

Oral History and Libraries

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In 1948 Allan Nevins established the Oral History Research Center at Columbia University. Since that time, several hundred additional programs have sprung up, each devoted to the collection, preservation and dissemination of oral history data. Today, major programs exist in every section of the United States and most other countries.¹

Oral history programs frequently are attached to university libraries or archives, but a number also are found in public libraries. It would be misleading, however, to imply that a majority of libraries in Indiana, or the rest of the country, engage in oral history in some fashion or other. In many localities there may be an interest in oral history but lack of an institutional focus for that interest. In such instances, what should be the role of the library? In what ways can the library participate in oral history? What are the advantages and disadvantages? What costs and responsibilities are likely to be incurred? In the following discussion, these and other issues are raised in the hope that a critical, more informed appraisal of the current situation will emerge.

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What is Oral History?

Oral history commonly is viewed both as a method and a body of material. As a method, it is only one of several tools in the historian's kit. It is like other historical research in that data collected must be checked for accuracy, whenever possible, with other independently derived sources. For example, if a person describes an event that he or she participated in, it may be possible to confirm certain basic facts about the event from written sources such as newspaper accounts. On the other hand, if no written documentation exists, it may be necessary to compile similar data from other oral sources.²

Oral history as a method taps the memory of a person or group, and may include discussion of a wide range of topics concerning individuals, events or activities. It is based upon observation, association or participation, and not upon hearsay. It requires careful selection of persons to be interviewed and topics to be covered, and is not merely a series of rambling, disconnected reminiscences. Generally it involves face-to-face contact, utilizing a question and answer format. Usually, though not always, the resultant information is recorded on oral tape or videotape.³

Some historiographers have argued that oral history is unique in its use of a question and answer format; in effect creating, rather than just collecting, data.⁴ This argument, however, ignores certain basic similarities between oral history and other historical inquiry. Historians working with written sources, for example, extract data relevant to their questions from a finite body of preserved material. Sometimes the data which would answer their questions simply have not been preserved. Practitioners of oral history likewise employ interview techniques to retrieve pertinent information from a finite store of material retained by the human memory. Historians using oral sources do not always get answers to their questions either. Memory is selective and may not have retained the data sought. And, as we all know, many people who are founts of information die before being interviewed.

Oral history is different than other historical inquiry, but for reasons dealing more with the nature of the data. Written data, in effect, is frozen in time. The words on a piece of paper remain the same, year after year. The same is not true of human memory. A person's perception of events changes over time. Interviewing a person immediately after an event, for example, may yield a wealth of detail but the significance of the event, measured against other forthcoming events, may not be known. Conversely, an interview conducted years later may explore the interconnections of events, but much of the individual perception of details surrounding the

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events may have been lost.⁵ What makes oral history as a method different, then, is that it is dealing with a fluid, rather than fixed, set of data. Ironically, the recording of oral information on tape fixes it in time as well. Thus, future historians using collections of interviews will employ much the same critical analysis for oral history (as a body of material) as for other written sources.

Oral History: Possibilities and Limitations

Most oral projects, except for some better funded operations, tend to focus on topics that are local in nature. One reason is that interest in local history has experienced a significant upswing over the past few years, both in academic circles and with the public. Another more pragmatic reason is that potential interviewees are close at hand.

Local history projects tend to encompass a wide range of subject matter, as a recent survey of the Muncie, Indiana, area has revealed.⁶ The purpose of our survey was relatively straightforward: to identify and locate past and ongoing local oral history projects, conducted by individuals, groups or other institutions. Our long range goals were to act as a repository for local collections and to develop a program which initially would identify topics still in need of research, and later, either to conduct interviews in those areas or encourage others to do so.

We began the survey with an examination of our current holdings, which included collections of local business histories, labor history, black history, life histories of a number of individuals, Muncie response to the Vietnam War era, and reminiscences of local World War I veterans. Other collections, still in private hands, included material on Muncie Jewish history, a history of Ball Memorial Hospital, additional life histories, and a history of the Burriss laboratory school at Ball State. More recently, additional projects have emerged. We, for example, are planning a series of interviews with Ball State faculty and administrators to supplement the holdings of the University Archives. Another project (conducted by a faculty member) will examine Muncie aviation history.

