

Proposal for a Saskatchewan Oral History Project

Robert C. Cosbey
University of Saskatchewan

Editor's Note: The letter that follows was submitted with the project proposal. We believe it is beneficial to reprint it here as an introduction to the proposal.

Folklore Institute
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana
December 14, 1973

Dr. John H. Archer, Principal
University of Saskatchewan
Regina, Saskatchewan

Dear Dr. Archer:

When I took sabbatical leave from the University of Saskatchewan for the year 1973-74, it was with the understanding that I would spend a part of my time developing a proposal for an oral history project for the Province of Saskatchewan. The Canada Council awarded me a Leave Fellowship to help make my work possible. The Folklore Institute at Indiana University, through its director Dr. Richard M. Dorson, made me welcome as a visitor and gave me facilities, encouragement and advice which have been of great help.

Since I sent you a preliminary report last September, I have been in correspondence with many oral history projects, and have through their generosity received letters of advice, descriptions of their projects and their procedures, and copies of their handbooks, guides, annual reports, and the forms and file cards they use. I have studied the Folklore Institute and the Archive of Traditional Music at Indiana University, the Roosevelt University Oral History Project in Labor History (Chicago), the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies at the Museum of Man in Ottawa, the Archives of Folklore and Languages at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine, in Orono. I have consulted a good many folklorists by buttonholing them at the International Conference on Folklore in the Modern World, Indiana University, August, 1973, and at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, Nashville, Tennessee, November, 1973.

I was first encouraged to think about oral history by the example and advice of an old friend, Studs Terkel, who long before he became known as the author of Division Street and Hard Times was demonstrating on radio and television in Chicago what an exciting medium oral history can be. When it became obvious to me that a tremendous opportunity and need for oral history existed in Saskatchewan, I was encouraged by Alan and Linda Quigley and their OFY project group, by Allan R. Turner, Provincial Archivist, by Frank Bogdasavich, Deputy Minister for Culture and Youth, and by yourself both as Principal and as a Saskatchewan historian.

It is with pleasure that I submit the following report, and in the hope that it may encourage the many people who are interested, to cooperate in the formation of a Saskatchewan Oral History Project. I shall be continuing my

study of oral history, and in a very modest way practising it. When I return to Regina as a fulltime teacher in the Department of English, I shall give the project any help I can.

I must record here my thanks to the officers of the following projects, who generously sent me both materials and advice: the Alaska Library Association, Bethel College, the University of California at Los Angeles, Public Archives Canada, the State Historical Society of Colorado, the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University, Cornell University Libraries, the Hagley Museum, the John F. Kennedy Library, the University of Michigan, the Ohio Historical Society, the Oklahoma American Indian Institute, the Pennsylvania State University, the University of South Dakota, the Southwest Collection, the University of Texas, the Harry S. Truman Library, Wayne State University, the University of West Virginia, and the University of Wisconsin.

Respectfully submitted,
Robert C. Cosbey
Professor of English
University of Saskatchewan

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I. What is Oral History?

The term "oral history" is in itself somewhat ambiguous, and in practice very different kinds of projects with little more in common than the use of tape recorders are called "oral history projects." But the decision about what, exactly, oral history is, will affect all subsequent decisions of organization, collecting methods, transcription and storage, and even selection of equipment, so anyone proposing an oral history project should start by explaining what he means.

The first impetus for an oral history project in Saskatchewan was the awareness that there are still old timers who remember significant segments of Saskatchewan's past, and the common agreement that it would be admirable to preserve somehow the memories of these older Saskatchewan people. A useful definition of oral history grows logically out of this practical starting point.

There are two kinds of oral history being practiced today. One, which has been developed by traditional historians, is the use of the tape recorder as an interviewing device to produce historical records which will be used in the writing of books of history. The other, which has been developed by folklorists, is the use of the tape recorder to preserve evidences of the folklife and oral traditions of a people such as would not be preserved by other means, which will be used by various kinds of researchers for varied purposes.

To illustrate the first: Allan Nevins, the American historian, began at Columbia University in 1948 an oral history project which has been the model for most such projects in the United States and has set the tone for the Oral History Association. In the age of telephones and rapid travel, more and more high-level decisions are made which are not recorded on paper (witness the recent interest in certain White House tapes). Therefore, in order to record how decisions were made, many oral history projects interview those people who were present or instrumental, and who can remember the pertinent facts. The interviews are usually recorded on tape, then transcribed onto paper,

corrected and edited by the informants, and preserved as written records. The tapes are usually erased and re-used. Two of the largest projects in oral history, those of the John F. Kennedy Library and the Harry S. Truman Library, are examples of this approach. Typically, the chief of the Harry S. Truman project, James R. Fuchs, says in a letter: "You will note that we do not preserve our tapes and consider a transcript as the end product."¹ This approach is characterized, then, by the traditional concept of history as flowing from the actions and decisions of key people, and also characterized by the use of the tape recorder as one step towards a typed document. From oral history in this sense have come a series of history books with a new sense of liveliness, an accuracy in small everyday details and in the words people actually used, seen in such works as James M. Burns's Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox, Joseph P. Lash's Eleanor and Franklin, and William Manchester's Death of a President.

