

Losing the past: the ineffectiveness of oral history

[History](#), [American History](#)



Samantha Grace Quartuccio AP US History Leslie Sullivan 15 August 2018

Losing the Past: The Ineffectiveness of Oral History From the Grecians in the east to the Native Americans in the west, oral tradition can be found everywhere. Cultures from around the world have relied on word of mouth and song to carry their stories for centuries. It was the only way to pass down the legacy of relatives and heroes to later generations. Because of its importance, oral history has a tradition of being very important in civilizations. Oral history also has a tradition of being unreliable and undependable. While oral history is culturally important, it is ineffective, limited, often erroneous, and outdated in the modern world. While many memorable oral histories have been passed down for centuries, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, most have been forgotten. Oral tradition is simply not preserved in the sense that writing is. Written documents can survive for many years even after a society has long since died.

The Rosetta Stone is probably the most famous of all of them. In the article, *The Discovery of the Rosetta Stone*, it is estimated creation date of the Rosetta Stone is in the middle of the year 196 BCE. It survived for almost two thousand years before being found in 1799. Another twenty-three years passed before it was translated. The stone's writing survived all that time. Oral tradition is not as safe. In the book, *Facing East from Indian Country*, the author specifically recognizes the many lethal diseases that the Europeans inadvertently brought with them to the Americas. These killed an estimated 90% of Native Americans. Generations of history were wiped out by these diseases. Natives who might have known an entire family's worth of stories died and lost the unrecorded information. Not to mention, the people who

did survive had to mix tribes to have high enough numbers to survive. The Five Nations Iroquois raided across the continent to stabilize their disease-ravished population. The book introduced a nineteenth-century descendant of the ethnic cleansing who described it as this: “ Their plan was to select for adoption from the prisoners, and captives, and fragments of tribes whom they conquered. These captives were equally divided among each of the tribes, were adopted and incorporated with them, and served to make good their losses. They used the term, We-Hait-Wat-Sha, in relation to these captives. This term means a body cut into parts and scattered around. In this manner, they figuratively scattered their prisoners, and sunk and destroyed their nationality, and built up their own. “ This loss of nationality among the tribes furthered the loss of the oral traditions. Tribesmen and women were forced to give up their old histories in favor of a new history supporting the Iroquois. The “ nationalism” of these assimilating communities wiped out most of the oral tradition left from the widespread death. When comparing the Native Americans’ main form of information to the Egyptians’ Rosetta Stone, oral traditions frankly pale in comparison.

The entire culture of the Egyptians had effectively been wiped out for a thousand years, but because of the Rosetta Stone, knowledge of their stories and translations of the hieroglyphics endured. In comparison, the Native Americans’ history could not last three hundred years with the introduction of tragedy relying on oral tradition. The longevity complications as mentioned before would not be nearly so compromising if the same problem would not be found with proliferation. Oral tradition has difficulty diffusing out into the collective conscience. Oral traditions were inherently personal to

the individual tribes in the Americas. They were a way to pass knowledge on to new generations and extend their legacy of heroes. While there have been incredibly famous pieces of oral tradition that are famous, Pocahontas, for example, most were incredibly personal and of little importance to others. It isn't that their oral histories aren't interesting or important, but that they don't hold a special significance to others. This problem is only exacerbated when including the Europeans. While different native cultures may find links between their stories and heroes, Europeans were as unfamiliar to the native stories, as the natives were to the European stories. The translation complications add another barrier, but that has to do with the staticity rather than the proliferation. The disinterest by the other tribes' is similar to the Five Nations Iroquois' assimilation of others stories. Each tribe wanted to be dominant and wanted to spread the tales of their heroes, not other tribes' heroes. This severely limits the range these stories can travel. Not only this, but oral histories cannot be copied hundreds of times and distributed to the masses as written words can.

Oral traditions must be personally told multiple times to be remembered by other parties. They can't be passed on any other way. The most ruinous of all of oral history's faults is its varying accuracy. Oral traditions are simply not as reliable as written documents. To expand, a document written with the intention of being false is going to be just false as an oral story that has the intention of being false. It is when a story intends to be truthful that the differences come out. A written document with aim of honesty is not subject to change. Like the Rosetta stone, the document is practically carved in stone. An oral story, however, needs to be passed down through many

generations to reach its subjects sometimes. And each generation it passes through, the story is most likely to change. Each of the storytellers are essentially historians, and historians are subject to bias, intentional or not. They have control over which parts of the story are included, emphasized, and sometimes embellished. Homer, who was mentioned earlier, is the perfect example of this. The Iliad is a famous story that was originally an oral story. It describes the war with Troy and the ten-year siege on the city. While the battle is real, not everything in the story is truthful. From Katherine Fi, it is found that even with removing the religious aspects, parts of the stories have obviously been embellished. Achilles' prowess in war is far beyond a human level, if he even exists, and the tale heavily vilifies Troy.

In fact, it is uncertain that it was the Greek that invaded Troy. In comparison, the tale of Pocahontas was also twisted. In the stories, Pocahontas is passed down the generations as a fearless woman who saves John Smith and bridged the gap between the Native Americans and English for the first true time. Facing East indicates, however, that she was a scared, but dutiful girl following her father's command in a scripted act to open up communication with the English. Oral stories are fluid with their facts, often changing themselves to the advantage of the author's party. This can lead to gross inaccuracies and fictitious stories. This is not to say that oral tradition doesn't have its place. It can be argued that it actually is more important than written history because of its cultural and personal significance often overlooked in factual essays. While oral tradition has its place, it shouldn't be used for the basis of factual history and should never be the only way history is recorded. Oral history is far too fluid to be the factual foundation of

history, and more importantly, it is far too simple to lose the information permanently. While it can be agreed that oral traditions should continue to pass down their myths to their children to preserve culture, it is far safer to simply write it down.

Culture is important, but the facts also need to come through. In conclusion, oral traditions are simply outdated. While oral history can and should be continued to preserve personal significance and culture, that doesn't mean that they can't also be recorded and stored in written down as well. Almost every society has access to at least paper and pencil at this point, and many countries have programs for children to learn to read and write. Reading is not available to the rich alone anymore. History is now taught from a mainly Eurocentric perspective because of the abundance of written documents that are available to historians around the world. While nationalism definitely plays a part in this, the lack of smaller cultures' oral histories' availability makes it hard to include accurately into the curriculum, though efforts are being made. Moving forward, oral traditions will have less and less of a place in a modern world with computers and phones able to share documents around the world in a blink of the eye. The short range and short-lived nature of oral tradition simply cannot compete with that. All in all, oral history is just ineffective in comparison to written history.