

The Library of Congress - The National Recording Preservation Board
Notice of Inquiry
Request for Information; Notice of Hearing; Study on the Current State of
Recorded Sound Preservation

Commentary by
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"In 1944, [Fred Vinson] invited me for lunch. He was the economic czar of Roosevelt's last campaign. And that morning I had a conference with Roosevelt. And when Fred and I sat down to dinner, I said, 'Fred, the President's sick.' 'Oh,' he said, 'you've been listening to these damn Republicans.' I said, 'No. I just left him. And I'll guarantee he didn't know who I was. He didn't know what I was saying. If you go down there, he won't know that I'd been there.' We elected a dead man in nineteen hundred and forty-four." [Interview with John Y. Brown, Sr., on March 9, 1976 for the Fred M. Vinson Oral History Project, University of Kentucky]

That vignette from an interview with John Y. Brown, Sr. that was conducted in 1976 is one of over 6,500 interviews in the University of Kentucky's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History Oral History Collection. These interviews cover over one hundred topical subjects and encompass over 12,000 actual taped interview hours. We have interviewed Kentuckians from Ashland to Hickman, from Paducah to Pikeville, from Louisville to Williamsburg, as well as many places in-between throughout the Commonwealth. The Nunn Center Oral History collection contains interviews with coal miners, farmers, doctors, lawyers, members of Kentucky's congressional delegation as well as state legislators, governors, newspaper owners, publishers and reporters, environmentalists, clergy and members of practically every religious denomination, AIDS activists, feminists, amateur and professional athletes, college graduates and people who never made it past the 8th grade, immigrants, artists, authors, military veterans, anthropologists, political scientists, historians, public policy advocates, members of the Ku Klux Klan, architects, and school teachers. And that is not a complete list. The books, articles, dissertations and theses that have utilized interviews in the Nunn Center Collection over the years would fill a good-sized room.

Donald Ritchie, the Associate Historian of the U.S. Senate Historical Office, who is the author of the internationally acclaimed manual titled *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Twayne Publishers, New York, NY, 1995) stated that, "From Supreme Court Justices, United States Senators, and civil rights leaders to farm families, the University of Kentucky's oral history collection is a model of its kind, not only for the

history of Kentucky but for Kentucky's role on the national stage."

The interest in oral history among academicians and the general public as a valuable research tool continues to accelerate. There has been recognition among scholars from many disciplines that written records often do not offer a comprehensive picture of the lives and motivations of people and events that have shaped American history and society. Oral history cannot, and is not intended to, take the place of written records. Important avenues of the scholar always have been, and probably will remain, written documents such as letters, diaries, court records, newspapers, church records, business ledgers, or other sources. While most written documents are regarded as permanent and authentic by the academic community, the oral history interview provides a contemporary technique for validating and filling in the gaps in the written historical record or, in fact, becoming the only record when no written documentation exists.

Oral history interviews also provide social and cultural information not available elsewhere. Written records often give researchers only the "bare bones" of history. Oral history helps to personalize history, to flesh out the "bare bones." The written records often do not tell us much about a person or an event, hence researchers increasingly have turned to oral history as an alternative method when seeking information. Formal written records seldom tell researchers much about people's everyday lives, what guided people's decisions, why people made the choices they made, who people voted for and why, what people believed in and why, or what contribution an individual made to society. These are all questions oral historians help to answer. 5

The Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky was established in 1973, and I've been with the Center for eighteen years. We have a lot of experience and we've seen a lot of changes not only in oral history theory and methodology, but also in the issues involved in preserving oral history interviews and in providing access to them, and that is the focus of my commentary here today. But first I'd like to give a brief overview of the history of the modern oral history movement in the United States.

The origins of oral history goes back at least as far as Herodotus, the Greek historian who lived between 484 and 425 B.C. and wrote *The Histories*. He gathered much of the information for his work by interviewing people who had participated or witnessed historic events, and he then recounted those stories. Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) after interviewing many of the participants. And many peoples passed along the history of their own civilizations orally ever since, including Native Americans. An example of crude, early oral history in the United States can be found in the Slave Narratives. Beginning in 1936 and ending in 1938, unemployed writers, musicians and actors were employed by the Federal Writers Project to go out and interview former slaves. This was before the invention of reliable and affordable tape recorders, so the interviewers, instead of electronically recording the interviews, wrote down more or less verbatim what they were being told by the former slaves.

