Oral History Access, or, What To Do With All These Interviews: A Case Study

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*Society of Florida Archivists Virtual Annual Meeting 2021*
My Pandemic Project:
Make our oral histories accessible
Oral History is Excellent

- Captures social & contextual history
- Creates emotional resonance - patrons are astounded to hear their grandparents’ voices
- Individuals can help capture history by conducting interviews or transcribing
- Builds ties with unrepresented communities
- Captures history of communities without documents
History Matters

- If we want to be serious about expanding our collections to document the experiences of underrepresented communities, we need to prioritize our oral history collections.
Lots of information on conducting oral history available

- Forms
- Selection of interviewees
- Interviewing style
- Equipment
- Transcribing
- Ethics of making available online
Most works on oral history end with a phrase similar to: “Deposit in your local archive for professional cataloging.”

Resulting in archives having:

- Piles of tapes or films
- Widely varying formats
- Often no information on the interviewer or even the interviewee
- Lack of release forms
- Old release forms, created before the internet

No information on:

- Where to host if you don’t have server space or I.T. assistance
- Cataloging options
- Techniques of making available online
- Outreach activities
Issues for Archivists who want to improve access

- Lack of information needed to catalog without listening to the multi-hour interview - no biographical information, no subject lists.
- Lack of paperwork authorizing release, or the form authorizing release before the internet made access so wide-spread, which creates ethical issues.
- Bad habits of oral historians:
  - Edited transcriptions, removing racist or sexist comments or language or cursing, or even rewriting the content
  - Interviewers assuring comments would be “off the record”
- Lack of I.T. or budget support for digitizing, transcribing, or support
- Cataloging staff uncomfortable with the oral history being in multiple formats with a finding aid that may change over time
Proactive tackling attempted

Made a guide to depositing oral histories, including:

- Sample release forms
- Cataloging information sheet to complete with name of interviewee and interviewer, date, time, bio note, interview note, etc.
- Example of a timestamped subject list and biographical note

Oral historians generally not interested in the nitty-gritty of cataloging!
First Steps to Providing Access

- **Digitization. Why first?**
  - Huge array of different formats, each needing different equipment
  - Preservation of tapes is a challenge
  - Volunteers can be drafted once they’re digitized

- **Permission forms updated**
  - Send updated form if the interviewee is still alive and the original form doesn’t mention the internet
  - Send updated form to their children if the interviewee is deceased

- **Ethical considerations.**
  - There is lots of information on the ethical issues of making oral histories available online. After this decision-making process, you will end up with a subset of interviews you can make available online.
Different Levels of Access

- **Minimal:**
  - Lists on website with links to interviews
- **A little more:**
  - Individual interview descriptions with biographical information and general subject with link
- **Index of subjects talked about**
- **Full transcriptions**
- **OCLC / library catalog record of collection or individual interviews**
  - Linking to webpage with links
- **National/international collections**
  - Linking to webpage with links
Boynton Beach City Library Local History Archives Plan (my pandemic project)

1. Digitize and secure updated release form (mostly completed)
2. Create finding aid on each interview
3. Upload to Internet Archive
4. Link from website
5. Catalog in OCLC
6. Add to local catalog
7. Outreach
Created a Finding Aid on each Oral History

1. Permission/public domain note
2. Disclaimer
3. Biographical information
4. Scope note, describing what’s chiefly discussed or not discussed
5. Keywords/subject headings
6. Timestamp of subjects discussed
7. Timestamped transcription with contextual footnotes and more information
Uploaded to the Internet Archive

https://archive.org/details/@bbcl-archives

- Finding aid as an ADA compliant PDF and Word
- Photograph of subject
- Recording
- Cut and pasted sections into Internet Archive
Why Internet Archive?

1. No I.T. assistance needed
2. Storage space
3. International exposure and distribution

If you’re not working at a major university with lots of server space and an I.T. staff, Internet Archive is an excellent choice.
Created entry on our website

- Created website
- Listed by name of interviewee
- Biographical information
- Photograph
- Interview date, interviewer, and subjects discussed
- Link to Internet Archive
- Take down request link to contact form
Cataloged on OCLC

- Cataloged the streaming interview, not the finding aid or the other formats of the interview.
Arris Ozzie Lunsford oral history interview, 1992 June 26 / conducted by Caryn Neumann.

By: Lunsford, Arris Ozzie, 1909-2003 [interviewee]
Contributor(s): Neumann, Caryn [interviewer] | Boynton Beach City Library Local History Archives (Boynton Beach, Fla.)
Material type: Mixed materials
Description: 2 digital files
Content type: spoken word
Media type: computer
Carrier type: online resource

Subject(s): Lunsford, Arris Ozzie, 1909-2003. | Interviews | Hurricane, 1928 -- Personal narratives | World War, 1939-1945 -- Florida -- Boynton Beach, Boynton Beach Q | Boynton Beach ( Fla.) -- History

Genre/Form: Oral histories

Online resources: Interview and finding aid including transcription available at Internet Archive
Forms part of: Boynton Beach City Library Oral History Project

Scope and content: Topics discussed include Lundsford's family, including his parents, children, and wife; life in Boynton Beach during the 1930s, including local business owners and mayor H.D. Stevens; experiences during the 1928 hurricane, including losing their house, then going to the Seaboard Depot; Boynton Beach during World War II, including working as civilian patrol on the beach, German U-Boats being bombed, and several local residents who were of German heritage being arrested as spies; local moonshiners during prohibition; and seeing the Palm Beach County Sheriff's men ambush the Ashley gang.

Rating: 5 stars, Average rating: 0.0 (0 votes)

Holdings (1) | Title notes (5) | Images

Originally recorded on audiotape.

Interview conducted by Caryn Neumann, for the Boynton Beach Oral History Project, 26 June 1992.

Topics discussed include Lundsford's family, including his parents, children, and wife; life in Boynton Beach during the 1930s, including local business owners and mayor H.D. Stevens; experiences during the 1928 hurricane, including losing their house, then going to the Seaboard Depot; Boynton Beach during World War II, including working as civilian patrol on the beach, German U-Boats being bombed, and several local residents who were of German heritage being arrested as spies; local moonshiners during prohibition; and seeing the Palm Beach County Sheriff's men ambush the Ashley gang.

Arris Ozzie Lunsford (1909-2003) came to Boynton Beach in 1924 at age 15 with his family, including father J.J. Lunsford (1880-1935), and several siblings. Lunsford worked as a carpenter, cleared land, and installed ditches for the Drainage District (1913-1987) in 1932 and they had five children.

Finding aid available online.
Outreach

- Displays, digital and physical
- Sharing to other organizations
- Social media through the library social media manager
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