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Oral History at the Pacific Aviation Museum

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APUS Library Submission

Attached is a practicum paper for the library.

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ORAL HISTORY AT THE PACIFIC AVIATION MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

ORAL HISTORY AT THE PACIFIC AVIATION MUSEUM

A reflection paper by

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American Public University System, May 24, 2014

Charles Town, West Virginia

Dr. Anne Millbrooke, Practicum Professor

Oral history projects are a powerful history resource, but they present a unique set of challenges to museum professionals and are often neglected or inadequately structured as a result. My internship at the Pacific Aviation Museum in Pearl Harbor allowed me to work with a mostly digital collection of oral history interviews through the stages of cataloguing, preservation, and preparation for an exhibit. Using best practices as a guide, I addressed the challenges posed by museum's own circumstances and availability of resources, and organized the collection in order to preserve it and make it useful and accessible. When working with similar projects, a simple organizational system can go a long way in ensuring the collection is not only preserved, but also accessible and manageable. Planning for the future concerning matters of obsolete technology, transcribing, and potential exhibits can simplify the work of museum professionals and make the best use of the invaluable resource that is oral history.

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Introduction

The museum of yesterday told a story, although its meaning usually belonged solely to the visitor. The nineteenth century museum historian was probably more of a collector or even a treasure hunter, gathering objects of interest to be admired by high society in grand buildings. The displays were more aesthetic than historically meaningful. Today's museum attempts to tell the story of objects and events which are part of history, and interpret it in order to educate the public. To do this, it relies primarily on the written sources which are found to be credible. But another type of source has been gaining prominence in the last few decades. Numerous oral history projects have appeared around the world started by all sorts of institutions and individuals. Their value is unquestionable, adding emotion and a human element to history, not to mention telling stories which might otherwise remain untold, but working with oral histories provides a whole new set of challenges to historians and museum professionals. Numerous guides exist on best practices for conducting, cataloguing, preserving, and disseminating oral histories, but each project tends to be unique, dependent on circumstances and available resources.

When Burl Burlingame, curator at the Pacific Aviation Museum at Pearl Harbor, described to me the project they needed completed, I jumped at the opportunity to put theory into practice. The museum, located on historic Ford Island, has struggled with limited resources, and relies heavily on the efforts of eager volunteers and aviation enthusiasts to achieve its goals. A series of interviews had been conducted, primarily by volunteers, with aviators and other individuals mainly on the topic of aviation in the Pacific in World War II. The problem was that there seemed to be a lack of an organizational system and the collection was, therefore, not being used as it was mostly inaccessible and its contents mostly unknown. There was also no

preservation system in place. The goal was to ultimately get the collection ready to be used in a physical exhibit at the museum.

The practicum would consist of a minimum of 160 hours over the course of nine to ten weeks to take place in hangar 79 above the restoration shop at the museum. The setting was a little noisy as was to be expected of a working shop, but there was no lack of excitement among all the historic aircraft. Burl Burlingame would be the supervisor for the project but I would be working primarily with the volunteers who had conducted the interviews. The volume and condition of the collection were unknown at the start of the project, so the development of individual steps had to happen as needed. I knew I would also be spending a considerable amount of time researching recommended practices to ensure my work was beneficial to the museum in the long term.

The first stage would be to evaluate the collection and determine what needed to be done to get it properly catalogued and make it accessible. At the beginning it was unknown whether I would be digitizing tapes, and whether I would be transcribing interviews. The goal was to have at least a list which could be searched for names or contents. Short descriptions could take the place of full transcripts if necessary. The second stage, once the collection was organized, would be to develop a plan for preservation. More than creating a set of backups, preservation should include having multiple copies in more than one environmentally stable location, keeping up with changing technologies, and performing regular upkeep to safeguard data. Lastly, the practicum would involve researching options for sharing the collection with the public (to include finding out what other museums were doing, and how successful other oral history exhibits had been), and working in selecting the most relevant content for an exhibit.

The Project

I went into the museum the first day expecting to find these interviews as a stack of tapes in a drawer somewhere. As it turned out, with a few exceptions, all the interviews were digital files and almost all video, not just audio. Unfortunately, there were a number of problems I had not anticipated. Because video files are incredibly large, most files had been compressed and edited (intro, logo, and credits added) and saved over the originals. This meant there were no original files to preserve. Additionally, the files were in many different formats, in many different physical locations, and there were many variations of the same files, though none original. There was a database, although it had many discrepancies.

