

Oral History, Civil Rights and the Archival Role

Rebecca Hankins, C.A., M.L.I.S

Prescript:

The years 2003 to 2006 will witness the anniversaries of many of the events that represent the Modern Civil Rights Movement. With the 50th anniversary celebration of the historic *Brown v Board* decision, the court order to desegregate the Boston Public schools in 1974 and the ensuing convulsions it caused. Couple with this the city of Birmingham, Alabama having experienced its most violent period of civil right activities during the 1950s and 60s, which many of those organizations and institutions in Birmingham will be commemorating from 2004 to 2006. The March on Washington and the 100th anniversary of the publication of W.E.B. DuBois's *Souls of Black Folks* behind us, this is an appropriate subject for our series. This issue of *Africa Rising* will chronicle how those professionals called archivist, charged with collecting, preserving, and making these important resources available to the public, view their role in this endeavor. This issue will show how oral histories have become a central component in the ongoing struggle to document, revise, and append the stories of the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

INTRODUCTION

Oral expression and transmission has been the cornerstone of sustaining, perpetuating and disseminating information in many cultures throughout the world. This is especially true in many African, Middle Eastern, and Asian societies that view oral transmission as an avenue to preserving the history, traditions, genealogical, and cultural legacies of their communities. These cultures have elevated those individuals who are the oral memories, the griots/griottes that ensure that their legacies endure by chronicling and remembering every minor and major event within those societies. Western scholarship has rediscovered the importance of this oral tradition. The willingness to reconsider those oral histories once buried in our archives and historical centers has brought awareness that we have only scratched the surface in showing the contributions of people of color. What scholars, academics, and cultural chroniclers comprehend is the essential element of the eyewitness account that oral histories add to the entire context of any scholarship, discussion, or research.

How do we as archivist/librarians charged with preserving, teaching, and providing access to these oral traditions assist in this transformation of scholarship? Moreover how can we be agents of change in the educational process by ensuring that today's student is exposed to this medium, and thereby increasing critical thinking skills and

information literacy? This paper will attempt to answer these questions, and provide examples of the kinds of collaborative endeavors that encourage scholarship through the use of oral histories to append the stories that were once thought exhausted.

AFRICAN/AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Emminent scholar, Dr. Ali A. Mazrui in his article titled African Archives and the Oral Tradition discusses the pros and cons of the oral vs. written traditions in African communities. Mazrui calls the oral tradition the oldest form of communication, the capacity to “recollect in tranquility.”¹ The reliance on oral tradition alone for many African societies, he posits, has resulted in the marginalization of African scholarship, and refusal to acknowledge that Africa was the originator of any significant contributions to science and philosophy: “the absence of the written word deprived much of Africa of the bounty of cumulative heresy.”² This lack of the written word and reliance on the oral has been an avenue to reject the testimonies of many people of color.

Within the African American communities this reliance on the oral has also been exploited and dismissed as evidenced by two recent discoveries. Both instances are classic examples, one a much revered author of the Declaration of Independence, U S President Thomas Jefferson, and the second surrounds recently deceased U S Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina --one a slave holder and the other a once avowed segregationist of the 1950s and 1960s-- were both “discovered” to have fathered Black children. The African American community passed these stories around for years, but because there was nothing in writing, their oral stories were dismissed until, through DNA testing and family acknowledgement, the truth could not be denied. What is even more telling about these and many stories like this is the lack of credence given to these oral stories by historians and writers who have written extensively on the lives of these two men. Brent Staples of the New York Times puts it succinctly: “The big lesson for historians in the Hemings-Jefferson case was that the oral histories passed down by slaves and their descendants were more reliable than the

¹ Mazrui, Ali A. “African archives and the Oral tradition.” *The Courier*, February 1985, No. 2: 13-15.

² Mazrui, 13.

official written record. This put historians on notice that they should give the oral tradition more credence, especially when working on issues of interracial intimacy.”³

The ideal research is not to rely solely on the written word as the only means of documentation, but in those instances where available, oral histories coupled with the written word serve as powerful tools in verifying the accuracy of an event. Dr. Mazrui explains it very eloquently in his comment on the oral tradition’s ability to illustrate “the dynamism of raw human memory in Africa.”⁴ This raw human memory has allowed the African to maintain their unique ethnic identity “the records of community, the memory of collective identity.”⁵

The need to preserve this collective identity is the impetus for the Oral History Programme at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, a project to record and preserve that country’s oral history and traditions. Fortunately, historians recognized the need to capture this history, or these valuable stories would be lost forever. The interviews are being recorded in the three major languages of the country, transcribed, translated and edited by the historians, cataloged and indexed by librarians and made available to the public. This project is a model for other countries and ensures that through oral traditions the reminiscences will endure for generations.