About the same time John Y. Brown, Sr. was having his meetings with President Roosevelt and Fred Vinson, the U.S. Army began an interviewing project of their own. S.L.A. Marshall spent time in the Pacific Theatre conducting interviews with commanders and soldiers in the field, and he and Forrest Pogue, a native Kentuckian, continued to do so in the European Theatre starting with D-Day. Pogue was there interviewing wounded soldiers as they made their way back to the hospital ship from Omaha Beach.

In 1948, Allan Nevins founded the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, the first of its kind in the United States. The University of California - Berkeley followed suit in 1954 by establishing the Regional Oral History Office, and by 1959 UCLA also had an oral history program. The social and civic activism of the 1960s and early 1970s fueled the interest in social history, or history from the bottom up as opposed to the traditional top down or "Great White Man" study of history and these social historians inspired the creation of many academic oral history programs across the country. Just in Kentucky alone, programs were established at the University of Kentucky, the University of Louisville, Murray State University, Alice Lloyd College, Eastern Kentucky University, and Western Kentucky University. Additionally, in 1976 the Commonwealth of Kentucky established the Kentucky Oral History Commission, the only state in the Union to have such a governmental body dealing only with oral history. The Commission still exists to this day. Many programs around the country were located in history departments as oral history finally became accepted as a valid research methodology by so-called "mainstream historians".

In the first two decades following the establishment of the state, regional and local oral history programs not just in Kentucky but around the country, the emphasis was naturally on the collection of interviews. Oral historians discovered a wide-breadth of interesting topics to explore and projects to do, infinite numbers of interesting people to interview, and felt the crisis of limited time to capture some of these priceless stories. Since the University of Kentucky is the commonwealth's land grant university, the mission of the Nunn Center is to collect as much political, economic, social and cultural history of Kentucky, and Kentuckians, as we can, and this was the philosophy of many other oral history programs around the country regarding their own geographic region.

By definition, oral history is the process of electronically recording memories of individuals. These interviews can be life histories where individuals reflect back on the entirety of their life, or they can be interviews about specific historic events that these individuals either participated in or witnessed. Oral historians do not record history, but memories, which is important in its own right. It is often more relevant to find out what people believed happened, than what actually did occur.

Before the advent of digital technology, this meant recording the interviews with analog, or magnetic tape. The first interviews conducted by the Nunn Center, and many other oral history programs around the country, were conducted using big, heavy and awkward reel-to-reel tape recorders. These reel-to-reel recordings are still generally playable if they've been stored in temperature and humidity controlled conditions. By

the mid- 1970s, cassette tape recorders hit the market and became instantly popular among oral historians. The cassette recorders were smaller, hence less obtrusive and intimidating to the interviewee. The recorders and cassette tapes were cheaper and easier to handle and store, and they were more portable and ran on batteries, which increased the venues where one could conduct an interview. Soon programs in Kentucky and around the country were amassing scores, or hundreds, if not thousands of oral history interviews. Yet few programs knew what information the interviews contained beyond the topic or project title. Tens of thousands of these interviews were locked away in filing cabinets or languished on shelves without indices, without finding aids and therefore are virtually inaccessible and unused.

A recent report by the Oral History Association, "Oral History and the Academy: An Assessment for the Mellon Foundation" (Spring, 2006) found that oral history is a normal part of graduate study at many institutions, and that institutions with oral history centers or programs, often affiliated with university libraries and archives, have the most substantial investment in oral history. The Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History is located in the University of Kentucky Libraries. Being part of the Libraries allows the Center to be an archive for interviews conducted by U.K. faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, as well as outside researchers who are utilizing oral history as part of their research methodology. We call these independent researchers our "associate interviewers". Often times we give them the 10 technical support in the form of equipment, blank tapes, legal paperwork, training - and not just training in the use of the equipment, but also helping them with project and question design. While those of us in the Nunn Center for Oral History conduct interviews for our own projects, the majority of our 6,500 interview collection has been built by our "associate interviewers".

As Don Ritchie rightfully stated, taped interviews aren't oral histories until they're placed in an archive where other researchers can have access to them. We tell our "associate interviewers" that allowing other researchers to have access to the interviews they have conducted only serves to validate their own research because these other researchers will have access to the same information. If an author is quoting from interviews that he or she has stashed in their personal filing cabinets, unless other researchers can have access to those interviews, those quotes or citations are always suspect.