I quickly realized the project was turning out to be far more tech oriented than I had expected. I also had to get used to working with a Mac, with which I had very limited experience, and figure out how to keep everything in files which could also be accessed with Windows. I spent the first week trying to create a master list and a master folder with all the interviews. The museum does not have a media server so there were literally piles of external hard drives, many of which proved to be inaccessible, both on Mac and PC.

I began working with one of the volunteers who had done most of the oral history interviews. I found him to be very knowledgeable and genuinely interested in the stories the people had to tell, and it showed in the interviews. He showed me how he went about finding people to interview. Walking around the museum and looking for veterans—one can usually spot them by something they are wearing, stories they are telling, or things they are pointing out on the aircraft—was the primary method.

As the work on the master list and folder continued I encountered more problems such as several missing interviews, which no one seemed to be able to locate, and I also kept finding

interviews buried in random folders which were not even on the database, and wondered how many more there might be like this.

Another problem I had to try to figure out was as follows. Most interviews were assigned numbers based on the date—like 2008-1, 2008-2, etc.—but many were not in the order they were conducted, there were missing numbers and duplicates, and it was generally confusing. I was listening to the beginning of each interview and listing the interview dates and could re-order them and assign new numbers, in most cases only having to change a few of them. The problem was that this was bound to generate some confusion since some people would still be looking at old lists with old numbers and there were some DVD copies with the old numbers. There might also have been some documentation with the old numbers. Ideally, a clean list would have been easier to work with, but not if it caused more problems than it solved.

An additional problem was figuring out what to do with additional videos that were part of the oral history collection but were not interviews. The second camera footage of the interviews I assumed should just be catalogued together with the primary video, but there were other videos. Some were presentations and several were videos of what the locals in Hawaii call "talk story"—that is, interviewees usually out on the museum floor simply talking and telling stories. Some of these were in the database listed as interviews, while others were just additional files. I was not entirely sure if these should be catalogued as separate videos, or as part of the main interview. Some were from the same day the interviews had taken place and only a few minutes long, while others were years apart and much longer.

I started compiling a list of recommendations for the museum for handling current and future interviews, although it was a work in progress as the project continued. These recommendations included transcribing all the interviews. I had started transcribing and based on

the number of interviews and average length, this could require anywhere from 300 to 400 hours of work. A few older interviews, and a few telephone ones, were not great quality—combine that with some thick accents and technical terms and it could take even longer. Transcription is important for providing researchers with a searchable document, which can be easily accessed when a video file might not, even if such files are made available online. Additionally, transcription is another form of preservation.

Another recommendation was to hire a professional translator/interpreter to translate three interviews the museum had of Imperial Japanese pilots. These interviews could provide valuable material for the museum, and be used in future exhibits with captions added. All that was known about these interviews was the interviewees' last names and that they were conducted in 2010. No additional documentation on them had been collected.

I spent some time working on the details for the preservation aspect, such as best file types and locations of copies, based on what was available. My working list included these basics: future interviews should be kept in highest resolution available to be preserved as original file; file type should be consistent, and only copies should be converted to compressed/easily edited file types to minimize data loss; until such as time as the museum has a media server, these files should be kept on minimum of two dedicated external hard drives kept in different locations and backed up on DVD or Blu-Ray; the DVD/Blu-Ray copies should be labeled and accessible to staff in museum archives; as collection grows and new technologies are made available, larger external drives may need to be acquired to accommodate entire collection; when server is available, files should be copied and inspected regularly to ensure data integrity; new interviews should be accessioned as soon as they are turned in; oral history cataloguing numbers should be assigned (by oral history department) in order that interviews were conducted, rather

than edited, to prevent confusion, and use of these numbers in any databases, reports, and DVD copies should be consistent.

In the early weeks, I was still determined to make transcribing a priority since I had not yet anticipated just how long organizing the collection would take. I was curious about using voice recognition software to transcribe interviews, so one of the first things I did was try it out for myself. I tried using a popular application called Dragon Dictation, which I knew worked fairly well and even learned the user's voice.[1] But when I tried it on an interview with two people talking, I got a jumble of words with some fragments of accurate sentences. It was not terrible, but I was not sure it was entirely useful either. So I did some additional research on this.

