

Rewinding Back to the Beginning: In Praise of the Donor Interview

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My career began at the National Archives of Canada (later Library and Archives Canada) in 1989. I worked for a period of ten years in Reference Services, first, in the Moving Image and Sound Archives and then as a Reference Archivist where I sat at the main reference desk. It was in 2000 that I returned to the Moving Image and Sound Archives, as an Acquisition Archivist, treading once again on familiar ground, and working with audio-visual collections. As a Reference Archivist, I became acquainted with donor interviews when researchers would request on-site consultation copies. It wasn't until I became the Acquisition Archivist assigned to the oral history portfolio that I came to appreciate the importance and contribution of the donor interview.

The National Archives of Canada Fonds and the Total Archives Concept

The National Archives of Canada (NA) came into being by proclamation in 1987, giving a new name to the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) which had operated as such since 1912. The PAC was formed out of two governmental agencies, the Secretary of State of Canada and the Department of Agriculture. Douglas Brymner was appointed as the head of the program for collecting Public Archives (1872-1873),¹ and by 1903, the two offices were merged as the Records Branch of the Secretary of State and the Archives Branch of the Department of Agriculture. Arthur G. Doughty became Dominion Archivist in 1904.

In the 1970s, it was Dominion Archivist Dr. Wilfred I. Smith's² vision to institute the "Total Archives" approach to acquiring and archiving. Separate media divisions such as the National Photo Collection, Documentary Art Section, Sound Archives, Moving Image Section, and Cartographic and Architectural

¹ Douglas Brymner was appointed by Order in Council 712, 20 June 1872. National Archives fonds, Mikan no. 266.

² Dr. Wilfred I. Smith served as Dominion Archivist from 1970 to 1984. National Archives fonds, Mikan no. 266.

Archives, within the Public Archives of Canada were perhaps not as well served as traditional textually-based archives. Media divisions had separate acquisition mandates and because they were non-traditional in an archival sense, at times, these media were perceived as support material.

The Total Archives concept meant that one form of record, media or otherwise, was just as valid as another in documenting the past. Regardless of their physical format and how researchers used these records, they each had unique processing and preservation requirements and concerns.

Peter Robertson, a former Photo Archivist, shared his views regarding the Total Archives concept: “I was one of the young recruits who was eager to map out a new field and to prove that perhaps photography was as worthwhile as manuscript material.”³ In time, media records and textual records would come to complement one another, to the benefit of the research community.

The National Archives fonds (Mikan no. 266) is a multiple media fonds consisting of 94 metres of textual records, many photographs, over 300 architectural drawings, several maps, close to 1200 hours of sound recordings, approximately 300 hours of video recordings, and 17 hours of films.

The audio-visual portion of the National Archives fonds includes videos, films, and sound recordings, with over 650 item level descriptions in the stand-alone audio-visual Misacs database.⁴ These media records document the activities of the institution consisting of broadcasts, proceedings, exhibitions, promotional productions, speeches, and more. In particular, the 1200 hours of sound recordings exist in various formats ranging from ¼ inch reel to reel audio tape to audio cassettes and digital media such as CD-R. They include speeches by respective Dominion and National Archivists, radio interviews with public and private broadcasters, staff presentations, symposia proceedings, recorded meetings of the Public Archives History Club, and in particular, donor interviews carried out by archivists in various media.

The Inception of the Donor Interview

The donor interviews’ benefits were numerous. In particular, they were used to fill in historical gaps, obtain context to build on descriptions, create finding aids, and develop biographical sketches. The advent of the portable tape recorder and

³ Email exchange with Peter Robertson, retired Photographic Archives archivist, 15 October 2014.

⁴ Misacs, a stand-alone database that has served the audio-visual staff extremely well since its inception in 1985, is part of the Minisis system. Misacs has several modules that perform functions which are particular to the needs of audio-visual staff. Although it can only be used to describe audio-visual records, the corporate Mikan system is used to describe all other media and textual records.

