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CLSC 646: Archival Management
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ARCHIVES AND ORAL HISTORY: A SITE VISIT

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For this assignment, I have chosen a non-profit organization, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST), and its archived holdings, the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program. The archive holds over 2000 completed oral history interviews of federal government employees (and their spouses) assigned at some point in their careers to diplomatic posts overseas. There are some 600 interviews in the pipeline at various stages of transcription and review. Over 1700 of the interviews are also housed at a Library of Congress website and updated every two years. I visited the ADST headquarters in Arlington, VA on Monday, October 2, 2017. I will do a survey of some of the literature on archives and oral histories and will conclude a description of my site visit.

Fogerty's article, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives," provides an excellent background for justifying the existence of oral histories, both in the field and study of history and in the archive. Acknowledging that oral history "inherits" the weakness that people and even (perhaps especially) scholars attribute to human memory, Fogerty cites well known professional historians who discount the oral history practice (Fogerty 1983, 149). But with similar logic, he points out that the basis of accepted historical sources, i.e., diaries, letters, memoirs, etc., carry with them the same fundamental flaws as oral history interview material are criticized for, their inherent subjectivity. As a compromise, Fogerty proposes a "blending" of archival research sources with oral history material to complete the picture, a total fabric as he refers to it, that add information that may be lost in and by traditional sources. With so much paper and so little usable information, the appraisal function may be the best opportunity to

weed out the information that is not useful to a collection and to identify what information is missing and can be supplemented by oral sources (Fogerty 1983, 150).

Going beyond the idea of subjectivity of oral history sources, Fogerty brings up the question of authenticity of those same sources (Fogerty 1983, 154). More recent research, however, reveals that reliability should be distinguished from authenticity, the former being a measure of the degree of completeness of information and the degree of control of the procedure of information creation, and the latter being a verification that facts and records are what they purport to be, and that the two should be kept intellectually separate (Duranti 1995, 6-8). In fact, Duranti recommends that if archivists have to choose between the two, they should go with reliability. When appraising oral history collections or item-level submissions, one should consider the reliability of the material, not as a bar to submission, but certainly as a legitimate concern.

Figure 1 below begins with Barbara Sommer's five-step Oral History Life Cycle (Sommers 2015, 34). As described by Sommers, oral history starts with an idea, a concept. Often, the idea is some need that is not being met at present. Hugh Bancroft, for example, noticed that life stories of individuals and families who travelled to California in the mid-19th century were not being recorded, causing him to hire a group of assistants to go out and conduct interviews he called "Dictations" (Sharpless 2006, 20). These oral histories became the nucleus of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. Similarly, the Federal Writer's Project of the post- Great Depression Works Progress Administration saw a need to collect life histories of former enslaved populations who were still alive in the 1930's (Sharpless 2006, 22). The second stage, the plan, identifies the requirements for carrying out the idea and the third stage, the actual interview, begins the creation of the record. Stage four sees the editing and completion of the

transcript, the make-ready. Stage five makes the archived material accessible and user friendly.

Lightly superimposed on the five-step lifecycle model in Figure 1 is Willa Baum's three step model: creation, curation, and consuming. Less granular, perhaps, and more conceptual, perhaps, Baum makes the additional point that in the curating phase a librarian's presence is essential (Baum 1996, 323).

