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Common-Man Biography: Some Notes By The Way

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COMMON-MAN BIOGRAPHY: SOME NOTES BY THE WAY

“An entire library devoted to the life and deeds of one man, and I’m standing on it!” I had come to Austin, Texas, to attend the 1972 Oral History Colloquium, and the immediate occasion of my yokel wonderment was a cocktail party in the sumptuous reception room atop the Lyndon Baines Johnson Memorial Library. The massive accumulation of documents represented by the many floors of stacks below me all but made my feet tingle, and I wondered how Johnson’s biographers could ever hope to deal with it all. The contrast with my own problems as a biographer was almost too perfect. I had written about the lives and works of two folk poets, Larry Gorman and Lawrence Doyle, was well along toward completing a third on Joe Scott,1 and the entire accumulated documentary material available to me for all three I could have held in one hand. It was a neat irony, I felt, and somehow significant if not even symbolic of something or other. Over the cocktail hubbub I told my lovely companion of the moment about it. She thought it was significant too, and maybe symbolic. We had another drink on it.

I could go on about that symbolism, about the views of the past (and, God knows, the present and future) it lights up, about elitism and non-elitism, about the poisonous snobbery of great-man/significant-event history, and about my commitment to common-man biography. These are all worthy topics, but at the moment I want to talk about that slight handful of documents I mentioned. When I was a doctoral candidate at Indiana I gave a lecture on “Biographies of the Folk” to one of Dick Dorson’s classes. He was enthusiastic and for some years he kept trying to get me to write it up as an article. He hasn’t said anything about it for seven years now, but it seems appropriate and in character that I prepare it for his Festschrift. It is also ironic, possibly significant, and maybe symbolic. We can have a drink on it.

The problem is clear: if the standard elitist biographer has usually a whole range of documents at his disposal—official records, letters, diaries, memoirs, and Lord knows what all else—the non-elitist biographer has very little. On one thing they can join hands, though: to both the task sometimes seems impossible, though for opposite reasons. Yet the work gets done.
I don’t want to labor the value of biography in folklore, because I hope that no one reading this volume needs that point labored. A specific item of folklore, a ballad for example, is created by an individual, and we can study not only the way that particular individual combined tradition and invention to bring that new item into being but also the way that ballad grew out of his own life and personality. That of course has been my own particular hobby-horse. But then, too, folklore is passed on and performed by individual people who absorb it and react to it in very specific and individual ways—and in ways very similar to others. We can and should study the lives of these transmitters, performers, and (why not) enjoyers.

No historian should find any surprises in what I have to say here, especially in what I have to say about the use of documents, but not all folklorists are historians. My hope is to suggest to folklorists who may want to do biographical study some ways of doing it better, and to point out some techniques that I have found useful in my own work. Nor are these techniques useful only for writing biography. Everything I suggest will be just as useful to someone who wants to establish the historicity (or lack of it) of a ballad or a local legend. The relationship between oral tradition and standard documentary history is one of the most fascinating areas of either history or folklore, and raises questions about Truth and Reality that should tease even philosophers—and it can be beautifully studied on the local level.

A modest disclaimer here. All of the people whose lives I have studied, am studying, or plan to study, have two things in common: they all lived in the rural northeast—Maine, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island—and all spanned the same time period—the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since my experience is thus limited, it is possible that much of what I have to say may fall into the category of special cases, hence useless to the worker in say, Oklahoma in the 40s. I doubt that though, and I still think it is best I speak directly from my own experience, allowing others to adapt it to their own specific problems.

Basically, my sources were of two types, written and oral, and most of them were oral. We’ll come back to the oral sources later, though, because right now I want to go into some detail on the written sources I was able to find. It is these sources that I find folklorists most often neglecting. Granted there is not much there, but there is always something, and the folk biographer who ducks this frequently tedious and sometimes dusty work had better go back to collecting Child ballads from quaint old ladies.

