

Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive.* Nancy MacKay. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Judith A. Gray

Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive is a guide for libraries, archives, and similar institutions faced with the challenges of accessioning, processing, and serving oral histories to patrons in person and via the Internet. Individual chapters cover the kinds of resources and activities necessary to establish, maintain, and provide access to a collection of oral histories (archives administration, recording technology, transcription, cataloging, preservation), together with a look at legal and ethical issues as well as concerns specific to placing oral histories on the Internet, and a concluding look at 21st century challenges.

The latter half of the book (pp. 89-150) consists of: (1) profiles of specific oral history programs, (2) sample forms, checklists, and worksheets that may be helpful models, (3) a glossary of many terms and acronyms that people may encounter, particularly with the technological and cataloging aspects of oral histories, and (4) resources, both bibliographic and organizational. The author has an accompanying website, conveniently giving direct links to the online resources that she cites, together with some 2007 and 2008 additions.¹

No such list, of course, can ever be complete, and new resources are steadily being produced. Among these is a new standard adopted by the Society for American Archivists in 2004, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACs)* (Society for American Archivists 2007), established principally for manuscript collections but now being tested for audiovisual collections. Another new resource is ID.LOC.GOV, a web-based service that allows easier access to Library of Congress authority records.² The first component on this website is the LC Subject Headings, but more name and title authorities as well as other controlled vocabularies will be added, all potentially useful in cataloging oral history collections.

While addressing the utility, creation, care, and use of transcriptions and related manuscript material, the author focuses much of her attention on the realities of handling audiovisual documentation in an age of rapidly changing formats and technological challenges. That being the case, the sections that seem to me to be the most important to highlight here are those regarding responsibilities and preservation.

In chapter 3 MacKay summarizes the responsibilities of (1) the interviewer (obtaining informed, written consent; interview preparation; responsibilities to narrator and to sponsoring institution; objectivity), (2) an ongoing oral history program or time-limited project (social responsibility; responsibility to the narrator; interviewer training; interviewer integrity and context; archiving), and (3) the archive itself (accessioning; access; privacy; legal issues; collection management; preservation) (pp. 38-40). These points are well worth reading and re-reading.

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To these, I would want to add the responsibility of any recording technician charged with preserving the audiovisual document, who must transfer the recording to another carrier with absolute fidelity—not editing out what may be discounted as “noise,” nor enhancing other sounds. Those tasks may be necessary for Web presentations and other end-user products, but they must not be part of audio preservation work.

And while the archive cannot assume responsibility for the narrator nor for eventual research usage, the archive may need to keep a certain distance between itself and the content of interviews in its collections. For example, it is unlikely that an archive can fact-check every assertion in an oral history collection, so if the materials are placed on-line, it may be prudent to provide that caveat, reminding users that assertions made are those of the interviewee, not of the institution.

The author’s brief section entitled “Respecting Cultural Values” (p. 37) is also worth reinforcing. She quotes William Schneider on the dilemmas that may arise from conflicting responsibilities based on cultural differences. In this regard, it may be useful for readers to take a look at the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, which encourage archives and communities to enter into ongoing dialogue about what is and is not appropriate, with full recognition of the realities of both parties.³

Preservation, however, is the major issue for archives with audiovisual materials. Digital preservation requires a permanent commitment to provide more than space on a shelf. It involves far more than copying analog materials on to CDs or DVDs, which are not archivally stable, or a reliance on proprietary software such as that for mp3s (see Bradley 2006).

The preservation standard now being used by audiovisual archives worldwide is a 96kHz/24-bit electronic file that can be migrated as needed, rather than any one material object.⁴ And digital files need constant back-up and error-checking, hence truly robust servers. In Europe there are now a few examples of partnerships in which commercial companies do the digitization and provide the archival storage for audiovisual materials in public institutions. Whether U.S. institutions will adopt a similar strategy is unclear; other options may be collaborations among archives, with digitized copies of oral histories residing on servers of larger institutions or consortia with similar resources.

In any case, judging by the number of inquiries we receive from individuals and organizations wishing to deposit their family (or ethnic group or occupational network, etc.) oral histories with us, it is clear that the interest in documenting individual experiences is strong, and that the interest in placing those documents in a repository is growing. Occasionally we hear from people before they start their documentation project, but more frequently they have recordings in hand, for which they are hoping to find a permanent home.

In that context, I could not agree more with MacKay’s observation: “The right match between an oral history collection and an archive is the most important ingredient to success” (p. 27). Making such determinations prior to acquiring a collection is part of an archive’s task. While MacKay’s principal comment about accessioning responsibilities concerns the timeliness with which an archive can make a collection accessible (pp. 36, 39), another aspect is related to end-

users. I am thinking here about the offers that frequently arrive of single oral histories. For the sake of researchers seeking documentation on topics of national interest, it makes most sense to group similar materials wherever possible; an isolated oral history from one person who participated, for example, in the Manhattan Project, will probably be under-utilized compared to a group of such narratives collected at a single repository. Those in search of information regarding local history are more likely to do their work in that area rather than to track down an individual narrative deposited outside of the state, for example. So playing to institutional strengths—and therefore suggesting potentially better locations, particularly for small collections, makes good sense for researchers in the long run.

Nancy MacKay's book is, then, a helpful guide to institutions coming to terms with the unique challenges of becoming a repository of audiovisual materials in general and of oral histories in particular. I am most pleased to have this book among the tools I can share with organizations seeking assistance with oral history projects.

Notes

1. The accompanying website can be found at <http://www.nancymackay.net/curating/>, accessed November 4, 2009. For an example, go to the "Oral History" tab then click on "Resources" in the right column.
2. ID.LOC.GOV can be found at <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/>, accessed November 4, 2009.
3. Protocols for Native American Archival Materials can be found at <http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/index.html>, accessed November 4, 2009.
4. See the Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects, IASA-TC04, 2nd Edition at <http://www.iasa-web.org/audio-preservation-tc04>, accessed September 3, 2010. Additional standards are being developed as part of the Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative: <http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/>, accessed September 3, 2010.

References Cited

Bradley, Kevin

2006 Risks Associated with the Use of Recordable CDs and DVDs as Reliable Storage Media in Archival Collections - Strategies and Alternatives. Paris: UNESCO. Electronic document, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001477/147782E.pdf>, accessed November 4, 2009.

Society for American Archivists

2007 Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS). Chicago: Society of American Archivists.

Judith A. Gray, an ethnomusicologist specializing in early Native American recordings, is head of reference services for the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress, home to the Veterans History Project (over 60,000 oral histories) and the archives of the StoryCorps project (over 30,000 interviews), among other spoken-word collections. The views expressed by the author in this review are not necessarily those of the Library of Congress.