Florida, by Word of Mouth

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Overview:

Considered an essential tool in present-day scholarship, oral history also served as one of the earliest means of preserving and transmitting cultural norms and values. A rich oral tradition has allowed countless humans to learn about and benefit from the folklore, customs, and habits of earlier generations. In preliterate societies, oral narratives provided an authoritative account that could easily change to match the ideals and prejudices of the audience and communal leaders. Over time, elders replaced portions of the story that failed to meet their contemporary needs with more suitable tales. The development of a written system of expression redefined both the role of language in the society and the means of verifying the accuracy of "evidence."

Despite its important role in other societies, the American historical profession generally ignored the importance of oral history prior to World War II. Similar to their colleagues in libraries, historians of the late nineteenth century attempted to transform and professionalize their profession. While earlier amateur writers had embellished their narratives and often
concocted dialogue to re-create the essence of past events, the professional historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced positivism and empiricism: They embarked upon a quest to accumulate 'facts,' those objective building blocks that would ultimately form the mansion of history. By emphasizing objectivity and documentation of sources in their scientific approach to history, these researchers condemned oral sources as subjective and therefore unreliable.

Attitudes changed during the twentieth century. Historians and other social scientists could embrace oral history as a viable scholarly resource only after they acknowledged the subjective nature of almost all other sources. Over the last fifty years, the practice of oral history has complemented changes within the historical profession and related social science disciplines. Pioneering efforts in this field began as Allan Nevins, a journalist and professor of history, assumed the directorship of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in the late 1940s. Just as many archives began to collect materials that represented most—if not all—facets of their constituent communities, local studies and 'nearby' oral histories have developed as historians attempted to ask big questions about small places and to document a variety of voice in the community. Of course, the development of enhanced technologies (such as inexpensive and easy-to-transport videocameras and the Internet) has continued to move the discipline beyond the reel-to-reel tape
and black-and-white transcript of yesteryear to its multimedia present.

What about Florida? Many Floridians know little of the historical heritage of their adopted state. Despite a permanent population that approaches 14-million residents, Florida remains a state where support for cultural and historic programs remains tenuous at best. For example, state authorities placed much of the funding and organizational responsibility on individual counties and non-profit organizations for the planning and implementation of events to celebrate the state's sesquicentennial--or 150th anniversary of statehood--in 1995.

Librarians often collect materials that preserve the history of their local communities. Unfortunately, few Florida libraries actively collect oral histories. The special preservation requirements, cataloging concerns, equipment requirements, and access/liability issues often discourage libraries from developing oral heritage programs that document "nearby" history.

Meanwhile, most historical societies and similar non-profit cultural entities operate with few--if any--paid staff and rely on the goodwill of volunteers, and many of these individuals have little if any formal academic training in either history or librarianship. Support for oral history programs by such organizations can change as one board of executive officers replaces another, and programs started by such organizations often fail to take into account the important legal, ethical, and
conservation concerns that professional librarians, archivists, and historians have thoroughly documented in their scholarly literature.

Thus, despite its substantial value as a primary source, oral history remains an underutilized form of historical scholarship in Florida. Those facilities that have developed oral history programs have a special responsibility to work with professional organizations and serve as mentors to other groups interested in this field. In my brief discussion, I will attempt to offer an overview of present-day trends in oral history, discuss the problems and prospects of using and including oral history, and briefly outline some of the effects of an active oral history program on library operations. [Finally, time permitting, I will present a brief oral history primer, or, what you should about the oral history process when someone asks you—or orders you—to initiate such a program.] But first, a little background about me and how I became interested in oral history.

Background: Me and Oral History at USF and Eckerd:

My first true experience with oral history in the academic world occurred in 1989 as I was revising an undergraduate paper on the school desegregation crises that occurred in Florida during some of the civil rights struggles during the 1950s. As part of my research, I wrote to LeRoy Collins, Florida's governor from 1955 to 1961 and--at that time--a frequent columnist in the St. Petersburg Times, requesting an interview. I also enclosed a copy
of my paper.