My written sources have been documentary and printed, and for documents we can begin with vital statistics: birth, marriage, and death. These are usually local records, kept in the town or city clerk’s office, but in most cases later records (since 1892 in Maine) are also on file in a state vital statistics office. One problem I have found in Maine is that while some town clerks have been very cooperative, others have not and have refused me access
at first (although I have always prevailed after a while). According to the best opinions and interpretations of the law I can get, vital statistics are public records, but believe me that that's academic if a town clerk gets his back up and decides—for whatever reason or for no reason at all—not to let you see them or to give you the information from them you need. I recommend being a very nice guy. A courteous letter ahead of time explaining what you are doing and what you need is an excellent idea. Get the town clerk on your side. If all else fails, I suppose you can hire a lawyer, but I've never had to even consider it. Chances are you won't either.

Although there is no such thing as a record that can't be wrong, vital statistics are as accurate a record of their primary data as you are going to find, giving some very solid dates for you to work with. For example, if the date on the tombstone and the date on the death certificate differ, trust the latter in every case. But these records are also useful for the secondary data they contain. A birth certificate will not only give the father's and mother's names, but frequently their ages, places of birth, and occupations as well. I was able to follow the worldly rise of Benjamin Deane, the subject of one of Joe Scott's ballads, for example, by checking his occupations as given on the birth certificates of his several children.\(^3\) Marriage records also will frequently give lots of secondary data (and they're apt to be more complete than either birth or death records), including the names, occupations and birthplaces of the couple's parents. A word of warning, though: while their primary data is authoritative, be a little careful with the secondary data. Try to think of who was giving the data, say, for a death record, and how much he or she might have known about the deceased. A son or daughter may know the town where their father was born, but then again they may not. Always check such data against other sources if you can, but sometimes it may be all you have. If that's the case, go ahead, but keep a skeptical eyebrow arched.

Towns vary in how these records are arranged, although the basic order is always chronological. In some small communities, there may be no index of any kind, but it is usually a simple matter to check through the twenty or thirty years you may be interested in. In larger towns and cities, the usual practice is to keep the years bound separately, with an alphabetical index in the front of each volume for that year (in marriage records, both names are listed separately). This raises a problem for anyone doing research, of course, because in order to find a death certificate you have to know at least the approximate year of death, which may be just what you are trying to find out in the first place! Some cities, on the other hand, have alphabetical cross-indexes; fortunately Berlin, New Hampshire, had a very good one, or I might have floundered around a long time before I found the date on which Benjamin Deane murdered his wife. If there is no cross-index, though, and if you don't know at least the approximate year of the birth, marriage, or death you are interested in, your only hope is to plow through years and years of
records, and a lot will depend on how sympathetic the Town or City Clerk is and how busy his office is at the time. Bill Perkins, then City Clerk of Rumford, Maine, was at first reluctant to let me search the records at all, but once I made it clear to him what I was doing, he made a place for me and allowed me to make a systematic search of twenty-five years or more of records. It is hard to imagine how he could have been more helpful. I was lucky, though. I do not believe that any interpretation of "public record" required him to allow me that kind of access.

There are other town-level records. Sometimes tax records and voter lists are available, and while I have not found them particularly helpful so far, they should be checked whenever possible. At the very least they can sometimes give a date and an address, just one more point fixée to work from. Police records, where they exist, can sometimes be checked, although I have found some resistance by those in charge of them. A letter ahead of time to the Chief of Police explaining what you are up to will help a lot. To sum up for now, vital statistics records must be checked thoroughly. Find out where they are located, how they are indexed, how easily available they are, then go to it. And make the Town Clerk your friend.

Legal records are of course invaluable, and there is almost always something to be found. In Maine, one begins his search in the County Court House. Court records, like vital statistics, are arranged by yearly volumes, each volume indexed by both plaintiff and defendant. These volumes, however, contain only the briefest summaries of the case, but they also give full information for requesting the complete trial records, which may range anywhere from a single petition form to one or more red manila folders bulging with documents and memos. In Benjamin Deane’s case, there was everything from little penciled notes from the County Attorney to a deputy to find such-and-such a man for questioning and the deputy’s return note, “Can’t find him, he’s drinking,” all the way to an eight-page typewritten statement by the County Attorney telling why he was willing to accept a guilty plea to second-degree murder rather than first and giving a full summary of all the circumstances of the case! Again, these are public records, but get the Clerk of Court on your side.