The other approach to oral history, which is folkloristic, uses the tape recorder to preserve two kinds of material: oral evidence about the informants' own lives and experiences, and oral tradition about events before the lives of the informants.

It surprises most of us to realize how remarkably tenacious, detailed, and historically accurate oral tradition can be. One of the most remarkable and moving examples of this is the story of how the oral traditions in an American black man's own family enabled him to return to the specific African village of his ancestors six generations back and find there an oral tradition which confirmed his own.² If we record the reminiscences of pioneers and old timers, it is not only to hear stories about the good old days--it is also to obtain real historical evidence. Oral tradition is, like all other sources of history, subject to bias and distortion, but this is not to deny its validity, properly used.

Oral history in this sense also preserves on tape the personal experiences, the daily lives and habits of past times. Think of hearing, in her own voice, a woman's detailed account of keeping house in a sod shanty. For many reasons, then, the final product of oral history in this sense is not a typed transcript but the recorded tape itself, often supplemented by photographs or artifacts. Transcripts are likely to be thought of as a convenient means of finding out what is on the tapes.

Typically, the assistant archivist of the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University, David Murrah, writes:

While many oral history programs furnish edited transcripts, we feel that the tape, and not the transcript, is and should be the finished document of our work. We are not attempting to make or produce books out of the oral reminiscences of witnesses: we are simply preserving the oral portion of history, that portion which in times past was either lost or distorted.³

Dr. Neil Rosenberg, Acting Head of the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland, advises in a letter specifically about the proposed archives for Saskatchewan:

An oral history archive which keeps its tapes and doesn't edit its transcripts...is also a linguistics, folklore, sociology, etc., archive, a multi-purpose place of use to a wide range of scholars. Hence it is not only useful to the people of the province, it is useful to scholars from a number of places.⁴

The products of oral history in this sense are varied. They include the same kinds of history books as grow out of the first approach. But they also include the dialect dictionaries and collections of local custom which are coming from Memorial University, the folklife histories of the lumberman and the lobster fisherman which are in progress at the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History, and such published works as William L. Montell's The Saga of Coe Ridge and Studs Terkels' Division Street and Hard Times: an Oral History of the Great Depression in America.

"Oral history" as the term is used in this report should be understood to mean the collection of evidences of the folklife and traditions of a people, recorded on tape and preserved for multiple use. It can be thought of as a general collection of the reminiscences of pioneers and old timers (which is what I shall recommend as the first phase of the Saskatchewan project), and equally as the collection of material on specific subjects: the history of the family farm, the history of political parties, the history of medical services, education, mining, forestry, inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations--all from the points of view of a spectrum of participants.

Projects already active which fall into this category of oral history include the Archive of Folklore and Language at Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine, the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University, and the South Dakota Oral History Project at the University of South Dakota. It is to be hoped that the planners and directors of the Saskatchewan project will keep in touch with these projects and benefit by their experience.

II. Why is an Oral History Project Needed in Saskatchewan?

Saskatchewan is at a most interesting point in time. There are still old timers whose memories go back to the settlement of parts of the province, to major events in our history, and to details of folklife not elsewhere on record. Students in the OFY project "Chapters in Saskatchewan Spoken History" were surprised to find that even for the first practice tapes they made, with the first informants they could reach, a wealth of detail turned up about arrival in the province, about life in sod houses, about the Dirty Thirties. There is simply no doubt that a wealth of material is there, in the memories of people who are extremely unlikely to get their reminiscences down on paper.

There is, it is equally clear, a great urgency to immediate action, since many of the potential informants will not be available much longer. This is commonly true, where oral history projects have sprung up to capture the memories of old timers. Students at the University of Maine who are compiling material for a folklife study of the Maine lumbermen told me that when they went to the Penobscot Indians to get the story of the Indians' role in lumbering (which was quite significant) the Indians told them they were just three years too late: three years earlier they could have interviewed several Indian veterans of the log drives, but now none were left and the story was lost beyond recovery.

Similarly, Pierre Berton, whose Klondike was based in part on interviews with old timers, tells us in a note to the second edition:

Most of the material in the last chapter of this book comes from personal interviews with Klondikers, all of whom have died since Klondike was first published....If I had waited a few more years to write the book, such personal memories would have been impossible;

indeed, before I finished the text a good many of my informants had already gone. Yet without these personal conversations, the book would be much less effective.⁶

This sense of urgency hangs over all who are concerned with the possibility of an oral history project for Saskatchewan. Leo LaClare, chairman of the Oral History Committee of the Canadian History Association's Archives Section, writes:

I would like to mention my personal interest in the oral history of Saskatchewan since one of my great grandfathers, Moise L'Heureux, was a pioneer rancher, farmer, and instructor at the Indian school of Delmas in the late 1800's and early 1900's. I should record my grandmother's reminiscences of her father and of pioneer days....⁷

G. S. Jackson, Director of Audio-Visual Services at the University of Saskatchewan Regina Campus, after commenting on technical aspects of the proposal, added: "I just lost a chance to record a cousin who died at 107 last year....The things she could remember...."⁸

These are by no means uncommon observations, as anyone familiar with Saskatchewan knows. Even a casual check of the obituary columns will show that people in their 80's and 90's are rapidly dying off, taking with them memories we cannot recover. One of the first goals of the Saskatchewan Oral History Project must be to change "The things she could remember!" to "The things she got down on tape for future generations!"

