CURATING ORAL HISTORIES

From Interview to Archive

NANCY MACKAY

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To the memory
of
Willa Klug Baum, 1926–2006

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Nancy MacKay

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PREFACE

The seed for this book was planted at the 2003 Oral History Association conference where I joined three other librarians and archivists on a panel to discuss oral histories in libraries. Though our session was scheduled early on a Saturday morning, our meeting room was packed. The audience was obviously eager to glean wisdom from our experience, and many stayed afterward to ask questions. It was clear that interest in oral histories in libraries and archives was high, and that there were more questions than answers in the air.

I, too, had more questions than answers.

The year before the conference I was asked to set up and manage a small oral history program at Mills College in Oakland, California, where I work as a librarian. As a cataloger for twenty-two years and a practicing oral historian for about sixteen, I'm familiar with the practices of each field, but when it came to bridging the gap between conducting oral histories and caring for them, I was stumped.

I faced the challenges of any new oral history program: space, equipment, record keeping, and cataloging. I found plenty of information on interview methods and oral history theory, but was hard put for guidance on what happens after the interview: processing, cataloging, rights management, preservation, and access. I muddled through that first year, creating forms and procedures and generally reinventing the wheel, but the experience motivated me to learn more about the state of oral histories in the repositories which become their permanent home.

I wanted to collect some data to back up my hunches, so in the spring of 2004 I conducted a survey[1] on oral histories in libraries and archives. I asked about the size and scope of oral history collections, about cataloging, about formats. I asked about the organizational structure of the repository—the kind of institution and the professional background of staff members. I asked about special problems associated with oral histories, and if they were often neglected (my suspicion) in the library or archive. I was eager to hear about the impact of technology, and how participants handled the preservation of deteriorating recording media. Finally I asked about dreams for the future.

Sixty-three responses came in from oral history repositories around the world—national libraries, universities, public libraries, corporate archives, community projects, and individuals. The results confirmed my suspicion that the majority of professionals charged with caring for oral histories are doing so in the dark.

I followed this survey with case studies of seven oral history programs that are particularly successful in meeting the challenges of the 21st century, that is, using technology wisely, participating in collaborative ventures, using the Internet for universal access, and making best use of human resources. Each program has a different organizational structure and set of goals, but they all successfully accomplish what they set out to do. Their comments and wisdom anchor the ideas in this book to real life experience.

All my investigations point to the information gap between the creators of oral histories and those who care for them. The need for standards, best practices, and a spirit of collaboration is essential as we move into the 21st century, to ensure that the work of oral historians is preserved as part of our cultural heritage. *Curating Oral Histories* is a step toward this goal.

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If this book realizes any success, it is because of the generosity of archivists, community historians, oral historians, and technical experts around the world whose experience I have compiled and built upon. This is truly a multidisciplinary and collaborative work.

The book is built around the responses to my 2004 survey. Archivists and curators took the time to analyze their collections, share their experience, and ask the hard questions. My first thank-you goes to all of you.

Seven oral history program managers participated actively in my research, taking the time to complete an extensive questionnaire, answer my detailed follow-up questions, and extend hospitality when I visited. I thank you from the bottom of my heart: Geoff Froh and Tom Ikeda at Denshō; Joan Craig at the Veterans Oral History Project, Morse Institute Library; Susan Becker at the Maria Rogers Oral History Program; Stephanie George and Art Hansen at the Center for Oral and Public History; Robyn Russell at the UAF Oral History Program; Troy Reeves at the Idaho Oral History Center; and Mary Ruth Thurmond and Richard Verrone at the Oral History Project, Vietnam Archive.

Others read sections of the manuscript with an expert eye, and offered suggestions based on a lifetime of experience or cutting-edge knowledge of current practice, as well as help with terminology in a field where the vocabulary is still finding its ground. Deepest thanks to Vivian Pisano, John Neuenschwander, Debbie Hansen, Geoff Froh, and Jennifer Myronuk. Errors, discrepancies, and shifts in accepted practice are bound to come up in a field as quickly evolving as this. If there are errors or lapses in judgment in how to present this material, they are entirely my own.