RESOURCE BASED LEARNING AND ORAL HISTORY

Colleges and universities have recognized the need for a dramatic change in how information is presented. These institutions have recognized that today's students need to move away from the passive-lecture model of education to a more active-research model if they are to become information literate. Institutions have discovered that the traditional methods of learning are woefully inadequate in developing information-literate students, students that have the ability to research, organize, or retain information, According to Patricia Senn Breivik’s study of student retention of course material, "at all levels of schooling students generally show rare high values of as much as 50 percent retained, but results frequently drop below 20 percent." To address these problems related to retention and information-literacy, many of these

³ Staples, Brent. “Senator Strom Thurmond's Not-So-Secret Black Daughter.” New York Times, December 18, 2003.

⁴ Mazrui, 15.

⁵ Mazrui, 15.

institutions have adopted a concept of resource-based learning. Resource-based learning theorizes, "if students are to continue learning throughout their lives, they must be able to access, evaluate, organize, and present information from all the real-world sources existing in today's information society." (Breivik, 25) Resource-based learning forces students to take a more active role in their learning with the results that they develop critical thinking skills. These skills allow students to be responsible for identifying, researching, and solving problems. "Such specific outcomes develop students' abilities to systematically and effectively approach new situation, and promote future success...that mean more than just a grade." (Breivik, 29) According to Breivik, "the collaboration of faculty and librarians is essential to the success of resource-based learning." Through the use of oral histories, archivists and librarians have taken up this challenge to make learning not only an academic exercise for students, but also assist them in using these stories to confront problems and find solutions in the "real world." Oral histories have been used to assist students in learning about different cultures, discovering the impact of historical events, and encourage active participation in their communities.

ORAL HISTORY USE AND THE ARCHIVAL ROLE

Ellen D. Swain's article titled "Oral History in the Archives" illustrates the significant contribution made by archivists and librarians in cooperation with historians to promote the use of oral history. She states, "...the origins of oral history in the United States are rooted firmly in archives and libraries. The Columbia University Oral History Research Office, founded in 1948, was one of the first and most notable programs."⁶ She further states that, "This archival emphasis-the practical use of oral history to supplement or explain information in existing archival collections-dominated the oral history field in the late 1960s and early 1970s."⁷ The Oral History Association was founded in 1967 and the Society of American Archivists, North America's professional organizations for archivists, formed an oral history committee in 1983 that was charged to study the collecting and preservation of oral histories along with establishing legal and ethical standards and guidelines pertaining to the interviews and subsequent use of the documentation. Archivists saw oral histories as

⁶ Elain D. Swain, "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-first Century," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 66, Spring/Summer 2003: 139.

⁷ Swain, 140.

an opportunity to take full advantage of their strengths as curators, appraisers, and researchers to assist historians in “bringing to the forefront issues concerning collection development...”⁸ especially focusing on those “experiences of groups under documented by “mainstream” repositories, such as women, minorities, civil rights and peace activists, and laborers.”⁹ Today there are numerous oral history projects, many under the guidance of archivists and librarians that are filling in these stories and giving a more complete account of the contributions made by minorities and women. As Ms. Swain states in her article, “The unlimited potential for collaboration among disciplines; library outreach to faculty, students, and the community; classroom education; and research through oral history practice, demand active and innovative discourse.”¹⁰

COLLABORATIONS AND RESOURCES

The following information will show how to connect the dots; how scholarship is richer because of this confluence of the oral with the written. As an essential partner, the archivist as educator, in collaboration with faculty in varied disciplines, integrates the use of these primary sources, the oral stories, with historical research methods, thereby encouraging critical and independent thinking skills within the new scholars of tomorrow.

My personal experience with oral histories comes from the side of transcriber and later as a facilitator in an oral history project to document an historical community in New Orleans. Titled the Helen S. Edwards Archival Project, the intent was to establish an onsite archives in the public school that would serve as a model for other schools to document and preserve the history of their communities. This project began as collaboration with the Dr. Clyde Robertson, Director of Africana Studies Department, New Orleans Public Schools and the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. Helen S. Edwards is a New Orleans inner city public school in an impoverished neighborhood with a 100% African American student population. New Orleans’ notorious crime-ridden and drug-infested Florida and Desire housing projects are feeders to the school. The main feature of this project was the

⁸ Swain, 145.

⁹ Swain, 145.