The range of topics covered is by no means comprehensive. Future projects are likely to include histories of religious institutions, professions, and organizations; women's history; neighborhood histories; historic preservation oriented histories of individual buildings and their occupants; and more general examination of various periods in Muncie's past. As Muncie has come to be known as Middletown, another area of inquiry might be the Middletown studies themselves—an historiographical investigation of the researchers and their

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methodology, reaction of participants, and an assessment of the impact on Muncie of being in the public eye for more than half a century.

What all of these oral history projects have in common is that they supplement the existing published and archival material. Newspapers, city directories, county histories, photographs, diaries, correspondence and the like are valuable local history resources. Frequently, however, they provide only sketchy information about an individual's life, the development of a business, or the impact of a traumatic event upon the local populace. Some groups, such as minorities and women, are unevenly represented in the written documentation. Also alarming, from an historical perspective, is the fact that much information presently is not conveyed by writing and is not retained in any permanent form.

Oral history can address some of these shortcomings. The range of subject matter is limited only by the existence of knowledgeable interviewees. Through oral history, individual perceptions, motivation and decision making processes may be explored. Large-scale events may be reduced to human terms. And perhaps most importantly, a wealth of detailed information may be preserved, that otherwise would be unavailable to future generations.⁷

Oral history, however, is not without its shortcomings. Often-times there is a tendency to trivialize or engage in nostalgia; to uncritically assemble a vast array of largely insignificant data. As with other areas of historical inquiry, oral history must be selective. Not everything is worth preserving.

A different sort of shortcoming derives from the constraints of the human life span. Most individuals remember very little before their later childhood. This means that a person 100 years old will be knowledgeable about the experiences of perhaps the last 90 years. As a result, oral history today is confined primarily to developments of the twentieth century.

Oral history also is weak in regard to quantifiable data. Very few business-related oral histories, for example, will contain detailed figures on production, sales, cost or profit. When individuals do remember figures, they often are not time specific. How many of us have heard comments like "I remember when chocolate bars were only \$.05"? But when exactly was that?

Finally, there is the issue of candor, although this obviously is not a problem limited solely to oral history. Interviewees, often for reasons best known to themselves, may distort, misrepresent, mislead or deny all knowledge of a given subject. The conscious act of assembling an historic record, in itself, may lead some interviewees to self-censor certain comments or, conversely, to inflate their role in an event. While perhaps not a common occurrence, oral history

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practitioners realize that this is yet one more area in which they must critically evaluate the accuracy of their data.⁸

The Role of Oral History in the Library

Mary Jo Pugh, in an extremely cogent article, has argued that libraries may get involved in oral history at one or more levels of commitment.⁹ Revising Pugh's analytical structure slightly, one might view these levels as:

- 1) developing collections of published materials
- 2) acting as a repository for primary resource materials
- 3) maintaining a program which records oral history

Acquisition of published materials tends to fall within commonly accepted library practice and procedures but, as Pugh rightly points out, involvement at the repository or program level may lead libraries into new areas requiring unfamiliar methods of technical processing, storage, and information retrieval.¹⁰ Recording and maintaining oral history collections, in short, is an expensive, labor intensive process which should be undertaken only after a careful assessment of their worth in relation to the overall library program.

1) Developing Collections of Published Materials

The bibliography at the end of this article contains a selection of largely annotated entries which may prove helpful in building a body of published literature concerning oral history. The first section lists several of the more important recent oral history bibliographies. Of particular note is John J. Fox's "Recent Works of Note," a regular feature in the *International Journal of Oral History*, which is the best single current awareness tool.

