

Shorter Features

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The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to: Michael J. Sullivan, Department Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives Building, Washington, DC 20408.

Augmenting Manuscript Collections Through Oral History

IRENE CORTINOVIS

THE ADVENT OF THE TAPE RECORDER and the development of oral history as a historiographic technique have enabled the archivist to augment manuscript collections in depth. The histories of labor, women, minorities, immigration, health care, neighborhood revival, and other subjects are being developed in large part by the oral history method, supplemented by sometimes scanty documentation.

A major labor oral history project is currently being directed by Alice M. Hoffman, a pioneer in the field, under a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant to the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. To supplement the written records already in the center's holdings, she and other historians will interview more than fifty union leaders who played key roles in the 1955 merger of the AFL

with the CIO. "Much of the valuable information about the movement," Hoffman said, "has not been recorded in print because of the continued involvement of labor union leaders in action rather than in recording their activities. Existing printed records can be dramatically enriched by oral history resources."

Another NEH grant enabled Constance A. Myers to direct a team of oral historians at the International Women's Year (IWY) national conference in Houston in 1977. The 240 hours of taped interviews have been deposited at the National Archives and should be of enormous interest to scholars of social history because the tapes reflect the views and experiences of a broad spectrum of people who attended the conference. This information is very different from the official IWY National

Commission files which are also deposited at the National Archives.

Archivists at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection—St. Louis are enthusiastic about the process of augmenting manuscript collections through oral history. One of their earliest ventures in combining manuscript collection and oral history began in 1975 when they received the papers of the League of Women Voters, dating from 1919. The archivists discovered during the processing of the collections that the league papers also contain the minutes of meetings of the Missouri Equal Suffrage Association from 1911 to 1919, because the same women were involved in both organizations.

Interviews with the veterans of these organizations yielded valuable information. Archivists learned about the motivations, attitudes, and personalities of the early leaders and the reactions of their families to suffrage and league work. The Missouri Democratic and Republican parties were downright hostile and suspicious of the avowedly nonpartisan and educational intentions of the league. Unfortunately, the St. Louis league confirmed the politicians' worst expectations by carrying out a partisan campaign to oust three elected judges. The resulting negative publicity caused the women to take their nonpartisan charter more seriously. Those interviewed agreed that this foray into partisanship was a major set-back to the progress of the league in its early years and believed that they had needlessly hampered their own work. The manuscripts disclosed none of this information. There is simply no substitute for the information that can be provided by those who were personally involved in events. The first president of the St. Louis league made this delicate comment about Avis Carlson's 1959 history of the league: "Mrs. Carlson came after me. She wrote a book, a very nice book. There were some parts of it I didn't exactly understand, but after all she wasn't there."

The most unusual oral history project carried out at the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis was one combined with the relatively new field of photo history. Although photographs con-

tain a wealth of historical information, they can be interpreted with validity only by informed analysis. An oral history project constructed around a group of photographs taught the archivists that things are not always as they seem, even in black and white.

As part of a large collection of personal papers of an early twentieth-century social reformer, the repository received about 500 photographs taken between 1920 and 1940. Every time the reformer went to a peace demonstration, a march of the unemployed, or a strike, he took photographs. However, most of the pictures were unidentified. During the cataloging process a manuscript assistant became particularly interested in some dramatic photographs of a strike in the garment manufacturing industry of St. Louis in 1933. In the pictures hundreds of strikers and policemen milled about, and the strikers were being loaded into paddy wagons by the police. In one photo a woman striker leaned against a building, sobbing, her coat torn. A large, uniformed policeman towered over her, his nightstick held high. Tucked in between two prints nearby was a clipping from a daily newspaper in which the police denied charges of brutality.

An archivist and a graduate student launched a search for the strikers and, through some very good detective work and with the help of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, they found many of the strikers. They arranged for interviews and used the photographs to awaken memories, not only of the strike but also of the total work-experience in the garment industry. They photographed the elderly workers as they talked, and the new and old photographs were later combined in a stunning photo exhibition with quotes from the oral histories used for captions.

Now, remember the sobbing striker with the torn coat and the menacing policeman? One of the interviewees looked at this photograph and chided the interviewer for not recognizing a scab a little worse off for being one. "Six of us would get around her, and she wouldn't go nowhere with us pushing her. And we'd get around the

corner of the building, and we'd get her up against the wall and tell her she should join the union."