In the article "Can Automatic Speech Recognition Replace Manual Transcription?" Doug Oard discusses work that has been done to explore this possibility. The consensus seems to be that voice recognition will produce a "world salad," which is neither useful on its own, nor does it make editing any easier than doing it from scratch. Programs have been developed and "taught" to be more accurate with oral history interviews, but the results are still far from readable transcripts. They can, however, be useful for search engines, since enough words are correct, so researchers can find the interviews that are relevant to their work. But these specialized programs took a great deal of time and work to make them even remotely useful, so it would only be cost effective for very large collections.[2] So it appeared that technology might not be the best solution in this case. Looking through some museums' websites (Seattle's

[1]"Dragon Speech Recognition Software," accessed April 1, 2014, Nuance, http://www.nuance.com/dragon/index.htm.

[2]Doug Oard. "Can Automatic Speech Recognition Replace Manual Transcription?" in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, eds. Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012), accessed March 24th, 2014, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/automatic-speech-recognition/.

Experience Music Project, or EMP, and their oral history project, in particular[3]), I found out that there is free software available that can make manual transcription a little easier, such as Express Scribe[4] and Transcriber, which allow for variable speed playback or can be used with foot pedals.[5] As it turned out, I ended up not having time in the practicum to explore this much further.

As I worked on transcribing and writing some synopses for the interviews that did not have any descriptions, I finally had a chance to listen to some of them in their entirety. I admit I had never been particularly interested in twentieth century history, but listening to some of these great aviation stories made me want to know more about World War II. While listening, I had to keep researching airplane designations, military terms, and names of places with which I was not familiar, so I could make sure I typed them correctly. While I like to think my knowledge of world geography is fairly good, there are a lot of islands in the South Pacific, and this become a great way to expand that knowledge. It also became a great exercise to improve my listening skills.

I had assumed I would be spending some time of the practicum getting the collection catalogued on PastPerfect, but a few weeks in I found out the museum only had one license for the software, so the registrar used the only computer with access to it, making it impossible for me to work on this at the time. I was told there were plans to purchase additional licenses but, as I suspected, it did not happen during my practicum.

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[3]EMP Museum, "Equipment Resources: The Usage, Creation, and History of Oral History Materials," accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.empmuseum.org/programs-plus-education/for-educators/educational-resources/oral-history-resources/equipment-resources.aspx.

[4]"Express Scribe Transcription Software," NCH Software, accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html.

[5]"Transcriber: A Tool for Segmenting, Labeling and Transcribing Speech," Transcriber, accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/index.html.

After researching online how PastPerfect catalogues oral histories, I decided it would be useful to create a simple form to be filled out immediately after each interview so that cataloguing was more straight forward and did not require a third person to listen to the full interview to try to gather details for all the data fields.[6] This form had to include names of interviewer and interviewee, date, location, and length of interview, brief synopsis, and year range of the content of the interview—most of the interviews focused on events surrounding World War II, but many also included valuable information from other decades. Most of this information had been provided fairly consistently, but not all of it. I already had most of the information needed for the existing interviews, with the exception of the year range. If I was not the one entering these on PastPerfect, I would make a spreadsheet with all the needed information to streamline the process.

I was glad to see that PastPerfect offered fields for uploading release forms (which should be scanned) and full transcripts. Unfortunately, after meeting with the registrar, I found out that half the release forms appeared to have gone missing, so now there was another hunt for physical documents this time. I was confident every interviewee had signed one, so there were no legal concerns, but it was important to locate and file them. I also spent some time converting files and making DVD copies for the registrar, since she was missing several interviews. I encountered problems with a few DVDs that would not play on my computer—a reminder of their short lifespan—so I made additional copies of those interviews. I was able to find the interviews I was missing with one exception—this interview apparently did not hold much value as it did not fit the museum mission statement, nor did it include much history; for this reason, it had not been

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[6]"The Archives Catalog," PastPerfect Museum Software User's Guide, accessed April 7, 2014, http://museumsoftware.com/v5ug/pdf/PP5-8.pdf.

kept safe and may have to be declared permanently lost, though I kept the notes on it, in case it was ever found.

I spent a couple of weeks fighting uncooperative computers and programs, and working on more file conversions. Some of the raw footage files were unreadable until converted and different programs had to be used for converting different file types. I also digitized some audio tapes the registrar had found, and spent a good amount of time trying to figure out how to watch some Mini DVs to identify various miscellaneous oral history videos (not interviews conducted by the museum). The primary computer used for the project crashed one day, serving as a harsh reminder of the need to keep multiple copies of everything in different locations. Luckily all the documents and files had been on an external drive or backed up on my own laptop. I promptly made additional copies of everything after this incident.

