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# Cultural Commentary: The Many Secrets of Joe Gould

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# Cultural Commentary

## The Many Secrets of Joe Gould

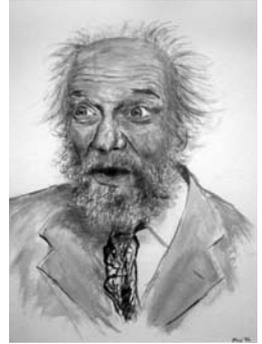
Patricia J. Fanning

*Have you ever wondered who coined the term “oral history?” According to an article in The Oral History Review, most people believe Columbia University Professor Allan Nevins, who first used the term in 1948, got it from a Greenwich Village, New York character named Joe Gould, who in the 1920s and 1930s claimed to be compiling “An Oral History of Our Time” from overheard conversations, occasional interviews and observations. Joe Gould. Therein lies this tale.*

Joseph Ferdinand Gould (1889–1957) was born in Norwood, Massachusetts, the last of a family that could trace its New England roots back to 1635. His grandfather and father were both Harvard-educated physicians. Following in the family tradition, Joe graduated from Harvard in 1911 but did not go into the family ‘business’ of medicine. Made infamous by Joseph Mitchell in a 1942 *New Yorker* profile, the diminutive, bearded panhandler had become a near legend in New York’s Bowery by the end of the Roaring Twenties. His daily rounds included flophouse lobbies, public cafeterias, and assorted barrooms and taverns where, in exchange for alcohol—he preferred gin—Gould delivered lectures, poetry recitals, and epithets. At Village parties he was known for performing the Joseph Ferdinand Gould Stomp, a dance he claimed to have learned from the Chippewa Indians. While ‘dancing’ Gould alternated between chanting an old Salvation Army song, “*There are Flies on Me, There are Flies on You, but There are No Flies on Jesus*,” and imitating a seagull. Flapping his arms and letting out one piercing caw after another, he skipped and pounded around the room, earning the nickname, “Professor Seagull.” Another antic, considered performance art by some later 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars, involved his smashing radios with a baseball bat in Washington Square as a protest against capitalism during the Depression. Gould’s acquaintances and supporters included artist Don Freeman, writers Malcolm Cowley and William Saroyan, and poets Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings, the latter featuring “little joe gould” in two of his poems.

Gould was most famous, however, for his “Oral History,” purportedly a mammoth tome more than ten times as long as the Bible. As outlined to Mitchell, Gould recorded his own conversations and those he overheard, radio commercials, street signs, gossip, graffiti, and scraps of his own poetry (“In winter I’m a

Buddhist, And in summer I’m a nudist.”). He began in 1917 and by 1942 he estimated he had close to a billion words, all handwritten in school composition books which he stored in friends’ studios and on a farm in Connecticut. He predicted that he would ultimately be known as “the most brilliant historian of the century.” The tales of dynasties, battles, and heroes were not really history, Gould insisted, telling Mitchell he planned to record “the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitudes,” something he predicted would produce a better understanding of American culture than any standard history.



He published essays titled “Civilization,” “Marriage,” “Social Position,” “Insanity” and “Freedom,” each part of the “Oral History,” in small literary journals such as *The Dial* and *Pagany* and reported that he lived on “air, self-esteem, cigarette butts, cowboy coffee [black without sugar], fried egg sandwiches, and ketchup.” Eventually diner countermen would hide the ketchup when they saw the disheveled figure come through the door knowing he would order a cup of hot water and then fill it with ketchup to make “tomato bouillon.” Dressed in cast-off clothing lined in winter with pages from the *New York Times*, Gould patrolled Greenwich Village for more than thirty years, until 1952 when he was committed to a state hospital where he died five years later at the age of 68. Following his death, an effort was made to locate Gould’s masterpiece but, of course, to no avail. The “Oral History of Our Time” was, as you might have guessed by now, a giant hoax.

Still, unlike most street hustlers, Joe Gould had made a lasting impression. His ruse—known but not acknowledged by Mitchell for years—was divulged in a second *New Yorker* profile in 1964. A year later, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, a compilation of the pieces appeared in book form and, in 2000, the Modern Library edition, with an introduction by William Maxwell, was published. That same year, Gould was immortalized in a film by the same name starring Stanley Tucci (who also directed and co-

**Little Joe Gould performs the Joseph Ferdinand Gould Stomp at a Greenwich Village gathering sometime in the 1940s. (Courtesy Culver Pictures).**

wrote the script) and Ian Holm. Portions of Gould's diary (eleven composition books filled with nonsensical ramblings chronicling the years 1943 to 1947) were uncovered in New York University's Fales Collection in 2000 and Ross Wetzsteon's 2002 history of Greenwich Village, *Republic of Dreams*, included a chapter on Joe Gould, subtitled "The Last of the Last Bohemians." Heady stuff for a n'er do well.

But there is more to Gould's story. For a few years following his graduation from Harvard, Joe Gould actually completed some rather interesting research, both in Norwood and across America; research which appeared in his hometown weekly, the *Norwood Messenger*. In 1913 the newspaper featured a seven installment "Racial Survey of Norwood" written by Joseph F. Gould. Weaving together personal recollections and statistical data, Gould discussed every ethnic group then residing in town. He composed separate articles on the Irish, "other British," Germans, Scandinavians, and "French-Speaking People," as well as accounts of "Native-born" residents and an analysis comparing Norwood with neighboring towns. It is surprisingly solid work that has stood the test of time and represents the first known study of Norwood's extensive immigrant populations.

Three years later, Gould traveled to live among the Indians in North Dakota. He sent a detailed account of his experiences back to the *Messenger* in letter form which appeared in March, April and May of 1916. Although in later years Gould stated he had been "measuring Indian heads" for the Washington, D.C. Eugenics Records Office, these articles contain a straightforward ethnographic description of Native American life without a hint of condescension or judgment. Between these two projects, Gould took on another task. During the years 1913 and 1914, he held the position of "Enumerator" for Norwood's school department. In that capacity, he made a house to house canvass to determine the number of children of school age who re-



sided in town. He broke the figures down by gender and, at the same time, also recorded the number of "illiterate minors over 14." It may well be that it was during this canvass that Gould gathered the immigrant life stories that enriched his "Racial Survey."

Eventually, as he told the story to Mitchell, Gould gradually realized that the people in Norwood whom he really respected considered him a fool. And so, when his father insisted he stop loafing and find real employment, he turned down a job as a rent collector and moved to New York to "engage in literary work." Once there, he used his eccentricities to his own advantage and transformed himself into, as Ross Wetzsteon described him, not "just a bum... [but] a bum of a certain genius." As it turned out, he was more than that. Joseph Ferdinand Gould was a statistician, historian, and ethnographer. And, he coined a phrase and envisioned a method that has enabled the experiences of ordinary people to be accepted as social history. All in all, not a bad legacy.

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