¹⁰ Swain, 157.

development of an oral history component to capture the stories of the neighborhood elders, who were rapidly either leaving or dying. Plans were developed to start an oral history project with the students conducting the interviews and documenting the people and neighborhoods. The project succeeded in establishing an archive within the school and the beginnings of an oral history with area residents was initiated. Unfortunately, through a lack of funding, the project was not encouraged or sustained. The Africana Studies Department is currently working on grants to reconstitute this program.

During my twelve plus years at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans Louisiana, the premiere center in the US that houses manuscript collections on African Americans, the African Diaspora, and people of color, I worked with many historians, writers and researchers using oral history collections. Amistad is arguably the first archival institution in the nation to collect, preserve, and provide access to primary resource material on the Modern Civil Rights Movement. Consequently, the Center has unique civil rights holdings in oral and written format not found anywhere in the country. Their collections on women involved in the Movement are unprecedented. Some significant, but little-known collections, oral and written interviews on the Civil Rights Movement are housed at Amistad Research Center. They include the papers of sociologist and anthropologist Inez Adams who interviewed many of the Montgomery Bus Boycott participants and also included interviews with those people throughout the South living during those turbulent times. I personally arranged the papers of Clarie Collins Harvey that also includes an oral history of her inspiring life and work as a behind the scenes force in organizing and funding the Mississippi Freedom Rides and international and national work for peace. The Kim Lacy Rogers/Glenda Stevens Oral history collection at Amistad is another model example of the collaboration of an historian, Dr. Rogers, with an archivist, Glenda Stevens. Their collection includes interviews with many of the major figures in Louisiana's fight for civil rights including the first Black mayor of New Orleans, Ernest "Dutch" Morial. This oral history collection is significant in documenting the history of the movement in Louisiana and the lives of many of those who have gone on to distinguished careers as judges, lawyers, community activists, and businessmen.

The oral history collection of Andrew Simons, former reference archivist, documents the Black community in Chicago, Illinois and represents a holistic approach to oral history documentation. Mr. Simons's collection includes radio programs, music, civil rights, the Black community, and politics. His recordings of local Black radio programs offer listeners and researchers an opportunity to glimpse issues and concerns within the Black community; issues not addressed in mainstream media. His collection also features interviews with the beloved and first Black mayor of Chicago, the late Harold Washington. Together with the Rogers/Stevens collection, the Simon collection of oral histories offer insight into the machinations and processes that brought two very different Black mayors into power in two large urban cities, one North and one South.

The oral history documentation at Amistad is too numerous to mention here, but as argued earlier, historians must be willing to use these invaluable resources to add to the stories that have been written. Oral histories are providing an opportunity to retell, or in many instances, to provide new perspectives on events and ideas once thought complete. They are giving historians an opportunity to tell those lesser-known stories that give alternative views of people and circumstances in history. Noted historian Darlene Clark Hine, who has used the oral and written collections at Amistad, recently commented, "When I wrote my first book, I depended a lot on oral testimony, which many historians didn't recognize as legitimate...But I decided I needed to talk to everyday people to get a sense of who they are and what they think."¹¹

CONCLUSION

Oral histories are in vogue today. Everywhere one turns institutions or organizations are either conducting oral histories or developing an oral history project, program, or institute. I recently attended the International Oral History Association conference in Rome, Italy whose theme was Memory and Globalization. The conference sent out a request for proposals and received over 600 applications from 64 countries. Yes, Rome was a big draw, but the final presentations consisted of over 40 presentations from 40 countries. The diversity of the presentations showed the possibilities for oral

¹¹ Learning from History, The Historians, *USA Weekend*, Feb. 6-8, 2004: 8-18

history research. The presentations covered everything from projects related to families, ethnic histories, and the effects of globalization on communities, countries, and individuals. One clear theme from many of the papers was the effect that education and the quest for a fair and just society, had on many of these communities, whether they were in Detroit or Brazil, Palestine or Mississippi. The opportunity to have their views represented from their point of view, the need to preserve the history and culture of their lives, the right to tell their stories was what oral histories offered them. A chance to leave something behind for future generations that would allow them to learn from those that came before them or just a chance to say “I was there and this is what happened.” Many of the presentations demonstrated how education was, and continues to be, an avenue for attaining economic and social status, and how people were committed to making that dream a reality for all people in spite of the turbulence of the times. The presentations showcased how leadership and power are not necessarily sought after qualities, but when challenged, people of all colors, status, and educational backgrounds do indeed rise to the occasion.

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Rebecca Hankins is an Assistant Professor/Curator of Area Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station, TX. She was previously a senior archivist at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. This paper has been revised from its original version presented at the 2004 International Oral History Association Conference in Rome, Italy.