# Oral History and the Archives

RONALD L. FILIPPELLI

THERE HAS BEEN A GREAT DEAL OF TALK about the role of oral history in archival programs. What is oral history? Who should do it? Where does it belong in the organization of an archives? Is it worth the cost? These are just a few of the questions raised, and they, along with many others, have been posed by the Committee on Oral History of our own Society, in their report in the *American Archivist* of July 1973.

Wisely, the committee chose to formalize matters by questioning professional archivists in a manner designed to broaden the debate and bring into it on a larger scale those most likely to be affected by the burgeoning interest and activity in oral history. Heretofore, our brothers in the historical profession have dominated the arena with their thunderings over the evidential value of the product of the oral history process. Although this controversy still limps along, somewhat muted, the tremendous increase in oral history programs and practitioners renders the whole thing somewhat academic. For archivists there are more concrete problems associated with what can no longer be considered a fad. In the spirit of the committee's call to debate, I wish to take this opportunity to respond directly to some of the major points raised in the report.

As an archivist who has participated actively in an oral history program and who presently is responsible for administering the results of that program, I must confess to some bewilderment over the intensity of the debate. What indeed is all the fuss about? It seems to me that while oral history requires some modifications of standard archival management, it is simply another kind of material to administer along with manuscripts, photographs, tapes, films, prints, cartographical materials, and who knows what else. Indeed, oral history is easier to deal with than many of the others. In transcript form it does not differ significantly from other forms of documentation in the care it requires from archivists. But since it is new and archivists are by nature somewhat nervous with things new, we need, I think, to reassure ourselves. Let me strive to reduce the mountain, if not to a mole hill then at least to a rolling hill.

Constantly arising is the question of just who should do oral history. Well, the obvious answer seems to me to be that he does it who is qualified. But that would be too simple. The real question is whether or not there are enough technical and theoretical considerations in the process of oral history to warrant establishing a profession of "oral historians." Basing my argument simply on the number of marginal professions now inundating us, I would say a resounding no. More seriously however, I would answer that oral history is best viewed as one of a variety of methods used by those involved in the collection and preservation of historically valuable material; and I would add only the proviso that one doing oral history should first

The author is archivist of the Historical Collections and Labor Archives at Pennsylvania State University. This article is based on a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Philadelphia on September 30, 1975.

learn interviewing skills and develop manual dexterity. Since archivists are a major, but not the only group involved in the matter, they should, of course, be involved in the collecting of oral history—or oral archives, as my colleague, Alice Hoffman, prefers to call it. But what is critical to archivists in the oral history process is not archival expertise but, rather, subject expertise. An archivist does not have to know much about the operation of an automobile company to know that the minutes of the company's Executive Board are a valuable source and should be preserved. However, he had better know something about automotive engineering if he wants to do an intelligent interview of an automotive engineer on the development of the internal combustion engine. Let me say this in another way. If a historical building is to be torn down, good archival sense demands a photographic record of the structure before it goes. Now, of course, whoever does the photography will need to know such things as how to operate the camera, what film to use, and the proper exposure. These can easily be learned. But what cannot be learned so easily is whether or not the building is historically or architecturally significant, what details are most important, what views are most useful for future study, and other such matters that only the architectural historian is likely to know. The archivist's job is to know what buildings are coming down and who is qualified to take on the historical assessment. If, of course, the archivist happens to be an architect also, he can do it in good conscience himself. The point is that subject expertise demands the emphasis in oral history.

It has been my experience that a researcher who knows his subject can immediately spot the quality differences between an interview performed by someone with real subject competence and one done by someone who has just boned up on a few secondary sources. If this is the case, who can possess the catholicity of knowledge required? If we refer to a great-man type of oral history program, then the answer is clearly: no one. The administrator of such a program, in addition to being familiar with the process of oral history, must be an organizer and rely on outside expertise from a variety of disciplines. But I do not believe that the typical archival institution should take on the great-man approach. For most of us the thematic, or project, approach makes more sense. The project, of course, should dovetail with all formats of the collecting thrust of the archives, thereby providing the greatest likelihood of the merger of archival sense and subject expertise.