It is true, of course, that some attempts have already been made to tape some of these resources. At least one OFY group did some collecting. At least one ethnic folklore group is collecting. The Ministry for Culture and Youth, in the "Towards a New Past" project in the summer of 1973 sent some thirty collectors out. Some university professors have made personal collections in their own fields. Some collectors from outside the province have collected materials, as Dr. Robert B. Klymasz, of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, for example, has collected among Slavic groups in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta. Several scholars in the field of anthropology have collected materials among the Native Peoples.

What is apparent, however, is that no coordinated project to send collectors into the field exists to take advantage of the present but fleeting opportunities and no central depository exists to make the collected results available to researchers. There are many dangers in undisciplined collecting: tapes may be inefficiently recorded, or haphazardly stored so that they deteriorate, or kept in scattered places so as to be useless. Collected information may be scrappy, incoherent or cryptic, or so poorly annotated as to be useless to historians. Collected material may be used in ways that violate the rights of informants and alienate them, making further collecting difficult. There is a very great need for professional supervision of collecting, for a common set of standards and procedures, and for a central and professional archive.

Once the project is systematically in operation, and the reminiscences of old timers are being made available in professional form to researchers, the Saskatchewan Oral History Project can be directed towards selective collecting in specific subjects. Perhaps the project will concentrate on certain towns or other points of historical interest. Perhaps it will compile histories of the family farm, or of medicine, or great social movements such as occurred during the Depression. In all such projects, the technique of oral history can produce materials unavailable through other sources.

Eventually, an oral history archives might be expanded or coordinated with museums or other archives to make available not only taped evidence but photographs, moving pictures, videotape, and such non-print historical materials as newsclips from television newscasts, etc., so that at some future time the student of Saskatchewan history could not only read about past events but to some extent see and hear them.

It is to be hoped that the urgency of getting recorded the reminiscences of our old timers will move us to set up an organization capable not only of making those reminiscences permanently available, but also of putting on record for future citizens many other collections of the kind that only a well-organized oral history project can produce.

III. Proposal for an Oral History Project: (1) Committee and Director

The chief purpose of this report is to urge that a Saskatchewan Oral History Project be established as soon as possible, so that coordinated collecting can begin in the summer of 1974, and the archives be operative in the fall of 1974. There is no need to set up an expensive or elaborate organization; indeed, the planners should quite properly demand to see some fruitful activity on a modest scale before recommending the allocation of funds, space, and effort on a relatively large scale. Two things are, however, of immediate and imperative urgency. First, a start must be made immediately. Second, the project, since it can be expected to grow, must be organized from the beginning in a way compatible to growth, so that later reorganization will not be necessary.

First, then, I recommend that the University authorize formation of a Saskatchewan Oral History Project as a unit of the University of Saskatchewan Regina Campus, to be housed for administrative purposes wherever it seems best to the Principal and his advisors (possibly as a separate unit reporting to him as an academic service. It could logically be part of Canadian Plains, the Department of History, the Humanities Division, the Division of Social Sciences, Audio-Visual Services, or the Provincial Archives, but in any of these cases the interests of the other groups would seem to be slighted.)

I recommend that the University invite the Ministry of Culture and Youth, and the Provincial Archives, to join the University in appointing members to a Saskatchewan Oral History Committee. The Committee's function should be to draw up a specific proposal, to recommend a candidate for the position of Director, and to approve all plans for collecting, archiving, and use of materials. I would hope that as one of its first items of business the Committee would study this report and recommend adoption of as much of the detailed proposal as seems fitting.

Such a committee will be needed not only to get the project started but to make difficult policy decisions as the work of the project grows. One site only one problem: there is much more opportunity for collecting than we can take advantage of. What particular projects should be authorized or encouraged?

In my judgment, the Committee should include members representing the Principal's office, the Canadian Plains Institute, the Bilingual Program, the Department of German and Slavic Studies, the Department of History, Audio-Visual Services, the Provincial Archives, and the Ministry of Culture and Youth.

The Director. I was surprised, as I visited several oral history projects and read about others, to discover how many of them owe their inception or their continued existence to the time, energies, and devotion of single

individuals. The Columbia University project was brought into being by the stubborn efforts of Allan Nevins. The Foxfire project was started by an English teacher looking for subjects his students would write about with enthusiasm, and sending those students out to report on their own folklife roots. The Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History was started by one folklorist in the Department of English. The Roosevelt University Oral History Project in Labor History is the product of one energetic historian. In many other cases, the same is true: one stubborn enthusiastic person has bulldozed through a program, often in spite of neglect or opposition, which has then been recognized as valuable.

In Saskatchewan, it is to be hoped that the pattern will be somewhat different, that several people already interested in such a project can come together and insist on its inception. But even so, they will need a director, and one with energy and dedication. He must coordinate the various collecting activities. He must see to it that wherever possible funds from CFY, LIP, PEP, and similar programs are used for collecting. He will need to publicize rules for collecting, including the ethics of collecting and the use of materials. He must publicize the project and conduct surveys to find informants. He must see to it that specific proposals are drawn up in cooperation with groups interested in collecting or sponsoring collectors. He must see to it that the collected materials are properly indexed, catalogued and stored. He must encourage such use of the materials as will in the long run justify the whole project (and attract funds, incidentally, such as Canada Council funds.)