Checking through court records for the full period you are interested in takes time, lots of it, but it simply has to be done, even if you are perfectly sure that your man was never in court. There is just too good a chance that something will turn up. For example, if the man you are writing about was foreign-born, his immigration and naturalization papers (if they exist) will be on file in Superior Court. Furthermore, it is even valuable to discover that your man wasn’t ever in court. For example, there were persistent stories that someone had sued Larry Gorman for something he had said in a song but that he had “gained the trial” by proving that what he said was true. A careful and tedious check of the records made it clear to me that while it is possible
someone had threatened Gorman with legal action and may even have hired a lawyer, nothing ever reached court. On the other hand, the search turned up evidence that Larry himself had filed a suit against an employer, probably for non-payment of wages. Serendipity strikes again!

Once you have found something, unless you are thoroughly conversant with legal language and processes, I would suggest you get legal help, because things are not always what they seem. A petition for divorce may make the defendant sound like a villain of the doublest dye going, the plaintiff like an angelic Griselda, when in fact it was all rather amicably handled. It isn’t a bad plan to check half a dozen or so other similar proceedings of around the same time to get the flavor of the contemporary legalese, but a lawyer can help a lot—and try to find one with a historical turn of mind!

Your next county-level stop should be down the court-house hall to the Register of Deeds. If your man owned property, bought it, sold it, mortgaged it, or held a mortgage, there will be a record of it. These records are kept bound in chronological order and indexed by both grantor and lessee; the index volumes may cover anywhere from one to five-year periods, and for some earlier transactions they may cover even more than that. Once again, you may need help interpreting what you find, though you can learn a lot just by checking other similar deeds. About 80% of the language of deeds is pure form. That can be confusing until you get on to it. You will also need help to determine exactly where the property is or was located; frequently that means a trip to the town hall in question to look over the plan books.

Your third court house stop will be at the Register of Probate office. While it is not a certainty, it is more than likely either that your man made a will or, if he died intestate, that there is a record of how his “estate” was disposed of. Joe Scott, for example, died intestate, but one of the Rangeley selectmen was appointed by the court as his executor; his entire estate was one bank account of $267.82, all of which went either to pay his burial expenses or to defray some of the costs of his two years in the state hospital, which helped both to explain and modify a story current back in his home town that he had left a whole lot of money but the “lawyers ate it all up.” Lawrence Doyle, on the other hand, left a very complete and detailed will, including a stipulation that “the sum of One Hundred Dollars must be set aside for Masses, one Mass every two months and Every third Mass to be said for my Wife’s Parents and my own,” which is perfectly in tune with what else I was able to divine of Doyle’s character. Checking for a will is a comparatively simple, one-shot business, assuming you know the date of death; if you don’t, wait until you do.

Census records are very useful. The original enumerator’s sheets with all their personal data are still confidential for the 1900 census and for all later censuses, but before that date they can be consulted. For Maine, for example, everything up to and including the 1880 census is easily available on
Canadian census records are available under similar restrictions, and I found them extremely useful in my study of Lawrence Doyle. Copies of the relevant Prince Edward Island material was on microfilm in the Provincial Archives in Charlottetown and contained detailed information on the size of the individuals' holdings by name, number of acres under cultivation, crops, livestock, number of children in certain age categories, etc.

