

Sharing their Stories: Making Oral Histories Accessible to a Wider Audience

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Abstract

The Oral History Collection at California State University Maritime Academy (Cal Maritime) began as a class project collaboration between history faculty, students and the library. Eventually the library and archives continued to maintain the project outside the classroom setting, increasing the gender diversity of interview subjects and expanding access to the recordings. The collection currently includes personal commentaries from a variety of alumni, as well as former academy presidents and long-time faculty. Recent additions include members of the first female graduating class of 1976. The library and archives have begun a process to create a more robust digital collection from the oral history recordings, to make the videos available for students, faculty, staff, alumni and interested community members. Once the videos are on an accessible platform with captions and transcripts, they can be used as primary sources in a variety of courses.

Background

Oral history has been used as a research method within a variety of disciplines for decades and can be an effective way to capture history not otherwise represented. Oral history can spotlight the lived experiences of communities that might not appear in more traditional published works. While the saying that “History is written by the victors” has been around for centuries in various forms (Phelan, 2019), sharing first person experience has become much easier in recent years with personal websites, message boards or blogs, and social media platforms. However, these are somewhat ephemeral and aren’t necessarily being collected in a curated manner with an eye for archival preservation. Oral history projects maintained by libraries can contribute librarian expertise with information management and the underlying infrastructure necessary to carry on the information and share it with a wider audience.

The Oral History Collection at Cal Maritime was created for just that purpose. Cal Maritime is the smallest California State University (CSU) campus, averaging an enrollment of roughly 1000 students in a typical year. The campus is atypical not only in its size, but also its curriculum, history, and demographics. The school was founded in 1929 as the California Nautical School and joined the CSU system as the 22nd campus in 1995. The first students of color and the first female students were admitted to the campus in the 1970s, and racial, ethnic, and gender diversity is still much lower than at other CSU campuses. It is one of seven maritime academies in the United States, and the only one on the West Coast. The areas of study at Cal Maritime are specialized and many students work in the maritime industry after graduation.

The history of Cal Maritime is unique, and oral history is one method to maintain access to stories that otherwise go by the wayside with the passage of time. The Oral History Project at Cal Maritime originated as a collaboration between Dr. Tim Lynch and librarian Ben Bolin in 2007, with students in Dr. Lynch’s class recording video interviews with alumni. Although Dr. Lynch and Ben Bolin have since moved on to other institutions, the collection of recorded oral history interviews has grown to include 66 video or audio recordings of personal commentaries from a variety of alumni, including members of the first graduating class of female cadets, as well as former academy presidents, long-time faculty, and even community members. I inherited the project and continued to conduct interviews with alumni during on-campus events with a focus to increase the diversity represented in the interviews.

Literature Review

The definition of the practice of oral history itself has undergone change over time. As a new practitioner researching best practices of oral history, I found the simple explanation by Ritchie (2003) that “oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (p. 19) to be a useful starting point. Additionally, Abrams’ (2010) definition provides clear and direct focus: “Oral history is a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analyzing their memories of the past” (p. 1).

Oral history functions both as a research method used by a variety of disciplines as well as its own field of study. Although human use of oral storytelling as

a means of transmitting information is not new, oral history is a relatively new area of academic theory and practice. As such, it has gone through growing pains in the past few decades and there has been an evolution in theory, ethics, language, and best practices (Gluck, 2018).

One example of a shift in language is the name used for the person being interviewed in an oral history interview. A solution is described by Yow (2005), “I use the term *narrator*, rather than *interviewee*, because *narrator* places primary importance on the person telling the story. *Interviewee* uses the suffix *ee*, which is a derivative form, secondary to the primary noun, *interviewer*” (p. 157). Also relating to language, the term *oral history* is multifaceted, and can be used to describe not only “the original oral interview, the recorded version of the interview, the written transcript” but also “the interpretation of the interview material” (Abrams, 2010, p. 9).

A unique aspect to this method is the accessibility of the practice, which is not exclusive to the academic community. In contrast to many disciplines and research methods, oral history is available as a tool for community practitioners and family archives or genealogy enthusiasts. Some well-known community projects include StoryCorps and the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project. Regardless of the background of the person conducting oral history interviews, the Oral History Association provides guidelines and best practices to guide the planning and execution of oral history projects, and has identified “four key elements of oral history work” as “preparation, interviewing, preservation, and access” (Oral History Association, 2018a, para. 1). There are many training sources for novice oral history practitioners (Shopes, 2012) and before getting started, it’s essential to make a plan outlining the goals and intended outcomes. Boyd (2012) provides a series of initial questions to get the planning process started, asking for introspection on topics such as the purpose, desired outcome, necessary equipment and how it will be funded, level of experience and technical support, intentions for long-term access via archives, and larger ethical and legal considerations.

