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FOLKLORE AND ORAL HISTORY: EXPLORING SUBJECT INDEXING *

Pamela Dean

Catalogs, indexes, inventories, retrieval systems, and finding aids are a major part of any archives and, as any archivist knows, they can also be a major problem--both to devise and to maintain. Handling oral materials can present some special problems, and there seems to be no one best system for repositories of folklore and oral history collections. Each institution has had to devise its own methods in response to the different types of material it contains and the different ways this material may be used. A recent project at the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History (NAFOH), at the University of Maine at Orono (UMO), was to devise such a system, specifically a subject index.

This problem was approached in three phases. First, an assessment was made of existing procedures, the nature of the collections, and the types of people who use the archives in order to determine general indexing criteria. Second, an informal survey was conducted of what other archives are doing in this field. And last, under the direction of professor of folklore, Edward D. Ives, founder and head of the archives, the NAFOH staff began experimenting with indexing itself. This was

*The author thanks those who so generously responded to her survey questions.

essentially an amateur effort, a matter of learning-by-doing, since none of those involved had any professional training in librarianship or archival management. This article is a report on the methodology and results of these three phases.

The Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, a part of the anthropology department at UMO, is a research facility and a repository for tape recordings, transcripts of tapes, and related photographs and manuscript material relevant to the folklore and folklife of New England and the Atlantic Provinces of Canada, with a special emphasis on Maine and the Maritimes.² Its holdings include over 1800 collections, about 3000 hours of tape recordings, and over 5000 photographs.

The first collections in the archives were submitted as part of the requirements for Professor Ives's courses in folklore. Students were asked simply to accumulate individual items of folklore--jokes, tall tales, ghost stories and the like. This produced a sizeable amount of valuable but disjointed bits of lore, and it became evident that something more was needed: the element of context. The inevitable movement was away from collecting items and genres toward gathering more information on life-styles, especially through eliciting complete or partial life histories. Soon, it became obvious that this work often had as much, if not more, to do with oral history as it did with folklore, and out of this confusion (or marriage) came the present emphasis and several ongoing archives projects.

The most extensive of these projects centers on the lumberman's life. Emphasizing the common woodsman and containing detailed accounts of every aspect of the lumberman's daily life, this project has made NAFOH perhaps the largest repository of northeastern lumbering information in North America. Another recent project focused on the working life of Maine women during the Depression and World War II. The archives also houses a great deal of information on the songs, stories, customs, beliefs, values, and

daily routines of other folk groups of the New England-Atlantic Provinces region. In addition, there is a strong collection of folksong and instrumental music, much of which is the result of Professor Ives's own collecting work which focused on local songs and songmakers. The archives also has material collected by others, such as an investigation into labor history in Maine conducted by the Maine State Federated Labor Council; the Penobscot Bay Fisheries and Industries Project, done in conjunction with the Penobscot Marine Museum at Searsport; and several projects sponsored by the University of Maine's Canadian American Center.

This mix of folklore and oral history covering many topics from a broad geographical area poses particular problems, especially since Dr. Ives has always sought to make the archives' collections available to both professional and amateur folklorists and historians, and to genealogists and students from other disciplines. While the folklorists might want material indexed by type or genre, the historian would prefer subject or location, and the genealogist, personal names. Thus, no one index seems appropriate for all uses.

Another significant constraint on NAFOH's ability to create and maintain effective indexing systems is that the archives has no regular funding or full-time professional staff. The budget comes primarily from fees and donations, with space and, occasionally, some funds for salary coming from UMO. Under the part-time supervision of Dr. Ives, NAFOH runs on the labors of work-study students, graduate interns, and volunteers. At the time this project was conducted, the staff consisted of two work-study students, two graduate interns, one volunteer, and a half-time assistant archivist. While it is hoped that this will not always be the situation, improved conditions are by no means assured, and any new system implemented at the archives should be one which acknowledges current realities.

The subject index file, therefore, ideally had to meet several criteria. It needed to cover the

variety of materials in the archives' collections, be useful to several different types of users, and be simple enough to be maintained by temporary, part-time student workers who would not be employed long enough to be trained properly in the use of a complex system and who worked with a minimum of supervision. It also had to be a system which could be computerized in the future.

