My History With Oral History

To give you all an explanation as to why I am making this presentation today, I felt I should explain my personal history with Oral History as an academic discipline. My first interaction with Oral History occured during the summer of 2011 where I worked as a library assistant at my undergraduate school of Brandon University in Manitoba. One day the head archivist at the university asked if I would be willing to assist them in a digitization project they were in the process of developing. As my work load was very light at the time, I was more than happy to help.

The digitization project, as it turned out, required converting an entire collection of cassette tapes from a local oral history project into digital format, with the goal being to upload the interviews onto the archives website. And what I thought would be a fairly quick, straightforward task soon proved to be anything but, as the collection consisted of over 300 individual interviews that ranged in length from 5 minutes for the shortest interview to over 3 hours for the longest interview. And as the digitization process required playing the cassettes, in a device that resembled a Walkman for everyone who remember what those looked like, have the digitization software record the interview onto a computer, and then have the software convert the recorded file to a digital format, it meant I was able to listen to the vast majority of these interviews for the year and a half it took to complete the process.

I quickly began to be enthralled by the stories unfolding on these tapes. These interviews ranged in topics such as homesteading on the prairies, teaching in one room rural school houses, operating businesses in small communities, serving in World War 2, and other tales in between, I could not help but be fascinated by many of the stories told in these interviews, and by the people who lived them.

Fast forward a few years to 2014 and I was a student excitedly sitting in the newly offered history course all about Oral History. The course is currently taught by Dr. Rhonda Hinther who has an extensive academic background in the discipline, and her course emphasized the entirety of the oral history process by exploring its conceptual frameworks and understanding how it applies to people. The course ended with each student conducting their own oral history interview with an individual to record their life history, and these interviews are stored at the S.J. McKee Archives at Brandon University.

Eager to do more with Oral History, I decided to make the last class of my undergraduate degree a directed studies course with Dr. Hinther that we called, appropriately enough, Advanced Topics in Oral History. For this course I planned, developed, and created a 5 interview oral history collection entitled Oral History and Community Music, which consisted of interviewing individuals chosen from the Brandon community who had a direct connection to music and how music shaped their lives and the lives of others in the city. This collection is also stored in the S.J. McKee Archive, and the essay wrote for the class is currently in the peer-review process for potential publication in the Manitoba History journal. The work I have done so far with Oral History has not only proven to be fruitful professionally, but have also been incredibly fulfilling on a personal level as well.

What is Oral History?

Paul Thompson is a person generally considered to be one of the founding persons of Oral History as an accepted research methodology. This came about from the publication of his book *The* *Voice of the Past in 1978* where he not only established the techniques and frameworks required to undertake an oral history project, where the central focus revolved around interviews with consenting participants, he also clearly defined what “Oral History” is. On page 39 of this seminal work, he wrote the passage I have on the screen here. This definition he formed brings together the idea that history, rather than consisting of a series of static information bits such as dates, names, places and such, is in fact active and malleable in the present day. It recognizes that as people engage and communicate with one another, the past as they understood it before begins to change as well for them.

Oral History is a methodology that allows us to look at individuals and groups within the context of the times they existed in. By retaining the humanity of the historical subject it better enables the listener to grasp the choices and decisions made by these people within the context of their time. In fact, Oral History methods place the dignity of the interviewee as one of the highest priorities when creating oral histories since the interviewees have been so generous to gift others with the tales of their lives. So while the content of the interview can, and should, be questioned by listeners given the various ways memory can become skewed and distorted, there should never be any doubt that it is human beings who have created this history.

The emphasis in Oral History is not just on the words being spoken, as the spoken word is only considered a part of the overall interview. How those words were delivered, where those words were delivered, who were the people speaking to one another during the interview, what setting did the interview take place in, these are all recognized as being variables that impact the nature of the interview itself.

Oral history recognizes that history and people are always linked together. On the surface this is fairly obvious given history is a humanities discipline, but all too often it becomes too easy for researchers and students to lose sight of this as focus becomes entrenched on notions of ‘key actors’ and nation-states and organized movements. The oral history becomes the reminder that at the core of all theories and methods and disciplines, everything is about people and the lives they live.

Why Libraries Should Have Oral History Collections (stay on What is Oral History slide)

So not that we have established what Oral History is, and why it is I am standing up here talking about it, I am now going to make my pitch as to why the oral history should be considered an essential collection in an LIS setting such as the library.

Perhaps the simplest reason why libraries should contain oral history collections is due to the multi-purpose role oral histories can serve. Given the wide range of subjects available for study, a listener can take the information found from the interviews in various directions.

From a personal perspective oral histories tend to make for great stories. One of my favourite stories I listened to while digitizing the oral history collection back home was told by a man who, during the Great Depression, decided to ride the rails in rail-cars and travelled across much of Manitoba and Saskatchewan as a vagabond. His tale of life on the road and of the people he met along the way made for a really entertaining listen. This is an element that should be exploited by the library, as the interview then can be considered a source of informative entertainment, such as popular podcasts like This American Life or Radiolab.

Oral histories can also provide primary source information for various disciplines to study. For my paper I was able to combine oral history practices with the discipline of ethnomusicology to create a project that explored community music. And it is not an uncommon occurrence to blend oral history with other disciplines. To give everything some quick examples I did a simple search in the University of Alberta Discovery system and these two results came up on the first page.

(next slide, Why Libraries Should Have Oral History collections)

The first example, Grunge is Dead: the oral history of Seattle rock music, was wrote by Greg Prato in 2009. A prolific author of all things music, Greg tells the history of the grunge rock scene in Seattle through oral history interviews with the musicians and people who made the scene as popular as it became in the 1990’s, such as Eddie Vedder the vocalist for Pearl Jam.

