

THE PARTNERSHIP OF ORAL HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

by Wilma MacDonald

Cet article explore le développement qu'a pris l'association de l'histoire orale et des archives au Canada. Pendant que plusieurs archivistes garantissaient de leur propre chef la conservation des produits de l'histoire orale, d'autres, citant des définitions traditionnelles de ce que constitue un document d'archives, ont adopté une attitude plus hésitante. Ces dernières prétendent souvent que l'effort déployé et les dépenses pour la conservation des produits de l'histoire orale n'en valent pas la peine, vu les problèmes particuliers reliés à l'acquisition, à la description, à la conservation et à l'accessibilité de ces produits.

L'auteur maintient toutefois que les avantages de l'histoire orale sont plus nombreux que ses désavantages. Les entrevues peuvent mener à la découverte d'importants documents écrits qui seront alors transférés aux archives. Les sources d'histoire orale renferment des renseignements uniques -- indices sociaux, nuances d'incertitude, humour, feinte, couleur locale -- des caractéristiques absentes documents écrits. La méthode de l'histoire orale pour l'obtention de renseignements supplémentaires inédits a agrandir le champ des recherches dans des domaines autrefois mal documentés comme le travail, l'immigration, la vie des autochtones et l'histoire des femmes. Les projets d'histoire orale ont ainsi produit une documentation plus étoffée sur notre société; ils fournissent par conséquent des documents historiques plus représentatifs aux chercheurs.

L'auteur conclut en disant qu'à l'avenir, de plus en plus d'archivistes reconnaîtront la juste part de l'histoire et accepteront de préserver ces documents.

I would like to explore with you some aspects of a partnership which has developed in Canada between oral history and archives. This partnership has involved the preservation of tape-recorded memories within archival repositories. Such action brings with it a number of both theoretical and practical problems. Many Canadian archives, in particular the Public Archives of Canada (Appendix A) and several of our Provincial Archives (Appendix B), have been leaders in ensuring the preservation of oral history products, whether or not they have assisted in its creation.

"Oral history" is the name applied to the end products of interviews into a wide variety of research topics. The end products are usually tape-recorded anecdotal information, and such tapes may include life histories, perceptions of historical events, narration of folklore, and memories of personal experiences. Most often oral history is the result of a cooperative effort between an interviewer and an informant. It is usually recognized that oral history is neither "history" nor "archives" in the true meaning of those words, if by "history" one means an in-depth analysis of past events, and by "archives" one means the organic nature of records created in the day-to-day operation of public or private organizations.

With some justification various archives adhere to the traditional theory of what constitutes "archives" and hold up a 'red flag' to accessioning oral history tapes. They are basing their actions on the traditional definitions of archives, such as the theories of Sir Hilary Jenkinson and T.R. Schellenberg, archivists from England and the United States respectively, who have greatly influenced our Canadian archival practices.

In 1922, Sir Hilary Jenkinson defined archives as documents which are drawn up or used in the course of administrative or executive transactions (public or private), preserved for official reference by the person or persons responsible for such transactions, and held in their unbroken custody. Jenkinson added the corollary that archives were not drawn up in the interest of or for the the information of posterity. He felt their use was strictly for internal legal and administrative reference.

According to Jenkinson, archives had two distinguishing features, their "impartiality" and "authenticity". They were impartial because if the researcher understood the purpose for their creation (their administrative significance) they could tell him nothing but the truth; and, authentic because the archives were preserved in official custody and for official information only. The historian may examine, interpret, analyze, and arrange them for the purposes of his research, but they themselves state no opinion, voice no conjecture, and are simply written memorials of official events. Jenkinson was writing in an era largely concerned with "paper" archives and his record types were those naturally accumulated during the day-to-day operation of government departments or private corporations or organizations. Such records included minutes of meetings, correspondence, reports, financial statements, statistical registers, maps and photographs.

T.R. Schellenberg, writing in the 1950s, defined modern archives as those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution. Schellenberg saw archives as having two essential values: first, archival records provided basic evidence of how the creating agency was organized and operated, that is, its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations and other activities. Secondly, archival records contained useful data concerning persons, places and subjects with which the creating agency dealt. In other words, archives had "evidential" and "informational" values. Schellenberg was more mindful than Jenkinson of the potential value of the archives to historical researchers.

According to Schellenberg, the major problem of the modern archivist was to select archives for permanent preservation from among the mass of official records created by public or private institutions of all kinds regardless of their physical form or characteristics. Schellenberg added that modern archivists had a definite need to redefine archives in a manner more suited to their own requirements.