As part of the U.K. Libraries, the Nunn Center uses archival best practices and standards and is committed to making information accessible. Oral history programs that are located in academic departments around the country often don't have access as a primary concern. In fact, often these interviews are jealously guarded by faculty members not eager to share the information with other researchers, even long after their own research has been completed. At the Nunn Center, although we do restrict public access to a researcher's interviews until his/her own research has been completed, we are eager to make the interviews in our collection accessible as soon as possible.

It wasn't until the mid- 1980s that oral historians and archivists began to really

question the longevity of the thousands of analog or magnetic tapes that had been used to record these interviews. Experts told us that the magnetic recordings would not last forever, especially the thin tape used for cassette recordings. Some oral history programs embarked on time-consuming and expensive projects to re-record the cassette recordings onto reel-to-reel magnetic tape that was known to last longer. However, as collections grew into the thousands of tapes and interviews, this process soon became not only cost prohibitive, but also a short-term solution to the existing problem.

An alternative solution was then arrived at - verbatim transcription. Oral historians and archivists concluded that since there was no way to permanently save the actual voices on the sound-recorded interview, the next best thing would be to try to at least preserve the information that the interviews contained by doing verbatim transcription of what was said on the tape. Archivists knew that paper, if stored in a temperature and humidity controlled environment, could last 500 years or longer, long after the magnetic tapes had deteriorated beyond use. At first, transcription was accomplished using IBM Selectric typewriters, which in the hands of an inexperienced typist, could be challenging. Later in the 1990s, the advent of the desktop computer greatly facilitated the transcribing process.

A secondary, but no less important benefit of transcribing was access. Researchers found that they could read through a 60-page transcript to see if it contained any information they could actually use for their research rather than having to sit and listen to the original two-hour recording. At the Nunn Center we always encourage researchers to listen to the tape as well, with the warning that the transcript is only our interpretation of what was said. In practice however, when a researcher discovered that we had both the taped interview and a transcript, they asked for the transcript 95% of the time and never consulted the taped recording.

However, transcription had its drawbacks. The first drawback was a lack of universal standards regarding the transcription process - how to handle dialect, accent, or speech patterns. These issues not only varied from institution to institution, but often from transcriptionist to transcriptionist.

A second drawback was that most programs required that the tape and "first draft" of the transcript be gone over by a second person on the theory that two sets of ears are better than one. If a word or passage was inaudible to the initial transcriber, perhaps the auditor/editor would be able to hear it. The introduction of the second reader slowed the process. And if there were more than one transcriptionist transcribing interviews, they could generate far more "first draft" transcripts than a single auditor/editor could keep up with. Most programs therefore ended up with a huge backlog of "first draft" transcripts waiting for correction.

A third drawback was that most programs generated or became the archive for more new interviews than could be transcribed. And lastly, and most importantly, transcribing is very expensive. It is a labor intensive and time-consuming enterprise. At

the Nunn Center, on average, it costs \$80 to transcribe one hour of taped interview, and that figure is low compared to national averages. Over the last twenty years, we have managed to transcribe about a third of our collection that keeps growing larger every year. Like most libraries and archives that I know, the U.K. Libraries' budget is already stretched to the limit and we receive no institutional support to transcribe any of the interviews in the Nunn Center Collection. Until recently, we relied on grant money to do the majority of our transcribing. With over 6,500 interviews and over 12,000 actual interview hours, the cost of transcribing the remaining interviews we already have is staggering, let alone new interviews we generate or take in as an archive. We came to the conclusion that it was not realistic to assume that we would be able to raise enough money externally to transcribe all of the interviews in our collection.

The state of oral history programs around the country, especially those that were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is dire. Over the past fifteen years, the number of active programs around the country has decreased significantly as budget cuts and other educational priorities have taken their toll. Many of these programs were personality driven, and once the founders retired or died, the programs quietly disappeared. Interviews collected for these now defunct programs now sit neglected and unused in archives around the country. The largest and most viable programs continued to grow throughout this period, even if they did not thrive. These programs put what little money they had increasingly into transcribing and editing of their interviews while continuing to collect more.

The advent of the internet provided new opportunities for oral history programs. At the Nunn Center, we moved quickly to take advantage of the internet's access capabilities. In 1996, ten short years ago, the Nunn Center was one of the first programs to begin mounting our transcripts on the web. At first we mounted only 40 transcripts on the web and waited to see what, if any, reaction they would generate. In the first six months those 40 interviews recorded over 10,000 hits. At that point we knew, number one, that the potential for impact was significant; secondly, that online interviews were the future to access; and third, that this was the right thing to do. What surprised us the most was the reaction of some of those who use the internet for their research. Instead of accolades for making this information readily accessible from their own homes, we received emails asking why more of the interviews weren't available on the web!