In asking who should do oral history, we are led to the question of the place of an oral history program in an archival operation. Should it be a separate office with no administrative tie to the archives? Once again, common sense must prevail. There is no best place for the office. In our case, the oral history program developed from the university's Department of Labor Studies as a result of the energy and talent of Alice Hoffman. It would have been folly to have moved it to the administrative control of the archives. Hoffman's work as a labor educator, the contacts she develops in the course of that work, her credibility with the labor movement, are invaluable to the success of the oral history program. Since we are a labor archives and our oral history project is labor oriented, the Department of Labor Studies is the proper place for it to be. One can envision arrangements of this kind between archives and departments of history, anthropology, agriculture, or whatever. The key to the archival success of such an operation depends not on where administrative control lies but on the kind of coordination and cooperation taking place between the program and the project. An added advantage of an arrangement of this kind is that funding and staffing are the responsibilities of the department. When and if the pro-

ject ends, the archivist is spared the pain of having to distribute pink slips to a portion of his staff.

But what if no such interdepartmental arrangements are possible and the development of an oral history project depends entirely upon the initiative of the archivist? In that case I would recommend the following: The oral history project should be administered separately with its own director and its own support staff, by which I mean at least one very good typist. General secretarial assistance can be shared. The budget should be carefully laid out and given a separate line to be administered by the oral history coordinator. The coordinator should be an archivist, but this is secondary to the subject expertise he or she brings to the job. Such matters as the process of collecting, identifying interviewees, transcribing, editing, and securing permissions and releases should be handled entirely by the oral history office and separated from the routine administration of the research use of the transcripts. This is not to say that the project director should not be required to act as an expert source for researchers using the transcripts, only that the collecting function be separated from the service function. I recommend this course for several reasons. Oral history is time consuming. A serious program cannot be run out of the archivist's hip pocket. It can easily take as long to prepare, carry out, and shepherd one interview through its many stages as it does to bring in several collections of other kinds. The process is intricate and requires constant administrative attention. Depending on the size and scope of the project it may be possible to assign other duties to the oral history coordinator, but it should be understood that they are secondary to his main responsibilities.

Of course, oral history will go on no matter how much we archivists try to rationalize and order the process. At least I hope it will. Much of it will be done outside any formal project organization. It will often come to an archives after the fact, as a result of some historian's research project. This is fine, and at that point the material should be evaluated like any other accession, with an eye toward its relative importance and its fit in the archival program. More often than not it will come with no such things as releases or conditions. This, of course, poses some problems, but none that we are not used to. After all, our archives are full of material accumulated over the years with unkown literary rights, provenance, etc.

We touch somewhat on the question of whether or not oral history can stand alone. In other words, although the ideal is to complement it with manuscript collections, should we collect it if it is all we are likely to get? My answer to this is a conditional yes. The availability of the occasional great man should not, of course, be passed up. But, for a guide in this kind of situation, we should simply fall back on what we do in other, more familiar, circumstances. Who among us is able to reject the single diary which comes our way, even when there is no chance of ever adding anything to it and even when it will plague us for years because we cannot figure any comfortable way to integrate it into our system? It is not big enough for NUCMC and not significant enough to report to a journal. Why should the odd oral history interview be any different?

Once the transcript is in the archives, the archivist's problems in preserving and servicing oral histories do not differ significantly from those encountered with other formats. As the SAA committee correctly observed, users of oral history, like Gaul, can be divided into three parts: 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. As I am sure you have noticed, these are the same three divisions which characterize the users of any archival material. The problems their different needs present are ones we have been wrestling with as a profession for many years. How do we let scholars know what we have? In all our handwringing I think we overlook the fact that we do a pretty good job already.

I believe that there are a variety of effective ways to inform the scholarly community of our holdings. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, news notes in the appropriate scholarly journals, and occasional publication of a catalog of holdings all can be used effectively. The problem is, in my opinion, less the fault of inadequacy of channels than the laxness often evident among archivists in reporting what they have quickly and in the right places. It is much easier, for example, for a scholar to find out what holdings our archives has than it is for him to discover that our special collections division possesses one of the great book collections of utopian literature. In any event, Hamer is being updated and that should help.