In the past few years, a bewildering number of how-to-to-it manuals and handbooks also have appeared. Some, such as Willa K. Baum's *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, lead the reader through a range of issues, from pre-interview research to equipment selection. Others focus on more specific topics such as transcription and indexing procedures, or methodological considerations. A few titles in this section have been included primarily for their appendices, which contain sample forms and questionnaires. A particularly good value (single copies free) and very readable introduction to the field is F. Gerald Handfield's *History on Tape: A Guide for Oral History in Indiana*.

Guides and directories likewise have been appearing in profusion. At one end of the spectrum, in terms of geographic scope, are works such as the Microfilming Corporation of America's *Directory of Oral History Programs in the United States*, which attempt to pro-

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vide a comprehensive list of programs at a national or even international level. Others, such as Kathryn Wrigley's *Directory of Illinois Oral History Resources*, have adopted a statewide focus. A number of guides to the collections of individual programs also exist. The most ambitious undertaking of this sort is the Columbia University Oral History Research Office's *The Oral Collection of Columbia University*.

Journals and newsletters in the field of oral history tend to be published by the various professional organizations. In Indiana the Oral History Roundtable puts out *The Recorder*, which is an essential source of information for oral history developments in the state. A more recent publication of statewide interest is *The Oral History Research Center Newsletter*, from Indiana University. At a national level, for the United States, the Oral History Association issues a *Newsletter* and the *Oral History Review*. Somewhat less accessible are similar publications for other nations, such as the *Journal of the Canadian Oral History Association* and *Oral History* (published by the Oral History Association in Great Britain).

A number of monographs contain useful information on oral history, although not devoted solely to the topic. Thomas E. Felt's *Researching, Writing and Publishing Local History*, for example, contains a very pertinent section on the value of oral history in documenting local history issues. Over the years, a number of library journals have published articles and, in some cases, devoted entire issues to oral history. One seminal article (not in a library journal) is the Oral History Association's "Oral History Evaluation Guidelines," which should be required reading for anyone considering a larger commitment to oral history.

Not included in the bibliography for sake of brevity, but nonetheless an important category in terms of collection development, are those histories, biographies and other works which have relied heavily upon oral history material as a source of documentation. Some of the more notable titles are James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom 1940-1945* (New York: Harcourt, 1970); Felix Frankfurter, *Frankfurter Reminisces* (New York: Reynal, 1960); Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkeley/Putnam, 1974); William Lynwood Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970); Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); and T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969).

Perhaps the single most important development in the field of oral history publishing has been *The New York Times Oral History Program*, a micropublishing endeavor from the Microfilming Corpo-

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ration of America. As a result of the program, libraries now may purchase significant portions of collections from some of the most notable oral history programs in the country, including the Columbia Oral History Research Office, the Appalachian Oral History Project, the New Orleans Jazz Oral History Collection of Tulane University, the Twentieth Century Trade Union Woman: Vehicle for Social Change Oral History Collection, and the United States Senate Historical Office Oral History Collection. Such a service, however, is not inexpensive. The cost, for example, of the Eisenhower Administration Project (197 microfiche), from the Columbia Oral History Research Office, is \$880". 11

2) Repository Status

Libraries frequently are approached by local historians, school groups, genealogists, historical societies, and others who offer their personal oral history collections, realizing that they cannot preserve the materials indefinitely nor make them accessible on a regular basis to the public. If the library accepts such donations, it is moving into the realm of primary resource materials and is, in effect, taking on archival functions, e.g. acquisition, arrangement and description, maintenance, and dissemination of information about holdings. Prior to taking such a step, however, several factors should be considered.

One of the most immediate issues is that of a collection development policy in regard to oral history materials. Will the library take everything offered? Will it adopt an active stance, soliciting further materials? Clearly some selection standards are necessary, but what criteria are relevant?

