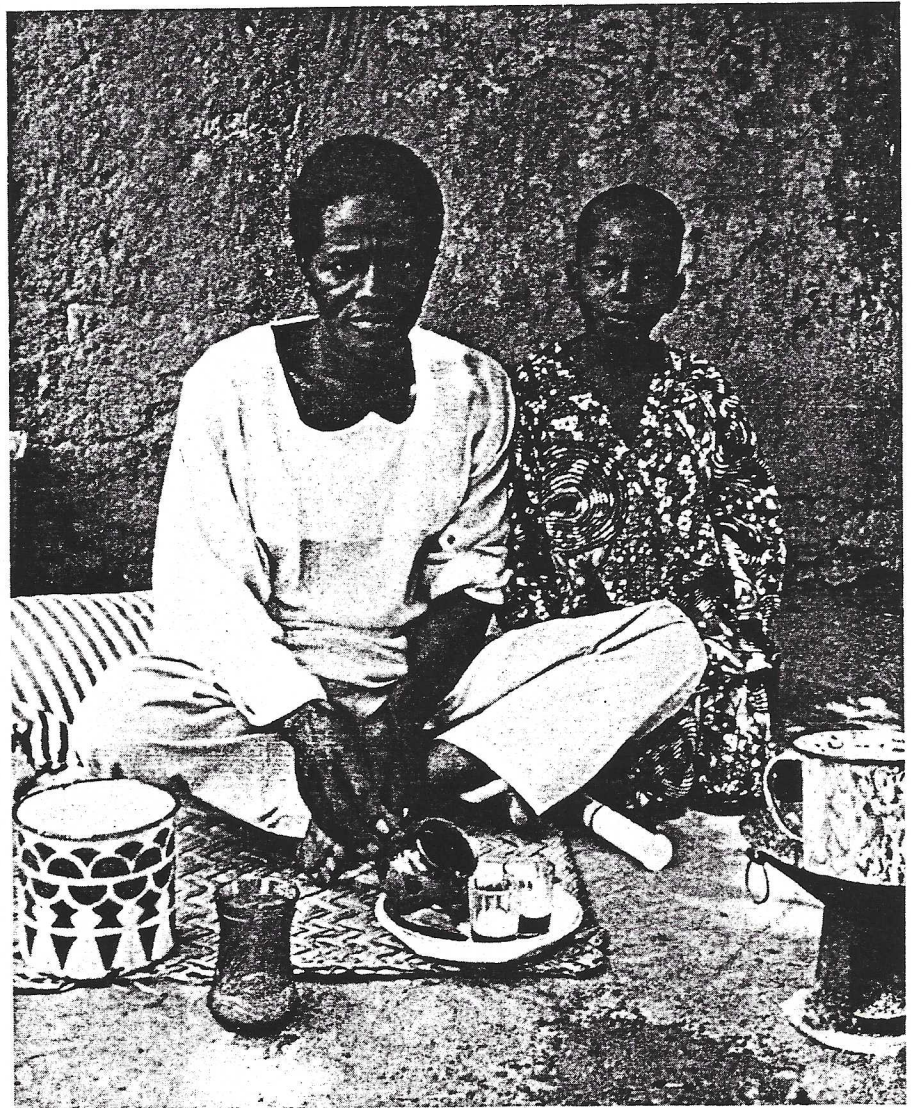

The Oral History Review

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REMEMBERING CONNECTICUT [Radio series]. Producer Jeremy Brecher. Connecticut Public Radio, 240 New Britain Avenue, P.O. Box 6240, Hartford, CT 06106-0240.

Among historians interested in communicating with a broad public, radio to a large degree has been the forgotten medium. It lacks the "sexiness" and potential outreach of video or film, and the permanence and complexity of the written word. Yet in its immediacy and "aurality," radio has proven to be a very powerful means for connecting people with the past, in a manner at once substantive, accessible and economical.