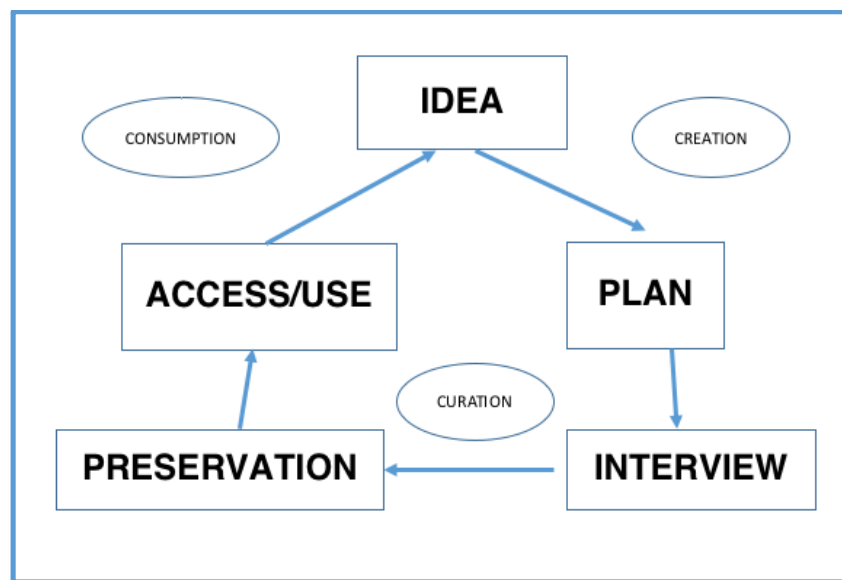


Figure 1. Lifecycle of an oral history.

Worthy of note in the earlier discussion about oral histories filling a gap in archives is the idea that oral histories can also speak for the inarticulate, overcoming the elitist bias that exists in most archival collections (Fogerty 1983, 155). Traditional records that end up in archives are the records of the people in charge, whether of government or business or culture. But an oral history can and often does focus on the non-elite of society, the workers, or marginalized groups like women, immigrant and refugee

families, racial minority group members, and the underprivileged whose voices might never be heard except for their oral history presence.

In a separate essay, "Oral History and Archives: Documenting Context," Fogerty addresses documentation of the context of oral history archives (Fogerty 2006, 207). In it, he offers useful tools for structuring oral histories to "fit" in archives environments and why that is important, including the need for provenance of the collection elements, documentation of the process of creation of the record or item, and transcripts of each interview, participants, etc. Much of oral history focuses on transcript text, but a file on each interviewee, along with any correspondence setting up the interview, the interviewee's photograph, a copy of the donor contract or release, and any background research material strengthens the material's provenance. Ideally, the file should contain the original interview tapes, the initial draft and first edit of the interview transcript, the final edit, of course, and increasingly in oral history collections, a video log or index of videotape that accompanies the interview (Fogerty 2006, 212-219).

Willa Baum, one of the great theoreticians and practitioners of the oral history movement, raises the following question in an essay, "The Expanding Role of the Librarian in Oral History" (Baum 1996, 321-340). They ask, of what use are oral history collections if they don't end up in libraries and archives where students and researchers can access and use them, where they can be displayed, advertised, and consumed? (Baum 1996, 326). There are additional considerations for the librarian/ archivist other than acquiring oral history collections and making them accessible and available for library members, questions, for example, of ownership if items are to be borrowed and/or reproduced, cataloguing and shelving issues for objects (tapes, photographs, papers) and sources, and even legal issues should material later be deemed to be slanderous or should material result in liability issues for damages to persons involved.

Additionally, what is the role of the librarian/ archivist in creating finding aids for material so it can be accessed, and in directing researchers to the effective use of archived oral history material? The question implies its own answer. The role of the librarian/ archivist is central and key, especially at the consumption and curation stages. Moreover, with respect to oral histories, one must also consider the role and contribution of both the interviewer and narrator to the creation stage.

Nesmith, in his essay, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," argues that "any type of archive-making is a type of authoring or creating of the archival record (Nesmith 2002, 32). The interviewee does not just "narrate" his life story or his experiences on a particular assignment. He, with the occasional prodding questions by the narrator, actually creates the historical record, particularly in those cases where there is no "official" record to provide as an archive source. Nesmith continues, "The idea that archives play an authoring role is based on the view that a record is a meaningful communication, which means it is a physical object, plus an understanding or representation of that object (Nesmith 2002, 32)." Oral history transcripts, and even the recording itself, un-transcribed, are perfect examples of this distinction between the physical object, the record, and the understanding or the representation of that object. Further, it becomes clear that when several of these transcripts are aggregated, whether or not related by time period, subject matter, or location, their management as archived sources plays a role in shaping and creating and even recreating the intended record.