At this point I started realizing how little time was left in the practicum, and tried to decide how best to use it. I was getting a list organized for facilitating the cataloguing process, whether I did it or somebody else did. But it was time to start focusing on the ultimate purpose of getting this collection organized—to actually use it on an exhibit. The last few weeks I would have to work on a plan or at least a list of options for equipment and set up of an exhibit using interview clips. Part of this would include spending some time listening and selecting good clips from the interviews.

So I started thinking about the exhibit itself and pulling clips which could be used to tell a story. It was very unfortunate when a good story was marred by poor audio/video or sometimes poor storytelling. I also had to try to think about what was relevant—something that was amusing could help give a general idea of the times, even if it did not contribute much to telling

the story of war or aviation. One of the main advantages to presenting oral history directly to the public is to allow them to relate to the people and times in question.

Most of these stories told tales of heroism and, as most veterans describe it, service men simply doing the job they were assigned to do, no matter the cost. They brought the realities of war to life, through the words of the men and women who lived it. The purpose of the exhibit should be to tell the story of these men and women, to honor and remember them and all others whose voices have not been heard. The primary theme of the interviews was the attack on Pearl Harbor and the ensuing fighting which took place around the Pacific, with most interviewees having been involved in aviation in one way or another. This was also the main theme of the museum itself so the exhibit would have to stand out in some way. It did not seem that the museum had many objects donated by the interviewees, although it had at least a few very interesting pieces. These could be used in an exhibit along with various other objects the pilots and soldiers would have carried, such as silk printed evasion maps (which the museum had), survival equipment, and other pilot gear. These objects could add a visual interest to the oral histories, along with any available photographs. Any particularly significant quotes from the interviews could also be printed on large labels in the exhibit space.

I spent some time looking over the potential exhibit spaces and the flow of the existing exhibits. The spaces available were one large elongated space, with one curved wall on the side, and bright ceiling spotlights; good for physical wall exhibits and large enough for any kind of audio/visual equipment. And one small alcove with many sides in a rounded fashion, like a tent, with three large cushioned seats; could be used for individual listening stations with headphones, or have a wall display either with a "play all" option or with some way for visitors to control what is played from the seats.

I continued listening to interviews and selecting clips for the last few weeks. I was not sure I would get to listen to every single interview, so rather that going in order I selected the ones I had heard the interviewer talk about the most. The ones dating back to 2007 and 2008 had a lot of problems with audio and video quality. The video editing was the problem on some of them but, since the original footage was not preserved (or could not be located), it was the best that was left. I spent a little time looking at some easy to use programs, like Audacity (I had used it to digitize the audio tape earlier), which could help clean up background noise.[7] I knew I would not get too far into that during the practicum, but at least I knew there were options to possibly make these videos usable for exhibits.

The clips could, for the most part, be placed in just a few categories, which could be used for individual areas of an exhibit. The categories were witness reports of the Pearl Harbor attack, battles in the Pacific (this category would probably have to be split further), and other flying adventures around the world—mostly in Europe.

I spent some more time researching technology options and creating a list to present to the curator. Museum attendance had been down considerably, and they were laying off staff, so budget would probably be a big concern. On the more expensive end, there were big touchscreen kiosks which can run in the thousands depending on size. One advantage to purchasing something big like that would be that the museum could also use it for other exhibits besides the oral history. For example, they do a lot of videos of their restoration projects which could be shown to the public in an interactive manner and on a large screen.

On the least expensive side was the use of QR codes, which can be simply printed on an exhibit panel and direct to individual video clips once scanned with a smartphone. The downsides to this choice include noise, if multiple people are playing videos at the same time,

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[7]"Audacity: Free Audio Editor and Recorder," accessed May 5, 2014, http://audacity.sourceforge.net/.

and data usage concerns. The worst downside is that most people simply won't bother to scan the code, either because it is inconvenient, or they simply do not know how, or do not have an application to scan it, since it is not built in smartphones. I conducted a very informal poll on a forum, which confirmed all these problems that I had already found to be common. I think I would recommend these only in conjunction with at least one touchscreen, as an additional way to access information, rather than a primary one.

The most versatile and convenient option I found was the use of tablets. I was actually surprised by all the companies I found selling stands (floor, wall, desktop, etc.) to turn tablets into kiosks. They can be customized depending on one's needs—for example, one can order one with a hook for hanging headphones, which would be useful for this exhibit. There are also applications that make it easy to block out all non-related applications from visitors, and the stands themselves can block out any or all buttons from the public. IPads seem to be the preferred choice of businesses, mostly because they are easier to work with in a kiosk setting.