Despite the apparent difference between archives (organic records) and oral history (inorganic records), most archival repositories in Canada have taken on the responsibility of preserving tapes from oral history projects. This action leads to several practical problems within the archives itself in appraising, selecting, accessioning, describing, storing, and preparing inventories or finding aids for researchers. The care and custody

of oral history tapes can mushroom the costs of operating an archives.

Appraisal and selection of oral history must be based on the collections mandate of the repository. In many cases the oral history tapes will supplement the written record, while in other cases it will represent all that is available on a particular topic. The appraisal and selection of oral history tapes requires great patience, time, and perseverance. It takes much longer to listen to an oral history tape than it does to read a written document. An hour of tape requires an hour of someone's time. Poor quality tapes take a lot longer to verify for content.

The technical equipment required for gaining access to oral history presents extra operating costs, such as play-back tape recorders and either headsets or soundproof cubicles for the use of researchers. Once oral history tapes are deposited, the originals need to be stored in a secure place after duplicate copies are made for reference purposes. This ensures the preservation of all original information acquired, while adding to the operating expenses for in-house cassette duplicating equipment and blank tapes, or the costs of outside duplication by a service centre.

Full identification ought to appear on oral history tape labels, and in the accompanying documentation. Documentation should contain such information as the purpose for which the oral history project was undertaken, the full names of the interviewer and interviewee(s), the place, date and location of the interview, and access information. If missing, this can frustrate not only the archives but also the researcher, as a lot of valuable information may be determined by knowing even the location an interview took place.

Tapes require storage in similar humidity and temperature controlled areas as paper archives, and for conservation purposes it has been recommended that they be rewound periodically at playback speed so as to prevent 'print through'. To rewind tapes at fast forward could damage edges and stretch the tape, possibly causing distortions, although the latter relates more to music recordings. Such conservation methods further draw upon additional staff time and increase the total operational costs of an archives.

In an ideal situation time ought to be spent providing cross-referenced topical and nominal indexes to the oral history tapes, and at a fundamental level a form of finding aid ought to be prepared outlining its contents. Full transcripts of oral history tapes are rarely deposited with the tapes and not usually provided by the archival staff for the tape is considered the primary document for researchers in Canadian archives. This is in contrast with the United States where the transcript is the primary document, and coincidental with the practice in the United Kingdom. The main reason the tape is accepted as the "primary" document is for the wealth of additional information which comes across in the sound of the voice.

Workshops are another major expense which several archives in Canada incur for the instruction of potential interviewers who plan an oral history project. These have been carried on, for instance, by the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, and the expenditure in staff time is offset by the deposit of tapes of a higher technical and informational quality. A desired end result of such initiative on the part of the archives is supplementary information to enhance its collections policy, as well as new information.

Criticisms of oral history abound, including the reliability of oral evidence, the role the interviewer plays in creating oral sources, the fallibility of human memory, and inaccuracies of dates, places and events. These criticisms are valid and ought to be taken into account by researchers, i.e. "user beware". Notwithstanding all these difficulties, when an archives decides to get involved in preserving the products of oral history, the difficulties are outweighed by the benefits. Often interviews can lead to the discovery of archival records, and result in their ultimate transfer to a repository for preservation for future generations of users. The use of the oral-history method by Canada's social historians has opened up large areas of study and research which have previously lain dormant. Included in the latter are such topics as labour and management history, family history, immigrant and ethnic history, small business and working class history, and women's history. The products of oral history projects are of interest not only to historians, but also to linguists, anthropologists, genealogists, sociologists and economists. Oral history sources provide inter-disciplinary information - social clues, nuances of uncertainty, humour, pretense, and the texture of dialect - all characteristics missing in written documents.

Oral history has revolutionized and democratized the historical record and demonstrated its value and worth by raising the consciousness of many Canadians about their own history and culture. Oral history projects have created a much wider and deeper pool of information on our entire society and, I would venture to say, most archival repositories have recognized this value and accepted the task of preserving these oral sources for future researchers. Sir Hilary Jenkinson could not have envisioned the revolutionary technological change which has taken place since the 1920s in public and private records keeping, nor the use of archives for anything other than purely administrative and/or legal purposes. T.R. Schellenberg, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, however, was aware of the changes in media types and in his wisdom made the suggestion that the modern archivist had a definite need to redefine archives in a manner suited to his (or her) requirements. Oral history tapes, those which fit the selection criteria of an archives, which add either new or supplementary information to the archival record, and which focus on ordinary or significant lives in the whole of our Canadian society, would provide a wider base upon which to base future interdisciplinary studies. I need no convincing that such oral sources are important to preserve, and that the advantages far outweigh the problems in including them in our collections mandate.