When I originally proposed an oral history project, I suggested that these functions might be taken over by the Provincial Archivist. The more clearly I see what is involved, the less practical it seems to add such duties to an office which is already a demanding one. Therefore, one of two other steps should be taken.

First: A new position should be established, to be called Director of the Saskatchewan Oral History Project. It should be filled by someone with training in oral history (or someone willing to take the summer classes offered by Columbia University, Berkeley, and a few other universities, or the oral history workshop offered annually by the Oral History Association). The candidate should have a background in history or folklore, and must be familiar with Saskatchewan.

Such an office need not be filled by a high-ranking or high-salaried person. What is needed is not a prestigious scholar, but an active energetic and intelligent coordinator. A young man with proper qualifications, at a salary comparable to that of an administrative assistant or that of a lecturer would fit very well for a start.

Second: As an alternative to the above proposal, the job I have described could be split into two: a director and an archivist. The first would direct all activities which result in tapes; the second would direct the indexing, cataloguing, storage, and use of the tapes. It might be possible to fill one or both of these positions on a part-time basis by releasing a present staff member from part of his present responsibilities.

The director is the key man. Although it is certain that in Saskatchewan an oral history program of any scope will come about soon only by the cooperative efforts of many people, it is equally true that a good director is needed to keep things coordinated and keep them moving. For this reason, I tend to favour the first alternative above, and the search for a young, qualified individual to

fill a new position. However the problem is solved, it should be solved soon. One of the first things the director should do is to see that applications for OFY and similar grants go in, in time for work in the summer of 1974, which means somebody must get to work very soon.

IV. Proposal for an Oral History Project: (2) Collectors and Their Training

Who shall be the collectors of materials in oral history, and what training do they need? In the oral history projects which serve traditional history, such as the John F. Kennedy Library and the Harry S. Truman Library, it is usual to have trained professional interviewers on staff. The advantages are obvious; the disadvantage is a matter of cost: very few projects can afford full-time professionals.

In many small projects, the one person whose energies keep the project going is also the only regular collector. If they are fortunate, such projects may from time to time obtain grants, but usually these are used up in hiring transcribers.

Where an oral history project has grown out of the activities of university classes, students have often been used as collectors, receiving credit for their work as part of the required class activity. Student collections, which can be quite reliable if the classwork includes proper theory and supervision, form important parts of the archive collections at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University, the Archives of Folklore and Language at Memorial University, and the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine. In all of these, the collecting is carried out as part of the work of classes in folklore.

In Saskatchewan, what sporadic collecting has been done has been mostly the work of scholars in anthropology or history assembling materials for their own research, or the work of students on OFY or Towards a New Past grants, sent out with minimal preparation and no training in collecting or archiving (due partly, to be sure, to the pressure of time.)

To decide what is needed, we should first review what it is that a collector needs to know, what kind of training is fundamental.

(1) First, a collector must know as much as possible about the subject on which he seeks information. Professional interviewers spend many hours in research preparatory to each hour of interviewing. It takes information to get information. That was borne home to me dramatically when I sat in on a class in folklore at the University of Maine. The students had invited an old former lumberman to talk about the log drives on the Bangor River. They had prepared in advance a large model of the log-sorting boom on the river, at which the informant had worked in his youth, and had read everything they could find about it, and were full of intelligent questions. When the man heard their questions he was much excited, and poured out a wealth of detailed information about how the sorting operation was carried out--information nowhere in print.

One of the devices of teachers of folklore is to send their students to their own home towns and to their own relatives for information, which gives them immediate advantages of access and background. At the 1973 meeting of the American Folklore Society, one of the papers presented to that professional body was an illustrated report on quilts, quilting, and the social customs associated with quilting in a small Georgia community. The author was an undergraduate student; the chief informant was her own grandmother.

If a Saskatchewan collector were going to interview people about life in sod houses, he would first need to read everything he could on the subject (starting, perhaps, with Roger Welsch's Sod Walls: The Story of the Nebraska Sod House, 1968).⁹ He would need to consult the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society's roster of sod houses, and their committee reports. He would need to assemble 8 x 10 reproductions of typical photographs to show informants as the basis for questions and to stir memories. Thus prepared, he could ask intelligent questions, could avoid information already in print, could spot leads to follow up, etc. He would not simply be saying "Tell us about the old days," and turning on the tape recorder.

Before any collectors are sent out, the Committee or the Director should have drawn up a List of Questions, outlining the kinds of information to be collected in Saskatchewan, so that the collector will not neglect areas of information. Such a list takes time to prepare but is very useful thereafter, not as a set form for interviews but as a reminder to collectors of areas of interest. A copy should be given to each collector, and he should know how to use it.¹⁰

(2) A collector needs to know his equipment. He must be so familiar with his tape recorder that he can use it casually, and seem to ignore it, so that it will not be forbidding to informants. He must know enough not to set the recorder and the microphone on the same table (where recorder noises will be picked up and the set look most formidable), unless he works with a built-in mike. He must know how to change reels or cassettes quickly and casually, how to adjust a microphone to avoid background noise, what to do about loud clocks, etc., which the human ears ignore but the machine picks up, how to allow for low voice levels, pressuring a hesitating informant, how to key in discussion of a photograph or object so the interview will make sense to anyone listening to the tape--dozens of other such points. He should know how to use a simple flash camera, to get photographs of informants and, if called for, of their tools, workspaces, etc.