Moving from the official and public records to semi-official and more or less private records, I have found church records very helpful when I could find them, which was not all that often. I have had my best luck with the Roman Catholic Church, but then again two of my subjects were Catholic. Much of what you will find here simply recapitulates what you will find in vital statistics, but sometimes it will add a detail or two. In fact the only record I have of Lawrence Doyle's father came from the church record of Lawrence's marriage, where he is listed as "son of James Doyle and Sarah O'Hanley, Fortune Road." It will also give records of baptisms and confirmations—a few more fixed dates to work with. The church records of Larry Gorman's funeral also contained the location by lot and section number of his grave, which was the only way I ever would have found it.

I have had little chance to use employer's records, partly because they frequently did not exist for the period I'm interested in. Lawrence Doyle was self-employed as a farmer, and Joe Scott was a common woodsman, and most records on that level have long since disappeared. Larry Gorman, however, worked for the Eastern Corporation in Brewer, Maine, and I was able to consult his personnel record there, which simply gave the years he worked, when he was let go, and a brief note, "too old to re-employ" (he was in his seventieth year). Where such records are available, they should certainly be consulted.

Sometimes the man's family has records that can be very helpful. Joe Scott's nephew, for example, had the old Family Bible, which contained in the front a carefully kept list of all John and Sarah Scott's children and their birthdates. It also contained a number of photographs, none of which, unfortunately, were of Joe. Up on Prince Edward Island, Alphonsus Whitty, Lawrence Doyle's grand nephew, produced a notebook that just happened to be the "Birch Hill School District Account Book," which was quite valuable to me, since Doyle had been Secretary of the school district for many years. Always, then, look up all living relatives, and press for any such oddments they may have, including letters and photographs.

Finally, there is the grave itself. There may or may not be a stone, and either situation will be revealing. If there is a stone, it will usually give you birth and death dates, which, as I've already indicated, are not as completely trustworthy as a death certificate, but it can be a starting place. The dates on Joe Scott's and Lawrence Doyle's tombstones were the first definite facts I had on their lives and gave me a place to start. The location of the stone may
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the more substantial citizens, although as usual, they pay attention to the
local elite. 11

Maps are invaluable for a more general purpose too; they can help you
get thoroughly acquainted with the place names in the area you are dealing
with (cadastral atlases will help you with personal names too). A plain old gas
station road map can be a big help, but there are the U.S. Geological Survey
topographic maps and State Highway Atlases too, both of which show a
wealth of local place-names. The better you know the area, the more you are
going to "see" as you go along, not only in what your informants tell you but
also in your reading of the local newspapers.

That brings us to that dustiest, most tedious, and at times the most
exciting work of all: reading the local newspaper thoroughly, and that means
a little more thoroughly than sanity will permit. First of all, you must
determine what paper or papers people in the area read at the time; that you
can do by asking around. Then you have to find out where complete files of
that paper are located; for this, the Union List of Newspapers is a reasonably
good guide, though sadly out of date. 12 Usually local authorities can give you
more accurate information—the State Librarian or the State University
Librarian. Then you go where the newspaper is—or you send for the
microfilms—and you start reading. There is no other way, but there are things
you can do to make the job easier.

First I have found that it is best to hold off on the newspaper work
until you already have some specific dates and some pretty specific items to
look for. In fact, I have usually saved it until I had almost everything else
done or was well along on it, so that I had a head full of special things I was
after. Second, it always turns out that there is about 90% of any newspaper
you can safely ignore. Turn-of-the-century papers in Maine and the Maritimes
that catered to an essentially rural population gave a large amount of space to
national and international news, (much of it reprinted from big city papers),
advice columns, serialized novels, editorials, and, of course, advertising, none
of which was directly relevant to my search (though my sense of serendipity
frequently led me astray—and I let it!). I soon found that the sort of thing I
was looking for would turn up—if it was going to turn up at all—in a "local
notes" column, often so named but always obviously just that ("Fred Titus
and his wife have just returned from a two week's visit to their son Frank and
his family in Sangerville" . . . "Charlie Pearson fell off the barn roof last
Saturday and broke his collar bone"). If the newspaper was one that served a
widespread rural readership these notes will generally be segregated by
community. The Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, newspapers all
followed this pattern; the "local notes" column was devoted to Charlottetown
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“Fortune Road,” etc. The Woodstock, New Brunswick, papers like the Carleton Sentinel covered an area roughly equivalent to but somewhat larger than the whole of Carleton County, and here I had to learn the various names the area where Joe Scott called home might go by—Lower Woodstock, Hay Settlement, Meductic, Riceville—, which was confusing at first and I had to do a lot of tedious backtracking once I found a new name for the region, but it couldn’t be helped. In working up Joe’s biography, I checked two weekly Woodstock papers over a period of forty years, and the Rumford Falls (Me.) Times for twenty-five. In working up Lawrence Doyle’s biography, I read through fifty years of The Examiner (Charlottetown). That, by the way, was a daily not a weekly, and in cranking the microfilm for it I developed a species of screaming neuralgia in my right arm that it took several months of therapy to get rid of. Scholarship has its little hazards.

