

A "History of Feeling" On Videotape

Real Life History From People Who Lived It



Photo/Marc Po Kempster

By Jeanne Weimann

You can see the confrontation coming a block away. A gray, ragged bum with solicitation in his eyes approaches. As you pass, he speaks: "Got any spare change?" You start to dip into a pocket, then you have second thoughts. Hell, he's probably just a wino. Why help him drink himself to death?

You're probably right about him, but maybe—just maybe—your man on the street is not a wino at all, but a member of high hobo society, one who considers panhandling a profession and feels no more sympathy for ragged winos than you do. He and his fellow genuine hobos, who really use their panhandling profits for traveling expenses, share a common grievance against the wino, who never travels any farther than the nearest liquor store—he gives all bums a bad name, and has real hobos begging from each other because they're the only ones who know they're for real.

This is just one of the revelations in "Bum Rap," a videotaped interview in which Charles Velsek, an Uptown hobo, recounts his cross-country tour by freight car during the Great Depression. The tape belongs to the growing Video Archives of "Documenting Social History: Chicago's Elderly Speak," a joint project of Loop College and Communications for Change.

The project's idea, to use video to make a living history of common folk, came out of a merging of two interests. Carole Collins, coordinator of the older adults program at Loop College, wanted to find a new means of communication between old and young. Ted William Theodore, a community videotaper, was looking for a way to make video more widely used as a people's medium. Together they dreamed up the idea of young folks videotaping older folks. But the young folks would be members of a video class, not a professional tv crew, and the

likely see on a neighborhood park bench than on Kup's show—not presidents, queens, or superstars, but "ordinary" people that represent the history of most of us. By interviewing the grandparent generation, students would amass a first-hand account of times buried from most people's minds. They'd also see their own times in a new light. How would today's popular peace movement look to a World War I draft resister who championed what was, in his time, a very lonely cause? What would someone who suffered through the 30's depression have to say about our current economic woes? The possibilities seemed limitless, and if an old-timer's memory had faded a bit over the years—so what? This would be more a history of feelings than of facts.

Collins and Theodore were able to wangle a community service grant from the Illinois College Board, and in the spring of '74 they began a pilot course at Loop College Center for Continuing Education. The course has been going strong ever since. During each 16-week session, students learn the fairly simple how-to's of operating portable tv equipment, as well as interview techniques in the style of Chicago's own Studs Terkel. In typical Loop Center fashion, some of the people occupying classroom seats may turn out not to be students at all, but resource persons called in to help. Like professional historian Jean Hunt, ready to give a rundown on Chicago's immigrant history; or psychologist Dr. Lucy Freund, prepared to describe the difference between "rip-off" interviews and those based on mutual interest and trust. Also on hand are highly committed field workers, who not only help beginners learn the ropes, but give to the project a depth and sense of continuity that students enrolled in just one session cannot provide.

Although the course is geared to the

wise old gentleman who'd listen bemusedly to the youngsters' generalizations about older people, then nod yes or no as to whether the views were true to his own experience. His assignment was to videotape a young person. The students' diverse ethnic backgrounds make for a culturally rich variety of tapes: a young Japanese woman taped her grandfather; a black man taped an older buddy who runs a combination pool hall/house of pleasure on the south side, a Puerto Rican woman did a tape in Spanish of a hairdresser who runs a beauty salon down the street from her.

More than 60 tapes have now been completed, and the organizers feel at least 20 of them are "good enough to show anywhere." Yet not even the "good enoughs" have fancy airs about them. Sometimes, view of the subject may be obstructed by a tv, a clunky piece of furniture, or an inadeptly placed microphone. Sometimes the soundtrack is cluttered with the clatter of trucks, the roll of pool balls, the ring of telephones, and the interferences of a local rock station or talkative relatives. There are no commercials, but ample breaks are provided by the interviewee fleeing the camera to answer a phone call or knock at the door, or to untangle a dog or cat from the videotape cords. Also, although students pre-interview their subjects, the actual taped interviews sometimes ramble off in ways not anticipated. One student, interviewing a preacher, found himself in the middle of a half-hour sermon. Another, arriving to interview a teacher, found the teacher had plotted out the taping like a classroom lecture, with ten pages of notes ready to go.

Since editing videotape is a tricky business, and not an official part of the course, most such flaws remain in the final product shown to the public. (Minimal editing is done by the field workers.)

seem more authentic. It's "regular folks" both in front of the camera and behind it. The first few minutes of a tape inevitably drag a bit for most viewers, since people are more accustomed to tv's fast action and quick cuts than they are to the relaxed "armchair interview." But viewers soon find themselves becoming emotionally involved in the interviewee's experiences, and when the half-hour tape reaches its end, they often ask if there is more.

Students are usually asked to videotape a "community" that interests them—be it ethnic, geographic, or political. Basically this means finding an older adult whose personal history can be generalized to represent a larger group of people. For example, a retired merry-go-round operator becomes the "community of carnival workers," with all the colorful jargon and culture that entails. Although students are free to choose whatever community seems most relevant to their own lives, several communities have been chosen often enough that they are now the subjects of entire collections.

