

# The Oral History Collection at Bluffton-Wells County Public Library

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Of the myriad of tasks a professional librarian must carry out in a medium sized rural county library, that of the oral history librarian is among the most pleasurable and rewarding. What a treat it is to see "old timers" recall with a sparkle in their eye the days of their childhood and to wonder with disbelief that anyone could be interested in their memories or their place in the book of local history.

One of my first responsibilities at the Bluffton-Wells County Public Library was to develop a local history and genealogy collection. The proximity to the Allen County Public Library and a limited budget precluded the development of an extensive genealogical collection. Limited materials existed dealing with the history of Wells County. Thus, an oral history collection appeared to be an inexpensive and colorful technique to embellish the local history collection.

Dr. Jerry Handfield was most helpful in providing useful hints for the mechanics of recording and techniques of the interview. A Panasonic cassette recorder with built-in microphone and high resolution audio tapes were the equipment used. Several sources were queried to develop a pool of names of persons to be interviewed. In addition to those notable persons in the community, attempts were made to obtain interviews with the ordinary working man or housewife as well as the judge, the banker, the lawyer, and the physician. Several persons contributed names to the pool, including the county historian, library board members, members and officers of the Wells County Historical Society, and many others.

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### Procedure for Interviews

After a person had been selected as a likely candidate for our oral history collection, the individual was first contacted by telephone or in person if he had no telephone, and asked if he was interested in the interview. The procedure was described briefly. The need for obtaining copyright release was explained as simply as possible. This sometimes caused concern among the elderly as they are often reluctant to sign any official looking document without advice from a family member or attorney. At this time they were urged to consult with anyone else they deemed necessary if they did not understand the need for copyright release. Our release simply states that the Bluffton-Wells County Public Library has the right to transcribe and publish the transcription after the approval of the interviewee. The release is not signed until the subject of the oral history has read the transcription.

The review procedure has often been a source of trouble. On several occasions, the individual has insisted that the transcription be changed to correct grammatical errors and slang expressions, completely destroying the flavor of the interview and much of its authenticity. The most extreme example occurred with a former local bank official, who returned with the transcript completely retyped and corrected by his secretary. The oral history at that time resembled a speech prepared for the local Chamber of Commerce. Even though the difference between an oral history and a prepared speech or publicity statement was explained in detail, he refused to sign the release for use of the original transcript. Needless to say, this oral history stands out among the rest like a "sore thumb," as a stilted, grammatically pure, insincere statement of facts in comparison to the warm, natural nature of others in the collection.

Because of the foregoing problems, great pains are now made at this initial contact to explain the nature of an oral history interview, emphasizing the importance of naturalness and authenticity. I have often taken a copy of one of the books edited by Studs Terkel, *American Dreams* and *Hard Times*, or materials from the Indiana University oral history collection to illustrate oral histories. These are excellent examples which show people speaking of things, places and events in their daily or usual expressions. Emphasis also has been placed on the fact that the library is interested in local history of Wells County and that the lives of the interviewees and those of their contemporaries are an important part of this history.

Following the initial contact, a letter which contained a list of sample questions which were to be asked at the interview was sent to the individual. The subject was asked to research dates, places, names, etc., prior to the interview. This procedure greatly reduced

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interruptions during the interview to check dates, names, and places. In one or two instances, the subject invited a second person to sit in on the interview. This is not recommended since, with two persons talking, it is often difficult to have control over the interview. On the other hand, however, the presence of the second person has led to more interesting facts and often to a second interview. Rambling, a common problem with interviewing, is much more difficult to control when two subjects are discussing a topic. Arguing about dates, names and other facts has been a common occurrence when interviewing either a husband or wife with the better half kabitizing. Since subjects often find it difficult to get to the library, most of my interviews have been conducted in the home of the subject, making it difficult to graciously request privacy. After some time has elapsed to allow the verification of facts, a date is finally set for the big day—the day of the interview. It is amazing how well prepared most persons are and how interested they become in searching out events of the past. They are usually armed with old newspapers, clippings and photographs, a number of which have become part of the vertical file collection of our Indiana Room. It is important that all background noises are kept to a minimum. Pencils, paper, or even change in the pants pockets, can be most annoying when tapped, crumpled or jangled into the microphone and often mask an important statement which, unfortunately, may never be recalled exactly as it was originally stated. Since our tape recorder has a built-in microphone, it is not necessary to hold the microphone or set it in a special place. A microphone sometimes makes the subject nervous, although audio pickup is probably better. You never know what to expect in an oral history interview, however. I had a difficult time, indeed, explaining a strange noise to the typist which occurred when the family's pet cat jumped up on the table and landed smack on top of the recorder. Everyone wants to get into the act in an oral history interview!