To an extent, selection criteria employed for published works also apply to primary resource materials. Oral history collections should complement other materials of a similar subject focus which the library is collecting, and should serve the perceived needs of some segment of the library's clientele. Other selection criteria, however, may be less clear. Many collections, for example, tend to be repetitive in nature. Tape after tape may be devoted to a single topic, with similar responses gathered from a number of interviewees. To what extent are the interviewees providing supporting, corroborating evidence? To what extent are they merely going over the same ground, ad nauseum? Is it really necessary to preserve all of these interviews? In many cases the answer is no. But, in such instances, which interviews should be saved? Often, the only solution is to evaluate the quality of each interview and to preserve the best. With extremely large collections, some kind of sampling technique may be more appropriate. Both approaches, however, assume sub-

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stantial subject and methodological expertise on the part of the person doing the selection.

Another issue relates to the format of the oral history data. Typically, an oral history collection consists of a series of tapes and some sort of description ranging from brief, handwritten notes about the contents of the tapes, to fully edited, typed transcripts. Some collections contain tapes alone. Established oral history programs, however, have found that in cases where both tapes and transcripts are available, almost invariably transcripts are preferred. It is much easier to page through a transcript than to jump from one part of a tape to another. What, then, should the library do about those collections consisting solely of tapes, or tapes with inadequate documentation? Does it have the resources to do transcription or a more abbreviated form of description? A ten-hour collection may sound manageable, but this probably will translate into 300 hours or so of processing time (to type a verbatim transcript, audit and edit the transcript, retype, proofread, and type the final copy).^{1 2}

The expenditure of time for transcription is significant, yet it is only one of several cost factors that oral history repositories face. Other labor costs include cataloging (and all oral history collections, as unique materials, require original cataloging); preparation of guides or inventories to collections; duplication of tapes and transcripts to provide user copies (originals should be retained as archival masters and not be used by the public as they cannot be replaced); costs associated with making the collections accessible (reference service and retrieval of materials, since they normally are not placed alongside other published materials in the open stacks); and general administration of the program. Further resource needs include space (for processing and listening), equipment (tape recorders, transcribers, typewriters) and supplies (audiotape and other general office supplies). In short, maintaining an oral history repository is an expensive proposition, which probably will require an annual commitment of several thousand dollars in staff time alone.^{1 3}

3) Establishing an Oral History Program

Oral history programs usually record, as well as store, oral history data. An obvious advantage for the oral history program is that it has a measure of control over the nature and quality of material collected, since it is involved in the interviewing process, whereas the institution that serves solely as a repository is largely dependent upon the interests and often widely varying levels of expertise of its donors.

Many programs rely heavily upon their own staff to do interviewing, but some advocates of library participation in oral history

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programs argue that it is possible, even preferable, for library personnel to administer the program, leaving the actual interviewing to a body of interested volunteers.¹⁴ Such an approach is less expensive and encourages greater community involvement. Its success, however, hinges upon the capabilities of the volunteers and the degree of supervision that the library is able to provide.

The interview process itself takes up a relatively small proportion of the time needed to maintain an oral history program. Prior planning and preparation are extensive. Topic areas must be defined, background research conducted, interview outlines prepared, interviewees contacted and equipment checked. Interviewing, too, is much more complex than simply turning on a tape recorder. Questions must be carefully phrased, equipment monitored, and legal release agreements secured to permit use and dissemination of the data. After the interview, the interviewee must be thanked, the data processed (transcribing, editing, etc.), and the information evaluated to determine if another follow-up interview is needed.¹⁵

The costs of maintaining an oral history program are even higher than those for repositories, which is not surprising given the additional functions. Again, much of the expense lies in the area of staff time, and this no doubt is why volunteer assistance often looks so attractive. Estimates vary widely, but libraries planning to use their own staff for most program responsibilities, probably should expect costs somewhere in the range of \$400 per hour of interview (from preparatory stages to final processing of data).¹⁶

Oral History for Your Library?

From the foregoing discussion, it seems that an unqualified positive response is not likely to echo from all quarters, nor should it. Oral history, particularly at the repository and program levels, is not for everyone. Whether or not it is something your library should engage in, probably depends upon your response to questions such as these:

1) Clientele - What are the perceived needs of your patrons? Are these best served by available published oral history literature? Is there sufficient local history interest to justify collection of original materials in that area? Is there interest in special topics which can be met only by recording additional oral history data?

