

# Oral History - Alive and Doing Well in Wabash

Linda L. Robertson  
Director  
Wabash Carnegie Public Library

Back in 1970 when the staff at the Wabash Carnegie Public Library began its project, oral history was hardly more than a gleam in some state organizer's eye! In 1970 there were few guidelines, few refinements, few pamphlets or articles to read for information, and hardly any Indiana resource people to call upon for advice.

Wabash was fortunate to have in town a volunteer interviewer before it even had an oral history project. George Dingley has done virtually all of the interviews in Wabash and has kept alive his enthusiasm for oral history for over thirteen years.

Project organization came about after the library had accumulated a number of untranscribed tapes stacked up on a shelf. Staff members looked at the growing number and thought—whoa, there! It's time to back up and start again. So, they did some of the things worth sharing now.

Wabash's is a small library project—not very grand—but it has had a lasting ability and some fairly decent quality over the years. This discussion shares some of the things about organization that they learned from the “go-out-and-do-it” school of thought.

First, if one is just beginning an oral history program, a few goals and guidelines are called for. Decide whether or not the community really needs oral history. That was answered in the affirmative in Wabash.

## WABASH

The last comprehensive county history had been printed in 1914 and the local historical society was made up of older people whose enthusiasm for writing and publishing had dwindled to almost nothing.

There was a need to collect memories of local people to supplement the official records and the newspaper accounts of county events. There also was some talk of putting together a Bicentennial edition of a new county history, and the interviews became valuable for that reason later on.

Decide, too, if the library (or other sponsoring agency) can afford oral history. It is not an inexpensive project—even with the aid of volunteers. In equipment and tapes Wabash has spent no more than \$1500 on oral history, but in the cost of manhours spent transcribing, copying, mailing, retyping, indexing, binding, and cataloging, administrators shudder at the thought and do not keep track of cost.

Wabash simply does not compute the costs of transcription and all that goes to get a finished product. There are three library staff members who know that if there are tapes to do, they are expected to transcribe as they find time. It may not be the best method of production, but it gets the job done without waiting for a volunteer and without having to hire extra staff.

Initially, equipment purchases may be a barrier. Wabash started with a reel-to-reel recorder, moved to an inexpensive portable cassette recorder, and abandoned that for a better quality recorder, which was, by the way, the gift of a person who had been interviewed. That last recorder is the one still in use after eight years, still with little or no mechanical difficulty. The original price was about \$225.

The library also purchased an IBM transcriber unit with a foot control and headset. All old typewriters have been replaced with IBM Selectrics (not just for this project, however)—a great boon to the way the clerks and typists feel about the oral history program!

Wabash library purchased fairly good 60 minute cassette tapes, about 25 at a time for a better price break, and bought cassette boxes and shelves to house the completed tapes. Tapes longer than 60 minutes are not recommended because of their facility for tangling with the container.

Plan on keeping up with what others are doing. It really is necessary for those involved in oral history to attend workshops, to belong to the Indiana Oral History Round Table, and to receive and read newsletters, books and pamphlets on the subject.

Decide who will use the oral history collection. The Wabash collection is transcribed, indexed, bound, cataloged, and housed in a relatively secure genealogy and local history areas of the library.

## INDIANA LIBRARIES

Tapes are kept in the director's office and they are available for listening although the library seldom receives a request for listening. The transcripts are available to historians, students, genealogists, other researchers, and, sometimes, just plain interested people.

The original copy of the interview is bound, an extra copy is kept in a file cabinet, and a copy is sent to the Indiana State Library. On occasion, someone will ask for a copy of a transcript and/or a copy of a tape (usually a family member of an interviewee) and the library complies. Tapes are duplicated at the local high school. Virtually no restrictions have been placed on the Wabash interviews by those interviewed.

If tapes are to be transcribed—and it is highly recommended—decide whether someone is going to edit the transcript and tape and if the tapes are going to be kept or erased and re-used. Wabash keeps its tapes. Some editing of the transcripts is done—mostly taking out stammering and dividing up run-on sentences and thoughts. “So-called” historical memory is not corrected even if the staff knows fairly certainly that an error has been made. Some of the interviews include considerable trivia and some wandering away from the subject. Wandering and trivia are not edited out—some day that may be just as important to historians as the hoped-for answer would be.

Not enough stress can be given to how important having the right interviewer is. Some of the qualities of the Wabash interviewer may serve as a model for others. Dingley is a middle-aged man who once owned a downtown appliance store. He is active in the county historical society, is involved in Rotary, is a former library board member, belongs to a toastmasters' club, and has taken some continuing education classes at Ball State University. He has served the last four years as Mayor of Wabash.

Dingley is a person who knows many people and knows human nature. He likes people, is personable, and is able to put people at ease. He is also knowledgeable, not only about local history, but about what was going on in the world at the same time that local events were occurring. He has tried to stress in each interview some questions about the Ku Klux Klan history in the area, about local history, and about the genealogy of the person being interviewed.

Subjects for interview are suggested by the library staff and board, by the interviewer, and by people in the community. An effort is made not to overly duplicate talks with people who have had like experiences.

Next, let the local media know how the project is coming along. Wabash has had some sort of news or feature coverage after nearly every interview. It not only promotes use of the completed

## WABASH

interview but also makes people accept doing a future interview more readily.

A warning though—once people find out what the project is, the administrator and the interviewer should be accessible for public programs in the schools, in churches, and for service clubs and should be available for being on workshop panels and for writing various newsletter and magazine articles. Promotion has played a big part in what Wabash believes is a successful oral history program. Every time there is a program, feedback comes from the audience and makes the whole process even that much more enjoyable.

Jerry Handfield of the State Historical Society can help design an appropriate release form for interviewees to sign. They will give the library and any designees the authority to use the materials in the interviews as they see fit. It will also give the interviewee the right to place restrictions on all or part of his interview.

Decide if the program is going to be built around the "shotgun" approach or the "rifle" approach. That is, will the concentration be on a wide range of experiences or on a specific event or period of history. Wabash has a bit of both. It is mostly a shotgun approach, but Wabash does have a number of interviews that concentrate on the history of the Honeywell plant that was in Wabash. The founder, Mark Honeywell, was a Wabash native, so it was a natural for the library to do part of a program built around Mark Honeywell. Besides, the secretarial pool at the company did those transcriptions and the finished Honeywell project was accepted at Columbia University for its collection of business history oral histories.

Now, if a person can think of all this in advance and get properly organized, one of these days, he, too, can have former mayors tell "their side" of the city's story and former police chiefs recount their big moments in fighting crime. He, too, can have a town drunk speak of prohibition, bootlegging, and spending time in the state prison. He can find out where the "red light" district was in town near the turn of the century. And he can talk with the town crackpot—if he can narrow it down to just one!