Swain's article, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," traces the history of oral history in library and archival literature with a few interesting twists and turns (Swain 2003, 140-143). For one, she cites the earliest use of oral history, not as a means for recovering the stories of the marginalized,

but as an archival documentation strategy to "fill in" gaps in the records of elite and prominent historical figures (Swain 2003, 140). This documentation strategy concept surfaces in other places, such as in Sanford's essay describing the MIT recombinant DNA oral history project (Sanford 2011, 54). The documentation strategy argument gives oral histories a more legitimate place, perhaps, in the pantheon of often competing information sources. As it happens, the documentation strategy arose practically concurrently with the establishment of both the Oral History Association (OHA) and the SAA's oral history committee. New funding opportunities for oral history projects by the National Endowment for the Humanities appeared in the same general period (Sanford 2011, 56).

Continuing with Swain's interesting twists and turns, the social history movement that started in the late 60's questioned archival neutrality and created a demand for a different set of research tools, of which oral history's non-neutral gatherers provided the perfect match (Swain 2003, 145). The development in the 1990's of the "archives paradigm," i.e., that all records "are subject to archival mediation and subjective evaluation" and the concurrent decline of the "recordkeeping paradigm" support oral history's memory-based documentation (Swain 2003, 147).

Douglas Boyd (2016), in his essay "Oral History Archives, Orality and Usability" concludes,

The archival community must strategically adapt workflows and capabilities to create solutions that accommodate the users of oral history interviews, because if we build platforms that make it easy to do, they will indeed choose to "click to listen." (133)

Site Visit

I visited the Arlington, VA headquarters of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training on Monday, October 2, 2017. I sent ahead to the staff some possible questions for discussion during the site visit. When I arrived, I initially spoke with the association's president, Susan Johnson (full disclosure: she is an old friend and fellow retired foreign service officer) but we were soon joined by the original founder of the oral history program, Stuart Kennedy, four staff members directly involved in producing the oral histories, and one MLIS student intern.

Stuart Kennedy began the oral history program in 1986, shortly after his retirement from the foreign service. Initially the program was housed at George Washington University with a small budget. In 1986, the ADST was established by a group of retired foreign service officers, and in 1988, the oral history program became a part of ADST. The first few interviews were exclusively former Ambassadors but later expanded to include non-ambassadors, spouses, and consular officers. The present collection is the largest collection of first-hand accounts of diplomatic practice by any country in the world.

ADST is funded by its membership (20-25%) and by donations, grant funding, service/sharing agreements, and in-kind donations.

Interviews are comprehensive, covering the entire life of the interviewee, not just the time spent working in foreign affairs (State, USAID, Agriculture, Labor, Energy and Commerce) and at overseas posts. I saw photographs of boxes of tapes and drafts of transcripts in a storage room. But electronic files of initial drafts, edited drafts, final cuts, and MP3 files of interviews are stored electronically on the central server, on external hard drives and in Google Cloud. Completed interviews are posted alphabetically to the ADST website at <http://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history->

[interviews/](#), and some 1700 interviews, are also posted to the Library of Congress Foreign Affairs Oral History website at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/foreign-affairs-oral-history/about-this-collection/>. Even though most of the marketing for the collection is done by word of mouth, ADST press releases cite traffic to the website has increased from 2000 visitors a month in 2012, to over 75,000 visits per month in 2017 so far. Interviewees sign a release allowing their transcripts to be posted. That release satisfies the requirement of a donor contract. So far, photographs are not included in transcript material.