To Debbie Hansen, Joan Craig, and Barb Sommer, my deepest appreciation for taking time out of your professional lives to read the entire manuscript. Each of you brought an expert eye from a different perspective, and you will see the results of your wisdom in this final draft.

Thank you, Mitch Allen, for believing in me from the beginning and all the way through, even when I didn't believe in myself, and for keeping things light in those dark moments. Thank you, Joe Ryshpan, for your sharp editorial eye. Thank you, Robyn Russell, for planting the idea for this project in my head.

I am indebted to Willa Baum, who recognized the importance of a strong relationship between oral historians and libraries back in the 1970s. Her work laid the foundation for all of mine. Willa's passing, just as I was putting the final touches on this manuscript, paralyzed me temporarily, since so much of her spirit lives in these pages. Willa saw the early drafts of this book, but unfortunately not the finished work. I also knew Willa on a personal level, since our families were joined by marriage, and my fond memories include babysitting her grandchildren (who were my niece and nephews), family gatherings, and Monday night dinners around Willa's large oak table in Berkeley. Mentor, friend, and family member, in my mind Willa will always be the grandmother of oral history.

Most of all, thanks to my family, who put up with playing second fiddle during this year of writing. Christiaan, you gave me the writing bug, and now I'm stuck with it. Michael, you set me on the course for seeking the Truth, and you never let me stray. Jonathan, your roots provide the anchor so I can spread my wings. Your loving presence in my life underpins all

my creative work, and casts the light that guides the way.

Thank you, Taos, New Mexico, where most of the writing was done. I am grateful for the fresh mountain air that kept my mind clear, and the desert expanses that made space for my creative juices. The summer I spent in Taos working on this book is one of the most productive and creative periods of my life. I hope the spirit of the mountains shines through.

INTRODUCTION

You are a librarian in a small public library. A local organization conducted a community oral history project and donated 1,200 interview tapes to your library. Most tapes are labeled and there is an inventory, but you must find a way to catalog, copy, shelve, and make them available to the public. Soon!

You are the new office manager for a large urban church. You come across a box labeled "Oral history interviews—civil rights workers—1964–1969." Many tapes are unlabeled, the physical condition is uncertain, yet they seem like valuable documents. What next?

You are a historian and have just received a grant to set up an archive—physical and digital—on the American immigrant experience, drawing on oral history projects around the country. You have the money and the subject expertise, but where can you turn for guidance on the nuts and bolts for assembling and managing this collection?

Sound familiar? Then welcome to the world of curating oral histories. If you find yourself in a situation like any of these, you are like great numbers of professionals, myself included, who must make decisions about the administration, cataloging, preservation, and access for oral histories, and have no place to turn for guidance.

Who are we—those of us charged with the care of oral histories? Judging by the responses to my 2004 survey,[1] we are an enormously diverse group. Our job titles range from historian to librarian to archivist to park ranger to community relations director. Some of us are volunteers who manage a single community project; others of us are administrators responsible for a large archive of which oral histories are just a tiny part.

Our educational background? Though most of us have advanced training in history, archives, or library science, others are doing this work because of interest or expertise in the topic at hand. Increasingly, full- and part-time technical experts appear on the staff roster.

Though our backgrounds and work situations are diverse, our unanswered questions are amazingly similar. These concerns were expressed in almost every survey:

- Need better communication among curators, oral historians, and other team members;
- Need standards and best practices for all phases of collection management;
- Need guidance on technology;
- Need creative ways to meet expenses in an era of shrinking funds.

Dreams for the future? Respondents unanimously mentioned the possibilities of digital technologies and the World Wide Web for improved preservation and access.