I got together with the curator the last week and we did a debriefing on the project. We talked about the problems encountered and went over my list of suggestions. He was interested in having my suggestions turned into grant proposals—these included acquiring a media server, transcribing the interviews, and hiring a professional translator for the Japanese interviews. We also discussed the exhibit and the possibilities I had researched. I had spent some time putting together some exhibit collages for showing how we could use QR codes with interviewee donated artifacts, and also have some general panels with all related clips on it. As it turned out, the museum was already currently using QR codes on some exhibits in a similar fashion.

Overall, the collection was organized in one location, with its contents searchable by keywords as well as various other categories; there was a working plan to ensure its preservation,

and also to share it with the public. The work was far from over and, above all, the museum needed funding. I decided I would continue helping with the project but, by the end of the internship, most of the goals set at the beginning had been achieved successfully.

Reflection and Analysis

I began the project with an idealistic vision of the end results. I thought the collection would not only be completely organized but also transcribed and shared with the public. I had not anticipated how time consuming organizing it would end up being. At times it felt like theories and best practices simply did not apply to what I was working with, since there were always unexpected issues coming up. Still, there were few days where I did not think of what I had learned in some of my classes. My previous training not only in oral history, but also in archives and managing digital files, as well as museum exhibition, proved to be immensely useful and I found myself going back to my textbooks and class discussions often, primarily to look for good resources provided in class.

My preliminary research had involved a lot of sources on best practices for audio and video digitization and working with various types of tapes as originals to be preserved. As it turned out, most of it was unnecessary, as the majority of the interviews were born digital files. This was when I realized that things were about to get pretty technical, and I hoped I was up to the task. There is a great deal of information available on best file types to use when creating videos or when first digitizing videos. The National Archives provide detailed information on the most common ones used for long term archiving.[8] But in this case I was not creating new files and I figured the fewer conversions I had to do the better to prevent data loss. In some cases, I

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[8]National Archives, "Digital File Types," Preservation, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.archives.gov/preservation/products/definitions/filetypes.html.

had to convert files to make them playable, but all of the original footage I could find was saved to be preserved.

Organizing the collection meant cataloguing, even if I was not doing the actual accessioning in the museum software. The collection consisted of seventy three interviews, including the three untranslated Japanese interviews (but not the one missing interview), plus several miscellaneous videos, some of which were associated with primary interviews, but still completely separate items. The volume was very manageable and, by listening to portions of the interviews and working with the synopses which had already been written—in some cases I had to add my own—I was able to create an organized spreadsheet with all of the basic information for cataloguing. The longer list of contents could easily be searched by keywords. With such a small collection, the items were primarily arranged chronologically, with the dates ranging from 2006 to 2014. In *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*, Nancy MacKay describes the challenges of cataloguing oral histories, as they are a unique type of item viewed differently by different professionals, like oral historians and cataloguers, who do not always agree on how it should be handled.[9] Cataloguing using museum software simplifies matters considerably, and facilitates the use of standard vocabulary, which is crucial for effective cataloguing. When constructing my database, I tried to be as consistent as possible.

A useful tool for cataloguing and curating oral histories is the use of metadata. The embedded data in each file can provide a wealth of information and make each item much more accessible. It "makes possible the discovery of themes and meaningful relationships within interviews, among sets of interviews, and with other digitally represented resources. New digital tools are being developed to enhance the accessibility of oral history interviews in various media

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[9]Nancy MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2007), 61.

and forms and to analyze and understand them in ever-greater contexts."[10] Born digital files

have their own automatically created technical metadata, but editing software can allow a user to

add more detailed and descriptive information. While this is a valuable tool, it was beyond the

scope of the project, as getting organized had to be first step, and to do this step accurately would

have required a great deal more time. The size of the collection also made this step less crucial.

I had learned that part of doing oral history was also transcribing in order to have a

working, searchable document that did not require a researcher to locate and listen to or watch

interview videos. Or at least that is what had stuck in my mind. So I was determined to make

transcribing a priority from the beginning. After it took me a whole day, with many online

searches of names of places and technical terms, to transcribe a single interview—and not

completely, for I had probably a dozen words or short sections that I had to mark *unintelligible*—

I realized this was an entire project on its own. And I found that transcription might not always

be the best option for a museum, due to cost or time constraints. In some cases, a brief summary,

as the interviewer at the museum had already been doing, might be adequate.