Dr. Wilfrid Smith's Total Archives concept were major contributing factors in the inception of the donor interview.

At the National Archives, the donor interview concept was born in the early 1970s. Curious archivists across a variety of media and manuscript holdings alike took part in the interviewing process. Helpful Sound Archives staff, consisting of an archivist, technician, and head of the section, equipped willing archivists with a Marantz PMD portable tape recorder, and a microphone for those who needed to do off-site interviews. When feasible, the Sound Archives accommodated interviewers and interviewees in a recording studio located in the basement of the West Memorial Building at 344 Wellington Street, in downtown Ottawa.

Certain managers supported archivists in their endeavour to learn about the oral history process and the donor interview. For Jean-Paul Moreau, a young and energetic Sound Archivist who joined the Sound Archives in 1972, it was a pleasure to introduce new recruits to the world of interviewing, by ensuring they were properly instructed in recording and interviewing techniques, and that they had sufficient blank cassettes and batteries to carry them through a lengthy interview.⁵

Once the interview was completed, the interviewer returned the borrowed equipment and the completed tape(s), whereupon Jean-Paul or a member of his team would prepare an itemized description based on the recorded interview, number the cassette, and make a preservation copy onto a 10 inch reel to reel tape.

In an effort to ensure archivists followed consistent standards in recording techniques, the Sound Archives staff and other concerned archivists in the Visual and Sound Archives recruited members of the newly-formed Canadian Oral History Association to draft oral history recording standards in both official languages.⁶

The Story of the Blue Duo-Tangs

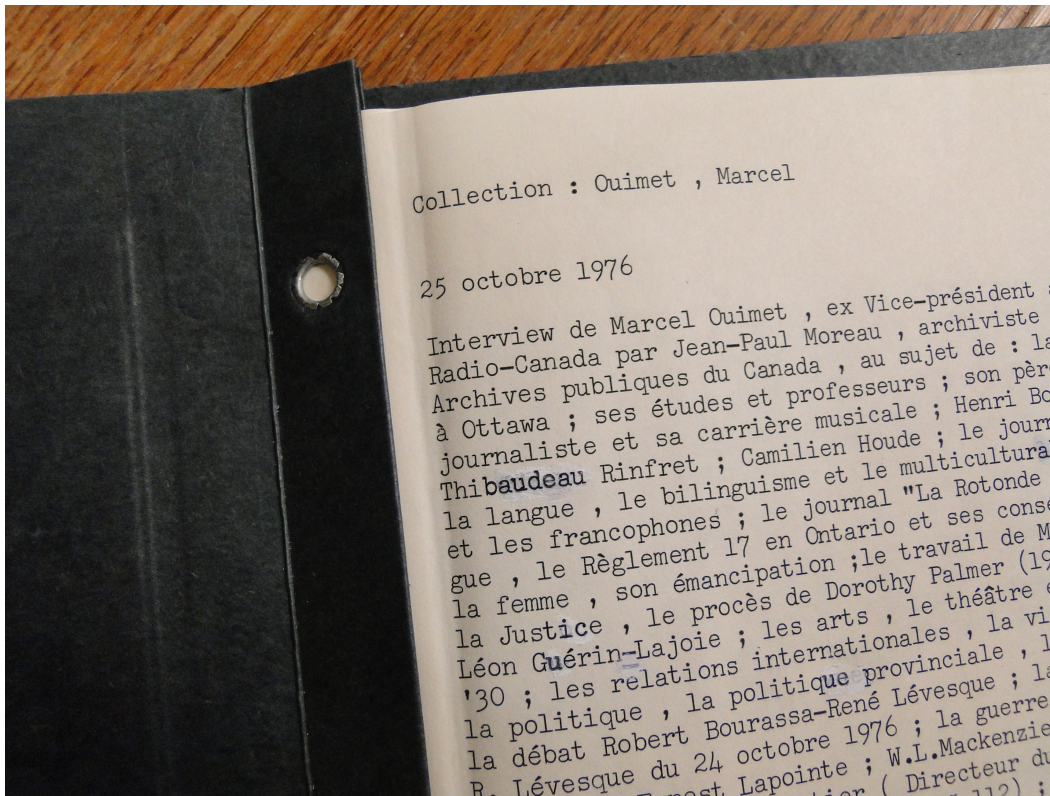
To my surprise, I recently came across a blue Duo-Tang folder tucked away in the back of an acquisition file that had probably been overlooked since 1977. It contained a series of eleven oral history interview descriptions (twenty two hours in total) conducted with Marcel Ouimet, between 1976 and 1977, by Jean-Paul Moreau.⁷ Ouimet was a Second World War correspondent with Société Radio-