The first collection, one particularly dear to the project organizers' hearts, is "Fireside Chats with the Old Wobblies." "Wobblies" is the nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labor group that had its beginnings and heyday in Chicago in the early 1900's. For the few remaining "troubadours of the working class," as members were called, it's mainly a nostalgia thing. But back before they were brutally squelched during World War I, the Wobblies were the moving force behind a worldwide movement for workers' rights. One of the prize chats is with 80-year-old Bessye Robin, a Jew who worked 14 hours a day in a Russian tobacco factory for a monthly wage of four rubles (the cost of a pair of shoes). One day, she recalls on the tape,

continued on page 12



Videotapes

continued from page 7

she bicycled to a picnic which turned out to be a rally for workers' rights instead. She wound up in jail, which turned out to be no picnic either. Yet rotten as the food was, it didn't matter because it was just the same as home. She came over to America to improve her situation, but found herself working in conditions similar to those she left. Unfortunately, just at the moment when Bessye is recounting her romance with a Chicago organizer, the tape runs out. And there is no second one forthcoming—Bessye felt she had "said her piece." Another Russian immigrant, Boris Ross, tells how he survived a barrage of firings after he was blackballed for putting radical ideas in his fellow workers' heads. Glimpses of the highrise where Boris now lives suggest things are a bit different from the days when he first came to Chicago to work in the stockyards.

Many researchers have passed through Uptown, pausing long enough to document such sociological fascinations as the "street with the highest crime rate in America." But in "Uptown Speaks Up," the people who live there speak for themselves—and reveal the human dignity behind the data. Inside one of the area's

many transient apartment-hotels we find Lois Michaelson, paying \$180 a month for a one-room flat. The place is no bargain, but better than when she paid \$18 a day to share a room with four others in a nursing home where she was told, "We only call a doctor if you're dying." A forced retirement due to polio and old age has taken her away from her mentally stimulating library job. And even her post-retirement dream—to record books for the blind—has been shattered by the requirement that the project meet strict deadlines—and Lois can't work as quickly as she used to. In a deep emotional moment, she recalls an old saying: "A human mind is a terrible thing to waste."

In another Uptown tape, our aforementioned friend the hobo presents himself not as a dirty streetcorner tramp, but a wordly-wise traveler. He and his hobo friends were splashing in the hot baths of Palm Springs long before the jet-setters even knew it was a place on the map, he says. His revelation effectively puts a damper on the notion that hobos never wash themselves, and, as his interviewer affectionately points out, "Why, you guys started a trend!"

There are historians who say that women have no history. And they're right. What women have is a herstory—which is the point of the just-beginning series, "Herstorytellers." Although older women activists may insist their lives have little relevance to modern feminism, the tapes tell a different story. In fact, quite often, while they are reminiscing on their past, these women come to see how much they are "sisters in spirit." Florence Scala, retrieving from her basement memorabilia of her Hull House days, notes how almost all the photos, posters, and books pertained to women. "I never really thought about it before," she says, "but it was all those strong women surrounding me at Hull House that sparked my fight to save the Hull House community, and even to run

for office." Then, looking at the "Florence Scala for Alderman" poster, she says, "At the time I thought it would be too forced to change that to 'Alderwoman.' Now I'm sorry I didn't."

In addition to the series that have been collected so far, there are scattered tapes on the immigrant experiences of Swedes, Blacks, Czechs, the Irish, Chicanos, and others; these may, someday, grow into an in-depth series on each of Chicago's unique ethnic communities. Then, of course, there are some tapes that will never fit into any particular series—but that doesn't make them any less valuable or entertaining. There is the cabdriver reeling off one hilarious account after another of the characters who have stepped into his taxi. And a guy who managed to hustle a circus job during the depression. The managers wanted a woman for their "Flying Valentino" act, but after a hundred had tried out unsuccessfully, he was given a chance. During the audition, the ropes burned his hands, and an unexpected fall forced him to do an impromptu swan dive into the net. He decided he didn't want the job after all, but the circus manager announced, "You're on!" and he was—with blonde wig and tutu.

The best storytellers, with their "all the world's a stage" attitude, really enjoy sharing in the project. But others are reticent, claiming that they are "too busy," "too uninteresting," or "too unphotogenic." Still others go along with the idea to help a student out, but when they eye the caseful of fancy equipment the student arrives with, they suddenly get cold feet. Even those with the stories, or some burning message to tell the world, may ask—albeit jokingly—"You want to waste a tape on me?" Used to the star orientation of tv, they can't quite believe that their own experiences might hold interest for someone else; it remains for the students to discover the insights they can provide on where we've been and where we're going. And once behind

the camera, the students find themselves focusing on their own futures, 30, 40, 50 years from now... and on the past of someone who has really lived.

Making the tapes, of course, is really only half of the project. The other half is getting them out to the people. Once there, they're introduced not by a producer's dream of animated titles, but by the producer him/herself. And when they end, the audience doesn't walk away, but stays to talk about what they've seen. The reactions prove as varied as the communities in which they take place. A showing of the labor history tapes at New World Resource Center attracted a crew of labor scholars who one-upped each other with comparisons between labor books they'd read and what the old labor leaders themselves had to say. The same showing at a suburban social club evoked astonishment that there were people in the world who'd actually fought for their rights in the streets. At Uptown's Bezazian Library, some of those old street fighters made up part of the audience, and afterwards they came up to tell their own labor experiences. And then there was the Senior Citizen's Action Group at Loop College, where a member of the audience seemed more intent on the person presenting the tape than the tape itself. Afterwards, he jumped up from his chair to announce that the younger generation consisted of a bunch of dirty, worthless hippies strung out on drugs. The taper didn't quite recognize himself in the stereotype, but he was the only young person in the room, so he turned to the rest of the audience and asked, "Do the rest of you believe this guy?" A rousing "NO" came back. There followed a torrent of views on the generation gap, leading to the conclusion that, under the skin, be it smooth or wrinkled, a person's a person—simply that.

That's just one of the things you can learn when you're not doing history by the book.

RENDEZ-VOUS

women and others

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