

## Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask

By the COMMITTEE ON ORAL HISTORY  
of the SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

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**D**URING THE DECADE of the 1960's the technique of oral history developed in the field of historical documentation in a rather sudden and substantial way. From all indications it is now an established practice being routinely used each year by an ever-increasing number of individuals and institutions. This transformation in the status of oral history, from modest beginnings to acceptability now by all but a small number of unchangeable traditionalists, has generated a need to look in new perspective at the problems and potential of the technique. We should examine certain assumptions that people have used almost automatically in formulating their attitudes toward oral history as well as their policies on interviewing, processing tapes and transcripts, and administering the research use of oral history materials. The primary purpose of this report, therefore, is not to make recommendations on new standards or practices to be adopted by oral history programs. Rather, the committee is of the opinion that at this point its most valuable contribution to the productive administration of these programs can be made by stimulating a more thoughtful and orderly discussion of the field of oral history, that is, by posing certain questions about the technique that we believe deserve attention. In doing so the committee will be setting forth the opinions many of us have about oral history. We hope these suggestions will elicit responses in future issues of the *American Archivist* and other journals. At a minimum we urge readers to send their comments to the committee chairman, who will circulate them to others on request.

1. We have considered first the professional-institutional setting of oral history. The growth and success of recorded interviewing pro-

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grams, in many respects, is dependent on the kinds of people involved in administering and carrying out oral history projects, the kinds of organizations and structures in which these activities are being conducted, and the kinds of professional associations which are dealing with oral history. Several questions are raised.

**Personnel.** Is there a sufficient body of technical and theoretical considerations surrounding the process of oral history to warrant the establishment of a profession of "oral historians," or would the cause of oral history be better served by viewing it simply as one of many methods used by those involved in the collection and preservation of historically valuable material? Are there identifiable trends in the direction of either of these alternatives, and is it valid to relate these alternatives to (a) an approach to oral history that emphasizes interviewing skills and techniques and (b) one that emphasizes subject matter expertise?

**Organizations.** It is advisable, as some programs have done, to separate organizationally the function of interviewing from the functions involved in administering the research use of tapes and transcripts? Does such a separation tend to produce an insensitivity on the part of interviewers to the research value of their products? If there is to be a separation, at what point in the interviewing, transcribing, proofreading, editing, final typing, indexing, and studying process should the division be made? Under what conditions, if any, is it advisable to organize an almost completely independent oral history program (i.e., a program either not part of *any* organization or part of a much larger multi-purpose institution such as a university, business firm, government agency, or philanthropic foundation)? Should oral history programs always be related functionally to broader-purpose, historically oriented organizations (archives, historical societies, special collections departments, etc.)?

**Professional Associations.** Is the Oral History Association generally dealing effectively with the problems of oral history? Is there really a need for the Oral History Association or for the Society of American Archivists, the two organizations most concerned with oral history, to stimulate more widespread discussion of the theories and assumptions of oral history, or should the role of these groups be limited to sponsoring or encouraging training programs for people beginning oral history projects and to disseminating news about various projects?

2. The committee next studied the status of oral history within the archival profession. In an attempt to gather additional data on the involvement of SAA members in oral history and on the way in which they viewed certain problems, the committee distributed a survey in

the spring of 1971. The more significant findings of the survey, copies of which are available on request, follow.

A sizable number of SAA members (about 20 percent) have *some* involvement in oral history. Only 20 percent of these serve as interviewers; most are either directors of larger programs of which oral history is a part or archivists-curators responsible for the research use of tapes and transcripts. More than 70 percent of the projects responding to the survey were founded since 1966. Most of the people responding (73 percent) believed that oral history should be viewed as a regular archival activity (i.e., those engaged in oral history should consider themselves professional archivists). Many (72 percent) indicated that their interviews were not being used as much as possible by researchers. The degree of skepticism about oral history among archivists is quite small as is indicated from the high number of "yes" answers to the question "Do you generally trust the accuracy of recollections in oral history interviews?" and the low number of "yes" answers to the question "Is oral history a passing fad?" "Obtaining adequate financing" and "establishing a program" were the most frequently cited problem areas.

3. A third concern of the committee was the retrieval and research use of oral history interviews. There are at least three types (or levels) of actual or potential users of tapes and transcripts for whom information about the content of interviews must be provided. These are researchers trying to locate institutions specializing in a particular subject and collections of interviews relating to their topics, those attempting to find individual interviews within an institution or collection, and those seeking specific types of information within a single interview.