One of the most ambitious, and certainly the longest-running, radio history series in the United States is "Remembering Connecticut." Produced by Jeremy Brecher, better known as the author of numerous books on community-based history and popular movements, "Remembering Connecticut" originated in the early 1980s in conjunction with the state's 350th birthday celebration, and with funding from the state humanities council. Since then, nearly 100 of the five-ten-minute programs have been broadcast over Connecticut Public Radio, interspersed as local features into such national programs as "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition."

At its outset Brecher and others involved in the series felt they had to reckon with not only a general lack of interest in history among the listening audience, but with a comparatively low level of state identification among Connecticut residents. Accordingly, they developed a two-part strategy to engage and hold potential listeners: each program starts with a "hook" to a current issue, then explores some related aspect of Connecticut history featuring excerpts from oral history interviews. Thus, a lead-in about the threatened cultures of indigenous peoples around the world today introduces a program on Connecticut's Indian heritage; an intro about domestic surveillance opens a program on the Connecticut supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti. While at times the associations between past and present are a bit strained, for the most part this device works, drawing the listener immediately and smoothly into the shows.

The inclusion of both contemporary and historical elements in each program initially created some tensions. Connecticut Public Radio staff apparently favored a more contemporary approach at first, while Brecher insisted that the series depart from standard radio news or commentary, and become more essentially historical in nature. Brecher prevailed, and the series is historically grounded to a degree rare in programming of this sort. In addition to the interviews, the programs include such diverse elements as travelers' accounts, diary entries, newspaper articles, poems, and even FBI files. Rather than detract from the oral interviews, for the most part these selections ably complement them, adding a texture and historical dimension that would not otherwise be present.

The same is general convention. Although oral history "Remembering Connecticut" interviews than do most programs and some listeners might argue that in radio it should be more direct and carry a program, the fact is, indeed, it is precisely the program's compellingly matches radio as a medium. It is for the most part on the frequency of the program's documentaries involving multiple voices, heavy editing, and the need to be included in a regular schedule and structural confines of radio in providing context and structure to the interviews. As the program progresses (for example, a forthcoming program of popular images of Pulitzer Prize-winning oratorical voice will be even more so).

As good as "Remembering Connecticut" Brecher himself not only the selections outside of the program are not only time and cost effective but also a conversational tone, and the program's. However, using actors to reenact the program, would highlight the program's more appealing content or continuity. The program's themselves are not as powerful as the program's be better recorded, edited, and distributed.

Broader questions emerge about the medium of radio itself. Despite the troubling subjects, to which the program's jure up images of a mythic twentieth century conservatism. The program's do programs fundamental to the state or statewide (let alone national). To what degree and in what way do the program's subjects to their own program's quaint, old-fashioned, and repetitive or the ephemeral. The program's have been received? (Brecher's program's have been influenced and

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The same is generally true with Brecher's active narratorial inter-
vention. Although oral history interviews are prominent in each program,
"Remembering Connecticut" has a higher ratio of scripted narration to
interviews than do most documentaries of this sort. Some documentari-
ans and some listeners might have problems with this approach, feeling
that in radio it should be the actual voices of those interviewed that drive
and carry a program, that the narratorial voice should be subsumed. In-
deed, it is precisely the personal quality of spoken memories that so com-
pellingly matches radio and oral history. Yet in this case, I feel that Brecher
is for the most part on the right track, especially given the length and
frequency of the programs. These are not highly produced half-hour
documentaries involving hundreds of hours of preparation, multiple
voices, heavy editing, and high-tech production, but rather are designed
to be included in a regular "radio magazine" format. Within the time
and structural confines of each program, the narrator is quite efficient
in providing context and interpretation that set up and augment the oral
interviews. As the programs have become more ambitious in conception
(for example, a forthcoming set of shows treats the evolution and impact
of popular images of Puritans and Yankees), it seems that an active nar-
ratorial voice will be even more in order.

