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Making Oral History Interviews Accessible...

...at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History

BY KOPANA TERRY • ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVIST
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In his book *“Doing Oral History,”* historian and scholar Donald Ritchie explains, “An interview becomes oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication.”¹ Oral tradition has been around for as long as humans have been talking, but it wasn’t until the use of a portable recorder during WWII that oral history as we know it today began to take root.

Up to that point, according to Ritchie, only newspapers seemed to value the spoken word as something worth repeating. To clarify, first person accounts have existed throughout history but

newspapers were the most motivated gatherers of these stories, particularly after the industrial age was in full swing and the world saw a decline in letters and diaries.² Meanwhile, scholars considered oral recitation little more than folklore, something imbued with imagination, inaccurate at best, and not to be trusted.

Still, today, as in times past, reporters in both print and broadcast news commonly use first person accounts only in part, rarely as a whole. They simply throw away their long-verse recorded conversations. For them, the actual recording isn’t “the thing.” (“The thing” being the artifact of value.) It’s just a means to an end.

Columbia University helped change “the thing” and perceptions of it when in 1948 it built what has come to be considered the first modern oral history archive.³ Other Universities soon followed suit, and by the 1960s oral history had thrown off the stigma of hearsay to become a legitimate scholarly pursuit. So much so that, in 1967, the Oral History Association⁴ was formed and continues to advance the field of oral history throughout the world.

ORAL HISTORY IN KENTUCKY

In 1973 the University of Kentucky began a fledgling archive that would eventually be known as the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History.⁵ It is the largest oral history archive in the Commonwealth with nearly 10,000 oral history interviews to date, and among the largest and most well-known archives of its type in the world.

By 1976 the Kentucky Historical Society had formed the Kentucky Oral History Commission (KOHC).⁶ It, too, holds a large collection of interviews, nearly 9,000 as of this writing. More than that, however, the Commission helps fund hundreds of individuals and projects around the state in the collection and creation of oral histories. These oral histories find homes in archives around the state, including the Nunn Center.

Other well-known oral history archives around the Commonwealth include University of Louisville, Western Kentucky University’s Kentucky Folklife Program⁷, Eastern Kentucky University, Morehead State University, Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, Northern Kentucky University, and Murray State University. There are numerous additional oral history collections around the state as well, including local and/or private historical societies and archives, and public libraries. All of these sources contribute to the growth of first-person story recording.

Collecting and preserving oral history interviews are major activities of the field, but access to collections can be limited and challenging for researchers. This paper will focus on the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History and its efforts to increase accessibility for users.

NUNN CENTER COLLECTIONS

The first oral history interview found in the Nunn Center’s catalog is with Supreme Court Justice Tom C. Clark, recorded on May 8, 1973. This interview is part of the Fred Vinson Oral History Collection from whence the Nunn Center’s still-growing, extensive political and public policy collections sprang. Among the interviewees are governors, senators, congressmen, and other legislators and judges.

As it is housed at the state’s flagship university, the Nunn Center has expansive collections on or about the University of Kentucky. These include interviews with UK athletes, faculty and administrators, alumni, student veterans, and women.

Not to leave the common Kentuckian behind, the Nunn

Center also has a vast collection of Appalachian interviews that includes series on the Frontier Nursing Service, the War on Poverty, regional peoples, coal, coal miners, coal operators, and the effects of the coal industry on the region. There are also collections from around the state on farming, industry, organizations, communities, education, gender, and a variety of arts and cultural traditions such as Kentucky’s writers.

In the last two years the Nunn Center has aggressively worked to make accessible nearly all of our African American collections. These include the Robert Penn Warren Civil Rights Oral History Project, Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame, Blacks in Lexington, Mississippi in the 1950’s, East End (Lexington) Project, and Legacy of African American Judges in Kentucky, among others.

Similar projects are underway involving African immigrants in the Bluegrass, Haitian earthquake survivors, Hispanics in Lexington, and other minority populations within the Commonwealth. These oral histories are as crucial to our shared history as those of better-known Kentuckians, and without their voices we bear an incomplete record of our state’s history. The Nunn Center is actively working to make sure their voices are heard.

The collections housed at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History have traditionally focused on Kentucky, but in recent years we’ve turned increased attention to the needs of the wider oral history community. There are many people across the country doing oral histories, but the safekeeping of those recordings remains elusive. More importantly, there are few archives with the capabilities to provide immediate (and more significantly informed) access to those interviews. Being first an archive, the Nunn Center works with oral history collectors around the country looking for an archival home. Providing such a home for, and access to, these out-of-state oral history collections has become a significant component of the Nunn Center’s mission.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE NUNN CENTER

The staff of the Nunn Center does not generate the majority of the oral history interviews, with one notable exception. Jeff Suchanek, Senior Oral History Archivist, provides extensive additions to our political and public policy collections, adding upward of fifty new interviews each year.

Rather than generate the oral histories, the Nunn Center primarily provides equipment, facilities, technical expertise, and philosophical direction to those in the community actively engaged with the gathering of oral histories. Some of these collections are produced in partnership with organizations, including Hospice of the Bluegrass by collecting stories of patients near the end of their lives; and the Oldham County Historical Society which interviews that county’s military veterans. Additional projects have been commissioned, including the History of Kentucky’s Community Colleges project and Kentucky Bourbon Tales, a project that culminated in a documentary by the same name.

Continued on page 10.