Ethical standards are covered in many contemporary publications related to oral history (Deblasio et al., 2009; MacKay, 2016; Yow, 2005), and specific disciplines which make use of oral sources often have their own guidelines on ethical obligations (Oral History Association, 2018b). Informed consent and collaborative communication that includes the narrator as a partner in the process is emphasized throughout the literature.

The area of Institutional Review Board oversight has been a shifting topic within the field of oral history (Shopes, 2007). Although the high ethical standards for oral historians published by professional associations and in disciplinary texts align with the primary goal of IRB to protect human subjects, some aspects of the structure of IRB review have historically been at odds with the methods of oral history research. The federal “Common Rule” governing IRB, 45 CFR 46 (Office for Human Research Protections, n.d.) prioritizes privacy, and is often interpreted at local institutions to require anonymity for research participants. The nature of oral history does not typically allow for anonymous participants, so this has caused some challenges for practitioners of oral history. However, a 2019 revision to the Common Rule currently exempts oral history projects from IRB review (Kyriakouides, 2020).

Guidance on legal considerations are essential to new and active oral history practitioners alike. Sample forms and documentation aids are available from several sources (Neuenschwander, 2014; Yow, 2005) which is particularly helpful “because oral history interviews are a copyrightable document, owned by the narrator, he or she must sign over – to either an individual researcher or a public archive – rights to the interview via a legal release form” (Shopes, 2010). Without this type of formal authorization, interviews may not be used in research or made public.

Oral history interviews are shared with the public in a variety of ways, but transcripts are fairly common and can be invaluable to researchers. Transcripts also present their own challenges, as described by Wood (2001), “the most difficult, most expensive, most time consuming, and often the most useful part of an oral history is transcribing the interview” (p. 46). As with other aspects of this burgeoning discipline, the methods and best practices around transcription have shifted over time. Some oral historians have made transcriptions of oral history interviews that almost amount to translations by changing the original language of the narrator to fit standard language norms in an effort to make them more readable. Other oral historians have made their best efforts to maintain the original language patterns of the narrator, transcribing the narrator’s words verbatim and using spelling variations to indicate local dialects. Contemporary ethics surrounding transcription are summed up well by Yow (2005): “The least possible tampering with the primary source—*according the most possible respect for the narrator’s unique way of speaking*—is the best way.” (p. 327). As in other steps of the oral history process, communication with the narrator is appropriate to check for meaning and accuracy.

Methods

The oral history collection at Cal Maritime Library began in 2007 as a student class project for a maritime history course, with a collaboration between Dr. Tim Lynch and librarian Benjamin Bolin. Students contacted alumni or retired faculty of the Academy as prospective narrators and invited them to participate in the oral history project. With the guidance of Bolin, students learned about oral history best practices and conducted background research on each narrator’s time at the Academy based on *The Hawsepiper*, the student yearbook, as well as other relevant material from the Library’s Campus History Collection. Students developed questions based on their background research and arranged to record an interview with the alumni on campus during the annual homecoming celebration in October. Some interviews are 1:1 and others are combinations of multiple interviewers or multiple narrators. Each of these interviews were typically recorded by Bolin or another student. The students conducting the oral histories also maintained the necessary documentation for each oral history and some of them even worked on transcribing their interviews.

There are 66 oral history interviews in the current collection, including 64 video recordings and 2 audio recordings. The first interviews were conducted in 2007, and the most recent interviews are from 2015. 48 of the interviews were recorded by students as class projects between 2007 and 2012. After Bolin and Lynch eventually moved to other campuses, the library continued to maintain the project outside the classroom setting. The remaining interviews were conducted by library faculty or staff at Cal Maritime, and they include interviews with alumni, former campus presidents,

retired faculty and staff, and community members. In 2015, we added oral history interviews with two alumni who were among the first class of female cadets on campus.

In 2020, I began a project to create a digital exhibit of the existing oral history collection. This process began with creating a comprehensive inventory of our oral history recordings, which including the number of video files per interview, the length of each video, whether video files exist or not and where they're stored. I also tracked specifics about each interview, such as the location, date, names interviewers and assistants (such as camera operators) as well as the names of the narrators being interviewed. For each narrator, I recorded the dates of their affiliation with Cal Maritime, the nature of their connection to the campus, and looked up details in the Hawsepape yearbooks to verify their names, degree programs and graduation years. We hired a professional video editor to work on the project, and for interviews with multiple video files, he combined the videos into one combined interview file.