⁵ Telephone interview with Jean-Paul Moreau, retired Audio-Visual Archivist, Film and Broadcasting, Library and Archives Canada, by Caroline Forcier Holloway, 16 October 2014.

⁶ The Canadian Oral History Association oral history recording techniques were made available to membership and others in the form of audio cassette, and later, on CD-R. They were written and recorded in English by Richard Lohead, and in French, by Jean-Paul Moreau.

⁷ National Archives of Canada fonds, accession number 1977-0004.

Canada (SRC). He is renowned for being the voice of French Canada overseas during the Second World War, and a pioneer in the Canadian broadcasting industry. After the war, he played a pivotal role in the building of SRC, first as Director-General of French-language broadcasting, and later as Vice-President of Special Programming.



Itemized description in a blue Duo-Tang folder. The blue Duo-Tang folders held descriptions of oral history interviews created by the archivists of Library and Archives Canada (LAC), prior to the inception of the Misacs database, a Minisis system database adopted by National Archives of Canada in 1985. Photo courtesy of Caroline Forcier Holloway.

The in-depth interviews cover events Ouimet reported on as an overseas correspondent, including the Battle of Ortona; the Invasion of Normandy; the Liberation of Paris, Brussels, and Holland; the Battle of Berlin; and the Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps. The interviews illustrate his post-war activities as a broadcast journalist, touching upon the political scene in Québec, notable colleagues in the field of broadcast journalism, his career at SRC, and his views on French-Canadian broadcasting.

The interviewer-interviewee relationship that developed between the archivist and the creator over the course of the interviews helped establish fundamental ties which eventually led to the subsequent acquisition of the Marcel Ouimet fonds in 1985. The fonds encompasses over fifty-three discs of war recordings as well as the beginning of the United Nations in New York,⁸ recorded between 1943 and 1953.

At LAC, the infamous blue Duo-Tang is synonymous with pre-computer-generated descriptions of sound acquisitions. The Duo-Tangs, cardstock folders with three-hole brass fasteners for 8½ x 11 paper, hold descriptions and item numbers of sound recordings such as speeches, radio recording, and oral history interviews.

In recent years, archivists have been entering these valuable detailed descriptions in the Misacs database on an ad hoc basis. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) has an ongoing audio-visual migration program to copy analogue audio and video holdings to a file base format, reducing further deterioration of endangered and obsolete formats. The migration program has also made it more feasible to adopt a systematic approach to entering the descriptions from the Duo-Tangs in the database.

Visual and Sound Archives Division – Donor Interviews

Within the Visual and Sound Archives Division, over 100 interviews (ca. 120 hours) were conducted between the 1970s and 1990s by archivists who wanted to bring a broader context to a potential or existing acquisition in such areas as journalism (J. King Gordon), radio broadcasting and production (Marcel Ouimet and Esse W. Ljungh), filmmaking (Gordon Sparling, Enid Fryer, Arthur Larente, King Irish, Donna King, Geoffrey Keighley), cinematography (Roy Tash, Dan Gibson), , film production (George Patton), sound engineering (Chester E. Beachell and Eric Handley), politics (Michael Starr and Jack W. Pickersgill), writing (Yves Thériault), and more.