With a sense of disbelief, just a few days later I received a reply from the former governor, welcoming me to visit him at his law office in Tallahassee. Soon thereafter, I met with Collins and had a wonderful interview that covered a number of topics. He spoke candidly about many events that placed him in national newspapers, including his refusal to follow intolerant southern governors who preached "segregation forever."

About 40 minutes into the interview, I looked down at my tape and realized that it could only record 30 minutes on each side!!! I tried to conceal my frustration, and, after the Governor finished another long response, I quickly turned the cassette to the other side and continued to record the conversation.

While I took meticulous notes, I know that I did not document everything that Collins had mentioned during that lost 10 minutes of tape. I felt like such a fool--my first interview was with a former governor, and I didn't even have the horse sense to remember to flip the tape! Unfortunately, my first visit with Mr. Collins was also my last visit--while we corresponded a few more times, he died shortly thereafter in March 1990. I could never again ask him to clarify his comments.

My first oral history interview taught me a number of lessons as a student of history. Later, during a graduate student assistantship at the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus, I learned how to appreciate the value of creating,
building, and promoting an oral history collection development initiative. Finally, to complete the circle, as an adjunct professor of Eckerd College I presently require students in my Florida History class to complete an oral history interview and write a paper describing the experience. I can therefore speak on the practice of oral history from a number of perspectives. Let me describe the USF program in greater detail:

The *Oral History of Modern America* collection represents the largest single oral history archival collection that I'm aware of in the Tampa Bay area. The USF St. Petersburg initiative has experienced phenomenal growth since its inception. During the 1980s, the campus library held fewer than 40 oral history transcripts, and most of them resided in a single collection: the Papers of Nelson Poynter, former editor and president of the St. Petersburg Times.

By early 1993, however, the USF St. Petersburg library had expanded its collection development policy to include oral history interviews. In September 1993, members of an oral history advisory committee agreed that the St. Petersburg campus should take the initiative to develop a comprehensive oral history program for the West Central region of Florida. At the time, none of the other USF libraries actively collected interviews aside from their institutional archives of lecturers and speakers (the Tampa Campus Library at USF has started a program since this time). By the spring of 1996, the *Oral History of Modern America*
collection had grown to nearly 500 primary source interviews, as well as 425 recorded lectures from the Campus Lecture Series, 120 recordings of the WUSF-FM "Florida Report" program, and a nearly 60 video recordings with interview sessions. The opening of a new library facility in the summer of 1996 with a "real" special collections facility—rather than a broom closet—will assure the continued growth of the collection.

In the fall of 1996, I began teaching Florida and United States in the Program for Experienced Learners, an innovative baccalaureate program at Eckerd College. In a busy eight-week semester, we cover Florida history from the pre-Columbian era to the arrival of Mickey Mouse, and students are expected to read a substantial amount of material and complete a primary research paper. One of the other core requirements in this Florida history survey is for students to complete an oral history interview. I have had over eighty students enrolled in my various sections of Florida history. And while nearly all of the students felt insecure about doing an interview when they first read the syllabus, most did a fantastic job when given an opportunity to practice history in the first person.

Of course, I provided them with a basic overview of the "nuts and bolts" before sending them into the trenches by dividing the oral history process into three essential areas. While preparing for the interview, I told students to set goals by defining a broad research topic, evaluating potential interviewees, and
examining secondary sources and other literature to gain a better understanding of the cultural context. This preparation phase also included the scheduling of an interview session and a brief discussion of personal (review of scrapbooks and other related items), legal (release forms), and equipment needs (a working cassette recorder, blank tapes, an electric cord and/or fresh batteries, etc.). While conducting the interview, students were instructed to place their subjects at ease, foster an intellectual exchange through strong and open-ended questions, respect the opinions of their subjects, take thorough notes, and—unlike me in Tallahassee!—monitor the equipment. After the interview, the students discovered proper ways to index, store, and preserve their interviews, as well as ways to incorporate oral memories into historical narratives.

Who did they interview? Some interviewed family members (such as a student who is a fourth-generation native of Hillsborough County), others asked questions of politicians or old-times, and one student in my recent Sarasota class interviewed people for her project: the nomination of a local property for the National Register. Since these interviews were part an academic assignment for Eckerd College, I did not solicit the interviews for inclusion in the USF St. Petersburg collection. In many cases, interviews with family members were better left within the family for its personal archive.