## Beginnings of National Oral History Programmes

CANADAPublic Archives  
of Canada

Folklore/oral history collections were pioneered by the National Museum of Man (ethnographer Marius Barbeau between 1916 and 1948 collected music and folklore of native Indians and fellow French Canadians) and CBC radio broadcasts ("Assignment" and later "Voice of the Pioneer" with Harry Boyle and Bill McNeil from 1956 onwards).

- 1939 Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa commenced preserving sound recordings of historical nature;
- 1967 PAC began acquiring oral history as part of historical sound recordings;
- 1972 Sound Archives became division within National Film Archives. Early 1970s the division gained access to 'historically valuable CBC programmes' and made copies for deposit in archives. (Public had been denied access to tapes after broadcasts heretofore.)

Focus: National historical significance.

Policy: Collector and promoter, not creator of oral history.

Primary document: The tape. Transcription left to user.

- 1974 Formation of the Canadian (Aural ) Oral History Assoc.
- 1980 National Film, Television and Sound Archives (NFTSA).

GREAT BRITAINImperial War  
Museum

Oral evidence had been collected in Ireland since the 1930s (Dept. of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin); and in Scotland, Wales and England since the 1950s (School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, the Welsh Folk Museum, and School of English at the University of Leeds respectively).

- 1972 Imperial War Museum established Department of Sound Archives.
- 1973 British Institute of Recorded Sound established as a clearing house for oral history projects to ensure minimum duplication of effort.
- 1973 The Oral History Society was founded. Impetus: the collecting of oral history since the early 1970s by university departments of history and social science, e.g. the University of Essex (Paul Thompson).

Focus: working class + elites (75/25% respectively).

Primary document: The tape.

UNITED STATESColumbia  
University

- 1948 Professor Allan Nevins (considered the 'Father' of oral history in North America) began the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, New York.
- 1967 The Oral History Association was founded.

Focus: Significant lives in the political, economic and cultural affairs of the nation.

Primary document: The transcript.

Chronology of Some  
Major Programmes in Canada

- British Columbia  
Provincial Archives
- 1941 - CBC radio series  
1960 - CBC's Imbert Orchard began a 12 year project of collecting oral histories  
1971 - Bill Langlois, Reynoldston Research began.  
1972 - Publications programme (later Sound Heritage)  
1973 - Proposed "Oral History Institute of British Columbia" (aborted)  
1974 - Formation of Aural History programme at the Provincial Archives of B.C.  
1980 - Sound & Moving Image Division, P.A.B.C.  
1983 - Demise of Sound Heritage publication.
- Saskatchewan  
Archives Board
- 1945 - Acquisition of sound recordings began.  
1955 - Archivist, Lewis H. Thomas, conducted the first oral history interview (with Gabriel Leveille of Maple Creek re the history of the Province and the Northwest). Afterwards, archival staff used tape recordings to fill in gaps in certain manuscript collections.  
1962 - Project developed to interview senior citizens.  
1973 - "Towards a New Past" project (interviewing people of various backgrounds who helped shape Saskatchewan's social & cultural identity) initiated by Sask. Dept. of Culture & Youth.  
1973-4 Robert Cosbey's "Proposals for a Saskatchewan Oral History Project".  
1977 - Saskatchewan Oral History Programme established.  
1979 - Saskatchewan Sound Archives Programme.  
1980 - School oral history project - commemorating 75th anniversary of Sask.'s entry into Confederation.  
1981 - First Sask. Oral History Conference.  
Collection in 1981 comprised 10,000 tapes - 8,000 hrs. of sound documents, the largest component oral history.
- Manitoba  
Provincial Archives
- 1983 - Survey initiated to determine extent and nature of oral history materials in Manitoba. Results to 30 January 1984: over 5,000 tapes held by some 25 individuals and 70 organizations.  
1984 - Areas needing exposure: labour and working class, small business, native people, women and children, and ethnic minority groups.  
" - Twelve oral history workshops offered by PAM.  
" - Facilitated projects included: Flin Flon O.H. project, Gretna O.H. project, Lac du Bonnet, Westman, Fire Fighters Historical Society, Neepawa Homes...and Winnipeg Past and Present Oral History projects.

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