The archives already has several index files which meet these criteria to varying degrees. There are comprehensive, up-to-date personal name, place name, interviewer, and interviewee indexes, and a shelf list. Together, these files meet the needs of many users, and they can be maintained by relatively untrained, temporary workers. What is clearly needed is a good subject index which would permit a researcher looking for ghost stories, or early farming techniques, or information on quilting to zero in on the appropriate accessions. Such an index had long been contemplated and some attempts made to establish one, but the staff was really waiting for the time and resources to do the "perfect" subject index. Realizing that such circumstances were unlikely to occur soon, the staff decided to go ahead and see what could be done under less than ideal conditions.

To begin the project, a survey was sent to twenty-seven folklore and oral history programs to see whether anyone else had developed that "perfect" system. Responses were received from twenty-one programs, an excellent rate of return, especially considering that the questionnaire was three pages long and asked a number of fairly detailed questions. The participating institutions were nearly all well-established ones. They were chosen primarily from Gary Shumway's 1971 directory, Oral History in the United States, thus ensuring that those consulted were apt to have encountered and dealt with the problems this project was attempting to address.

Large institutions, such as Columbia, were not chosen, since differences of scale might make their procedures inappropriate for use at NAFOH. Despite

this decision, note was taken of their system, since Columbia is the recognized leader in the field of oral history. The Columbia oral history program's directory lists only 128 subject headings plus 92 special projects under which its memoirs are cross indexed. ³ An attempt was made to select a wide variety of programs of various sizes, some associated with historical societies, others with libraries or universities, some in which the oral material was a part of a larger body of materials, others that were strictly devoted to oral history.

While the primary purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether anyone else had a good subject index system which might be adaptable, several other questions were also asked. Was the archives associated with a parent organization (library, historical society, university, etc.)? How adequate was the budget, and how large a staff did they have? What was the nature of their collections? And who were their principal users? This sort of information would help in determining whether their systems would be appropriate for use at the archives, since what might work for a library-based oral history collection with adequate staffing and a generous budget might be wholly unsuitable for NAFOH. Questions were included about what their general accessioning procedures were, how they handled the original tapes, and what they considered to be the primary document--the tape or the transcript.

Of the twenty-one institutions that responded, nineteen filled out the questionnaire, and two sent only samples of their indexes. The following information is based on those which returned the questionnaire. Like NAFOH, most of the programs--fourteen, in fact--are affiliated with universities, while two are part of state historical societies, one of a state library, and one of a privately endowed museum. At eleven institutions, the oral collections are part of a library and at seven, part of a more general archives. Thus, only four are, like NAFOH, separate archives specializing in oral material only.

Of those who responded to the question on funding, five receive state funds, in some cases as part of the budget for a state historical society or library; nine have university support; nine operate, at least in part, on grants, fees, or donations; and one has an endowment. Most of the programs which are not affiliated either with a library or a larger archives seem to run much as NAFOH does, with a part-time director, little support staff, and a budget dependent on "soft money" or "whatever the department considers adequate," which frequently is not. "More money, more help" was a plea made more than once.

Overall, ten programs have part-time directors and seven have full-time directors. Eight have one or more full-time professional staff; six have between one and three full-time nonprofessional staff; and twelve have work-study students or interns, one with thirty to thirty-five of them and the rest with less than ten. Thus, with the exception of some of the institutions where oral material is but one part of a larger collection and, therefore, receives only a portion of the attention of one or two staff, only three of the programs appear to function with as little staff as NAFOH. While nearly all of the archives surveyed contain the same sort of local history as NAFOH, only three have the mix of history and folklore.

In size, the oral collections ranged from less than 80 tapes at one major university facility, where oral material constitutes a tiny portion of the holdings, to 4,200 at another. In all, eight have more than 1,000 tapes and five have less than 250. NAFOH, with 1,900 tapes, houses a comparatively substantial collection, especially in relation to staff and funding levels.