Archivists displayed their knowledge and expertise of collections and themes in a variety of ways such as in 1975, when Richard Lohead, former Audio-Visual Archivist and Manager of the Film and Broadcasting Section, interviewed Dr. Maurice Haycock while viewing the footage of the visit of Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson, Group of Seven members, to the Arctic in 1930.⁹ In this particular case, the interview took place after the film was acquired,

⁸ Marcel Ouimet fonds, accession number 1986-0072.

⁹ Item level description of the commentary/interview entitled: Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson in the Arctic (Misacs - ISN 189471). The film of the same title, described separately in Misacs (ISN 189469), was originally shot in 1930 on 16mm silent, black and white, original reversal stock.

which set a precedent for other archivists to follow suit with this interviewing method.

Alex Grant, an Archivist with the National Film Archives, interviewed Dr. Linwood Brown, Director of Child Welfare for the Grenfell Missions in Labrador, about his filmmaking experience. The ¼ inch reel to reel audio tapes containing the interview and descriptive commentary of the film, form part of the LAC sound collection along with the Grenfell Mission films donated under separate cover, now part of the LAC film collection.

Interested archivists have also encouraged donors or surviving family members to provide annotations of their silent home movies, where little or no information is available, and when people, events, and locations are unidentifiable. Every once in a while, unidentified footage resurfaces when a researcher wants to access it. Often they are looking for detailed information the archivist cannot provide.¹⁰ When a donor can provide the details in the form of accompanying commentary to the film, archivists are grateful, such as in the case of early footage shot by archaeologist Graham Rowley, Doug Betts, RCMP officer posted in the Yukon in the 1930s, and Dan Gibson, wildlife cinematographer.¹¹

Documentary Art and Photography Division – Donor Interviews

The Documentary Art and Photography Division archivists were one of the largest groups of proponents of the donor interview. Collectively, they amassed well over 90 hours of interviews with notable photographers such as Kryn Taconis, Pierre Gaudard, Michel Lambeth, and Ted Grant, as well as over a dozen interviews with other photographers, reporters and editors from the *Montreal Gazette*, and even an interview with Judge J.R. Matheson about the Flag Debate. Other interviews were recorded but are linked to the donor's fonds or collection. Some noteworthy interviews include photographers Richard Arless, Ken Bell, Gilbert A. Milne, William Rider-Rider, and Lorraine Monk; visual artists such as Napoléon Bourassa (by Anne Bourassa) and Jean-Charles Désiré; and graphic artist Maxime Bénaïme.

Exhibitions, publications, information to add to the archival holdings, were only some of the reasons for sitting down with a prospective nationally

Thanks to their collaborative efforts, the donor is pleased to have provided the all-important context, in the form of a descriptive commentary, to an otherwise silent film.

¹⁰ Unidentified footage is an issue encountered in almost every archive. It is time consuming work for an archivist to attempt to identify home movie footage without labeling, end credits, or the input of the donor or a relative. Sadly much footage of this nature remains unidentified because of the lack of resources available to describe them.

¹¹ Dan Gibson was the last donor to be interviewed by an LAC archivist (Caroline Forcier Holloway) in 2004.

significant donor and collecting precious information about photographic and art processes, photojournalism, operational and organizational historical info about photographic units of some government departments and agencies, as well as some private sector industries.

A former archivist with the National Photographic Archives, and Director of the National Portrait Gallery of Canada, Dr. Lilly Koltun, recalls her first encounter with oral history in 1976. She credits her first manager, Andy Birell, with being insightful in encouraging her to conduct oral history interviews with prospective donors. Her interviewing skills improved with every interview she conducted with Lorraine Monk, doyenne of photography in Canada.¹² The interviews spanned over several years from 1976 to 1981, culminating in two separate series of interviews, and nineteen interviews in total. Topics discussed range from Ms. Monk's career as head of the National Film Board's Still Photography Department, notable photographers including Yousuf Karsh and Roloff Beny, the Centre for Photography, and a series of six photographic books she produced to commemorate Canada's Centennial year in 1967.¹³

Although an acquisition did not ensue from the series of in-depth interviews, Ms. Koltun's devotion towards this project enabled her to gain significant insight into a notable Canadian female's contributions to still photography in Canada, and allowing the archival research community the opportunity to discover the wealth of information that lies therein.