Our greatest difficulty with the oral history collection is transcription of the audio cassette tapes. With a small typing staff there is not time for this work load, and I have resorted to searching out volunteers from the community. Most recently, the advanced typing class at the local high school has completed the rough draft typing. I hope to develop a more structured volunteer system in the near future which should alleviate this problem, since our budget does not stretch to cover such expense.

### Highlights of the Collection

Bluffton, Indiana, is rich in Swiss and Germanic heritage. One of our first oral histories was with Samuel Aeschliman, lay minister

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of the Apostolic Christian Church, a unique sect in America. The church was started in Switzerland by a Samuel Foelich. The first elder of this church walked 250 miles from Monroe County, Ohio, to form this church with a local membership of more than 2,000 persons. For many years, German was spoken in the church and homes of its members and special schools taught the language to the children of members. One doctrine of the church is public repentance and confession. In regular services of this church, men sit left of center aisle and the women to the right of the center aisle. Marriage is encouraged between members and converts only. The membership of this church comprises a large segment of the community of Wells County, and it has contributed rightly to the history and culture of the area. Some of these facts have been recorded in this and other oral histories.

One of the more interesting oral histories in our collection is that of a long-term legislator who was a state senator for twenty-eight years. He had an active part in many major developments in the state and describes many of these in detail including the mental health legislation in Indiana and the construction of the Carter psychiatric hospital, construction of the State Office Building and the School Reorganization Act. One of his famous quotes, "I couldn't always understand what a bill said, but I could smell what they meant," meaning he had a sense of political intuition: "You have to look and see what the law is about and why they're doing what they are doing." Two other controversial pieces of legislation discussed in this oral history which makes it most interesting involve 1) an attempt to have all public high schools and colleges teach birth control information and 2) the joint construction of the Port of Indiana by the states of Indiana and Illinois. Most interestingly, as an elected Democrat, the legislator's two favorite governors for co-operation were both Republicans.

Many comments on transportation run through the oral history collection. One interviewee recalled the celebration, as described by his father, when the first railroad reached Bluffton in 1873 in the form of the Lake Erie and Western. Many remember the first corduroy toll road between Bluffton and Fort Wayne, with a section of Bluffton still carrying the "Toll Gate" addition title. Bluffton was rich in a heritage of interurban lines. There was the line from Fort Wayne to Indianapolis which stopped in Bluffton, the line which ran from Marion to Bluffton, and the Celina, Bluffton, and Cincinnati. Every single person interviewed remembered vividly a terrible tragedy when two interurbans collided north of Bluffton at Kingsland,



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Indiana. All those killed were from Bluffton and the tragedy struck almost every family in town.

Everyone seemed also to remember well his first automobile or his first opportunity to drive an automobile. Driver's licenses were not required until the 1920's and an early law required automobiles to pull over and stop while a horse and buggy passed by. One driver described his single cylinder Oldsmobile with a curved dash by saying that by going downhill with the wind at your back you could get up to 30 miles per hour if you were lucky. Backing into trees and fences and running down mail boxes and horse troughs were other common experiences for these budding drivers. One history buff described the old school hacks as being a big box pulled by two horses with a bench on either side and coal fired furnace underneath. He also described the first motor driven school bus as a 1918 G.M.C. ten and a half truck which could haul about 30 students. The entrance was at the rear with a high step. Each bus driver had a conductor whose duty it was to run ahead after the bus had stopped at the railroad crossing and to look in both directions for a train. He also had to keep order on the bus and lift the little ones on and off because the step was too high for them. For that he was paid the grand sum of \$.25 per day, but that was good pay for those days.

Early Christmases in Wells County were big wonderful pine trees cut from the woods and dragged through the snow to the house where they were lit briefly with candles. A doll or a drum or a muff, or even a toy soldier, might be under or on the tree for the children. Special treats were hard candy and chocolate gum drops. The babies often received "fairy sticks," pure hard candy about the size of a lead pencil.

Disasters and tragedies are most often remembered by the individuals being interviewed. Many remembered in detail the great flood of 1913 when the Wabash River and its local tributaries were broad avenues of water where business and houses now exist. Acts of heroism abound, with people, cattle, horses, and animals all being rescued after three solid days of heavy rains. The interurban wreck, when one car was telescoped by another, touched many lives as the car was crowded with passengers from Bluffton on the way to Fort Wayne to visit the annual fair. Mrs. Marris recounted how a tornado took half her house away, but left her alive thanking God for that blessing. As if to balance the tragedy, many remembered happy times as well. The armistice after the first World War, V-Day after World War II, the centennial celebration in 1936, street fairs, weddings, etc., are some of the happier occasions described.