Most archives use a variety of interviewers including students, faculty, staff, or other paid interviewers and volunteers. Four use only paid interviewers and one uses only volunteers. Most provide some training for their interviewers, although three require no training, and four use both

trained and untrained interviewers. NAFOH asks all interviewers, who are primarily students, to take a training module. This familiarizes them with the recording equipment, with basic interviewing techniques, and with methods for insuring that the tapes, interview participants, and items, people and places discussed on the tape are clearly identified. Interviewers are also taught to process the tape into the archives' standard format--a rough transcription, somewhat condensed and paraphrased, which is called a catalog, ⁴ much to the confusion of all librarians.

At NAFOH the tape is considered to be the primary document, and researchers are encouraged to refer to it, using the catalog which includes tape counter numbers as a rough guide to the contents and their location. This is also the thinking behind the TAPE (Timed Access to Pertinent Excerpts) system developed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. A preservation master tape, containing the original field recording and a pre-recorded time signal, is made on 1.5 mil open reel tape. An abstract, briefly describing the major topics covered, is then made with the time of each noted. Thus, any subject can be quickly and precisely located on the tape. ⁵

Seven of the programs surveyed consider the primary document to be an edited, rather than verbatim, transcript--usually one which has been edited by both the interviewer and interviewee. Four out of these seven are library-based programs, and their preference for this format may be due to its compatibility with the other written material in their institutions. NAFOH staff prefers the tape, feeling that only the researcher himself should choose the level of accuracy of transcription which is appropriate for his work and that often the way in which something is said may be as ⁶ significant as the factual content of the statement.

Most of the archives surveyed have personal name, place name, and subject indexes, or a master index which includes all of these. Only one indicated its staff does little indexing, while three others report

that they do not have a subject index. The rest indicated that their subject index was the one most used, which confirms its importance.

Among those who do index, the unit card format, similar to those found in library card catalogs, is the most common. This usually includes the interviewee's name, some biographical data, and an indication of the basic subjects covered in the interview. Copies of this card are then filed under the appropriate headings, that is, subjects, place and personal names, etc. A different format is used at NAFOH. In personal and place name index files, cards are headed with the name to be indexed. Then the accession and page numbers where references to that name appear are listed below. The advantage of the latter system is that indexing is done to the page level rather than just the accession or collection level. The drawback is that if researchers wish more information on the general contents of the accession, they must either go to the accession itself or to the shelf list card, thus adding a step to the process.

The answers to the section of the questionnaire dealing with who was responsible for indexing offered scant encouragement for NAFOH's hopes of developing a system usable by work-study students, since thirteen indicated that professional staff was primarily responsible. Only two said that nonprofessionals also indexed, while four reported that graduate assistants or work-study students helped. Even those institutions with no more staff than NAFOH said that professional staff did the indexing. This may indicate a greater processing backlog than currently exists at NAFOH. It is clear that, especially with subject indexing, the continuity of perspective on the part of the indexer is helpful, but to date the lack of permanent staff at NAFOH has made this impossible to achieve.

The reported level of indexing varies widely. In response to the question whether indexing was done broadly (less than five citations per accession), moderately (five to fifteen citations per accession),

or in detail (even brief mention of subject cited), five checked broad; six, moderate; and seven, detailed. Of the seven which index in detail, six use professional staff and one uses work-study students. This again offers scant encouragement for hopes of finding a system which would permit indexing subjects to a degree matching the detail of existing archives personal and place name indexes and of using work-study students to do so.

The crucial question in the survey, of course, was does anyone else have that perfect system? Or more specifically, how do they decide what to index? Most seem to be doing much as the archives' staff did in their initial attempts; they index whatever seems to be important. This is the case for eleven programs, while four work with an authority list and index only what is on that list. Of these four, one created its own list, one used the Library of Congress (LC) headings and two used modified LC based lists, having found it necessary to add specialized headings or to "bend" the LC categories. The archives using only the LC system and one of those using a modified system are library-based. The staff of the latter report that their library affiliation in part led them to drop their previous hierarchical indexing system in favor of "adapted library or manuscript cataloging along with adapted Library of Congress subject headings," but nine of the library-affiliated archives continue to index their subjects more or less arbitrarily without attempting to be strictly compatible with the larger library catalog.