I created an index of questions for each oral history video by watching the interviews multiple times in detail and identifying the times and content of each interview question. I noted the main questions and shared the index for each video with our video editor, who added the questions to the videos according to the timestamps, to create context for the viewers. These timestamped question indexes can also be used by researchers to skip to specific portions of a video.

In consultation with our campus Public Affairs, we developed opening and closing graphics for each video to provide a consistent viewing experience for all the recorded oral history interviews. The graphics provide contextual information for viewers with the date, time, names, and campus affiliation information. For the closing graphics, I also tracked down Hawsepape yearbook photos for each of the oral history narrators who were interviewed, and our video editor added the yearbook photos at the end of each video.

As noted by Yow (2005), "It takes a high level of skill and good judgment to force an oral document into a written form that has the degree of truthfulness necessary for research" (p. 327). I do not have formal experience with transcription, so we hired a professional transcription service to transcribe the recorded oral history interviews. In preparation for hiring transcript services, I watched each video carefully for mentions of campus-specific terms that may be unfamiliar to a transcriber. I made a glossary of terms and submitted it with each transcript order to increase the accuracy of transcription. I reviewed the transcripts that were submitted back, made edits when needed, and sent the transcripts to our video editor, who embedded the timestamped files in the videos as subtitles.

The final step is the implementation of the digital collection, which makes the videos browsable and searchable with relevant metadata and transcripts of the interviews. In Summer 2020, the Library began using the Omeka platform to host our first digital exhibit, a collection of ship mural photographs from the Campus History Collection. We plan to use Omeka to host the oral history digital exhibit as well, specifically with an add-on to Omeka designed for oral history projects, called the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS). OHMS was developed by The Louie B. Nunn

Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries, and it provides an interface that allows viewers to view the video, transcript, and index on the same page, and to search for specific words and find the corresponding section of the recorded interview.

Results

Although the primary purpose of this project is to create a digital collection of oral history interviews to make them available to researchers, and not to conduct analysis, I did notice some themes in the interviews that connected with topics I read about in the oral history literature.

As one might expect, the narrators who participated in oral history interviews recognized the benefits of oral history, as exemplified by a comment from Edward Higgins, Class of 1964, in minute 50 of his interview: "You talk to these people, find out about what life's like from a foxhole as opposed to a big map looking down at arrows is really different. I think you get a far greater appreciation for people and their activity when you do oral histories, so I applaud you guys for doing this."

Representation

Oral history does not require a representative sample, but a best practice noted by the Oral History Association mentions the importance of selecting appropriate narrators for a project: "Oral historians should choose potential narrators based on the relevance of their experiences to the subject at hand, while striving to identify and incorporate as many diverse voices as possible" (2018a, para. 4). The oral history collection at Cal Maritime primarily includes interviews of alumni who graduated decades ago, to get an overview of their careers and their experience when they were students and compare that to the experience of students now. Almost all of the narrators in the collection are white men because that's who was attending the Academy decades ago. Female cadets and students of color did not start attending the Academy until the 1970s. One of the goals for the future is to increase the diversity of the collection so that it more accurately represents the current student body in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, career experience, and other areas.

Moreover, the narrators who have participated in the campus oral history project are all people who not only had affiliation with the campus in the past, but have also maintained some level of connection to the institution. A sentiment repeated by several narrators is a fondness for the institution and an appreciation for the life experience they gained at the Academy. There is scant perspective represented in the collection of former students who decided not to continue at the Academy or alumni who have not maintained a connection because of negative experiences. As a result, the interviews may be skewed in one direction.

For example, one of the observations that I noticed from several narrators who graduated several decades ago is that hazing was used as a technique to weed out people who weren't "strong enough" to be at the Academy, from the perspective of the people in power, whether it was student leaders or administration. I would be interested to hear from people who decided to leave after their initial Indoctrination Week or left after a year or so and didn't stay through graduation and aren't participating in the Alumni Association.

A first step in increasing the diversity of representation in the collection has been to add interviews with two of the first female graduates, Lynn Korwatch (Class of '76) and Laura Kovary (Class of '78). The first five female cadets were admitted to the Academy in 1973, and the campus culture is still adjusting to the addition of women on campus, as evidenced by the 1990 California State Legislature Hearing on Problems at the California Maritime Academy and the more recent creation of a Faculty Senate Committee for Gender Equity in 2017. Although female students make up a majority of students nationwide, the female student population at Cal Maritime has hovered around only 15% through the 2010s. In their interviews, Korwatch and Kovary shared their perspectives on being part of the first group of female cadets as well as their careers in the male-dominated maritime industry, and many of those stories focus on the theme of triumphing over adversity. They provided some examples of their lived experience that would not have been visible to male students attending at the same time. By adding additional interviews with students who represent a broader swath of student experience, we can flesh out the shared memory of campus history, and narrators can relate their experience in their own right, and not specifically through the lens as a representative of their gender or other specific group.

