

ORAL HISTORY AND ARCHIVES: THE CASE AGAINST

by Jean Dryden

Nous croyons qu'une implication trop incisive et importante de la part des archivistes en tant que créateur de documents d'histoire orale pourrait s'avérer néfaste à plus ou moins brève échéance et constituerait un accroc du rôle de conservateur que sont les archivistes. Deux raisons nous portent à de tels propos. D'abord, nous pensons que les universitaires, les chercheurs en général sont plus en mesure de percevoir les lignes de force de la recherche que ne le sont les archivistes. En second lieu les coûts parfois fort élevés d'un projet d'histoire orale tant du point de vue financier que du personnel requis ne peuvent être assumés par les archivistes et les institutions qui les emploient.

Ceci dit, nous pensons que le rôle des archivistes, en plus d'être les conservateurs des documents historiques, pourrait aussi en être un d'encouragement à l'histoire orale. En en faisant la conservation, en rendant les entrevues accessibles, en standardisant le traitement et en publiant des inventaires de documents oraux, le rôle des archivistes est déjà fort important. En face d'une telle tâche nul besoin n'est pour eux de devenir les créateurs ou les commensitaires des documents oraux.

I have been asked to argue the case for the premise that archives should NOT be involved in oral history. Although I have done a certain amount of reading, as well as talking with colleagues from various other institutions, most of my opinions and statements are based on my experience and knowledge gained while working at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. While this may seem a rather narrow foundation for some very strong opinions, very little that I read or heard from others caused me to feel that I was completely off-base in my views.

Since I am arguing that archives should not be involved in oral history, I must first define just what I mean by the term. Throughout my remarks, I will be using the commonly accepted definition of oral history to mean the collection of information by means of tape-recorded interviews with individuals. I must make it clear that I have no objection whatsoever to the collection and preservation of recorded data of all sorts whether in the form of interviews, ceremonies, broadcasts or music. What I am objecting to is the notion that archives should be actively engaged in running oral history programs, that is, arranging, researching and conducting interviews as well as preserving them and making them available for researchers.

Let me digress a moment to discuss some of the values, real and/or perceived, of oral history. It is undeniable that oral history interviews are a means of eliciting information not likely to exist in written form, and a valid tool for those practitioners of various forms of social history who are interested in examining events from the point of view, not of the leaders, but of

those led. Oral history is indeed valuable when interviews are conducted by competent interviewers who have researched the topic as thoroughly as possible. I would not quarrel with that. However, I have found that one must deal with a strongly embedded popular conception of oral history which, in Alberta at least, bears very little resemblance to the ideal I have described above. To Albertans, oral history is "getting those old-timers down on tape before they're gone". Oral history involves simply finding someone who is suitably ancient, setting up the nearest tape recorder, and letting him or her ramble on and reminisce at will. In the popular view, that's it. Oral history requires no more work than that. The idea that it might be worthwhile interviewing someone young enough still to be active in, or recently retired from, a career or occupation other than homesteading, and that it might be valuable to do a little research before the interview and a little indexing afterward is completely alien to the popular concept of oral history. Indeed, I strongly suspect from my experience with a recent province-wide survey of oral history, as well as with various oral history groups, that the very fact of being interviewed is an end in itself. Once interviewed, one's status as an old-timer is established, and what happens to the tapes after that is immaterial.

Is this view of oral history peculiar to Alberta because the province is young and some of the original settlers are still around? I don't think so. I think that the notion that it is easy to do oral history is widely held beyond Alberta's borders. A logical extension of this popular view of oral history is that it can be done on a shoestring budget. And yet, somewhat illogically, oral history retains a certain mystique. Judging from the number of requests the archives gets to do interviews, many people believe that a special expertise is required to do oral history -- expertise that only the archives has. Combining these ideas results in the popular notion that an oral history program can easily be fit into an archives activities with few, if any, additional financial or human resources. If popular opinion insists that oral history be part of an archives program, then the archives have a tough job to do to fight for and obtain adequate resources to run it properly. In the meantime, the products of shoestring oral history programs are not going to yield impressive results.

Even if we could change popular opinion, and convince the politicians who control our budgets of the need for the extensive resources required to run a proper oral history program, I have strong doubts that it should be an archives which should be running it. There are several important reasons why I feel that archives should not be involved in oral history interviewing. First of all, archivists are custodians, not creators of records. It has been argued that oral history does not create records, but rather records responses available in no other form. This argument is valid only in special cases, for example, if an archives periodically arranges to record a ceremony of particular significance. However, if an archivist is to conduct interviews in order to acquire further information about a particular topic, he or she cannot help but interact with the informant to shape and structure that interview. The archivist is creating a record and that is not our task.