▶ 00:21:18 - The Second World War in Appalachia

▼ 00:33:09 - Visiting war cemeteries / Terry's uncles in the war

EDIT **DELETE**

Partial Transcript: Well, when you were, um, um, in service and overseas, were you able to visit, uh, some of the, um, uh, sites where some of the battles were fought?

Segment Synopsis: Terry describes his visits to two World War Two cemeteries in Europe: the Netherlands American Cemetery and the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery. Norman describes his visit to Normandy (France). Terry explains that his uncles Herman and I. B. Terry were reticent about their wartime experiences, though I. B. told some stories, one of which Terry shares.

Subjects: Normandy (France);Cemeteries.;Veterans.;World War Two

Subjects (Translation):

Keywords: Netherlands American Cemetery;Sicily-Rome American Cemetery;Paratroopers;Herman Terry;I. B. Terry;Second World War

Keywords (Translation):

GPS:

GPS Zoom:

GPS Description:

Hyperlink: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/79/Sicily-Rome_American_military_Cemetery_in_Nettuno_near_Anzio.jpg

Link Description: Photo: Sicily-Rome American Cemetery in Nettuno (Italy).

▶ 00:42:06 - Terry's work on his grandfather's farm

The Nunn Center is particularly engaged with faculty and students on the University of Kentucky campus. Many masters and PhD students rely on oral histories for their dissertations, and many of those collections find a home in the Nunn Center archive. At the same time, professors are finding value in the classroom for oral history collecting and indexing for access, and thus increased numbers of UK students are contributing to the Nunn Center's archive.

Additionally, there are individuals and members of community groups whose passions drive them to collect oral histories. These individuals also contribute significantly to the Nunn Center's archive.

ACCESSING THE INTERVIEWS

Access to oral histories has historically been problematic. Earliest recordings were made on large reel-to-reel recorders. When technology reduced magnetic tape to the size of a cassette, accessibility improved, but these, too, proved limiting. Patrons ordinarily would need to visit the library to hear the interviews. Access could be cumbersome and inconvenient, and many interviews sat on a shelf for decades without ever being heard.

It was not just the media that limited accessibility. Knowing the interview content was just as problematic. Before the internet, there was the card catalog – small cards that held only a fraction of the information about an interview. Too, librarians and archivists did not always view content and access as valued as we consider them today.

Fast-forward to 2005 when audio digitization became a reality and online access was suddenly possible. The Nunn Center was again at the forefront as one of the first archives to digitize select oral histories, providing access through the World Wide Web. It was also in 2005 that the prototype of the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS)⁸ was created which allowed the time synching of audio to a transcript that then provided the most basic level of searching of an audio recording. As this technology advanced, it fundamentally changed the Nunn Center's focus, which in turn had a ripple effect in oral history archives around the world. More on this in a bit.

The Nunn Center provides access through a multi-faceted database known as SPOKEdb⁹. It is both a catalog and a content management system. Built on Omeka¹⁰, a free and open source platform originally designed primarily for exhibits, we are able to embed both audio and video interviews into the database. Now, when users find something they want to hear, it is already at their fingertips. No longer are they taken outside the database to another platform or vendor with or without a pay-wall. The interviews that have been indexed, approximately 2,300 at present, are available immediately. To be sure, Nunn Center oral histories are still available through ExploreUK, the UK Special Collections' digital library, and through various linking platforms such as KOHC's Pass The Word and UK Libraries' catalog, Discover InfoKat.

ENHANCED ACCESS WITH OHMS

The key to providing access to interviews in the Nunn Center is the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS). Further

developed by Nunn Center Director Dr. Doug Boyd from that early prototype, OHMS is no longer limited to synching audio to transcript. It allows the interviews to be indexed, unleashing previously unavailable search capabilities.

The indexer can choose as little or as much information to add to an interview's index. The segments are chosen by their content and look something akin to book chapters. Within each segment, an indexing technician can choose to include the first line of a verbatim transcript (helpful for those interviews that do not have a transcript), keywords, LC subject headings, GPS coordinates where applicable, and links to pertinent content outside the interview, like photographs or websites.

There is also the segment synopsis feature. Here, the indexing technician can summarize the segment in such a way so as to expand on the segment's topic in a way that a verbatim transcript never could. To borrow Dr. Boyd's example, let's say in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s interview he never says the word "segregation." Yet, a portion of his interview is devoted entirely to the topic of segregation. By summarizing that segment using the word segregation, in both the segment and keyword, researchers can now move within that interview to the point where Dr. King talks specifically about segregation.

All of these features provide value-added components to an interview that traditional transcripts cannot provide.

Today, some 200 institutions from 16 countries are using OHMS to index their collections, and the Nunn Center continues to develop OHMS for greater usability and access. A recent update, for example, has made bilingual indexing possible for the first time. This feature opens oral histories to researchers confined to a single language. OHMS can accommodate for audio and video interviews streaming from a variety of popular platforms. The more institutions use OHMS, the greater the developments in the future. The sky is the limit.

CONCLUSION

The oral history interviews housed in Kentucky's library and archival repositories are vast and valuable. The development of the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer at UK Libraries' Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History is providing greatly improved access to these often underutilized important research collections.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Second Ed.). Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ <http://www.incite.columbia.edu/ccohr/>
- ⁴ <http://www.oralhistory.org/>
- ⁵ <http://libraries.uky.edu/nunncenter#libscroller>
- ⁶ <http://history.ky.gov/kentucky-oral-history-commission/>
- ⁷ <https://kentuckyfolklife.org/>
- ⁸ <http://www.oralhistoryonline.org/>
- ⁹ <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/>
- ¹⁰ <https://omeka.org/>