

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.

Oral History in American Business Archives

GARY D. SARETZKY

"... for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself. . . ." Sherlock Holmes*

BELL'S TELEPHONE accelerated the pace of business, but has had the unfortunate side effect of reducing the comprehensive documentation of business communications. Recollections and reflections cannot replace original documentation, but they can supply vital information otherwise unavailable, and add a personal dimension to archival records.

Oral history is the spoken word as document, and may be rendered in several media including audiotape, videotape, and transcripts. Each medium has unique communicative characteristics that make it more valuable for some purposes than for others. Transcripts cannot replace tape, just as tape cannot replace the experience of being in the room with the narrator.

*"The Red-headed League," in *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, from *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., n.d.), p. 176.

On tape, the sound of the voice conveys a gestalt that is absent from transcripts; and pictures of the narrator, whether still (photographic), sequential (cinematic), or continuous (video), provide other insights.

Some facts may be more readily gleaned from transcripts than from tape because the written word exists in the time frame of the reader who can stop at any point and focus on word or phrase. Also, the transcript reader may scan the document at varying rates of speed. But, while they find transcripts easy to use, researchers gain maximum comprehension by examining as many media as are available. For this reason, most contemporary oral history programs preserve all materials.

Interest in business oral history projects has grown with the awakening concern of corporations with their own histories. One indication of this positive development is that, since 1959, the number of American business archives has doubled to about 200, still, however, a minuscule proportion of the potential. In 1979, Theresa McHugh Palmersheim, graduate student at the American University, found that only one-fifth of the 500 largest corporations had an archives. Of fifty-five responding to her questionnaire, twenty indicated the inclusion of oral histories. This proportion is consistent with my 1975 survey (*American Archivist* 40, no. 4 [October 1977]: 413-19) which also found that business archives directed by archivists were much more likely to include oral histories than those directed by librarians or records managers.

Twenty-five years ago, most business oral history projects were conducted by universities, with expenses underwritten by industry. Columbia University, for example, which pioneered oral history in the United States in 1948, carried out many interviews in the 1950s for Weyerhaeuser Timber Company, Federated Department Stores, McGraw-Hill Book Company, and the oil industry. Larger than any of these was the oil industry project of the University of Texas Archives, which obtained 218 interviews between 1952 and 1958.

The earliest Columbia interviews were considered a shortcut to a narrator's written memoir based on the tape, which was not retained. The final transcript contained but little evidence that it derived from an interview, since the interviewer's questions and comments were eliminated. However, just as the qualities of photography were eventually seen to be different from those of painting, so too has oral history practice matured with the realization that original tapes have more evidentiary value than edited transcripts. Consequently, the oral history product has evolved toward interrelated tapes, verbatim and edited transcripts, pictorial images, indexes, and supportive documentation, all necessary for the historian's evaluation of such factors as interviewer influence and narrator credibility.

The first large-scale oral history project conducted within a corporation should be considered in this historical context. The Ford Motor Company, in the 1950s and 1960s, carried out 400 interviews with a project staff trained by Columbia. The intent was to document both Henry Ford and his business, and narrators ranged from members of the Ford family to assembly line workers. Each extensively edited transcript was bound, with photograph, autograph, and index. Although some may regret the destruction of the tapes, there is no question that this was an impressive achievement.

Unlike the Ford project, carried out under the direction of its archives, several other corporations are engaged in programs in which the primary role of the archives is to preserve the products of oral history and make them available for use. Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) has conducted more than 100 interviews with high-level personnel since 1978, as preparation for an official history. The ARCO special-project staff are advised by oral-history expert Enid Douglas of Claremont College, which will receive copies of the edited transcripts while the ARCO Archives will retain the complete set of materials. An unusual feature of this project is the interview of one person by a small group.

At Sears, Roebuck and Company, Diana Seidel, of the Personnel Research Department, has conducted more than 300 interviews of retirees who began working for the company before 1930. The tapes and transcripts, which are not edited, are kept in the Sears Archives.