The benefits of having a transcript are undeniable—access and an extra form of

preservation being the primary ones—but "[m]uch is lost in transferring a unique voice and

speaking style to the flatness of print on a page, so much so that the result can be misleading."[11]

So the emotions that make oral histories so special and so powerful are mostly lost in a transcript

but, at the same time, it can be argued that once it becomes a written document the oral history

becomes somehow more official as a historic source, more likely to be accepted by what one

might call a traditional historian. So I still felt that transcription in this case was important,

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[10]Elinor A. Mazé, "Metadata: Best Practices for Oral History Access and Preservation," Oral History in the Digital Age, accessed May 3, 2014, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/metadata/.

[11]MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories*, 49-50.

especially given the topics being discussed. Since my research on automatic voice recognition had not proven very helpful, it seemed that manual transcription was still the only way to go. MacKay describes transcribing as "an art and craft that requires skill and judgment, and the transcriber should be included in the oral history team."[12] The advantages of doing it in house include primarily a better understanding of the subject matter and, therefore, the language used but, particularly for very large collections, professional services might be desired. When asking a team of individuals, whether volunteers, staff, or outside professionals, to transcribe it is important that style and language be consistent. The Institute for Oral History at Baylor University provides a useful reference guide for editing oral history transcripts.[13] It was my recommendation that the museum use volunteers for this project.

Making the Pacific Aviation Museum's oral history collection available online was not a part of my project, but I spent some time exploring possibilities in this regard. Having a collection online is another way to preserve it, as well as sharing it with the public. There are national repositories accepting donated interviews, but it was determined that this was not a good option for the museum, which holds exclusive rights to all the material. The Hartford History Center's Digital Collections Guide advocates collaboration with other institutions as a way of "us[ing] your digital primary sources on different platforms (different audiences, contexts) to optimize your organization's online presence."[14] In the future, the collection or portions of it

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[12]Ibid.

[13]Baylor University, "Digital Oral History Workshop," Institute for Oral History: Workshops & Resources, accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=61236.

[14]Hartford History Center at Hartford Public Library et al, "Digital Collections 101 Pilot Workshops: Companion Guide and Additional Resources," (May-June 2013): 29-30, accessed April 1, 2014, http://www.cthistoryonline.org/cho/project/docs/de101_companion-guide-resources_beta.pdf.

could be made available on the museum's own website and links shared with other institutions for public dissemination.

Only the first steps toward an oral history exhibit were taken during the project, namely selecting clips and brainstorming ideas for layout and equipment. Nonetheless, the ultimate goal of an exhibit was the primary motivator for the entire project. Ron Chew, executive director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, which has a tradition of using powerful oral history exhibits, states that "[o]ral history has begun to permeate the museum—having proven its value as a research and organizing tool, a component of exhibitions, and a document worth preserving in the collection archive."[15] He describes the power of telling stories through people's words and using oral histories to create meaning in exhibits beyond what artifacts and labels can provide, using as examples successful exhibits on topics ranging from tragedies of human history, like World War II internment camps, to celebrating and helping preserve Native American histories. He goes on to advocate the power of storytelling, sometimes with something as simple as a significant quote on a wall, but recognizes the point of view of some traditionalists who may "blame oral histories, in part, for what they see as a headlong rush toward converting galleries into dumbed-down, gadget-filled entertainment spaces."[16] The oral history exhibit must be more than throwing a computer in a room and telling people to go interact with it. But the power of the oral history lies in the fact that it is presented directly to the visitor, allowing him or her to experience it and interpret it with or without guidance. The oral history is not used to dumb down an exhibit and avoid the work of interpreting the historic sources; it is used because

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[15]Ron Chew, "Collected Stories: The Rise of Oral History in Museum Exhibitions," *Museum News* (November/December 2002), accessed May 8, 2014, http://dwohp.tumblr.com/post/31270439217/collected-stories-the-rise-of-oral-history-in-museum.

[16]Ibid.

it adds a powerful human element—it allows the visitor to relate to the material being presented and to actually experience a real historic source, rather than simply what is derived from it.

The National Park System is responsible for a great number of the country's oral history projects. Their attempt to better describe the American experience has led them to embrace the use of oral history. "Increased use of oral history can help lead us away from presenting oversimplified—and ultimately less interesting—history to our visitors. Oral history helps us document the past, adds texture to the stories we relate to park visitors, and allows us to expand our understanding of who we are as a people."[17] But lack of funds has prevented them from exploring it to its full potential. The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project aims at telling the story of the National Historic site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, and honoring the aviators who trained there. This project is "an example of the National Park Service's growing commitment to systematic, adequately funded, and professionally administered oral history research."[18] It almost seems inconceivable that historic sites like this one do not always include oral histories when the participants are still living, but not all historians have yet come to accept oral records as valid sources.