We are passionate about our work—I know because my survey shows that, for the most part, we are overworked and underpaid. One way or another, most of us have found creative ways to make the best of limited resources. And, though we'd rather not admit it, we very likely have a shelf or a whole closet—as far out of sight as possible—where our unprocessed oral histories sit, waiting for answers to our many questions.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book will introduce you to the tasks required in taking an oral history from the

interview to archive. It outlines a number of technical concepts as they apply to oral histories—each of which could be a book in itself. I do not attempt to provide a one-stop shop for curating oral histories, but rather to make you aware of the right questions to ask, and to offer guidelines for planning for your own situation.

The body of the text is organized loosely around the tasks that define an archivist's work: acquisition, description, rights management, preservation, and access.

Appendix B has worksheets and sample forms that can be used as is or be adapted to your own situation.

The Glossary (Appendix C) is a compendium of terms from the many disciplines that inform oral history.

The Resources section (Appendix D) points you to *recent* print references, or to websites that are frequently updated.

Appendix E is a list of organizations that sponsor publications, conferences, online discussion groups, and tutorials. This kind of networking is essential for keeping up with a field as rapidly evolving as ours, and how I got much of the information for this book.

The accompanying website, http://www.nancymackay.net/curating, provides direct links to the online resources mentioned here, details of my research, and other supporting materials.

TERMINOLOGY

When a work draws on many disciplines, understanding the terms and concepts is the foundation for communication. Terminology is an important part of this book. The Glossary brings together terms from law, library science, archives, oral history, preservation, recording technology, and information technology. Terms defined in the glossary are indicated in **bold** when first used in a chapter, if the meaning is not clear from the context.

Some important terms and concepts, though, cannot be so easily defined. Either the concept itself is fuzzy or the popular use of the term differs from the technical definition. Here are some terms I've taken liberties with:

The job of a *curator* is generally more comprehensive than that of an *archivist* or *project manager*; but duties overlap depending on the needs of the project or institution. I use these terms somewhat interchangeably, opting for the term that fits best within the particular context.

A *repository* and an *archive* are similar, though repository refers to a physical site for storing documents—library, archive, or off-site storage facility—and archive refers to the materials being stored and the concept of archiving, as well as the physical site. I use the term repository to refer specifically to a physical site, and archive when the concept is more general.

A *project* has a specific goal and end date; a *program* is more permanent, and usually connected to an institution. Though the terms are distinct, their roles in the curating process overlap. I've often taken the shortcut of using the term *project* when I mean either.

I've also taken the liberty of using *archive* and *project* interchangeably when I discuss concepts that could apply to either.

I've borrowed the term *rights management* from the information technology world, as an umbrella term to describe all the legal steps involved in creating, donating, and using oral histories. When I want to be more specific, I use *legal papers*.

I make a distinction between *interview* and *oral history*. An interview is a recorded question and answer session completed in a single sitting—a component of a completed oral history. An oral history is a "package" which I call the intellectual unit: the interview or series of interviews supplemented with commentary, photos, timelines, clippings, and other

materials the oral historian includes to provide context.

Medium or *media* refer to the physical devices that carry the spoken words of the interview—audiocassettes, CDs, etc. *Recording media* are the devices that capture the sound. *Storage media* are the devices that store the sound in the archive. *Preservation media* are the devices especially designed for long-term preservation. Though the official umbrella term for these media is *data carrier*, I have opted for the more common term, *recording media,* to speak of these physical carriers as a group.

My solution to the gender equity dilemma is to use the male pronoun for the narrator and the female pronoun for the oral historian/archivist/curator/interviewer.

GETTING STARTED

The best way to get started is to complete the *Self-Study* on the following page, and to read the guidelines that follow. This will help you assess your own situation and determine the best way to use this book.

SELF-STUDY

ORGANIZATION

1. Type. What is the purpose of your organization? How are the archive and the oral history project related? Does the archive collect materials other than oral histories?

2. Structure. Is the archive part of a larger organization? What is that relationship? What are your responsibilities? What are the benefits? Is the archive organized around formats, such as a sound archive; or topics, such as a historical society?

RESOURCES

1. Human. List staff members: their skills, their duties, and how much time they devote to oral histories. Include permanent staff, student workers, volunteers, consultants, and vendors.