I insist that this newspaper work has to be done, and it must not be done hit or miss or just looking for specific things at specific dates but rather ranging through the whole span of the man’s career in that locale. It may be you can hire an assistant or “assign” a graduate student to do this kind of menial work (I had to at one point), but you can be sure that they will never do it as well as you could. If you are not ready for this kind of foot-soldiering, you had better stick with the Motif-Index or structural analysis or reading Erving Goffman or (as I suggested before) visiting Child-ballad-ridden old ladies.

What are the results of such forced marches? I hope that any reader of Lawrence Doyle will be able to answer that for himself. Even though in all the reading I did I only came up with one item referring to Doyle by name (in 1886, at a Liberal Party meeting in St. Peters: “Lawrence Doyle, Esq., of Farmington, was appointed chairman.”), the amount of material I turned up that helped elucidate his songs made the whole venture well worthwhile. The same could be said of my work on Joe Scott, except that in addition I turned up two of his songs published in the Rumford Falls Times, and one further item in the Carleton Sentinel that takes a little background to be appreciated.

To begin with, I did not know when Joe left Lower Woodstock for Maine, but I had made an educated guess. Then two people from there told me he came back for a visit once, and when he came he had a wife and a couple of children with him. At the same time others denied that, claiming he came back alone years later, and then only to stay for a few years. Subsequent research in vital statistics explained the wife and children, but while the trip back to Woodstock with his family made sense in one way, it didn’t in others, and the whole thing remained problematic. Then one afternoon in the summer of 1965 in the upper stacks of the old Bonar Law-Bennett Library of the University of New Brunswick, after several weeks of afternoons checking the Sentinel (I was teaching all morning), I hit upon the following under “Lower Woodstock Items” for 14 July 1900:
"Joseph Scott, who has been absent about 14 years, returned home Wednesday with a wife and two children." That settled the trip home; it had happened. It also nicely supported my surmise that Joe had left home about 1885, when he would have been eighteen. It is hard to convey the excitement I felt, except to say that I dropped my dime twice trying to call my wife from the pay phone in the lobby.

Naturally, you should also check the newspaper for specific things, and you don't have to wait to check for them. As soon as I knew a date of death for one of my subjects I checked immediately in all the relevant papers for his obituary. Again, as with legal documents, it helps to know the obituary style of the time and place, which I always got by reading a couple of dozen others from the same and competing papers. If there is no obituary, keep in mind that nothing may be as significant as something, but you will have to figure out the significance for yourself.

A penultimate bit of advice on written sources. Don't ever think you have run everything down until you have checked carefully with the best libraries and archives available in your area. Make your problem known to the relevant librarians and archivists, preferably by letter. People deposit amazing things in such places: minutes of local organizations, letters, diaries, account books, even old hotel registers. As a shining example, the "Assistant Assessor's Ward Returns for the City of Bangor" are on file for the years 1843 through 1912 (in fifty-two volumes) in the Special Collections Section of the Fogler Library, University of Maine—a treasure of local detail for anyone writing about a man from Bangor!

