Center got going, the new one; the State Street mall, you know. All of those things are relatively recent and most everybody is still around on those. To me that's a major story. It may be even more important in the future, perhaps. I think that's one.

You know, there's just so much that never gets into the newspapers. I'm thinking about an interview, for example, with Betty Smith would be just full of succulent things that would shed a lot of light on how the Civic Center came to be there.

Very little has been done with the more recent things that have happened: the mall, the concourse, the Civic Center, and that sort of thing.

Another thought occurs to me. Have any newspapers done a story on what you're up to? What you're doing is very exciting and could easily be a feature-type story. Have they written you up yet?

Every couple of years sometimes a fresh injection is worthwhile. Throw it out again, even though it was done earlier, because you will get a few more volunteers.

I've enjoyed being here tonight, I really have. But I think it's most important you people be commended for what you're doing. It is, indeed, time consuming.