Dr. Koltun recalls: "We were an active and creative group, and there was a real interest in connecting with the contemporary community of photographers." During my recent phone interview with Dr. Koltun, she alluded to being open to learning to work with a new form of technology that was both a good cost and time efficient measure – telephone interviewing. This method of interviewing allowed her to conduct a series of comprehensive interviews with *Montreal Gazette* photographers, which she would have not otherwise been able to conduct due to the level of commitment required to set them up. She adds that although the technology took some getting used to, interviewees regarded her to be an open and credible interviewer.

Her oral history interviewing skills served her well into retirement, when she interviewed a series of visual artists for a Rogers Cable television program in Ottawa.

¹² Lorraine Monk is credited for having created a concept of photography as a valuable medium.

¹³ The National Archives of Canada fonds, interviews with Lorraine Monk, series of nineteen interviews, accession numbers ranging from 1976-0177 to 1981-0136.

Other Media and Traditional Archival Divisions

Cartographic and Architectural Sector archivists collected over 11 hours of interviews with architects from the private and public sector. Manuscript Division archivists collected over 68 hours of interviews between 1972 and 1986, with German Canadians talking about their immigration experience: an artist, opera singer, author, politician, engineer, labour organizer, historian, demographer, and others. In more recent years, a Philatelic Archives archivist interviewed philatelists and a postal historian about their respective careers.

“Creating a Record” vs. Acquisition of Oral History

At the National Archives of Canada, there existed an ongoing debate about the donor interview process. Many viewed it as creating a record, and as such were opposed to the process since it went against the principle of the fundamental role of an archive: to acquire and not to create. There were definitely two divided camps; those opposed to the donor interview process deemed it to be a luxury. The same opponents feared that if officially adopted as a process, the donor interview would be an additional task to add to an already existing heavy work load. Those who did partake in the worthwhile process knew that there was much more to an archive than just acquisition, description, and preservation.

Although it was never condoned nor entirely adopted as a process, many archivists were grateful that staff and recording equipment were made accessible to them to document a creator and/or donor’s background, biographical information, accomplishments, thoughts about a certain medium, and how they began their career and what led them to create the type of material for which they became known. Oral history as a process was a logical extension to the enhancement of a collection or fonds.

In many cases, the archivist felt a sense of urgency to interview donors. Peter Robertson, retired Photo Archivist, shares his thoughts on the donor interview process:

We interviewed photographers because we felt it was part of the job of archivists to have direct contact with the creators of the record we were preserving. The interview I did with Ken Bell (photographer) turned out to be the beginning of a long friendship, during which Ken gradually donated the rest of his enormous fonds to NA [the National Archives of Canada].¹⁴

¹⁴ Email exchange with Peter Robertson, Photographic Archivist, Library and Archives Canada, 15 October 2014.

This process was seen as a natural progression, a component directly related to the decision to acquire.

Mr. Robertson goes on to say that there was a sense of accomplishment about the donor interview process; most archivists can attest that the courting process could take several years before the acquisition officially took place. Donors were very appreciative of the interview process as it would allow them to share their knowledge and reminisce about processes and respective careers. In essence, they were praised for their endeavours and accomplishments.

Retired colleagues I interviewed and queried unanimously and unequivocally stated that the most important reason for conducting donor interviews was to ensure that the context provided by a donor supported the “content” of the acquisition. In acquiring a fonds or a collection of documents, the donor interview was never part of the official process, but grew out of necessity as a means of culling more information from the creator and/or the donor of the material. In many cases, the oral history interviews conducted by archivists complemented and enriched the textual records.