A final survey question on who were the major clients of the archives reveals a pattern similar to that found at NAFOH. Of the categories suggested, students and the general public were the most frequent users. The experiences of others in the field confirm the validity of NAFOH's original intent. Any system adopted should be usable not only by trained professionals but by novice researchers as well.

The survey results clearly indicate that no one

has a subject indexing system which could be readily adopted by other institutions. While many other repositories of oral material are part of either libraries or of more general archives, most programs, especially those which, like NAFOH, are separate entities, run much the same. They all muddle through with fluctuating staff and funding, devising their own systems as best they can. NAFOH compares favorably with other archives of similar size. There is no backlog of accessions, and with the exception of a subject index, accessions have been fully indexed in a format readily usable by researchers for many purposes. But a subject index is, nonetheless, definitely needed, as the responses of all those who have one indicate.

While waiting for the responses to the survey, some of the NAFOH staff began an experiment in indexing to discover what problems had to be addressed in such work and to attempt to establish some general criteria for what should be indexed and how it should be done. Professor Ives and two graduate interns took a number of accessions, chosen for their varied format and content (for example, a collection of unconnected items of folklore, a life history interview, and an interview on the technical details of lumbering). Independently, each read the catalog, transcript, or manuscript for the accession and listed, with page numbers, all of the subjects which seemed to justify indexing. They then met once a week to compare notes and to try to come to a consensus on what should be indexed and why.

The depth to which indexing should be done was a continuing source of debate. Should even brief and passing mention of a subject be cited, as is the case with personal and place name files? Should such a citation be made only when some significant information about the subject is conveyed? Or should only the major topics of the whole accession be indexed? For purposes of this experiment, it was decided to index to a depth nearly comparable with existing files. A card format compatible with those files was also chosen, that is, subject heading at

top, accession and page numbers where that subject is mentioned listed below. With this format thirteen accessions, with a total of 552 pages, were processed. Four hundred ninety-two individual entries were made under 183 subject categories, with nearly half as many "see" and "see also" cards intermixed.

Many other questions and arguments arose during the course of this work. On some, agreement was readily achieved. Others would be decided in one way in one session and in another when the question next arose. Reference was often made to the LC headings, but since there often was no appropriate heading for the subject under discussion, new categories were frequently created. The indexers tried to be consistent and to develop a rationale for what would be indexed, in order to establish some rules and guidelines that another indexer (for instance, that future work-study student) might easily apply and which would also make the material accessible to that proverbial amateur researcher. Like all good indexers, they tried to avoid the simplistic "What can I list this under?" and to ask "What would a researcher who wanted to find this sort of information look under?"

The question of indexing by genre was raised by the inclusion of folklore in the collections. This possibility was rejected since only folklorists could use such an index and only a trained folklorist could make it. Then, how about jokes? Should they be indexed under the term jokes alone, or broken down into ethnic, animal, political jokes? Or even further, into Irish, Franco-American, Polish, and elephant, or bear jokes? Unable to come to agreement on this, the staff decided to go with jokes for the moment and to hope that in the future someone would like to take this on as a special project.

Abstract concepts as "neighboring" or "wintering", frequently mentioned by informants in Maine, also provoked much discussion. Neighboring--in the sense of being neighborly, looking out for and helping one's neighbor, as well

as in the sense of visiting among one's neighbors--seemed to be a major thread in folklife that should be noted. But would someone, some researcher, come looking for such a heading as a concept apart from the people or place being discussed? At first the decision was no, but this was later reversed. Cross-referencing sometimes solves such problems, but it is not always the answer.

Obviously, more questions were raised by this exercise in indexing than were answered. While greater agreement was achieved by the end of the project as to what each participant chose to index under what headings, a rationale that could be clearly articulated was not always found. It was easier to "do" than to "explain," and the decisions made often seemed to be arbitrary. Again, this is an argument for one person being responsible for subject indexing so that at least there is some consistency in the arbitrariness.

Basically, the process described above--going through the accession, deciding item by item what to index and under what heading--may be the only feasible one to use. The goal should be to develop an authority list of subjects, to add to this list only when absolutely necessary, to use LC subject headings whenever possible, and to have a clear and consistent rationale for each indexing decision.