(3) The collector must know the techniques of interviewing: how to prepare an informant by letter before the interview to give him time for recollection, how to break the ice and establish rapport, how to guide the talk without shutting off valuable reminiscences on other subjects, how to judge when to end the interview, and whether to return for more. He must know what field notes are needed for researchers who will use the tapes; what information about the informant and his history; also what notes to take for the transcriber of the tapes, such as spellings of proper names, etc. He must know how to elicit material which is controversial or charged with emotion, since a serious record of the past must certainly include such material, and how to draw it out without taking sides or rousing ill will.

(4) The collector needs to know the ethics of collecting and interviewing. He must make it clear to everyone that he is an agent of the Project, not collecting material for his own use or for commercial use, and that the informant has the right to determine what information he will give and what restrictions shall be placed on its use. He must use no trickery, and especially must never record without the informant's knowledge and consent. He must be able to explain the release forms by which the informant gives the Project the right to make material available to researchers, and the restrictions which will be put on the use of materials. He must be able to explain the informant's continuing rights to his own material even though the property rights to the tapes and their verbatim contents will belong to the Project.

(5) The collector must know how to submit tapes to the Project; how to mark tapes and containers for safe identification, how to make out an accessions sheet including an index of the taped materials keyed to the counter of his own tape recorder, with a parallel set of notes to the transcriber on spellings, difficult passages, etc., in what form to submit field notes on the informant and the interview so the material will be useful to historians, how to submit a field diary with leads for future collecting. He must follow up any photographs, diaries, etc., loaned by the informant and be personally responsible for getting them back to the informant after they have been copied for the files.

Where shall we find such collectors? I recommend a number of steps. First, and most urgent, we must develop our own Handbook for Collectors of the Saskatchewan Oral History Project, as a minimum statement of the project and its methods. Such a handbook might well be modelled on Edward D. Ives's Manual for Field Workers,¹¹ which is one of the best, but it should carry the name and description of the Saskatchewan Oral History Project, a statement of purpose, the Saskatchewan list of Questions for Collectors, and other detailed information needed by collectors, and samples of release forms, etc. This Handbook, as a minimum first step, should be given to everyone collecting for the Project, as a statement of expected procedure.¹²

Second, we should take maximum advantage of such funds as are available through ONY, LIP, HEP, TFP, etc. Experience has shown, both in Saskatchewan and elsewhere, that such funds can be made available for the collecting of oral history. Indeed, it should be a point in favour of those applying for such funds, that they will be working under the supervision of the Project, and contributing to the preservation of oral tradition in a regular archive. One of the immediate tasks for the Project is to find out what funds will be available for the summer of 1974, and to ensure that Saskatchewan students (and such others as may be eligible) apply for such funds. It might not be too late to suggest to the federal and provincial funding agencies that funds be made available for such purposes, stressing the value of the results not only in summer employment but in permanent value to the people of Saskatchewan.

Third, the University of Saskatchewan should offer a class in oral history for regular undergraduate credit, and collecting projects should be part of the work of the class. It should also offer a class in folklore, in which the illustrative materials will be as much as possible those of Saskatchewan, and in which collecting will be required. Such classes would be of value to many disciplines, of course, in their own right, besides contributing to the archives.

Fourth, an effort should be made to get summer scholarship funds for regular students in majors related to Saskatchewan, to enable them to spend time in collecting oral history (after proper training). Whether such funds are called scholarships or summer employment grants, they could be justified as such as well as contributing to the archives.

Fifth, the Oral History Project should enlist the interest of museums, libraries, history societies, and local groups around the province to sponsor collecting projects for the archives, and to send collectors to Regina for training sessions. The Project should develop a short course for such purposes, of about one week of intensive work. (The Ministry of Culture and Youth should be asked to consider whether the costs of such a program could be provided.)

Sixth, the Oral History Project should enlist groups interested in special aspects of Saskatchewan history (such as community clinics, wheat pools, labour organizations, women's movement groups), to subsidize collecting of the oral history of the groups; the collectors to be trained by the Project and the tapes to be available for research in the Archives.

In all such ways, and as many more as can be thought up and put into practice, we should be enlisting help in supporting collection, always insisting on the coordination of projects, the training of collectors, and the retention of tapes in the Archives.

V. Proposal for an Oral History Project: (3) The Archives and the use of Recorded Materials

In this section, I recommend a specific system for the accession, storage, and use of collected materials. My suggestions are based on an examination of many oral history projects. Some I visited and studied on the spot; many others sent me descriptions of their procedures and samples of their works sheets, index cards, etc.¹³ I have combined all I could learn from these systems into one system which would fit our needs as simply as possible, using as few forms and as few steps as possible, which would serve the needs of researchers efficiently, and which would be logical enough to be efficient no matter how large the Archives may in the future become.