Nor should you neglect the local historical society or museums if there happen to be any around where you are working. People dump odd lots of documents in their laps too. Finally, there's the local historical packrat, the one-man (or one-woman) historical society who keeps everything piled up on chairs and all over the floor and never throws anything away. The late and beloved Louise Manny of Newcastle, New Brunswick, was such an institution; it was impossible to spend an afternoon mousing around that wonderfully cluttered living room of hers and not come up with something you needed and never dreamed still existed. And at 4:00 Mrs. MacLean saw to it that you had your tea.

As I said before, most of the material I have gathered in my work has been from oral sources, from interviews I have tape-recorded, taken notes on, etc. This meant first of all finding people that knew the man I was writing about. One of the first things I've always done is to publish a letter in the newspaper which people in the area read, asking simply, "Who knew this man?" adding that I was interested in talking to such people and telling them how to get in touch with me. I have had great success with this simple ploy. In writing about both Larry Gorman and Joe Scott, I published such letters in practically every daily and weekly newspaper in Maine, New Brunswick, some in New Hampshire, and a scattering elsewhere. I received dozens of responses.
In the case of Lawrence Doyle, I only published a letter in the *Charlottetown* (P.E.I.) *Guardian*, and here again I got excellent results. I even heard from a lot of people off the Island who told me that someone “back home” had clipped my letter and sent it on to them.

Some of my best informants have come to me via the newspaper letter, but not everyone who writes in is going to be a good informant, of course. Unfortunately there are a lot of inveterate letter-writers in the world, people who evidently write simply to write. But don’t take chances. Don’t try to sort people out before meeting them. You cannot make assumptions ahead of time; the only thing you can do is go see them all. Some excellent informants sound impossible in their letters. It also happens that a lot of people will write to you not because they know something but because they know someone who does. In other words, they are good secondary informants. And that leads me to mention another great advantage of the newspaper letter: it alerts a lot of people who would not write themselves but who nevertheless did see the letter. Frequently, on the recommendation of a secondary informant, I have gone to see someone and had him say, “Oh yes, you’re the fella that’s interested in Lawrence Doyle. How are you making out?” That is said with genuine interest, and the person often adds that he did not write me because he did not feel he had enough information or that everyone knew what he knew, etc. But I have yet to find a situation in which the letter to the newspaper has worked against me in any way.

What should you say in the letter? Be as specific as you can about what it is you’re looking for but at the same time do not give in your letter the very information you hope to get. Do not, that is, lead. There is no real secret here. It is just a matter of common sense. Do not ask leading questions in your letter any more than you would in an interview unless you have some definite reason for doing so.

It is also a good idea to ask the newspaper to send you a clipping of the letter as they published it and the date on which it was published. If you do this, you will have a record of where the letter appeared and where it did not. Always enclose return postage or simply include a stamped self-addressed envelope. If, of course, you are writing to a Canadian newspaper don’t forget that you need Canadian return postage. Always answer every letter that comes to you and keep a carbon copy of your answer. In other words, keep good books. I would not say this excepting that I know from experience it is too easy not to do and if you don’t, you can be sure that you will be sorry for it at some point.

Since I have already written extensively about interviewing in general, I don’t plan to say that much about it here. However, in doing biographical research through oral interviews there are some things that one should keep in mind. Again, they are mostly common sense, but perhaps they are worth repeating.

It is extremely important that as you talk to someone you try to
determine whether he in fact was ever in a position to have known the man that you are writing about. I talked to one man, for example, who told me he remembered Lawrence Doyle. I determined rather easily later on that he had not been born until after Lawrence Doyle had died, and that everything he was telling me was second hand. That did not make what he told me valueless; it simply put a different value on it. Ask a few simple questions like, “Now just where did you know him? Where did you meet him? How long did you work with him? When was the last time you saw him?” That sort of question is pretty easy to ask and very useful. If you hold a second interview you can repeat some of those questions and see whether or not you get the same answers. (This is re-eliciting of information is standard technique in any kind of oral research.)