Another type of oral history project is currently being conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, a Roman Catholic teaching and nursing order. Their archivist, Sr. Dolorita Mary Dougherty, conceived the project. Currently, the congregation is probing deeply into the history of their order with the express purpose of augmenting their archives. Although religious orders generally have splendid archives, research for the written history of these nuns turned up large gaps, especially about the sisters themselves. The roots of these omissions lie in the nature of religious life prior to Vatican II. Until then, a woman who joined a religious community was to put her past behind her and submerge herself in her new role. Once given her new name in religion, her family name was almost never used.

This oral history project is producing names, dates, and other facts which the sis-

ters could not have obtained in any other way. Their next project will seek to recapture attitudes and feelings, with the main focus on the vast changes in religious life promulgated by Vatican II.

What did it mean, to already professed sisters, now to choose their careers, to change their dress, to live outside convents, to keep their own hours? During the 1960s many women of all ages left their congregations. What are the feelings of those who stayed? Why did they stay? What did they think of close friends and colleagues who left? What is the relationship of all this to the worldwide women's movement of the sixties?

These are just a few examples of the possible ways contemporary oral history can enhance a manuscript collection or archives. One interview, or a project which is carefully planned and based on a thorough knowledge of the available papers, can complete a collection in a unique way.

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Customizing a Finding Aid System

MICHAEL B. BALLARD

DURING THE PAST YEAR the Western Carolina University Archives and Special Collections Department adapted the finding aid system devised by University of Washington Archivist Richard C. Berner. Before, the only finding aids available were accession forms and shelf lists.

Compounding the problem of minimal and inadequate processing was the presence of a large backlog of unprocessed collections many of which had no accession record. Further, with the aid of an NHPRC grant, the department's holdings doubled from June 1978 to June 1979 to a total of over 300,000 items.

Before implementing the finding aid system, each collection was given an accession record to provide control over the location and current stage of processing of the collections on hand as well as those received during the grant period.

With a staff of only one full-time archivist, one full-time clerical assistant, and a fluctuating number of student assistants, usually a minimum of two or a maximum of four, it was necessary to modify the Berner system. To make any headway against the large backlog and the influx of new materials, the assistant and students would have to process collections completely.

The Berner system has been described in detail elsewhere, so only its distinguishing features will be mentioned here. Berner's can be defined as "a single integrated finding aid system." Inventories are indexed by posting the accession names and numbers on loose-leaf sheets in rectangular boxes, rather than by cataloging manuscripts in the traditional manner involving 3×5 cards. At the top of each sheet is the name or subject relating to the posted collection. Thus, a researcher looking up a specific name or general subject would find all relative collections listed. From these cumulative indexes, he would then refer to the inventory/guide for more information.

Any archival facility which has already heavily invested its staff time and money in traditional card catalog systems would probably not find it feasible to install Berner's system; but this was not the case at Western Carolina.

The initial step in adapting the system was to establish an inventory/guide form containing the accession name and number, collection size, history of the collection, the collection's content and scope (which includes biographical information and series arrangement and description), shelf list, bibliography, and index. This form was easily adapted to pre-grant collections, for which the only detailed finding aids had been shelf lists.

The key to the Berner system is the cumulative index element. Three indexes are involved: name, subject, and chronology. For the department's purposes it was decided to combine the name and subject indexes into a book-type index for each inventory. Strictly speaking, this departs from

the loose-leaf method of Berner, but we thought the nature of our collections justified the adaptation. Most archivists would agree that even for a staff of trained professionals, creating subject indexes provides many headaches. Given our small staff, the problem might have proved especially troublesome. Rather than wrestle with subject headings and sub-headings, e.g., War-Civil War-Western North Carolina, an entry would be inserted in the combined index as Civil War-Western North Carolina.

Instead of posting the index information as in the Berner system, we decided to accumulate the inventory indexes with the appropriate accession number beside each entry. The cumulative list will be computerized; thus, as in the Berner method, there will be no card-catalog index. New printouts will be made periodically as new collections are processed. A researcher using the printout will copy the numbers by the name or subject of interest, then check the front of the printout for a typed list of collections arranged in accession number order. Each collection name and number is followed by a summary in the manner of the main entry card in traditional cataloging. This arrangement is based on the format of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. From the summaries, the researcher would then proceed to the inventory/guide for detailed information.

Our adaptation of the Berner system is working well. The system as adapted seems to be making the best use of staff time and abilities. Beyond benefitting the staff, the real beneficiaries are the department's patrons.

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