

# What Happens to the Oral History You Create?

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Where would the discipline of History, particularly Social History, be today without the use of oral history methodology? The interviewing of informants/interviewees to accumulate raw materials for the writing of history has made for a more democratically documented society, especially since the invention of recording equipment around World War II. When all people see themselves and their roles in society, young and old, rich and poor, formally educated and the self-taught, reflected in the histories of the day, they feel a greater sense of pride in being part of the shaping of our country and their place in its history.

Through this inaugural electronic issue of *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, it is hoped that my article will encourage those of you who create oral history records to think about preserving your audio/video/digital records in an archival repository.<sup>1</sup> Before writing another sentence, it ought to be acknowledged that the costs of carrying out oral history projects, in general, and the steps required in an archives to make them available to the research public, in particular, are very high! Also, I would venture to add that archival repositories are chronically underfunded for the worthwhile services they provide to all our citizens. We need more support from all government levels, private industry and creator organizations to be able to continue to hire more well-trained staff to ensure the timely processing of many back-logged acquisitions, in order that they may be made available to researchers. Once a repository's administrative needs are met (i.e. adequate funding), the same universal archival principles apply to oral history documents as do to other media types – the principles of appraisal, acquisition, selection, arrangement, preservation and description, i.e. making records from a variety of creators available to the research public. These records include textual records, documentary art, photographs, maps, plans, drawings, illustrations, moving images and, especially these days, electronic records. The actions performed by an archives on the oral history records therein preserved (rather than serving a single purpose and gathering dust in their creator's basement) will provide a more democratic archives. By including oral history as an integral part of its multiple media 'pool' from which historians may draw in the writing of Canada's history, an archives fulfills a more democratic function for society.

Social historians must rely heavily on interviews to obtain information

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<sup>1</sup> My paper does not focus on the great work being done in many archival repositories in Canada on capturing and preserving the oral traditions of its Aboriginal Peoples.

about the lives and work experiences of those who may not have accumulated written evidence during their lifetimes. Oral history's strength is how it is able to shed light into places and illuminate people who have hitherto remained in the dark. If your family members worked their whole lives as labourers in one type of heavy industry or another, the only information on their contributions to their communities may come to light if they are interviewed by a journalist covering a specific event, such as a tragic mine accident,<sup>2</sup> or a broadcaster preparing a radio or television program, or an historian collecting information for a book, or a community researching its social history, or a grandchild doing a project for a 'show and tell' day at school for which his/her grandparents willingly become the featured informants. The chances are very good that in some of these situations these audio/video/digital records will not be preserved for the long term. Would it not be a much better scenario if their voices survived in order to be listened to another day? For this to happen, however, the oral history would need to be preserved by their creators (i.e. not wiped from their formats in order to be reused) and eventually deposited in a public institution, i.e. a library, archives, or museum for long-term preservation. The possibility of being cited in another user's research, instead of being a single-use record, would honour the lives featured in such oral history documents.

The post World War II period has seen a steady growth in the creation of oral history documents in Canada, as well as around the world.<sup>3</sup> Oral history is most often seen as a tool of investigation and as a source of historiographical information. This technology has assisted university faculty members to carry out multi-disciplinary studies of interest to them, to publish books and articles, some of which put a private face on official history. Oral history methodology, more often than not, has been used by researchers, historical societies, and the public particularly to explore areas of social history, women's history, children's history, family history, labour history, homeland and ethnic history. Oral history documents add flesh to the bare bones of official documents, in the same way that private diaries do in complimenting the official records of political leaders.

While a lot has been written on the subject of oral history and archives, rarely has the literature dealt with the application of archival principles to the handling of oral history documents. Oral history documents have often been isolated from any evidence that they form part of the organic and natural activity of a person, organization, or institution. This reflects the historic practice of

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<sup>2</sup> The author grew up in the coal mining community of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia.