In the second place, it is impossible to ask archivists (who tend to be generalists) to attempt to meet the needs of present and future researchers in general interviews such as have been conducted in the past. To draw another example from the Alberta situation, the experiences of the agricultural pioneers

have already been extensively documented by means of interviews now preserved in the Provincial Archives and Glenbow as well as other institutions. The value of many of these interviews is questionable. Most of them were conducted without a particular focus other than to "get those old-timers down on tape" for posterity. In my experience, the only people who ever come in to listen to the tapes (with very few exceptions) are the descendants of the informant once he or she has died. Those few researchers who aren't related to the informants have expressed disappointment in the tapes they have listened to, complaining that the interviews did not ask the right questions. How could they have hoped to anticipate the needs of future researchers? While archivists are in a good position to be able to identify the gaps in more traditional documentation, it just is not economically feasible to allow archivists to devote the vast amount of research time required to identify, research and interview people with the knowledge to fill these gaps. Furthermore, even if such resources were available, it is humanly impossible to fill all the gaps, and there would still be complaints that the interviewer did not ask the right questions. It makes much more sense to have someone with a certain expertise in an area to conduct interviewing with a particular focus in mind.

Thirdly, in my opinion, other, more traditional, archival activities are far more important. Specifically, reducing our existing backlogs and mounting an active acquisition program is far more important than creating more records which may be of marginal value. Archiving sometimes seems like juggling, and most of us are already trying to keep too many balls in the air at once. To add more when you're already in danger of dropping the ones you've got, makes no sense at all.

This leads me to the main reason why archives should not be running oral history programs. To run a proper oral history program is extremely expensive. Few archives are adequately funded now to carry out certain basic responsibilities outlined by statute or rules set by their creating bodies. To try and squeeze in oral history is sheer folly.

In sum then, I am arguing that archives should not be running oral history programs because: 1) they are custodians, not creators, of records; 2) they would have difficulty meeting the needs of researchers without a very specific focus and expertise, and most important 3) they simply cannot afford the resources necessary to do oral history properly.

It might be argued that archives should be directly involved in oral history so it will be done right. I see little evidence for that assumption. With all due respect to my archival colleagues, I would suggest that archivists are no better interviewers than anyone else. Even if one is prepared to grant a certain infallibility to archivists as interviewers, we must still consider the issue of finances which I raised a moment ago. There simply is not enough money in archives budgets to do it right.

One could argue that archives should supervise oral history programs funded from outside the archives budget should such funding be available. The Provincial Archives of Alberta has had some experience with this and it really did not work very well. I will not detail certain difficulties in the relationship between the PAA and the funding agency which meant that we had inadequate input into hiring, and it took far too long for our dissatisfaction with

certain employees to register. Furthermore, no-one recognized just how much time is required just to plan and supervise and monitor even a modest oral history program. The supervision is almost a full-time job in itself, and speaking from experience, I would not recommend trying to run a program funded by an outside source without some power over the pursestrings, and some recognition that it takes a surprising amount of time just to supervise.

If archivists shouldn't be doing oral history, who should? The people who should be doing oral history are those who have an expertise in a certain area and who are conducting oral history for a project with a specific focus. Such people should be encouraged to deposit their tapes in archives once they have finished their projects. As well, tapes will continue to be generated by senior citizens' groups, those working on local histories, or by individuals interested in recording the reminiscences of the older family members. They too should be encouraged to deposit their tapes in archives. In both cases, of course, archives can be expected to apply their standard appraisal criteria, i.e. duplication of information, technical quality, etc. before making a commitment to accept the tapes.

Besides encouraging interviewers to deposit their tapes in archives so that they may be preserved and made available to others, what else should archives be doing as far as oral history is concerned? In their efforts to make recorded data available, archives should be working toward standardizing description to best meet the needs of researchers. They also should be undertaking an educational role in an ongoing effort to teach the public and those who control archival budgets of the resources required to do oral history as well. More specifically, they should be available to provide guidance in the form of pamphlets or perhaps workshops on the practicalities of conducting good interviews. Finally, in an effort to prevent duplication and wasted effort, each provincial archives could possibly serve as a clearing house of ongoing oral history projects. Such efforts will provide assistance to and encouragement of oral history projects. But given the traditionally low profile of archives and woefully inadequate funding, I cannot foresee the day when archival institutions will be able to afford the luxury of being fully involved in ongoing oral history programs.