

Value of the Duke Indian Oral History Collection for Research

The Duke Indian Oral History Collection at the University of Oklahoma is potentially of great value for a number of research purposes. The key to using oral history most effectively, however, lies in understanding the special nature of oral history materials, and of Indian oral history materials in particular. Oral history materials--verbal testimonies and written versions of verbal testimonies--are primary documents like letters, diaries, account ledgers, public records, and archaeological remains. They do not speak directly in categories which are familiar in finished historical and ethnological works, but have to be interpreted. Several kinds of oral testimony may be distinguished, each having a different kind of value for the researcher. There are oral traditions such as traditional stories, myths, and legends, handed down from time immemorial--the folklore of a people--possibly based upon fact in the remote past, but untestable by other criteria. Then there are eyewitness accounts and hearsay accounts of phenomena which historians would call "events." Such factors as standards of truth and credibility, cultural differences in perception, the reliability of the witness, and the manner in which the account is transmitted enter into assessing the value of these kinds of testimonies for research purposes. Also there are personal reminiscences about "life in the old days," which may be tinged with nostalgia or what may be a widespread--but by no means inevitable--propensity of the aged to view the days of their youth through a rosy filter. Finally there is a great deal of what anthropologists would simply call "ethnographic data"--explanations of behavior and descriptions of how things were done in the traditional culture. Here the