**Basics of a Successful Oral History Program:**
Whether working as professors or volunteers at the neighborhood historical society, we must become proactive rather than reactive in developing oral history collections. Few patrons will visit a repository if it resembles a closet for old, useless records. Staff must engage in outreach activities that allow others to learn about the archives, its purpose, and its holdings. Through outreach programs, the institution can promote and market its program (by indicating the value of oral history as a scholarly and community tool), encourage use of targeted collections (by describing oral interviews available at the facility), and cultivate potential donors for future collections.

**Acquisition of Interviews:**

All oral history interviews added to a library or organization's collection require proper documentation. The deed of gift must cover five essential areas: 1) who donated the item, 2) who received the item, 3) what was transferred between the parties, 4) what conditions govern the transfer, and 5) what proves that the transaction occurred. Deeds of gift for special collections must clearly specify what all parties intend to do, as well as stipulate any conditions or restrictions placed on the use of the collection. Remember: legal and physical possession are different in nature.

**Appraisal of Interviews (What about donations?):**

In a university setting, an appraisal usually establishes intellectual rather than monetary value. Potential donations to
should fall under the general areas designated under the collection development policy. The act of appraising materials continues long after the librarian places items in a collection. As available technologies and collection parameters change, you must continuously re-evaluate how individual materials fit within institutional policies and objectives. All donations occupy precious space and cost money to maintain due to salaries, preservation needs, storage containers, and duplication and transcription costs.

The appraisal of all archival materials must consider three important factors at two distinct levels. **Evidential** value provides evidence of the creator's actions. For example, while many textbooks contain a copy of the Constitution, the original copy possesses unique, evidential, enduring, and historical value. **Informational** value emphasizes the importance of the content over the medium. Thus, some researchers might select a data file of a transcript over a typed document or the actual recording of the interview. As long as the researcher has the ability to obtain the requested information, the item retains value regardless of the format. **Administrative need** requires that certain materials remain in the collection for statutory reasons and institutional purposes. Appraisal originally occurs at the group level, and later at the subgroup or item level. For example, if a donor offered ten oral history recordings and only eight of the interviews fell within the purview of your collection development
policy, you would work with the donor to locate suitable repositories for the other two recordings.

**Technical Services: Arrangement and Description:**

Arrangement refers to the act of confirming, imposing, or creating order within a collection. Whenever possible, you should attempt to maintain original order and provenance, while establishing relational links between and within collections through the online catalog, homepage, or in-house database.

Description can occur through an individual item record, a specific database, or a comprehensive finding aid. This guide should include a physical description that addresses the organization and format of the material, a sketch of the creator that establishes provenance, and a scope and contents note that expresses relations among items in the collection.

**Public Services: Reference, Security, and Access:**

If you keep interviews in a locked room or on closed stacks, this limited level of access mandates a strong commitment to reference services. Staff must understand the research process, attitudes, and goals of their constituency. In addition, the curator of oral histories should know the collection (information in the records), its provenance (information about the records), and other sources available (related information). Repositories should have reading room policies available for public inspection, as well as registration and security procedures.

**Conservation and Preservation:**
Finally the act of collecting audio and visual materials poses a variety of problems inherent in the media. When budgeting scarce resources, you must consider the preservation and conservation needs of the collection. "Technology migration" is a term you will become familiar with: If your oral history interviews reside on 8-track cartridges and your transcripts are stored on a vintage-1980s Commodore computer, the "2000" millennium bug problem is the least of your worries! I strongly recommend maintaining an archival copy and a use copy of every interview, and of keeping back up copies of transcripts of other information stored off-site, away from your equipment.

**Summary:**

Oral history offers great potential for preserving and promoting our State's history. I applaud the Florida Historical Society for putting this panel together, and hope that those of us who share an interest in oral history can continue our dialogue.

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**Plans for Dissemination**

**ORAL HISTORIES IN MODERN AMERICA**

A Select Bibliography of Sources

*Books and Monographs*


**Journal Articles**


ERIC Documents