Always begin by letting your informant lead as much as possible. Begin with very vague questions. “Well, tell me about Joe,” was a favorite of mine, a perfectly “stupid” question. Or I’d ask the even more stupid question, “Well, what kind of a guy was he anyhow?” Almost certainly that got me the answer, “Oh, he was a nice fella.” But it at least gave me a natural kind of opening. Don’t be afraid to ask “stupid” questions, general questions. Then when you see that things are drying up or that your informant has said all he is going to say on his own, you can start asking more specific questions.

Don’t hesitate to use one informant against another, although I suggest you do this without using names. You can simply say, “Someone told me the other day the Joe etc. . . . . Is that the way you remember it?” That does not commit you to a particular answer; it is merely asking your informant’s opinion on something you have heard. Sometimes this question asked in a negative way is extremely useful. For instance, in connection with Joe Scott’s song, “The Plain Golden Band,” I have said, “Someone just the other day told me they didn’t think Joe wrote that song. They said somebody else wrote it, but I can’t think of his name now. Does that sound right to you?” Answers to questions like that are frequently direct, detailed, to the point and occasionally dramatic.

I’d like to conclude by suggesting a methodological problem. When we go looking for information on a particular person, to what extent are we creating his notoriety by the very process of trying to discover it? How much, for instance, of Larry Gorman’s fame is the result of my looking for information on him? Granted that I had found information on him in printed sources before I began looking, I simply wonder if this oftentimes does not happen in my kind of biographical research. It is not so likely to happen on the elitist level, where there are pretty well-established guidelines, but on the non-elitist level it could be a problem. I’m now in the midst of an experiment to see whether or not there is an alternative way of gathering biographical material to check on this problem. Rather than going into a particular area and letting it be known that I am looking for material on a particular person,
I am simply going in to interview any number of people who were alive and around at the time when he was around or who might have been around long enough themselves to have heard about him. But I will not directly ask questions about him, not at first anyhow.

My ostensible and announced purpose will be the writing of a community’s recent history through a series of oral autobiographies. My basic question will be, “What was it like around here fifty years ago?” In time I will plant some questions to try to discover whether or not the particular man I am interested in was really as well-known as I think he was. In other words, rather than looking for material on my man, I will interview people in order to see if they will tell me about him without my asking. If they do not, in due time I will certainly ask directly for material on the man, but only as a last resort. My “pilot” interviews have been very successful, but it is a very slow and “inefficient” way of gathering material, something like browsing through old newspapers. Then again, it just might work. Browsing does.

These then, comprise whatever “secrets” I may have to impart concerning the writing of common-man biographies or “biographies of the folk.” Actually the whole business is like any other kind of folkloristic or historical research—a combination of thoroughness, hard work, common sense, and good luck, but the greatest of these is thoroughness. If this essay has a thesis, it is the following: while good common-man biographies are based on a combination of oral interviews and written records, and while the bulk of the information will come from oral interviews, do not neglect in any way to check every possible written record you can get to. There won’t be much, but what there is you must go after—and go after hard.

NOTES


2. In Maine, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island the address was the same: Division of Vital Statistics, Department of Health and Welfare (in Augusta, Fredericton, and Charlottetown respectively). In each case the search cost a dollar, and one had to know at least the approximate date of the statistic one sought.


4. Ives, Lawrence Doyle, p. 6.

5. For further information see Bureau of the Census Catalog: 1973 (Washington-

6. Ives, Lawrence Doyle, p. 3.
8. Ives, Lawrence Doyle, p. 6.
9. The Bangor City Directories on file in the Fogler Library, University of Maine, are complete as far back as 1867-68, and there are scattered volumes as far back as 1834.

10. Maine Register, State Yearbook and Legislative Manual (Portland, Maine: Tower Publishing Co.). The Fogler Library (University of Maine) has a complete file going back to 1822. As a footnote to a footnote, the telephone book is just one more source.


14. I raised this question first in Lawrence Doyle, pp. 181-82.