For the researcher trying to find the individual interview within a collection, the problem does not seem to me to be any more difficult than trying to find the individual collection within the record group. In our case, a query about the extent of our holdings on the United Steelworkers of America will be answered with a mimeographed listing of our manuscript holdings as well as a listing, with brief summaries of each interview, of our oral history interviews. The availability of these lists, along with others in special areas of our collection, is announced to the scholarly community through the appropriate journals.

A different problem is posed by the query that asks what information we have in our oral history collection dealing with a particular person or subject. For this we should provide for each interview a detailed subject and name index as well as a summary of the major emphases of the interview. So, for example, if a scholar wants to know whether or not our interviews contain information about the 1959 steel strike, we could make a quick review of our indexes and summaries and tell him which interviews are pertinent to his topic, as well as which ones give it more than cursory attention. The index and summary of an interview are analogous to the scope notes of a manuscript collection. The preparation of them is an archival function which should, of course, be done by someone with knowledge of the subject. This is not a new problem for archivists. Preparation of the index is simple, but to so describe the interview as to tell the potential user whether or not it is significant enough for him to journey to see it is the kind of activity enabling us to call ourselves professionals. Of course a combined index of all the interviews in a given project is an excellent tool, but of necessity it must be delayed until the completion of the project.

Once we have provided reasonably good access to information about what we have, the larger problem of dissemination confronts us. Are there legitimate reasons why projects should not provide copies of open transcripts through interlibrary loan procedures? While recognizing the possible impact of open distribution on the character of the interview, I think that the aim should always be for the widest possible accessibility. Experience shows that most interviewees are willing to allow open access to their memoirs, as long as permission to quote is reserved to them. Certainly if interviews are loaned, the borrower should be made aware in advance of any restrictions or conditions, and should return a signed statement to the effect that he agrees to them. I recommend that loaned copies be administered through the special

collections divisions of the receiving libraries. These divisions are accustomed to the special conditions associated with the use of rare books and manuscripts and are less likely to neglect to inform the reader of his or her responsibility, thereby reducing the possibility of secondary photocopying of the interview.

I believe also that the marketing of transcripts should be expanded, but only for transcripts for which the literary rights are clearly in the hands of the marketing institution. Since oral history is expensive, the marketing of transcripts is one way to recoup some of the costs and make the projects more feasible. One problem with this is that the potential buyer has no way to determine the quality of the interview or its applicability to his or her interests. I fail to see why review copies could not be supplied to the appropriate scholarly journals.

The cost of oral history also raises a variety of other questions for the archives contemplating undertaking a project. Because of the cost, $75 to $200 per interview, I do not believe that oral history is for everyone. As I indicated earlier, if oral history is to be done, it should be undertaken with the full knowledge that it will become a major part of the archival program, with special staff and support services. Anything less will result in a slipshod program—the money might better be used for putting your existing backlog in shape. I am talking about the project approach here. There is no argument against keeping a tape recorder handy so that the archivist can pick up random interviews with local notables.

When should an archives undertake a serious commitment to oral history? In my opinion, only when two conditions are present. The first condition is available money. To me this means outside money, whether from foundations, corporations, unions, professional societies, or any other source. The second condition is the presence of physical documentation. The type of project you need should grow organically from the kind of holdings you already have or anticipate. The records and the interviews will reinforce each other, both providing keys to the other, turning up leads, suggesting new approaches to organization, and helping in other ways in the collecting of the other.

Related to the matter of cost, I suggest that more effort be devoted to cooperation among institutions in the carrying out of oral history. A variety of institutions already have excellent, experienced, oral history operations which could be used to carry out projects for other institutions on a contract basis. Two institutions could pool their resources to carry out a project of mutual interest, both sharing the costs and results. It seems to me a waste that experienced oral history operations, with no current projects, are in danger of going out of business while other institutions are incurring unnecessary costs in starting up their own projects.