**Locating Collections.** Is the system of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections satisfactory for oral history materials? Is there need or justification for a "Guide to Oral History Materials in the United States"? To what extent is under-utilization of interviews caused by the inability of researchers to locate oral history collections pertinent to their subjects? To what extent is under-utilization caused by remaining doubts about the validity of interviews?

**Locating Interviews.** Is it generally advantageous to integrate finding aids for oral history collections with those for manuscript collections? For a collection of oral history interviews, what are the advantages and disadvantages of such finding aids as (a) a comprehensive name and detailed subject index; (b) an integrated listing of the broad general topics covered by the interviews (i.e., a combined listing of the tables of contents from each interview transcript); and (c) a catalog of transcripts by name of interviewee, general subject,

and accession number, with narrative description of content and biographical information about interviewee. What is the best approach to use in a finding aid in separating valuable information from useless verbiage? (Because of the nature of the interviewing process, most transcripts contain a certain amount of information that is either already very well known, very trivial, or of absolutely no interest to anyone except the interviewee. Often, it is suspected, this type of information is plugged into the retrieval system, much to the frustration of the researcher using the collection).

**Locating Passages within an Interview.** At what point, in terms of the size of the interview, is it important or essential to have a detailed index attached to each transcript? Would not a brief table of contents be sufficient in most cases?

4. Research use of oral history interviews, including copying and the distribution of tapes and transcripts, is a special problem of oral history programs. A wide variety of approaches have been followed, ranging from the very conservative (no copying whatsoever, all materials used only within the institution, etc.) to the very liberal (unrestricted public dissemination).

**Services to Individual Researchers.** Are there any legitimate reasons why projects should not provide copies of open transcripts through inter-library loan procedures? Do literary property and copyright problems frequently prevent the quick-copying of transcripts for research use?

**Services to the General Research Public.** Does the commercial distribution of transcripts tend to change the character (including the quality) of the interviews being conducted by a project? Should there be a better system available to those librarians responsible for purchasing transcripts to insure that the interview is worth the asking price? (Do projects engaged in commercial distribution have an obligation to present enough information about the transcript to enable potential purchasers to assess the value? Or, perhaps, should there be more critical reviews written about oral history interviews or collections of interviews being offered for sale?) Could publication projects, such as that of the New York *Times* Oral History Program, tend to be counter-productive over a long period of time by inhibiting the acquisition of interviews on sensitive topics?

5. The cost of producing oral history interviews is often the major deterrent to the initiation or expansion of projects. Estimates of the total cost of producing one hour of interview tape and transcript range from \$75 to \$200. There are at least three models, or approaches, which project administrators might use in considering costs.

**The "Priorities" Approach.** Is there a significant problem of institutions organizing oral history programs to the detriment of other, more critical, activities (e.g., preparation of finding aids for archival or manuscript collections)? Would it be realistic to encourage more comprehensive collecting of physical documentation before undertaking oral history interviews? Would it be wiser to follow the principle that physical documentation is apt to be present *somewhere*, (attics, garages, closets, etc.) and that therefore emphasis should be placed on oral documentation which is lost forever as people grow old and die?

**The "Quality of the Interviews" Approach.** Is it possible for the people conducting interviews to develop and use a system capable of evaluating the worth of individual interviews? Is it possible to develop a system whereby the worth of an interview would be dependent upon the type of use it received by researchers? Is it realistic for oral history programs periodically to be evaluated on the quality of their products by outside groups of experienced historians? Would it be profitable to develop a list of criteria which might be used by individuals and projects in evaluating interviews? Such criteria might include (a) the amount of information readily available elsewhere in usable form, (b) the number of opinions expressed by interviewees whose views are of no greater consequence than the views of any other "average" member of the American democracy, (c) the amount of repetition in the interview, and (d) the degree of exaggeration contained in the interviewee's accounts of most incidents.

**The "Efficiency" Approach.** Is payment of an hourly fee for interviewing or transcribing less expensive than having salaried employees? Is it feasible to reduce the cost per hour of interview tape by assigning significant non-oral history duties to the interviewer? Are either tape indexing or oral history registers feasible answers to the problem of high transcribing costs?

Archivists already involved with oral history, and those planning to be, should examine their programs and ask themselves these questions. The answers should help them to assess their efforts and to introduce reforms, which will mean the greater utility and reliability of oral history.