Other firms are contracting oral history out. Columbia University, for instance, is doing an oral history for Donovan, Leisure, Newton & Irvine, a New York law firm. At the request of Kaiser Aluminum, Mimi Stein, of Oral History Associates, San Francisco, conducted twenty-nine interviews which she used with other materials to write a corporate history.

The programs mentioned above were designed to be of limited scope and duration. In contrast, business archivists conduct projects that are more open-ended and a normal feature of ongoing work. The Weyerhaeuser Archives, possibly the longest continuously active in oral history, has completed more than 160 interviews since 1974. Some other firms with active archives include Chase Manhattan Bank, Coca-Cola, Corning Glass Works, Walt Disney Productions, and Educational Testing Service (ETS), each with interesting features. ETS, for example, has cut costs in producing edited transcripts by using computerized word-processing equipment; and it foresees computerized key-word indexing of transcripts. Corning is using videotape for its international program of interviews with retired employees. Coca-Cola is collecting oral histories from its franchised bottling com-

panies as well as from the parent corporation.

While each business oral history program is unique, all have the same primary objective: to help the company. Not surprisingly, at most organizations involved, the use of tapes and verbatim transcripts is, for the present and short term, usually restricted to company personnel; while edited transcripts are often made available to visitors. Business archivists are, however, aware of their responsibility for the long-term preservation of the tapes so that future researchers can have the remarkable experience of hearing the voices of long-departed narrators. It should be noted also that business archivists are preserving recordings of conferences, internal meetings, and interviews conducted for other purposes; but this practice is outside the scope of this report.

Over the past quarter century, enlightened American corporations have enriched their archives with oral histories. Some firms have concentrated their efforts on retired employees, reasoning that the older generation should be recorded first; others have included current staff members in order to obtain impressions while memories of events are fresh. A number of projects have been limited to managers and officers, on the assumption that the most influential should receive the most attention; others have included all levels to counteract a paucity of worker viewpoints in the written record. Whatever the particular program design, each contributes to the company's historical resources and, in the larger context, to the history of American economic life.

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Collection Processing as a Team Effort

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ARCHIVAL LITERATURE, from the pages of professional journals through the standard publications such as those of Schellenberg, Kane, Duckett, and Gracy, contains studies of all aspects of archival administration. From this literature, those approaching collection arrangement for the first time can find guidance; and SAA, the National Archives, and some regional archival organizations conduct basic workshops in which new members of the profession may learn the fundamentals of processing.

By and large, the professional literature and the many workshops all approach collection arrangement and description as a solitary activity, and, for the most part, it is just that. An archivist, working alone, accessions an incoming collection and works with it through various stages until it is ready for use by researchers. This traditional approach is typical of archival practice in archives large and small; and it makes sense in terms of the continuity and intellectual integrity required. However, from an administrative viewpoint, the single-archivist approach to collection processing may not always be the most efficient or economical utilization of the available archival resources.

At the Archives of Appalachia, we have been experimenting with a team approach to collection processing, along with the more traditional one. In comparing the two approaches, we sought to determine how best to employ clerical, para-professional, and professional personnel; which approach suited our need to process collections as promptly as possible; and which approach resulted in the best collection processing. Our full-time professional staff includes a director, a head processor, an office manager/reader services librarian, and a special subjects bibliographer responsible for our book and periodical

collections. The director and the head processor do some work with collections, but much of the actual arrangement and description is done by graduate assistants, student workers, and volunteers. In this respect, the Archives of Appalachia is similar to other small and medium-size archives. Before we began our experiment, we allowed only graduate students to process collections and then only upon completing a full semester training program under the archives director. It was not cost effective to train student workers because they were never with us long enough to provide a return on the time invested in their instruction. Instead, they were assigned more routine tasks, such as xeroxing, typing, and filing.

