

ORAL HISTORIES AND PARTIAL TRUTHS IN MEXICO*

ERIC P. PERRAMOND

Alberto stormed out of the meeting, fuming and cursing his enemies as he strode off into the countryside (Figure 1). For months he had sought approval to sell his cousin a portion of his land, to no avail. The farmers who formed the rest of his town's corporate community refused to expand the list of landowners. They had nothing against Alberto, they declared, yet they were worried that selling land could set a precedent: People who were not officially members of the corporate lands, or *ejidos*, might attempt to purchase lands from other *ejidatarios*. This was not Alberto's opinion: He blamed three men for the outcome of the meeting, each of whom explained the vote differently.

Events may seem straightforward and understandable to witnesses, yet the context and rationale for them and for their consequences is sometimes unclear. I consider here the problems of interviews, oral history, and the interpretation of past or current events in communities. My examples come from a small-town Mexican context, but field-workers everywhere face much the same challenges.

FROM ORAL HISTORY TO WRITTEN GEOGRAPHY

My dissertation work in Sonora, a state in northwestern Mexico, delved into a variety of research methods. Without a doubt, the most important was the mining of spoken words. These constitute a fleeting and finite resource, especially when they are compared with the rumples, stately parchment documents that repose in the aged archives of Mexico City or Seville. Quite frequently, my invaluable sources turned out to be friendly chats with ranchers and cowboys. Sometimes I turned to the stodgier vessel of structured interviews. Still other conversations could be more technically catalogued as oral history. Important distinctions exist between each type of oral source, its practice, and its results. The sequence I brought to bear—chat, interview, and oral history—was a function of methodology and common sense.

As a research method, oral history is not often seen in academic geography, though a few studies have used the technique to great effect (Lewis 1992; Stevens 1993). Data recovered from oral methodologies are not easily shaped into firm quantitative measures of the past but, instead, reflect current perceptions and memories. These are frequently embellished or reconstructed in a way that establishes the "teller" as an authority on the subject or as a central character of the story. Thus, using oral history as a formal technique for geographical research places some peculiar limita-

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✪ DR. PERRAMOND is an assistant professor of geography at Stetson University, De Land, Florida 32720-8401.