Oral histories are also invaluable to genealogists. Unfortunately, our oral histories have not as yet been indexed, but this is proposed

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for the future. Just as the content of most oral history is not part of written history, in the same manner many names found in oral histories will be found in no other sources.

Most of the oral histories in our collection illustrate the mid-western value of hard work and perserverence leading to success in one form or another. The retired bank president told of how he started his first job working at the Boss Glove factory. He was so small that he had to stand on a wooden box to reach the thumb turner at which he worked. A prominent attorney helped support his family and pay for his education by raising and selling rabbits and chickens door-to-door. Others speak of eating moldy bread, which was distributed for free, and enjoying it. A ninety-six year old widow spoke of traveling in her horse and buggy through good weather and bad, snow and cold, to give music lessons to support her family after her husband was killed in an accident.

The same prim lady provided a clue to the cause of an accident of long standing notoriety in the county. It seems a wagon full of nitroglycerine exploded when the driver missed the ford in the Wabash River, demolising everything in sight. That same day the lady music teacher drove her horse, Belle, and buggy to instruct one of her students, Velma Klopfenstine. Velma's father owned the distillery on the other side of the river. She remembers that one of the many customers that day was the teamster with the wagon of nitroglycerine, as he was not a welcome visitor anywhere. Thus, the first case of drunken driving evidently occurred with serious consequences in Wells County.

Oral histories offer vivid descriptions of flourishing towns that now appear as "ghost towns." Vera Cruz, formerly called Newville, population now about 75 persons, once boasted a grist mill, a hotel, four saloons, a harness shop, two groceries, a milk condensary, and furniture company. Bluffton, at one time, was the home of a tile mill, several foundries, the Farnsworth Corporation, a glove manufacturing company, Estey Piano Company, and numerous other industries. Poultry farms were big business, even in the 1880's. One resident recalls how his uncle who was in the poultry business raising ducks and chickens would accompany one, two, or three cars of poultry to New York by train. His pay for keeping the poultry watered and fed was the eggs which he gathered enroute and sold door-to-door in New York after he arrived.

Little is written in Wells County histories of the small Jewish population in Wells County. Oral history has filled that gap, with one local physician recounting how his father came to Bluffton as an itinerant peddler, and established a flourishing business. He also remembers other Jewish families in early Wells County history.

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In one of the more notable oral histories in our collection, Dr. Harold Caylor recounts how his father, a Dunkard minister, came to form the Caylor-Nickel Medical Clinic in Bluffton. Caylor began his medical practice at the time of the oil boom in Indiana, the 1890's, and came upon the idea of group practice after studying with Drs. Mayo, Graham, and Plummer in Rochester, Minnesota. Caylor recalls years in medicine from the days when his father sewed up a patient who literally carried his intestines in his hat to today's world of CAT scanners and sophisticated surgical techniques. He tells of major epidemics with typhoid fever, polio, influenza in 1918, and of the importance of drugs such as antibiotics.

Many descriptions of early rural schools are found in Wells County oral histories. Most were one or two rooms and teachers were jacks of all trades, getting to school an hour early on a cold winter's morning to fire up the pot bellied stove and staying an hour late to sweep up the floor. Drinking water was provided in a bucket with a tin cup or dipper and favored students often had the privilege of getting the water or cleaning the erasers. The high school was only available to those who could pass the entrance examination and had the means of transportation to the county seat where the high school was located. Many lived in with friends or relatives to attend high school, and many were unable to afford the time or money for this education. The Bluffton schools also established the first "year-around" educational system in the 1890's under the leadership of William Wert, as reported in the oral history of Dr. William Gitlin, physician and former local and national school board member. Gitlin has researched carefully the history of the Bluffton schools as reported in his oral history.

Likewise, the descriptions of the formation of the first church in Wells County occurs in one oral history. Six Mile Church, the oldest church in Wells County was organized by a circuit rider named Hallett Barber on September 2, 1838. A descendant of a charter member tells of sitting in the "Amen corner" and being tapped on the head with a cane when misbehaving. This congregation has built three churches. The first, a log church, was soon outgrown. The second, a white frame church, was destroyed by fire. The third, the present brick church, was built in 1915, but the congregation built a tabernacle to house the congregation during the construction of the third church.

To sum things up, oral histories are invaluable to the local history collection and genealogy. Your library is missing a great source of valuable information, as well as a sense of the culture of the community, if oral history is not a part of your library and your community.