

## Review

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Charles E. Trimble, Barbara W. Sommer, and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The American Indian Oral History Manual: Making Many Voices Heard*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2008. 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-59874-148-3.

Aboriginal people have found themselves the subjects of research for centuries. This, in turn, has led to complicated and sometimes strained relationships, sometimes poorly conducted studies, and misleading and biased scholarship. In recent years some researchers have become more sensitive to the need to change old practices, but the supporting literature is only now becoming available that can help in creating relationships where research is sensitive, insightful, and trustworthy [Could we break this into two sentences separated by a semicolon and shorten a bit: In recent years, some researchers have become more sensitive to the need to change old practices; the supporting literature that can help in creating sensitive, insightful, and trustworthy research, however, is only now becoming available]. In producing *The American Indian Oral History Manual: Making Many Voices Heard*, authors Charles E. Trimble, Barbara W. Sommer, and Mary Kay Quinlan bring their considerable collective experience in both oral history and Aboriginal oral history together to create a useful and well organized manual. The book offers a great deal in a compact resource for people wanting to explore what the authors term “archival oral history” in a Native context.

The book itself provides an interesting example of a sensitive collaboration between Aboriginal researchers and more traditional academic scholars. Charles E. Trimble is an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. In the 1970s he played a key role in founding the American Indian Press Association and was Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians. This book grew out of a project Trimble was involved in, collecting the stories of American Indian veterans. The manual was then expanded to cover Native oral history collection in a more general context with the input of University of Nebraska-Lincoln historians Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, who, between them, have extensive experience with the practice of oral history and with their regional oral history association (for more information about the authors, see Left Coast Press’s website: <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=190> ). The book is primarily intended for use with projects driven by Aboriginal community needs and interests, and as a guide rather than a template, but the issues the book raises are important for any practitioner of oral history, as well as for students of cultural anthropology and ethnohistory. Both the overview of oral history and Aboriginal archival oral

history as well as some practical information about media storage make this a useful book for archivists or people tasked with archival duties in smaller organizations and communities such as librarians and even local government or band clerks.

One of the many contributions the authors make to the field of Aboriginal oral history is to clarify issues of meaning surrounding the term “oral history.” The authors note that this book is primarily intended for use by those interested in what they term *archival oral history*, which they distinguish from the many other meanings that “oral history” can hold. As they understand it, a key component of archival oral history is that the resulting material will be part of an archive, and this means that certain considerations in the choice of subject material and the structure of a project must anticipate this outcome and be compatible with it. The authors go on to discuss how, for American Indian people, the term *oral history* may have layers of meaning that may not be exactly the same as those operative in other communities. It would be impossible for one book to cover all the implications of this important note. But the authors alert the reader to the importance of developing a clear mutual understanding of what sort of material can be a part of any proposed initiative and what protocols must be considered when planning a project. The authors provide a thoughtful discussion about this and about issues of recollection and memory, myth and legend, and sacred stories.

*The American Indian Oral History Manual* also covers a comprehensive array of practical topics including planning, budgets, sample forms and evaluation guidelines, the context of storytelling, the use of recording devices, and interviewer preparation. The language is both precise and accessible. Because of this, this book stands out in the field of oral history literature by bringing together information about these essential areas in one very readable publication.. The section on oral history evaluation guidelines includes not only practical material, but an interesting, if brief, discussion of the historiography of oral history and the process that has gone into developing effective guidelines for its practice. Even the section on “Legal and Ethical Issues,” which is necessarily geared to an American audience still serves to alert the reader to the need to consider these questions in a local context. Like much of the book, the discussions in this section can be used as a spring board for researching local standards and considering particular ethical issues that might be unique to an area or project.

While the thoughtful, logical, and concrete information the authors have provided in this book are useful tools, this structure also raises an important caveat. If researchers adhere too rigidly to a format, or worse, plan a course of study without consideration of the community’s and individual informants’ goals, the study may well miss important information. These sorts of practices can serve to reinforce perceptions from past experiences that scholarly research is at odds with community values and interests. This manual can be a valuable tool once the community has clearly identified its goals, but not before. It should not be thought

of as a format or structure in and of itself, despite its comprehensive and well organized presentation of information. Much as the authors note that the classic structured interview format may not be appropriate for Aboriginal contexts, the structure of this book cannot be imposed on every, or perhaps even any, oral history context. Chapters dealing with interview preparation, interviewing, and interview processing suggest some possible scenarios, but the “step-by-step” format they take cannot not be taken too literally.

While it is impossible for the authors to fully explore all the possible topics related to Aboriginal archival oral history, it would have been useful if they could have addressed issues of translation in more detail. How translation is undertaken, changes in meanings and subtle nuances that may not be shared between generations, or even by translators from other communities are all things that need to be considered in projects where information is collected in a language other than that in which it will be presented.

Despite the somewhat minimal discussion of translation issues, the book’s section on transcription offers an excellent discussion of issues that can arise as spoken words are changed to letters on a page, issues that are best anticipated so that transcribing can be done consistently from the beginning, and informants can feel that their words are being gathered, stored, and disseminated respectfully. Of particular value is the warning of the authors that the transcribing step can have the effect of removing informants from their words, and the importance of doing all that can be done to minimize this effect.

Practical information about various media and how best to store things like audio tapes, and an overview of the process of collection and organization of oral history material and transcripts make this book valuable to anybody who will have the charge of caring for oral history material. Policy guidelines about access and related issues are important considerations that need to be agreed upon before informants are able to give informed consent, but also need to be clearly spelled out and transmitted to the custodians of the material so that they can abide by the terms.

With their considerable experience and cultural backgrounds, the authors of *The American Indian Oral History Manual: Making Many Voices Heard* have brought together the essential elements of Native archival oral history study in one compact, readable, and practical book. While anyone designing a particular study will have to add to the core material presented here with local consultations, cultural information, and possibly legal and ethical advice, this work is well worth including in core reading material. It could be equally valuable whether designing a project or teaching a class. The useful and usable information about archival oral history in an Aboriginal context that this book brings together make it a valuable addition to the bookshelves of Aboriginal groups, academics, archivists, librarians, and students alike.