2) Library Holdings - How will oral history materials fit into the overall collection development policy of the library? Will they complement existing holdings? Will they fill in significant gaps?

3) Other Institutions - Who else in the area is doing oral history? What are their levels of commitment? Are they willing and capable of sustaining such commitment? If you decide to engage in oral history,

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will you be duplicating effort?

4) Resources - Do you have the resources (manpower, space, equipment and supplies), both in the short and long run, to develop and maintain a printed collection, repository, or oral history program? If resources are available, are they best spent in this area, or are there more pressing needs?

5) Preservation of Historical Data - What is the likely effect if you decide to engage in oral history? What if you don't?

Further Assistance

A number of active oral history programs currently exist in Indiana. Some of these are described elsewhere in this issue. For those interested in oral history but unsure what direction to take, it may prove helpful to contact representatives of these programs and ask what their experience has been. The following bibliography also should provide some guidance. One entry, the Indiana Communities Project's *Sharing Our Lives*, contains a section on "Funding and Technical Assistance," listing a variety of services of particular interest to Indiana residents.

NOTES

¹ F. Gerald Handfield, Jr., *History on Tape: A Guide for Oral History in Indiana* (Indianapolis: Indiana State Library, 1981), pp. 6-7; John J. Fox, "Window on the Past: A Guide to Oral History," *Choice* 17 (June 1980): 495. Handfield noted the existence of about 100 oral history projects in Indiana as of 1981.

² A more detailed discussion of these and related issues may be found in Barbara Allen and William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981) and David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York: Longman, 1982).

³ Willa K. Baum, "Building Community Identity Through Oral History - A New Role for the Local Library," *California Librarian* 31 (October 1970): 272.

⁴ See, for example, E.D. Pfaff, "Oral History: A New Challenge for Public Libraries," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 54 (May 1980):568.

⁵ Anne R. Kenney, "Retrospective and Current Oral History Projects: A Comparison," *The Midwestern Archivist* 6, 1 (1981):47-57.

⁶ This survey was conducted primarily in the spring of 1982, with the assistance of an undergraduate fellowship, provided by the Honors College, Ball State University. Holdings of tapes and related documentation are in Special Collections, Bracken Library.

⁷ James E. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983):148-57.

⁸ An older but still valuable assessment of the value of oral history, offered by one its foremost practitioners, is Louis M. Starr, "Oral History: Problems and Prospects," in *Advances in Librarianship*, Vol. 2, ed. Melvin J. Voigt (New York: Seminar Press, 1971), pp. 275-304.

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⁹ Mary Jo Pugh, "Oral History in the Library: Levels of Commitment," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 15 (October 1979) :13. Betty McKeever Key, "Oral History in the Library," *Catholic Library World* 49 (April 1978): 380-81, offers a similar analytical model.

¹⁰ Pugh, pp. 16-17, 22.

¹¹ Unfortunately, Microfilming Corporation of America recently decided to cease its micropublishing program. For details, see Cullom Davis, "From the President," *Oral History Association Newsletter* 18, 1 (Winter 1984) :4.

¹² Sangamon State University, Oral History Office, *History With a Tape Recorder: An Oral History Handbook* (Springfield, Illinois: Sangamon State University, Oral History Office, n.d.), p. 5.

¹³ This section barely scratches the surface in regard to policies and procedures. More specialized information may be found in the entries in the manuals and handbooks segment of the bibliography.

¹⁴ One of the most forceful arguments for volunteer participation is offered by Willa K. Baum, "Building Community Identity," p. 271.

¹⁵ Indiana University, Indiana Communities Project, *Sharing Our Lives: A Handbook for Community Oral History and Folklore Research Projects* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Indiana Communities Project, 1983), pp. 7-19 and Handfield, *History on Tape*, pp. 7-14, offer extensive guidelines for establishing an oral history program.

¹⁶ Pugh, p. 24.

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