The Nunn Center has a history of firsts. Again, we were one of the first, if not the first, to loan out user copies of our recorded interviews and transcripts. Most programs around the country required the researcher to use the interviews in-house. This required the researcher to have the financial ability to travel to visit oral history repositories. At the Nunn Center, we made the decision to level the playing field for all researchers by treating our interviews like the library treats the book collection, and so we made copies of our interviews available through interlibrary loan. With the advent of the internet, we felt that mounting our transcripts on the web eliminated postage and the middle person in getting our interviews into the hands of researchers.

Recent improvements in digital technology have increased our ability to provide greater and more effective access. We can now preserve the actual tape recorded voices by generating a digital surrogate. We can also increase access to all of the digitized audio recordings instead of waiting for final draft transcripts of the interviews to be completed. And we are exploring ways to merge the final draft transcripts with the recorded audio so that researchers can read the transcript while listening to the actual audio recording, thus putting more of the interpretation of what was actually said, and how it was said, out of the hands of the transcriber and into the hands of the researcher. The transcript will still be very useful in locating information, so this format is not yet obsolete. If voice recognition software is improved significantly, we will have to revisit the cost effectiveness of the transcribing process. At the Nunn Center, we have embarked on a pilot project to digitize over 350 interviews with World War I veterans housed in our collection as well as the interviews with Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and other civil rights leaders. It is our goal to digitize all of the non-restricted interviews in our 6,500 interview collection and make them available on the web, which will be another first for the Nunn Center. Other programs have digitized some of their interviews in their entirety, or snippets of interviews, but our effort to digitize our entire collection is the first of its kind nationally.

As with transcribing, this effort will require a massive financial commitment on the part of the Nunn Center. With grants from the Kentucky Oral History Commission and interest generated from a small endowment, we are now able to partially fund our transcribing operation and pay for the digitizing equipment and human resources that that operation requires. However, few oral history programs around the country have the financial resources comparable to the Nunn Center, and the oral history interviews in these collections sit on library or archive shelves unused, inaccessible, and destined to perish unless immediate action is taken to digitally preserve them. The interviews in the Nunn Center Oral History Collection that were conducted over 30 years ago have suffered noticeable audio quality degradation as the tapes become brittle and the ferrous oxide flakes off. We are digitizing our most vulnerable interviews first. Some of these recordings break apart immediately soon after they are run through the digitization process.

The Nunn Center, in conjunction with the University of Kentucky Libraries' Digital Programs, follows accepted audio preservation standards in the digitization process. No filtration or manipulation beyond that which is inherent in the hardware is used while converting the analog signal to PCM.wav. Capture settings are as follows: File Format: PCM.wav; Channels: (2) Stereo; Bit rate: 16; Frequency: 44.1 kHz. A .txt metadata file is generated for each master file. It documents cassette sleeve information, master file creation settings, hardware and software settings as well as filtration settings that are applied to the edited file. From each preservation master file a separate "edit" file is produced. This new edit file uses the same file creation structure as the preservation master file with one exception: they are mono instead of stereo which reduces storage requirements. Various filtration and manipulation settings in Adobe's Audition software are applied to remove pops, cracks, and white noise (inherent with magnetic tape) along with limited background noise reduction or voice enhancement.

Five copies of each preservation master and edited.wav file and .txt metadata file are kept in four separate locations: an off-site tape back-up system, two in-house external drives, and two DVD copies, each housed in separate locations. The metadata text file allows for quick recreation if the edited file becomes corrupt. Derivative files are not retained on tape or DVD but are backed-up on external drives. The Nunn Center is now using digital recording equipment when conducting in-house interviewing projects, but analog tapes are still being archived in the Nunn Center Collection by independent researchers.

If funding is not made available to oral history programs and repositories to preserve their oral history collections, hundreds of thousands of recorded American voices, voices of not only the powerful and famous, but of average Americans will be silenced forever. Information that researchers can find nowhere else will fade away. It is one thing to read about the siege of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in World War I in a history book. It is quite another to listen to someone who was there describe their experiences during the siege. Oral history interviews make history come alive for researchers and students. Digitizing the interviews offers the most promising opportunity to preserve the priceless voices of those for whom our "history" was the stuff of everyday life. The loss of these voices would be a tragedy of immense proportions for the history of our nation.