

# Meddlesome Practices – Oral Histories of Good Troublemaking in Business

This exhibition invites new directions in documenting business through the methodology of oral history. You can listen to our introductory podcast or read the text below.

[\[Welcome Audio - Meddlesome Practices: Oral Histories of Good Troublemaking in Business\]](#)

In 1948 Allan Nevins, heralded by some as the “grandfather of oral history,” embarked on a methodological journey that would consume much of his scholarly career: to establish U.S. business practices as a valid line of inquiry in American historical study.

A decade earlier, in his book *The Gateway to History* (1962), Nevins proposed reinvigorating historical study by making “a systematic attempt to obtain from the lips and papers of living Americans who had led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the last sixty years.”

To this end, Nevins conducted scores of interviews. A particularly illuminating example of both the oral history process and historical sources created would be the experience he and Frank Ernest Hill had creating an oral history project of the Ford Motor Company. In a 1963 interview, Nevins describes the sometimes contentious process of creating oral histories “with integrity” when the subject of documentation is also funding.

Oral historian Donald Ritchie notes that “[c]orporations used these interviews for diagnostic purposes, for development planning, and to boost employee morale. He goes on to cite Rob Perks, Lead Curator of Oral History at the British Library who criticized corporate oral histories, for being “a cozy and comfortable public relations exercise” that are “such projects are fatally flawed through being commissioned and funded by corporate bodies.” It’s an ethical conundrum that oral historians face when raising funds for projects, but also demanding academic freedom and integrity to stay true to their ethical standards.

Of the thousands of interviews in the Oral History Archives at Columbia (OHAC), we’ve selected a few collections and excerpts for your consideration. Read and listen below. Exhibition excerpts are also on view at the Libraries Conference Room in the recently opened David Geffen Hall on the Manhattanville campus and in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library’s reception area.

**Federated Department Stores project : oral history, 1964-1965**

**Black Journalists oral history collection, 1971-1972**

**Carnegie Corporation Oral History Project**

**Continental Group project : oral history, 1974-1975**

**An oral history exhibition about business practices and epistemologies**

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### Citations

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Practice in the United States. *The Oral History Review*, 43(2), 367–391. <https://doi.org/10.1093/>

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Nevins, A. (1938). *The gateway to history*. D. C. Heath and company.

Ritchie, D. A. (2015). *Doing oral history* (Third edition). Oxford University Press.

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