<sup>3</sup> A survey of archival practices carried out on oral history documents in Canada's National, Provincial and Territorial archives in 1984 and again in 1994 found an increase of over 16,500 hours of taped recollections acquired over the ten year period. See Wilma MacDonald, "Archival Theory and Oral History Documents," Master of Archival Studies thesis (Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 1995), Introduction, Table 1, page 2.

depositing only the end results, the *products* of oral history projects, in an archives, divorced from other record forms to which they relate. In 1995 after a period of research and study at the University of British Columbia, my Master's thesis<sup>4</sup> offered practical advice to sound archivists (i.e. professionals handling sound documents) on the inclusion of oral history documents as just another record format arriving in a repository – whether the oral history is appraised to be 'archival' in nature or merely a 'collection.' At the appraisal stage an archivist can distinguish oral history documents which form part of an *archival fonds* from those which are only a *collection*. An individual's archival *fonds* provides evidence of the day-to-day activity of their creator (juridical or personal) and may include oral history documents integrated with the other record forms created by the individual, organization, corporation or government department. The written documents with which the oral history documents are related may include a professor's in-coming and out-going correspondence, appointment diaries, course outlines, lecture notes and reference materials, research project files, manuscripts, reports, and so on.

A collection, on the other hand, does not provide evidence of the day-to-day activity of its/their creator(s) but is rather a quantity of taped interviews which may focus on a variety of subjects, created for the sake of posterity. Their value rests in their informational content alone – perhaps focusing on some central theme or subject matter. If the oral history documents are removed from their natural office of accumulation and are isolated as sources of information about the past, they are better treated as a collection. Different standards of appraisal apply to the two cases. Whether oral history documents are determined to have archival qualities *or* are merely a collection of interviews, archivists ought to ensure that accurate descriptions are carried out for retrieval and use of these documents by interested researchers.

The question of whether oral history documents ought to be acquired by archival institutions very much depends on the *policy* of the institution. A strict acquisition policy would welcome oral history documents which meet their archival criteria. A less strict policy would permit the acquisition of oral history documents as collections, with greater focus on making the contents available than on issues of provenance and archival theory. The value of certain documents alone does not make them archival, and the same is true for oral history documents.

More often than not, sound archivists have written articles from a preservation standpoint in dealing with oral history documents, with a view to *creating* and/or *using* oral history documents in museums, or for broadcasting purposes, or for filling in gaps in the written record, rather than from an archival standpoint. Archival theory provides a set of professional principles to guide the

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<sup>4</sup> "Archival Theory and Oral History Documents."

keepers of these materials through the appraisal, selection, acquisition, arrangement and description processes.

Archivists ought to treat oral history documents like any other archival record. There is no reason why archival institutions cannot continue to preserve oral history materials, but as a matter of principle the archival quality of the documents, where it exists, should be preserved. Much more work needs to be done, for instance, in such areas as copyright, access to information, and privacy legislation related to oral history documents; conservation issues; and what role archivists may play in ensuring the creators of oral history documents preserve their original, unedited interviews as part of their archival fonds - even when summaries and transcripts may be available (the latter favoured by users because they can flip through them quicker than one can listen to a tape with the added value of speech patterns, accents and emotion).

Archives must determine in their acquisition policy whether they will acquire collections or restrict themselves to those oral history documents which happen to be part of the fonds they acquire. In other cases, whether as a fonds or as a collection, a different approach to arrangement and description is needed, but the results in terms of access to content is not appreciably different. A single approach is not viable. Everything depends on the circumstances of creation, on context, on custody, and on the acquisition policy of the institution.

Perhaps it would be a timely exercise (albeit a labour intensive one) to carry out another survey of today's creators of oral history documents in order to learn how they are handling their raw, unedited data. Are they ensuring its preservation for eventual transfer to a repository, along with their other records? We need to preserve more voices telling more stories about our past in order to see ourselves reflected in our archives.