Challenges Encountered Along the Way

Transcriptions were not included in the donor interview process as this would have been an additional expense to be incurred by the archives. In retrospect, with transcriptions being in high demand by the research community, the added expense may have benefited wider access to the interviews in the long run.

At times, donor interviews proved challenging for an archivist when, during an interview, a donor would try to change the main focus and avert the topic at hand. Photo Archivist, Andrew Rodger, recalls the last interview he conducted with a photographer: “I wanted to get him to talk about things like the work he did, how he did his photography (a very interesting aspect because taking industrial and mining photographs means solving a lot of lighting problems which simply don’t crop up in the studio), his activities at the National Film Board, and so forth.”¹⁵

Many felt that the process might encroach on their work time. Preparing questions, learning how to use the recording equipment and practicing interviewing techniques, and arranging travel to see the donor, were just a few aspects of what the process could entail.

¹⁵ Email exchange with Andrew Rodger, retired Photo Archivist, 7 October 2014.

Donor Interviews in Federal Institutions

The *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*,¹⁶ published by the Canadian Oral History Association in 1993, is a useful tool outlining detailed findings from a comprehensive survey of oral history collections in archival, library, museum, and gallery repositories across Canada. It also provides information on donor interviews conducted by archivists, curators, and collection managers within Federal Governmental agencies and departments. These include: Canadian Museum of Civilization (now known as the Canadian Museum of History), National Research Council Archives, National Museum of Science and Technology (now known as the Canada Science and Technology Museum), National Gallery of Canada (including the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography), and National Archives of Canada (now known as Library and Archives Canada).

The Canadian Museum of History has never had a formalized donor interview process by museum staff but the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada* provides a few examples of interviews of an ethnographic nature. A recent example of a comprehensive donor interview is that of Nettie Covey Sharpe by curator Jean-François Blanchette,¹⁷ following the donation of her home contents, consisting of an extensive collection of folk art, to the Canadian Museum of History. He recorded video and audio interviews with the donor, describing individual artifacts while conducting a walk-about tour, in a form of material culture interview. He then assembled the interviews into a virtual tour and posted it on the museum's website¹⁸ for the benefit of researchers and museum patrons alike.

Concluding Thoughts

Twenty-five years later, I'm still working with oral history collections; however, the landscape has changed in many ways. The recording equipment is outdated, and sadly, donor interviewing, once a prevalent part of the job, for some archivists, has since been forgotten.

A major contributing factor in the interruption of the donor interview process at LAC is the change in technology. Those who continued to conduct

¹⁶ Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada, *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 13 (1993). The Guide is now based at the University of Winnipeg Oral History Centre Website: <http://oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Jonathan Wise, Archivist, Canadian Museum of History, 21 October 2014.

¹⁸ Nettie Covey Sharpe interview (not included in the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*) by Jean-François Blanchette: http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/arts/sharpe/sharpe_e.shtml.

interviews into the late 1990s and early 2000s, including myself, were still using the trusty Marantz PMD cassette tape recorder. Some were reluctant to give up analogue recording equipment for fear of becoming acquainted with new digital technology. Upgrading recording equipment would also prove costly for an activity that more or less was not widely accepted. By then, the former Sound Archives staff had dispersed and held positions elsewhere throughout the institution. A decrease in back-filling positions and subsequent retirements led to depleted resources of helpful and technologically-knowledgeable archival staff.

If the donor interview process was once considered to be beneficial to the acquisition experience, why not take up the challenge of reinstating it and equipping a new generation of archivists to be the players in this vital acquisition role. Oral history is alive and thriving in many institutions across Canada. Perhaps a revival will ensue and LAC will follow suit to pick up where its predecessors left off – celebrating its rich legacy, in praise of the donor interview.

Special thanks to my fellow archivists Jean-Paul Moreau, Richard Lohead, Lilly Koltun, Peter Robertson, Andrew Rodger, and Jonathan Wise, for their contributions.