

To Audibly Preserve: The Present and Future of Collection of and Access to Oral and Video History Materials

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Oral history is an important method for documenting the past, and indeed the oral tradition dates to a time before written records. During the mid 20th century, academic historians began to systematically record and collect these resources. Alan Nevins at Columbia University initiated one of, if not the first, academic based oral history projects to capture human memories in order to create primary sources in 1948. This movement led to the formation of the academic discipline of oral history and its relevant literature and methodology. The rise in popularity of this format as an academic tool therefore roughly parallels the development of the space industry, and those researchers working in the aerospace and space fields researchers during this time often collected and utilized oral history as part of their scholarly work.¹ The digital information revolution of the late 20th century allowed for an even greater sharing of these materials, but has also created questions of purpose, ownership, and authenticity.

In the introduction of his widely read text on oral history, Donald Ritchie urges us to “think forward or get left behind.”² This paper will attempt to do just that by examining the following questions and using the present to prepare for the future. Mindful of a focus on collection and access to space flight materials, we will examine the following questions: How can organizations facilitate documenting and making available oral and video history interviews, now and in the future? What are some best practices for conducting these interviews? What methods can institutions use or anticipate to use to make the interviews more accessible? Most importantly, how can oral history remain relevant and useful to contemporary users?

This paper will also provide a case study based on the rich and vibrant oral and video oral history collections at the University at Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) to investigate

¹ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd Ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2006) pp.1-2.

² Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. xi.

the above questions. UAH began collecting space archival material in the late 1960's as a result of a NASA contract project to assemble a research collection on the Saturn V, which included oral interviews. Charles A. Lundquist and Dennis Wingo detailed the history of subsequent efforts (1969-2010) at collecting oral and video interviews at UAH.³ This paper highlights examples from current practice at UAH as a benchmark by which to build to more formally establish procedures for both the oral history process and to create digital access to these collections.

To outline the parameters of this paper I would like to offer some definitions. The Society of American Archivists defines oral histories as: "1. An interview that records an individual's personal recollections of the past and historical events. - 2. The audio or video recordings, transcripts, and other materials that capture and are associated with such an interview."⁴ Collection in this instance can refer either to the act of collecting, as in recording an interview with a person or group of people, or to a collection of interviews stored in an library, archives, or museum (LAM). Access is the method by which information is located or retrieved from a LAM, and can include both physical and digital methods.

The heart of this paper is the following questions, upon which I will elaborate with examples during the session. In looking to the future LAMS must:

- Ask the question: Why collect oral history?
- Develop best practices, including a management plan and workflow for collecting oral histories.
- Continue to collect materials to document space flight, in both quantity and quality, via a viable long term plan.

³ Charles Lundquist and Dennis Wingo, "Apollo Knowledge Transfer: Preserving and Transferring the Apollo Legacy to a New Generation" in *Lunar Settlements*, ed. Haym Benoroya. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010), pp. 55-62.; see also Anne Coleman, Robert Middleton, Charles Lundquist, and David Christensen, "The Oral History Tradition at the University of Alabama in Huntsville," 57th International Astronautical Congress 2006, Valencia, Spain.

⁴ Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), pp. 279.

- Collaborate with and identify other stakeholders to develop and sustain oral history projects.
- Work to be inclusive in their collection practices, and place particular focus on groups whose stories are marginalized or untold.
- Migrate older, obsolete formats to new media platforms to ensure preservation of data, as my colleague Drew Adan suggests.
- Seek out cutting edge technologies and utilize them to share access to collections.
- Build a national network to share resources on space flight history.

In conclusion, oral and video history are important components of many space flight collections. In many ways, we have a unique opportunity in that our topic is relatively new in the world history continuum. What the world will know about man's interaction with space during its early years may well be determined by this and the next generation of LAM professionals. Dr. Wernher von Braun once stated that "The greatest gain from space travel consists in the extension of our knowledge. In a hundred years this newly won knowledge will pay huge and unexpected dividends." Apollo is 50 years behind us, and we are responsible for collecting and making public the next 50 years.