(1) The Collector Submits Material. In what form should collectors submit material to the Archives? This question must be considered in conjunction with another: what equipment will the collectors be using?

As for equipment, I find a surprising unanimity among oral history projects. If money were no object, we should use the latest model Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorders (and we should, in any case, try to obtain one such recorder for special use.) Since the cost makes the Nagra impractical for our field use, we should consider the Sony TC 800B, a five-inch reel-to-reel portable recorder currently selling for \$280.00 U.S. Most oral history projects which have professional interviewers use this machine. However, since our collectors will not be professionals, it makes more sense to use as our standard field equipment the Sony TC 110 cassette recorder, a small, unobtrusive but very efficient machine selling at under \$100.00 U.S.¹⁴ I shall assume, therefore, that recorded material comes to the Archives on cassette tape.

The collector will submit to the Archives a) his cassette tapes, with his name, etc. on a label on the cassette itself and on the container. He will also submit b) a release form signed by the informant (See Figure I), c) a photograph of the informant and any other photographs collected all with identifying notes on the back, d) his field notes giving the background information about the informant (his age, places of habitation with dates, schooling, profession, etc.), and e) his field diary (giving notes useful to future collectors). He will also fill out, on the accession sheet, information about the tape, the collecting session, etc., and will enter on the accession sheet a brief index of the contents of the tape, keyed to the counter of his own tape recorder, with a parallel set of notes for the transcriber (See bottom portion of Figure II). The field diary, which is for the use of other collectors, is set aside in a special file. The other material is taken over by an accessions clerk (a function which in our case will be one of the duties of the steno-transcriber).

(2) The Process of Accession. When a unit comes in from a collector, consisting of one or more cassette tapes and the other material noted above, that unit is given an accessions number, indicating the year and the item number. (Thus the accessions number 74-103 would mean the one hundred and third unit accessioned in the year 1974.) This accessions number is stamped on each page of all material relating to the unit: accessions sheet, field notes, photographs, etc. This is the base number, on which all filing and access will be based.

An accessions card is made out for each item, giving name of informant, name of collector, date and place of collecting, and a very brief indication of subject. The accessions cards, numerically filed, are the basic index of the archive materials, corresponding to a library shelf list.

At the same time, an accessions folder is stamped with the accessions number. This folder, which will hold all material about the tapes in one unit, is filed numerically. In it will go accessions sheet, informant's release form, collector's field notes, photographs and negatives. If a transcription is later made of the tapes, that is stored in this folder also.

Figure I: Release Form, to be Signed by Each Informant (The restrictions, here illustrated, will probably be rare.)

Saskatchewan Oral History Archives
Release Form

I hereby donate to the Saskatchewan Oral History Archives the taped information I have this day given to John Smith, collector, by tape recorder. I understand that the taped material will be stored in the Archives and made available for responsible use, and that it will not be used verbatim except with the written permission of the Director.

June 13, 1974 (date)

James Brown (signature)

It is understood that the material about the troubles in our church will not be released for use before my death.

James Brown

John Smith (witness)

The accessions sheet on which the collector has entered basic information and an index of his tape, is also a workflow sheet, on which the various steps to be taken with the material are checked off when completed, with the date of completion and the initials of the workers. (See Figure II.)

A collector index card is made which bears the name of the collector and accession numbers of all items he has collected. These cards, filed alphabetically, form the collector index.

An informant index card is made, bearing the name of the collector, his place of habitation, and the accession numbers of all items for which he is the informant. These cards, filed alphabetically, form the informant index.

A place name index card is made, bearing the name of the place which is the locale of the taped information, identified according to a standard map of the Province, and accession numbers of all items concerning that place. These cards, filed alphabetically, form the place name index.

A number of subject index cards are made, based on the collector's index, one card for each subject, such as people mentioned, occupations historical events, etc. Each card will contain one such heading and the accession numbers of all items containing material on that subject. These cards, filed alphabetically, form the subject index.

The cassette tape is stamped with the accession number. It is then dubbed onto master tape (preferably 3M Scotch Brand No. 208 Low Print/Low Noise quarter--inch Master Tape). The master tape is marked on the reel and on the box with the accession number. The tape, in its box, is stored standing on edge in a wooden cabinet (to prevent magnetic distortion), all the master tapes stored in order to accession number, under temperature and humidity control. The cassette tape is erased and made available for re-use in the field. (In practice, as will be seen, the use tape is dubbed from the cassette tape at the same time as the master tape.)

At this point, accession and indexing are complete.

(3) Making Materials Available for Use. The master tapes are unique. It would be dangerous to let them be used, just as it would be dangerous if users of the Archives have access to the accessions folders. Therefore, we need to reproduce materials for use.

The tapes, except for portions restricted by informants or judged unintelligible, are dubbed onto use tapes (Preferably 3M Scotch Brand AVC 176 Heavy-Duty tape). These tapes, marked with accessions numbers, are made available to researchers in a use area.

