Building the Golden Gate Bridge: A Workers’ Oral History by Harvey Schwartz.

Building the Golden Gate Bridge: A Workers’ Oral History is a concise but elegant oral history book in the style of the San Francisco Bay Area oral history projects of the 1960s–80s. It is no wonder that the book’s structure reminds readers of this early period: the author, Harvey Schwartz, is a foundational pillar of this oral history community. During this same era, Willa Baum conducted institutional oral histories as director of UC Berkeley’s Regional Oral History Office, while graduate students such as David Dunaway, UC Berkeley’s first doctoral candidate in American Studies, documented the American folk music movement, including the Pete Seeger family.

Trained by labor historian David Brody, author Harvey Schwartz has persistently documented, from the 1970s to the present, the oral history of San Francisco urban trades workers. In 1978, he wrote The March Inland: Origins of the ILWU Warehouse Division, 1934–1938, based on his dissertation on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). In the 1980s Schwartz joined the newly formed Bay Area Labor History Workshop (BALHW), a monthly study group that linked labor scholars with rank and file union members documenting California’s labor history. Members of the BALHW helped to create San Francisco State University’s Labor Archives and Research Center (LARC) in 1985, and Schwartz worked closely with founding director Lynn Bonfield to undertake oral history documentation of San Francisco trades workers. For the past sixteen years he has served as the curator of the ILWU’s Archive Oral History Collection.

While working with LARC, Schwartz conducted the interviews he presents in Building the Golden Gate Bridge: A Workers’ Oral History. For the study, Schwartz interviewed eight white male workers from different trades who were involved in building the Golden Gate Bridge from 1933 to 1937. In addition, he includes several other interviews: a more recent male Golden Gate Bridge maintenance worker, as well as one of the wives of the male construction workers, two female nurses who helped when accidents occurred during construction, and one more recently employed African American female Golden Gate Bridge maintenance worker.

Reading these rich interviews, I was struck by two particular points. The first is how many second-generation immigrants worked to construct the Golden Gate Bridge, an important cultural and physical structure (a point that also makes this book timely given the current political climate on immigration). Secondly, I found the absences in the workers’ stories just as interesting as what was included. The male workers mostly describe in great detail the nuances of their work days: the skill involved, how the weather affected them, their political inclinations and union membership, and how they dealt with practical issues such as bathrooms while working seven-hundred feet in the air. Only two of the eight men mentioned their families, either their wives or their children. This is curious since extended as well
as nuclear families were financially and emotionally affected by the mortal peril bridge workers faced on a daily basis. In only one case, Schwartz interviewed a male worker and his wife, to get her perspective on how her husband’s work affected her life. Although the couple seemed to be sitting together in the interview, the husband never mentioned his family, only his work and politics.

The format of the book is in the classical style of other oral history books from the 1960s–80s, such as Studs Terkel’s or Sherna Gluck’s work. These books differ from more recent oral history works that use interviews to inform the secondary source narrative—such as Matthew Garcia’s A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900–1970 (2002). Instead, Building the Golden Gate Bridge provides an introductory chapter that explains the historical context of the topic and then allows the interviewees to tell their own story in their own words. To tighten and strengthen the interviews, Schwartz edited and reorganized parts of them to read smoothly and flow easily. When personal photos were not available, he conducted thorough archival research to find photos to complement the interviews. Through the interviews and photos, readers come to know each of the interviewees. The result is a very accessible book with broad appeal for both students and the wider public. It is also an excellent primary source for students to use for future research.

Building the Golden Gate Bridge aims to go beyond the celebratory memory of project “movers and shakers” by telling the history of laborers who performed the daily work to build the Golden Gate Bridge. After meeting the interviewees at LARC’s fiftieth anniversary of the bridge’s official opening in 1987, Schwartz conducted individual in-depth oral history interviews. Schwartz stated that the intent of this book is to do what Studs Terkel declared at the opening of Public Radio’s StoryCorps booth in New York’s Grand Central Station: to “celebrate the lives of the uncelebrated” (4). But the work goes well beyond what any StoryCorps short recording could do, and underscores the difference between StoryCorps’s story telling and oral history’s life telling. Oral history is the documentation of a whole life through in-depth interviews conducted by a well-informed scholar using historically grounded questions to reveal why interviewees’ made the life choices they did. As demonstrated by Schwartz’s informative interviews, oral history interviewing is a well-honed skill that goes beyond the “stories” movement’s self-reflective five-to-fifteen minute vignettes—and Schwartz is a master at it.

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