As good as "Remembering Connecticut" is, it could be still better.
Brecher himself not only narrates each program, but also reads all of
the selections outside of the oral interviews. I recognize that this reflects
not only time and cost considerations, but also a desire for informality,
a conversational tone, and narratorial identification by the audience.
However, using actors to read the historical passages, if not the narra-
tion, would highlight those elements and make the actual *sound* of the
programs more appealing to a broad audience, without sacrificing either
content or continuity. There are times, too, when the oral interviews them-
selves are not as powerful, vivid or telling as they might be, and could
be better recorded, edited and utilized.

Broader questions emerge from the format of the series and the medi-
um of radio itself. Despite Brecher's efforts to select complex and often
troubling subjects, to what degree do the programs almost inherently con-
jure up images of a mythic past—of self-sufficient farmers, early twen-
tieth century conservation efforts, and Native American healers? How
do programs fundamentally grounded in localism tie in to broader regional
or statewide (let alone national or international) concerns or identity?
To what degree and in what manner do listeners in fact relate the pro-
gram subjects to their own lives, or are these topics primarily seen as
quaint, old-fashioned, and distanced from the present? How do either the
repetitive or the ephemeral qualities of radio affect how the programs
have been received? (Brecher reports that many people have stated they
have been influenced and even moved by the series, yet have difficulty

recalling the details of any given program). None of these questions have easy or obvious answers. What is clear is that Jeremy Brecher has not only produced an accessible, engaging, and far-ranging radio series, but has raised issues of importance to anybody interested in the comparative use of oral history in diverse media.

Cliff Kuhn
History Department
Georgia State University

AMERICAN DREAM [Film]. Barbara Kopple, producer-director. 1990. Color. 100 min. 16 mm., also 35 mm. Distributor: Miramax, 375 Greenwich Street, N.Y., NY 10013, (212) 941-3800.

The 1980s was the worst decade for working people since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Mines, mills, and factories closed; workers lost their jobs; unions were broken; union organizing drives failed; wages and benefits slid backwards; and union influence receded. By 1990, 84% of American workers were employed in non-union settings.

In *American Dream*—the 1991 Academy Award winner for “best documentary feature”—Barbara Kopple uses the 1985-86 Hormel strike as a microcosm of this decade. Hormel, a profitable employer with a brand new plant, demanded its workers take substantial wage and benefit cuts because its competitors were getting concessions from their workers. When the workers resisted and went on strike, Hormel followed the new practice of the 1980s and “permanently replaced” them. Men and women with thirty and forty years’ seniority, whose parents and grandparents had given their lives to Hormel, found themselves cruelly cast aside.

But the significance of the Hormel strike did not rest solely on this corporate juggernaut and the broken lives left in its wake. Two other elements were equally critical—that the workers chose to fight back, and that, when they did so, their own international union refused to support them.

The men and women of Local P-9 fought back with a degree of participation not seen in fifty years. A union that could not get a quorum to its monthly meetings suddenly could not find a room big enough to hold meetings in. Families became involved—spouses, retired parents, youthful children.

This strike-inspired vitality captured the imagination of union activists the country over. Three thousand local unions sent assistance to Local P-9. Support even reached Austin from unions in nineteen coun-

tries. They were moved but by the example of

Kopple does not dig in sufficient depth to work effectively. As a lessness and despair in tum from “Don’t mou

More broadly, *Ame* Kopple presents rank- neither get to know the participation in this stru all over the country flo meet even one of them middle-of-the-night pic tion which the P-9ers

Kopple’s treatment the mark. Lewie Ander international, figures pr terpoint to P-9 leader Jii ple’s extensive interview of this struggle. Her ju makes him seem down

But Anderson’s pre ball—he worked hard to contract that got P-9 in its new leadership. He allowing the other Hor and he opposed the use Hormel. Most importan sident members of the democratically elected l to crossing officially sa

Kopple’s failure to resistance, on the one the defeat of the strike o to weigh the prospects fo as a “human interest” s decision to cross the pic terest instead of issues.

While some viewers ently, my fear is that Kop negative responses rathe Lost is the empowerment ment that could be the ho