The second example is Oral History, Community, and Displacement: imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Wrote in 2012 by Sean Field, Associate Professor of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, this work explores such broad subjects as trauma and memory, social diaspora, and the politics of remembering, all within the scope of oral history.

The oral history can then be said to be a multi-disciplinary work, as the content held within the interview contains information applicable to a wide range of topics. And one of the charms of developing an oral history collection is the potential to unlock new and fascinating information from sources that are normally considered peripheral to conventional study. Oral History then, is an adventure into the unknown.

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An oral history collection is an excellent opportunity to have the library directly engage with its respective community. One of the definitions for the word 'community', as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is that it is an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location. By developing an oral history centered around the library's community, it allows people to be able to learn about the unique parts that comprise this community, and can show people how exactly the communal whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

In a 2015 article about developing Oral History collections for libraries, the authors Marquis and Waggener wrote that oral histories are valuable resources and can be particularly successful in capturing a community's social history. This is true for all communities, whether the community is a general one such as a particular city neighborhood or for a more diverse community such as librarians.

A great example of capturing a general community's social history can be seen courtesy of the New York Public Library, which has undertaken a Community Oral History project that to date has created 8 unique oral history collections centered around the various communities of New York City. These interviews are performed by volunteers who were trained at the library on how to properly conduct these interviews, and all interviews are accessible online or physical copies can be circulated at the library. This collection allows not just New Yorkers but anyone from across the world the opportunity to learn and understand what it is like to live in neighborhoods such as Harlem or Greenwich Village.

To illustrate the ability of Oral History to capture the social history of specialized communities, and to also show how oral histories can highlight the hidden potential of certain groups, I present the U.S. National Library of Medicine Oral History collection. In a 2008 article titled “Library Roles in Disaster Response: An Oral History Project by the National Library of Medicine”, the authors used the Medical Library Association's oral history project handbook to conduct interviews as part of the National Library of Medicine's Library Roles in Disaster's Project. This project was intended to capture the stories of librarians who worked through emergency situations such as Hurricane Katrina and the SARS epidemic in Toronto, in order to highlight the roles libraries and librarians played in these situations. The project was also intended to foster a close relationship between libraries and emergency disaster managers, as the interviews found that librarians played multiple roles during these situations with little to no formalized authority established for them to do so.

These examples show some of the possibilities oral histories have to connect the library with their community. Not only do they provide a platform for the individual to be heard from, they create a tangible means for libraries and their community to establish a dialogue between themselves through the development and creation of oral history collections.

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Oral History is very capable in studying those people who have stories to tell but need to have the sanctity of their story retained. An example of this can be seen with the Oral History collection stored at Concordia University called the Montreal Life Stories. This project captures the stories of over 500 refugees who have experienced war, genocide and other human rights violations in their home countries and who now live in Montreal. These stories are a collaborative work between the university and community-based volunteers, and are intended to provide listeners candid stories of people who have survived the worst that humanity has to offer. This project also gives listeners a face and voice to put to these events, placing the horrors these people lived through into their field of consciousness in a way few other mediums truly can for others. At the same time, it avoids depicting these survivors as being pitiable, an important distinction if you want others to truly listen to what you have to say.

Oral histories are also well suited in telling the stories of Indigenous peoples across Canada. As much of the history of these people come from the oral tradition, the most appropriate way to record this history is by letting them speak it in their own voice. The inhuman treatment forced upon Indigenous groups by the residential school systems meant this has become increasingly difficult to do as the language and culture of many groups are on the verge, or already have, been lost to us. Oral History allows for some of this to be retained as the discipline is well equipped to study and capture the essence of these stories. As just a couple of examples, I have on the slide here two collections centered around Indigenous groups that I would recommend exploring.

A distinctly unique feature of oral histories in the Canadian context is the fact that Indigenous oral histories can also serve as legal resources too. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada made a landmark ruling in the case of Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, where the original case centered around the claim of Aboriginal Title for land. In their ruling, the Supreme Court determined that, since the Common Law tradition of evidence required documentation to be presented in court cases, oral cultures would always be at a legal disadvantage since they would have no physical proof of land ownership. As such, the court determined that the oral history of an Indigenous group is admissible evidence for all cases regarding Aboriginal Title, and this ruling have been upheld in several cases regarding Aboriginal Title since then.

Oral History then is a platform that gives those who would otherwise not have a voice in society a chance to truly be heard in the way they want society to hear them. Not only does Oral History depict people in as accurate of manner as possible, it also shows listeners the positives of being willing to listen to their stories too.

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For those you who may now be interested in working with, or developing your own oral history collection, I'm afraid I have a major caveat to mention.

Boston College Belfast Project

* Head of the Burns Library created the project as his own pet project. Did not bother to consult college administration or legal counsel about it. Only people who knew about this project were those working on it: an author of Irish History and the person who would conduct the interviews, a former member of the IRA.
* Interview promised full confidentiality to all interviewees. When interviews were finished a book was published called Voices from the Grave that contained the full name of a recently deceased interviewee, and his confession to a cold case murder from decades before.
* Led to UK authorities demanding all records from the project be seized as evidence, and US authorities pushed for this to happen as well. Led to 11 interviews being seized with all pertinent information for the case.
* If you plan to make a collection, make sure the collection is appropriate to community and make sure it is LEGAL.

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In summary:

* Oral history collections are unique collections
* Provides an opportunity to directly interact with and engage the library's community
* Oral histories are multi-faceted resources that can be used for a diverse range of study and use
* While it is time consuming and challenging to create and oral history collection, it is ultimately a rewarding experience

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