

# **To Infinity: Preserving the Legacy of Space Flight with Oral Histories Built to Last**

Caitlin Birch, Dartmouth College

The oral tradition — the act of speaking one’s story aloud to an audience who will carry it forward in time — is a universal constant in human history, nearly as old as language itself. The advent of sound recording technology, and particularly magnetic tape recording in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, opened the door to new ways of thinking about the oral tradition. Among these were its scholarly applications; with the ability to record and preserve an individual’s story — not just its content but the sound of it, its cadence and dialect and emotion and context — the oral tradition gradually morphed into an acceptable way for scholars to gather evidence and examine moments in time. It became oral history.

The methodology of oral history has evolved in the ensuing decades and is now a popular way for scholars and information professionals of all kinds to document and study the individual experiences and memories that together comprise history. Oral history’s emphasis today is on the stories that are unlikely to appear elsewhere in the historical record. Less concerned with rehashing what is already documented in other forms of recordkeeping, oral history is another, more personal side of well-known figures, and perhaps more importantly, a tribute to figures who wouldn’t be known at all without it. As such, it is arguably one of the most useful endeavors the space flight community can undertake to paint the fullest, richest picture of its history. It is also a project that should be envisioned and designed with long-term preservation in mind.

My paper for “To Boldly Preserve: Archiving for the Next Half-Century of Space Flight” will explore the issues that one must consider when endeavoring to create oral history interviews that will stand the test of time. My focus will not be with the methodology itself — there are many valuable resources already in existence to guide beginners

through the basics of oral history practice<sup>1</sup> — but rather with project design. How can individuals and organizations interested in undertaking oral history work design their projects so that they are suited for archival repositories and long-term digital preservation? Writing for an audience assumed to include many doing oral history work for the first time, I will address the issues of identifying the appropriate repository for a project, establishing strong collaborative relationships with archivists, and preparing to work on the core legal, structural, and aspirational elements of oral history project design. The overarching goal of my paper will be to equip actors and stakeholders across the field with the knowledge they need to document the voices of space history in all their diversity, and in such a way that those voices can speak for many centuries to come. In the remainder of this abstract, I offer an introduction to the topics I intend to cover more fully at the conference.

### **Identifying the right repository for your project**

Many readers will be affiliated with an institution that includes an archive. One's home repository is not always the appropriate repository for a given oral history project, though, as archives are organized around specific kinds of collecting that may not encompass the project topic. If you are planning an oral history project and want to explore your own institution as a home for it, become familiar with the archives' collecting policy. If your project is not a fit, use a resource like ArchiveGrid to locate a repository with collecting strengths in your area of focus.

### **Establishing strong collaborative relationships with archivists**

When you have identified a repository, contact the archivist and establish a collaborative relationship as early as possible. Oral histories are complex primary sources with significant challenges, particularly in the areas of rights and preservation. Issues not addressed during project design can be difficult to address after the fact. The archivist

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix.

can guide you through potential pitfalls as you begin, ensuring that the end result is one the archives can accept.

### **Legal and ethical considerations**

All oral history projects require thorough legal release forms, often ones that have been vetted by institutional legal counsel. Oral history projects accepted into some types of repositories (especially academic) may also require the approval of an institutional review board or other research-governing body. Even seasoned researchers are likely to encounter legal and ethical issues with oral history that have not arisen in their past work, and it's important to address them before the project progresses beyond the conceptual stage.

### **Describing your content**

The more descriptive detail you provide about your oral history interviews — what is known as metadata in the information professions — the easier it will be for researchers far into the future to find and use them. Your collaborator in the archives can help you design a standard metadata form that will gather helpful details from and about your interviewees, and that will translate into strong archival description once transferred to the archives.

### **Recording your content**

The choices you make at the point of recording will have a significant impact on how well your interviews can be preserved. Resources like the Library of Congress' Sustainability of Digital Formats will provide a wealth of information that can help guide your thinking about file formats, but a conversation with archivists at the repository that will preserve your project is the best way to learn that repository's practices and preferences.

## Imagining your project's future

When your project is complete, what outcome do you see? This is the overarching question not only of my paper, but of “To Boldly Preserve” more generally. As you work with the archivist for your project, questions about transcription, access, delivery, and preservation are likely to arise. Discussing these topics early and often will help shape not only what your project can accomplish in the immediate future, but for many generations of research to come.

## Appendix

The scope of this paper does not include the actual methodology of oral history interviewing, but there are many existing online resources that can act as a guide for first-time oral historians. Though not exhaustive, the following list provides a few good starting points, including several focused on oral history within scientific disciplines:

American Institute of Physics. “Suggested Questions for Oral History Interviews.” Last modified 2018. <https://www.aip.org/history-programs/physics-history/oral-history-interview-questions>.

Baylor University. “Introduction to Oral History Manual.” Accessed February 8, 2018. <https://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=931751>.

Indiana University Bloomington. “Oral History Techniques.” Accessed February 8, 2018. <http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/techniques.html>.

The Optometric Historical Society. “Guidelines for Conducting an Oral History Interview.” Accessed February 8, 2018. [http://www.aoafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017\\_OCAMO\\_OralHistoryPacket.pdf](http://www.aoafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017_OCAMO_OralHistoryPacket.pdf).

Oral History Association. “Principles and Best Practices.” Accessed February 8, 2018. <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>.

University of California, Los Angeles Library. “Interviewing Guidelines.” Last modified 2015. <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/interviewGuidelines.html>.

University of California, Santa Cruz Library. “Oral History Primer.” Last modified August 2013. <https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oral-history-primer>.