The IT staff is investigating ways to use voice recognition software to speed up the transcription process, though the greatest backlog is in editing transcripts that are already transcribed. Occasionally retiring diplomats and family of deceased diplomats submit to ADST small collections of personal papers and effects from a long diplomatic career. A collection development policy would be a useful tool for regulating the inbound supply of oral history material. The president is working on a number of policy and procedure initiatives.

What appears on the surface to be a total reliance on electronic media for storage of the archives is not the case. There are in fact several card catalog files full of original cassette tapes of interviews, and several vertical files full of edited transcripts of conversations. Having a partial backup of the collection hosted by the Library of Congress on their separate, oral history site provides needed electronic redundancy of the material. Every transcript is kept forever, so there is no need for a physical disposal/deaccessioning policy. There is precedence in the oral history literature for a completely digital archive focused on the sound archive of the original interview (Bradley and Puri 2016, 76-79).

The ADST site has a search function that operates as a word search query through transcripts that are all pdf files. Files are posted in alphabetical order with designations for spouses and employees from agencies other than State. The catalog is the alphabetical list of transcripts. A few transcripts include a table of contents and a keywords list, leaving open the possibility for a more sophisticated cataloging effort in the future. Nancy MacKay, in "Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive," provides all the textbook reasons why collections should be cataloged: to organize the material; to provide links to related items; to have a linked description to physical, or in the case of this collection, virtual items by means of an address, whether an accession number, a call number, or a URL; to furnish a description of intellectual content; to provide multiple access points to the content (name, post, subject, time period of service, etc.); and not insignificantly, to share information across institutions (MacKay 2007, 58-59). There is no good time or place to implement a cataloging system on an already existing collection; there will be hours of work involved in "back fitting" the system and lots of thought and effort should go into designing such a system for so specialized a collection. But an open source cataloging/archiving system may be sufficient both to organize existing records (transcripts) and to adapt newly arriving records.

I conducted a search on a capital city in West Africa, Bissau, a former Portuguese colony, and the search engine turned up four pages of results, 36 results in total. The results were not in any particular order, neither chronological, nor alphabetical. Choosing one, I read through the narrative. Richard Thompson. It was the record of an officer who served twice in Angola, a different Portuguese colony, but because of the mention of Bissau as a colony, it comes up. So it's a false hit. I chose another name on the list. Ellis Jones. Service in Conakry, Bissau's neighbor to the south. There's mention

in the narrative of rebels from Bissau being harbored in Conakry, but again, a false hit. This is the flaw of word-based search queries. Too many false hits. One more try. George Lambrakis. The Table of Contents said he was Chargé in Bissau in 1982. Let's check the narrative. It was his final assignment, so we can scroll all the way to the end of the document. Aha! Just a mention, no real discussion.

The word query way of searching through pdf files of transcripts has real problems, especially for a researcher who might be searching for connections across several different oral history transcripts, presenting a strong argument for doing item-level cataloging up front for each submission.

In addition to the single person transcripts, the ADST website contains a country and subject reader where staff have aggregated portions of transcripts pertaining to a selected country, subject or issue in foreign policy. While a useful finding aid, one wonders which sections of which transcripts may have been intentionally or inadvertently left out of the aggregated collection. The "organic-ness" of the original oral histories is somehow lost in the artificiality created. If I were researching a particular person, event or country, I'd be reluctant to rely on such a curated combination.

What have I learned about archives and the archival profession from this research experience? Before this experience, I felt intuitively that oral histories were an important part of history and of archival practices, but I didn't know exactly how. I learned that people are doing interesting archival work without calling it that. I saw an example of how a collection development policy could make a real difference for the collection and for the people hosting and managing it. I learned that archivists play an important role in creating and managing oral history collections. There is a lot about

history that I learned, especially how changes in its practice and profession both gave rise to and resulted from transformations in archival practices, sort of “we create the tool and the tool creates us.” Finally, there is so much in the literature about the practical importance of legal documents, donor contracts, releases, etc., that should form an integral part of our practice as archivists.

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