Museums have evolved beyond the veneration of artifacts that marked their early days. The historian is no longer a collector putting found treasures on display for the entertainment of the elite. Objects need context and meaning, and exhibits need to tell a story, to educate the general public. Objects are still relevant, but history is very much about the people who made and used the objects, or lived through the events depicted, as asserted by Donald A. Ritchie in

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[17]Todd J. Moye, "The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and Oral History in the National Park Service," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2, History and September 11: A Special Issue (September 2002): 587, accessed May 7, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092176.

[18] Ibid., 582.

Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide.[19] Extra care must be taken when dealing with

controversial topics, as history has demonstrated, primarily concerning more recent historic

events. It is not enough to present the voices of the primary players in the act, since this would

likely result in a biased interpretation of history. Ritchie advocates the presentation of multiple

viewpoints. "Rather than the authoritative, and sometimes condescending, single voice of the

historian/curator lecturing the visitor on what it all means, the mélange of voices of participants

and commentators can argue with each other to recreate the complexity of the past."[20] The

curator has the power to tell a story through other people's voices, but it must be noted that the

selection of which voices are presented is a way of interpreting history in itself. The topics being

presented at the Pacific Aviation Museum are not likely to cause controversy on their own, but

how they are presented could easily cause some problems. The museum has a clear mission—to

"develop and maintain an internationally recognized aviation museum on Ford Island that

educates young and old alike, honors aviators and their support personnel who defended freedom

in the Pacific Region and to preserve Pacific aviation history."[21] Telling the story of these

aviators through their own words should be a straightforward matter. But when selecting clips

that I thought could be used for the exhibit, I found myself wondering how people would react to

what was being said. There were unquestionably some statements I found could be troubling and,

at these times, it is a matter of carefully assessing the historic value of what is being said, at risk

of allowing personal bias to affect the outcome.

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[19]Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 237.

[20]Ibid., 240.

[21]Pacific Aviation Museum, "Our Mission," accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.pacificaviationmuseum.org/aboutus/ourmission.

While I always tried my best to research the best courses of action for each circumstance, this was a learning experience as much as it was an opportunity to practice the craft. Knowing my limitations allowed me to proceed cautiously, ensuring to the best of my ability that my project did not harm the collection or hinder the museum's mission in any way. Further research is always beneficial in keeping with best practices, and I have no doubts that I still have much to learn.

Recommendations

One of the most useful quotes I read while working on this project and trying not to get discouraged was the following. "Forgive yourself for what has been done/is currently in place that doesn't conform to best practices and that isn't up to preservation standards. ALL organizations face this problem in managing digital resources, and with maintaining access to them over time."[22] At least I knew I was not alone. There was no sense in wasting time lamenting what had or had not been done. The purpose of the project was to take what was there and improve it, and develop plans to ensure best practices were used from that point on.

When tackling a project such as this, one of the primary things to keep in mind is to keep things simple. A complex plan with too many disparate steps or a complete reworking of the existing organizational system is less likely to be adopted, or more likely to be abandoned. Change can be difficult, and for this reason, individual circumstances should dictate plans of action, rather than simply abolishing all current practices and starting from scratch. Simply put, it can be beneficial to leave some practices in place, even if they are not the most efficient, so long as they accomplish what they are meant to, and are done consistently. Simplicity should also be kept in mind when doing basic organization of files, for example. When I worked on creating my

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[22]Hartford History Center, "Digital Collections," 4.

list of interviews, I had to reconcile cataloguing numbers from databases, digital file names, and DVDs. The easiest thing to do would have been to reassign numbers to all the interviews in the order they were recorded. But, for simplicity's sake, I kept as many unchanged numbers as I could and assigned new numbers only when strictly necessary to, hopefully, minimize the number of inconsistencies.

A museum should always plan for the future. The oral history project at the Pacific Aviation Museum was still ongoing at the time of this project, but the number of interviews conducted was steadily and rapidly declining. One reason for this was that the interviews were primarily conducted by volunteers who only worked very limited hours. But the primary reason was simply that there are not that many World War II veterans still around, or visiting Pearl Harbor. One recommendation I had for the curator was to setup a program to collect donated interviews, much like the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project.[23] A web page could include all necessary release forms and documentation, as well as instructions for conducting a good interview, such as what type of equipment to use. This could provide the museum with valuable material from people who might not be able to make it out to Hawaii. Although, technology could, of course, also offer solutions—quality audio can easily be recorded over the internet or telephone. This would, however, require staff or volunteers willing to conduct virtual interviews.