The contents of the accessions folder are xeroxed and put in a use folder, marked by the accessions number, which is also made available in the use area. Where this use area will be is an important question. It should be physically separate from the storage area, to avoid confusion. For example, the archive's storage area might be in the Provincial Archives, where the master tapes could be kept under controlled temperature and humidity, and the use area might be in the Audio-Visual Centre or the Bilingual centre, where equipment exists for listening to tapes. I suggest that the researcher should come to the archives to consult the various indexes, then go to the use area to consult the use folders and listen to use tapes.

To what extent should tapes be transcribed? Transcriptions, which must be precise word-for-word records of what is on the tape, are very useful to people working with the material. Ideally, all tapes should be transcribed, and for such as are not in English there should also be a translation of the transcription into English.

But it can take up to fifteen hours to transcribe one hour of tape, especially if the speaker has any kind of accent, and a ratio of eight hours transcribing to one hour of tape is fairly standard. Transcribing can, it is clear, soon become very expensive. Therefore, it is necessary to propose that tapes be transcribed in order of their apparent usefulness, and to the extent that money becomes available. (Grant money from LIP, etc., has been available for this in some projects.)

When transcriptions are made, they will be deposited in the accessions folders. Xerox copies will be made and deposited in the use folders.

The use area must be controlled by some kind of supervisor. Perhaps this function could be given to some one in the Audio-Visual Centre or the Bilingual Centre. In any case, use must be supervised, because the materials on the tapes must be subject to certain restrictions. In library terms, these materials are not like books, but like unpublished manuscripts. Each user must sign an agreement sheet before using any material, stating that he understands and accepts the restrictions. The basic restriction must be that no material on tape or transcripts may be reproduced verbatim in any form without the written consent of the Director.

The ultimate use of the materials will, in the long run, justify the whole operation. With the set-up I have described, it would be safe to encourage wide use of the archive materials, by researchers undertaking historical studies, ethnic studies, geographic or linguistic studies, by students doing research for term papers, by members of the public interested in genealogy, or local history, or educational radio programs, etc. The widest possible use should be encouraged, at the same time that the archive materials (as distinct from the materials in the use area) are kept under tight security. It is to be expected that the results of such use would include books based on the materials, articles, reports, etc., and a wide understanding and appreciation of the oral tradition of Saskatchewan.

Figure II: Accessions Sheet

Saskatchewan Oral History Archives	
Accession Sheet	
Accession no. <u>74-103</u>	Accession card made <u>14/6/74 KL</u>
Collector <u>John Smith</u>	Collector card made <u>14/6/74 KL</u>
Date <u>13 June, 1974</u>	Informant card made <u>14/6/74 KL</u>
Informant <u>James Brown</u>	Subject card made <u>16/6/74 MS</u>
Place <u>Almont</u>	Master tape made <u>16/6/74 GSJ</u>
Language spoken	Use tape made <u>16/6/74 GSJ</u>
on tapes <u>English</u>	Transcription made <u>20/9/74 JA</u>
	Use folder made <u>17/6/74 KL</u>
Collector's Index	
Index	Noted
Tape 1 (of 3)	own in Ontario: LIMHOLMS
0-50 why came to Sask. from Ontario	(Song interrupted-I repeat question after disturbance)
50-75 choosing site	neighbor: JONSTONE
75-130 help from neighbors	See photo #2, from family album, also my
130-260 how sod house was built	photo #3, of present remains.
260-300 how heated in winter	
300-375 cooking, feeding animals	
(con't)	

VI. Funding

What will it cost to set up and maintain such an Oral History Project as I have proposed? While it would be difficult to make a precise budget at this point, an estimate of costs must certainly be presented.

First, it is expected that the University of Saskatchewan Regina Campus and perhaps the Provincial Archives, will donate some facilities and services. It would be ideal, for example, if space could be found in the Provincial Archives for the Oral History Archives, both because the facilities exist for temperature and humidity control and because the Provincial Archives are dedicated to the retention for use of archival material. What would be needed would be shelf space in wooden cabinets to be specially constructed, a small amount of office space with work area for indexing and accession work, and space for filing cabinets and index cabinets (the latter so situated as to be available to researchers.)

It is to be expected, too, that the University will make available, either in the Audio-Visual Centre or in the Bilingual Centre, a use area which will include listening booths (four, to start with, adjusted so that tape cannot be erased), with some table-top desk surface for researchers, a filing cabinet for use folders, and specially designed wooden cabinets for storing use tapes. All this should be in an enclosed area, for supervision.

As for equipment, the University may be able to donate the labour and materials to make the special wooden cabinets needed for storing tapes. (Their dimensions can easily be worked out from the dimensions of seven-inch tape boxes, since these boxes will be stored side by side, on edge.) These can be only two at first, one for the Archives and one for the Use Area, each to hold five hundred tapes. It may be that the University can supply one three-drawer steel filing cabinet for each of the two areas, and index boxes for 3 x 5 index cards (six such boxes, all for the Archives.)

I have been assured by the Director of the Audio-Visual Centre that the equipment already exists there for high-quality dubbing from cassette to master tape and in the same operation from cassette to use tape, and the equipment necessary for listening to use tapes. I believe equipment also exists in Audio-Visual for transcribing (which requires a tape recorder with foot control which can stop, start, and reverse the tape. The Tandberg 15-series and the Uher 5000 are most frequently used in oral history projects.) Perhaps the maintenance costs for field equipment could also be donated by the University through Audio-Visual.