However, as the Archives began to receive large collections, including the papers of the presidents of East Tennessee State University (our parent institution), the Clinchfield Railroad, and Magnet Hosiery Mills, we discovered that our flexibility in staff assignments was significantly curtailed as each processor labored exclusively over his or her large collection. To a certain extent this situation was unavoidable; our personnel resources were limited. Yet, we recognized that certain aspects of collection arrangement and description are highly repetitive. It seemed to us that we might employ our student workers as assistants to the processors, thereby freeing the latter for more important professional responsibilities. For control in this experimental effort, we continued to process the university's presidential archives in a traditional manner. A single archivist worked on each of these record groups from start to finish. The ETSU presidential collections ranged in size from 18.5 to 55.5 linear feet and took from five to nine months each to process.

The Magnet Mills, the Congress for Appalachian Development, and the

Clinchfield Railroad collections, by contrast, were larger and not nearly as well organized. In addition, these archives required more attention. Many documents needed separate cleaning and flattening; still others were treated for mold or insect infestation. For the arrangement and description problems posed in these three collections, we chose a team approach. First, the Archives director met with the one or two graduate students who supervised each collection processing team. During these discussions, the director reviewed the research potential of the collection in question, the types of documents it contained, their condition and hence the problems that the processing team might face, and the nature and scope of the finding aid to come out of the team effort. The graduate students then inventoried their respective collections and established series and subseries designations. With guidance from the director, they placed the archives in order according to the principle of provenance. In completing this fundamental step in arrangement, they ascertained the extent of special conservation treatment required for their collections. Also, they developed a fuller appreciation of the collection contents and how to structure the finding aids to reflect these contents.

Each graduate student operated as a work coordinator for one or more student assistants. The student workers were assigned specific tasks, such as removing staples and paper clips or flattening and cleaning documents, tasks easily mastered and requiring little subsequent supervision. When the graduate assistants had ensured that folder labels accurately described folder contents, the student workers prepared acid-free file folders with the same designations and, if appropriate, span dates. This left the supervisor free to develop content descriptors for the collection's finding aid. The supervisor was always available should questions arise, and occasionally he or she checked to see that the students did their work properly. Thus, the intellectual aspects of arrangement and description remained in the hands of those trained in these pro-

cedures while the time-consuming, routine, but essential maintenance aspects of the work were accomplished by the relatively unskilled. Thus the archives realized the most economical utilization of its personnel.

The results of the experiment were gratifying. All three experimental collections were processed expeditiously without any sacrifice in the quality of either arrangement or description. Whereas a single archivist working alone processed the presidential archival collections at the rate of about 4.8 linear feet of finished materials per month, the team approach achieved a rate of about 14.4 linear feet per month. Admittedly, more people worked on the Magnet Mills, CAD, and Clinchfield collections than had worked on the ETSU presidential collections. However, the former records arrived at the Archives in disarray, and therefore required considerable reconstruction. Furthermore, there were greater difficulties in both the physical condition and the conservation of these papers. In other words, the processing teams, though faced with more difficult tasks, performed them quickly and economically.

The use of student workers allowed the professionally trained staff to devote their energies to other aspects of the Archives program, such as reference services, archival outreach, and collection development. But the experiment yielded other benefits as well. Researchers obtained prompt access to processed materials with no apparent loss in the quality of their respective finding aids. Indeed, graduate students working in tandem created more readable and better indexed collection guides than they had hitherto produced individually. The team approach also improved staff morale in that the professional and para-professional staff enjoyed working together. The student workers came into closer contact with archival procedures and developed a fuller appreciation of the operation of an archives; the graduate students and the full-time professional staff were freed from some of their less creative responsibilities and

able to spend more time working with researchers.

In the future, the Archives of Appalachia will employ both the individual and the team approach to collection processing. Small collections, and archives and manuscripts with special arrangement and description problems will continue as individual efforts. However, the team approach has clearly demonstrated its value in dealing with large organizational

collections. Other archives faced with fixed or shrinking professional staff, and the constant flow of collections into their institutions, might be well served by our example. Student workers or conscientious volunteers can perform useful functions at little or no additional cost to the archives. If the professional staff provides the supervision, a team approach to processing will result in the prompt release of collections and their descriptive tools for use by researchers.

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