When beginning a new project like the Pacific Aviation Museum's oral history project or similar, there are some simple steps that can be taken to help later on, even if the project lacks appropriate funding or trained staff. One of the primary concerns should be preservation. It is important to have a centralized location for the files, so they do not end up scattered throughout

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[23]Library of Congress, "How to Participate," The American Folklife Center: Veterans History Project, accessed May 1, 2014, http://www.loc.gov/vets/kit.html.

various locations. With the cost of portable data storage steadily coming down, it should be fairly easy for even the smallest museums to keep their digital files not just together as a collection, but also copied and stored in more than one location. The easiest way to preserve files is simply to keep multiple copies in different locations—not just one backup in media with a short lifespan, such as DVDs.

A simple organizational system can go a long way in keeping a collection safe and making it useful. It should not require additional training or specialized, expensive equipment, but it does need to be used consistently in order to be effective. It should ensure that files are kept in order, saved and backed up properly, and that all documentation is in order. Usually having more than one person going over the steps can be useful in maintaining consistency. If a new system is adopted after the project has already started, time should be taken to ensure earlier work is transferred and conforms to new standards. In a project such as this, care should also be taken to avoid neglecting what might be categorized as miscellaneous files. Files that do not necessarily fit in with the main collection, such as the "talk story" videos discussed earlier, should still be documented as carefully as possible, to ensure that they can be used by the museum.

When dealing with oral history projects, transcription does not have to be a priority, by any means. Its benefits should not be overlooked, however, and it might be useful to plan for it in the future. Generally speaking, the interviewer is the most appropriate individual to transcribe the interview shortly after it takes place. Any other person present at the time of the interview or associated with it in any way might also have a distinct advantage. But there could be many reasons why this might not be practical or desired at the time. Keeping clear notes in the documentation with names of people and places spelled out, as well as any technical terms or

equipment designations, can be extremely useful for someone transcribing at a later time, and is a good practice to use.

Finally, a museum should keep in mind the primary purpose of the project. An oral history project should aim not just to preserve but also to share the histories it collects. With this in mind, it would be beneficial to identify particularly significant files or portions of files, especially if there is a very large collection being planned. The interviewer is generally the most qualified to make any special notes on an interview, but in many cases someone who is in charge of putting together exhibits could better identify useable material for future exhibits. Most projects can always benefit from having more than one person reviewing the material and the organizational procedures being used. While there are best practices for doing things, each museum's circumstances are different, and adapting practices to an institution's needs and available resources is acceptable, provided there is consistency and care to ensure adequate preservation of the material.

Conclusion

Oral history projects, while filling a significant gap in the way history is traditionally done, present numerous challenges to historians and museum professionals. There is value in any attempt at collecting the histories of those whose voices have not been heard but, with a little planning, an institution can ensure that those histories are utilized and shared with the public, instead of sitting on a shelf (actual or virtual) awaiting the day when someone takes the time to work on them. The professional literature provides guides for every step of the process, including the more problematic cataloguing and preserving. In cases where proper procedures were not

consistently followed from the beginning, a little creativity and common sense should be employed.

The Pacific Aviation Museum's oral history collection was not as problematic as it might appear, but it was time consuming to reconcile all the data and documentation. The lack of a centralized storage location had left the collection scattered, and the organizational system had not been consistently used, resulting in missing or difficult to locate data and discrepancies in databases. Lack of access to the museum's cataloguing software also prevented accessioning from being a part of this project—ideally, accessioning would have been done as each interview was turned in, but this had not been the case. There was also the risk of data loss, even though backups had been created for the majority of the interviews. Even so, the work the volunteers have been doing for the museum is invaluable and the collection a historic treasure.

The latter part of the project included evaluating the collection and the individual interviews in the historic context. Some people had a lot more to share than others; some of it was a lot more historically significant than the rest. I attempted to pull the most relevant and interesting statements concerning both major events—Pearl Harbor attack and major Pacific battles—and minor—routine missions and daily life. Not all of it can be used in exhibits, but these are important stories and they should be shared with the public.

The challenges of working with oral history projects are unique, but seldom does theory turn into practice without the surmounting of various challenges. Public history is not a static field and its rewards are found in the ability to adapt and evolve. Theory and best practices serve as guides but every project is unique, each institution has its own circumstances and availability of resources. This practicum gave me the experience of working with an actual collection through the steps of organizing, cataloguing, preserving, and preparing for use in an exhibit, and

addressing problems as they were encountered, allowing me the invaluable opportunity to see

theory applied in a real world museum setting.

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