2. Technical. List technology needs for computer hardware and software, recording and transcribing equipment, archiving, preservation, and access. Then list the available technology resources, including skills of staff members.

3. Financial. List funding sources and projected expenses. Is funding ongoing, intermittent, or one-time-only? Do current funds meet the needs of the organization? What are opportunities for increasing funds? For doing more with less? For sharing expenses in a collaborative venture?

4. Physical. List your needs for staff work space, temporary and permanent storage for completed oral histories, reading and listening space for users. Is it secure? Is it environmentally friendly for long-term storage? What are the opportunities for sharing space?

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

1. Legal papers. Are the legal papers for each oral history sufficient for the current requirements of your archive? How do you keep track of them? Does your collection include **orphaned** oral histories? If so, determine what can be done resolve the outstanding legal problems.

2. Acquisition. How are oral histories acquired? How many new oral histories are added each year? Are they added in batches or in a regular flow?

3. Inventory. How many *physical items* in the collection? List (estimate, if the collection is large) each type of physical material (tape, disc, transcript, etc.) and the number of items within each category.

4. Extent. How many *oral histories* in the collection?

5. Recording media. List all the *kinds* of recording media in the collection—audiocassette, reel-to-reel, videocassette, CD, DVD, etc.

6. Transcript. Are oral histories transcribed? If not, do you intend to have them transcribed?

7. Cataloging. Are oral histories cataloged? If so, does the cataloging meet current standards? Where do catalog records live? What cataloging resources are available to you?

8. Backlog. Are there oral histories waiting to be processed, transcribed, or catalogued? How many, and what needs to be done? Does the backlog increase over time?

INTERPRETING YOUR ANSWERS

ORGANIZATION

1. Type. The institutional structure of the organization will, to a large degree, determine the standards you follow, the staff resources, the technology available, and the institutional goals. Whether your institution is a library, historical society, or sound archive; large or small; rich or poor; private or public, this is the first question to ask.

It is also important to determine the relationship between the oral history project and the archive. If they are the same entity, then communication channels are probably well established. If they are different entities, make sure to get an agreement in writing of who does what, so that each party understands the work of the others.

2. Structure. If your archive is part of a large organization, such as a university or government agency, you probably have both benefits from and responsibilities to that organization. Be clear about what these are, and understand the chain of command. On the other hand, your archive may be part of a very small organization, or even be a one-person operation. If this is the case, then you have a lot of flexibility and control over the materials, but fewer resources to draw on for big-ticket items, such as cataloging and preservation. Whatever the situation, consider the benefits and drawbacks, and how you can maximize the available resources to meet the needs of your oral history collection.

RESOURCES

The resources at hand will factor into all your planning and decisions. For example, if technical expertise and equipment are available from a parent organization, you don't need to budget for them. If you can meet your staff needs with energetic volunteers, you may need a manager to coordinate their efforts. The curator's job is to realistically assess the needs of the archive and be creative with available resources to accomplish the project's goals.

1. Human. Depending on the nature of the project, you may need an archivist/curator, project manager, interviewers, subject experts, catalogers, transcribers, technical experts, and preservationists. People resources are the beginning and the end of any endeavor—all that really matters in the end. Whether they are permanent employees, students, consultants, or volunteers—praise them, inspire them, pamper them, and mine them for their skills and their contacts in the study community.

2. Technical. Technology needs are complicated and expensive, but essential in a modern archive. In this rapidly evolving arena, it is necessary to purchase and maintain recording equipment and media, and computer hardware and software on a regular basis. Be aware that most of what you learn, as well as the equipment you purchase, will become obsolete in a short time. This is a fact of life, and don't feel bad if you can't keep up with it. None of us can.

3. Financial. Since archives are dedicated to preserving collections for the long run, their safety depends on a stable repository with permanent funding. Developing and maintaining an oral history collection is expensive, so be realistic about financial limitations, and creative about seeking funds. Most expenses