If we can assume that the above items can be supplied, the rest of the necessary costs can be estimated as follows:

1. Personnel.	
Director of Project	10,000
Steno-transcriber	6,000
Part-time transcribers	<u>2,000</u>
	18,000
2. Supplies	
Office supplies (letterhead, forms, cards)	500
Tape (at bulk price of 2.00 / 1000)	<u>2,000</u>
	2,500
3. Equipment	
Field tape recorders, Sony TC 110, ten machines at 100	1,000
Desk, etc., director	700
Desk, etc. steno	700
IBM typewriter	<u>400</u>
	2,800

Of these sums, the \$2,800 for equipment would be a one-time expense until depreciated. The \$18,000 salaries and \$2,500 supplies would be annual.

What about the cost of the actual collecting? It is to be expected, as I have suggested in Section IV, that our collectors will be mostly students in classes or people on government grants. Presumably, the government grants will cover such expenses as travel. Should we not, however, anticipate some expenses of this kind, and some travel on the part of the director? It would seem reasonable to set aside a modest amount for this kind of expense, to be used at the discretion of the director under guidelines set by the Committee. Say \$2,000 per year.

These figures are far from inflated. Leaving aside the very significant contributions in space and services proposed for the University, we can expect minimum expenses of \$2,800 for equipment, and an annual budget of

Salaries	18,000
Supplies	2,500
Misc.	<u>2,000</u>
	22,500

It is to be hoped that the University and the Government will agree that such a project is worth this much to Saskatchewan. If more funds are available, more can be done. If less is all that can be made available, less will be done. But this seems a reasonable estimate for the project I have described.

We should remember that oral history projects in the United States and Canada have benefited from government and foundation grants. The Canada Council has greatly aided the work of the Archives of Folklore and Language of Memorial University of Newfoundland, in response to requests for funds for organizing, transcribing, and the collecting of special material. The Reynoldston Research and Studies Project in Vancouver has been funded largely through LIP grants. O.Y., LIP, and the TNP funds have been granted for collecting. All of these sources are possibilities, but they all tend to operate on the principle of the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves." That is, they will support a project which is already in existence and can show results. So it is very much up to the University and the Government to establish the Archives in the first place, before these other sources can be approached.

Notes

1. Letter to the author, dated October 16, 1973.
2. See Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Geneology," Oral History Review 1 (1973): 1-25; also Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (Chicago: Aldine, 1965); in addition, the Oris Duke Indian Oral History Project at the University of Oklahoma: A final report (1973) reporting on the collection of oral traditions which will "it is hoped, lead soon to the publication of new historical materials on the American Indian." (p. 16); and the works of Richard M. Dorson, Director of Indiana University's Folklore Institute, listed in the attached bibliography.
3. Letter to the author, dated November 7, 1973.
4. Letter to the author, dated September 26, 1973.

5. W. Lynwood Montell, The Saga of Coe Ridge (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970); Studs Terkel, Division Street: America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967) and Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).
6. Pierre Barton, Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush 1896-1899 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, revised edition, 1972).
7. Letter to the author, dated August 18, 1973.
8. Letter to the author, dated September 25, 1973.
9. Roger L. Welsch, Sod Walls: The Story of the Nebraska Sod House (Broken Bow, Nebraska: Purcells, 1968).
10. Before drawing up such a Saskatchewan List of Questions it would be helpful to look through those handbooks which outline other cultural areas for the same purpose. The best of such handbooks are Sean O'Suilleabhain's A Handbook of Irish Folklore (Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942 reprinted Hatboro, Penna.: Folklore Associates, 1963), which is based on the Swedish archives at Uppsala; George Peter Murdock et al., Outline of Cultural Materials (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, third revised edition, 1950); and Notes and Queries on Anthropology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul for the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, sixth edition, 1951).
11. Edward D. Ives, Manual for Field Workers (Orono, Maine: Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, 1973).
12. Other guides and handbooks which should be consulted as models before compiling the Saskatchewan Handbook for collectors are: Procedural Manual for Oral History at the Ohio Historical Society (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1972); Student Guide for Collecting with Tape Recorder (St. John, Newfoundland: Memorial University, n.d.); Willa F. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, second edition, 1971); and Kenneth S. Goldstein, A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore (Hatboro, Penna.: Folklore Associates, 1964).
13. Most helpful to me in this survey were Mr. Frank J. Gillis of the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music; Dr. Robert B. Klymasz and Renee Landry of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies; Dr. Neil Rosenberg of the Archives of Folklore and Language at the Memorial University of Newfoundland; and Dr. Edward D. Ives of the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine. I have also benefited from information generously supplied by many others. Additionally, an important article on cataloguing collected materials by Arlene Custer, the editor of the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections published by the Library of Congress, is "Bibliographical Identification and Description of Oral History Records," pp. 99-102 in Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History (1972).
14. The cassettes and cassette tapes used must be capable of giving a tone signal when the tape runs out, since it is very difficult to monitor this visually under field conditions.

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(Note: Starred items are available in the R. Cosbey collection. See headnote to Section C.)

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