The overriding purpose of any changes in procedures at NAFOH is, of course, to make the collections more accessible to researchers. To this end, a comprehensive subject index is certainly essential. But to create this index, as well as simply to insure that the archives remains open on a regular basis, additional funds for staffing are needed. Recent efforts have succeeded in getting university funding for one part-time assistant archivist for one year. This, however, is not a long-term solution.

There are two possible approaches to obtaining more adequate long-term funding, both of which possess drawbacks as well as benefits. One is to

become, like many other oral programs, part of the university library or of a larger archives. This would probably mean coming under the special collections section of the Fogler Library at UMO. One concern with this option is that there is no guarantee that the standards and methods that have been established at NAFOH would be maintained, that the collection's unique oral characteristics would not get lost in a system which is geared to handling written material. The greater resources of the library could, however, ensure that at least some consistent, dependable level of support was available assuming, of course, that the library itself has the necessary funds.

Grants from the federal government or from private foundations form a significant part of the budgets of many programs and are another possibility. They are available for many types of projects which would be compatible with the archives and could allow expanded services. While such grants are usually awarded to carry out some specific project and not to supply basic operational funds, funds can sometimes be included for administration, supplies and even, occasionally, equipment. Depending on grants involves certain drawbacks, including the fact that one must do what the granting agency wants done, not necessarily what appears to the grantee to be the project of greatest value. Also, much time must be spent in the application process and in "servicing" the grant (reports, bookkeeping, etc.) once it is obtained. Despite the drawbacks of both of these approaches, greater stability of funding may well be worth the price.

The second major conclusion, suggested by both experience and the survey responses, is that subject indexing should be done much more broadly than in the experiment and that it should be done by permanent professional staff. Even if pursuit of the previous recommendation brought NAFOH an increased staff, creating a subject index that would match existing indexes in depth would be a very long-term project. With the one part-time temporary assistant archivist

now on the staff, it would be virtually impossible. Since increased accessibility is the goal, it would seem better to adopt a system which would permit the indexing of the major subjects in all accessions within a reasonable length of time rather than to choose one which would result in covering only a small number in great detail.

The purpose of this indexing project was both to learn how NAFOH's processes and procedures compared with those of similar institutions and to establish a basic subject-indexing system for the archives. The results of the survey were most helpful to both objectives, and implementation of the conclusions reached as a result of this project has the potential for greatly expanding the ability of the archives to perform its primary tasks: collecting, preserving, and disseminating the oral history and folklore of New England and the Atlantic Provinces.

NOTES

¹ What a library would call a card catalog, NAFOH refers to as an index file. This terminology will be retained for this article.

² The Atlantic Provinces include Newfoundland and is the correct designation for the broad area covered by the collections at NAFOH. Maine and the Maritimes (the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) are the more specific focus, with the bulk of the collections coming from New Brunswick and the Penobscot Valley in Maine.

³ Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr, eds., The Oral History Collection of Columbia University, (New York: Oral History Program, 1979), xx-xxiii.

⁴ NAFOH, unlike most of the programs surveyed, generally requires that all tapes be transcribed or cataloged by the interviewer before they are

accessioned.

⁵ Dale Treleven, "A Brief Description of the TAPE System," Drexel Library Quarterly 15 (October 1979): 77.

⁶ See Willa Baum, Transcribing and Editing Oral History (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), for perhaps the definitive discussion of this method of presenting oral history. See also Cullom Davis, Kathryn Buck, and Kay MacLean, Oral History: From Tape to Type, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977). Edward D. Ives provides a description of transcribing with minimal editing in The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1980).

⁷ Many of the programs which use edited transcripts create a detailed index for each collection which is stored with the transcript, especially if it is bound. This provides the depth of indexing found in NAFOH's card files and is an excellent first step in creating the more general, to accession level, indexing usually found in card catalogs. See Baum, Transcribing and Editing Oral History, and Davis, et al, From Tape to Type, for excellent discussions of this type of indexing process. Both works also cover the techniques and questions pertinent to choosing subject headings for card catalogs.