Interviewer Trust

Students conducting oral history interviews for this project often asked alumni to reflect on differences between their experience on campus in decades past compared to the current experience of students at the Academy. This is an area where the possible power dynamics of interviewer trust come into play, which is highlighted by Mercier & Buckendorf in their description of differences between “insider” and “outsider” researchers or interviewers (2010, pp. 21–22). They identify some advantages and disadvantages of each type of category, with advantages of “insiders” including personal familiarity with the subject or even the narrator, knowledge of sources to obtain historical and other records, and an understanding of the relationship to other communities. Challenges of “insiders” include a desire to present their community in a positive light, which may hamper follow-up questions that could illuminate thorny issues, and an assumption of familiarity with places or events mentioned by the narrator that would otherwise be clarified by an “outsider” interviewer. On the other hand, advantages of “outsider” interviewers include a fresh perspective that may lead the interviewer to ask about things an insider might take for granted, while challenges include additional time to develop trust with a narrator and the community.

In the case of this oral history collection, one could assume that all of the interviewers are “insiders” through affiliation with the Academy as student, faculty or staff. However, the level of rapport between interviewers and narrators in each of the oral history interviews in our collection are varied, and I believe that some narrators perceived their interviewers as “outsiders” although they were current students at the narrator’s alma mater. If an alumnus graduated during a time when all their classmates were white males, anyone outside of that group may be categorized in their mind as “outsiders.” An example of high interviewer trust and a perception of the interviewers as “insiders” was clear in the oral history interview of Gordon Simmons,

Class of 1960. Simmons was asked by his two student interviewers, who were also white males, at minute 25 about his “opinions on allowing females to attend the Academy” (which was not the case when he graduated in 1960). Simmons felt comfortable speculating that the addition of female cadets could detract from the campus camaraderie because of a need to be more delicate with language and sensitive to other issues, which he thought might reduce the male bonding and development of friendship that he remembered from his time at the Academy. He acknowledged that he didn’t have personal experience with a coed college environment, and added that “From a work environment, they [women] create some pretty interesting challenges.” In this interview, the narrator felt a high level of trust and comfort with the interviewers, and we may have received a different response if a female interviewer had asked the same question.

Individual Memory and Collective Memory

A consistent theme that appeared in many of the interviews were memories about the prevalence of hazing among students. Some narrators remembered it as a useful tool to indoctrinate new cadets into the campus culture and maintain order, and some narrators remembered the hazing as a hellish experience. In some of the oral history interviews, these seemingly contradictory perspectives were not mutually exclusive. Carl Shipley, Class of 1955, described in detail (starting at minute 28 of his interview) the equator crossing ceremony that was typical during his time on the annual training cruise, explaining that “It was real harassment for about three hours.” However, in his next sentence, he also stated that when he looks at his equator crossing certificate, he remembers the experience with some fondness.

Yow illustrates this ostensible dissonance with an example from a community of mill workers who simultaneously held “memories of harsh personal experiences and positive memories of mill work” (2005, p. 53). Yow explains that she “was amazed at the way their individual memories and collective memory were contradictory although both were seriously believed and simultaneously held. The testimony of personal hardships...was at odds with the rosy picture...the collective memory” (p. 52). Yow goes on to summarize research which indicates that collective memory can overshadow individual memory, creating that “rosy picture” she refers to. The shared experience of our communities colors the memory of our past, and while each oral history interview is the recollections of an individual, it also represents the collective memory. Although we have photos of some of these past practices of campus culture in the annual yearbooks, oral history provides a remarkable glimpse into the daily lives of cadets on campus and on the training ship.

Another example of collective memory is the shared experience of the Class of 1964, which represents an outsized portion of the oral history recordings. While on shore leave in Colombia during their 1962 training cruise, the cadets were on a train when it crashed into another train, injuring and killing passengers. Alumni who were part of this experience remember it vividly and share similar versions of the same story, which include details about cadets offering assistance to injured passengers, helping them get off the train and providing first aid. The memory of the train wreck is clearly a strong part of their collective identity as a group of alumni, and members of

the Class of 1964 have a high incidence of participation in the oral history project and other campus initiatives.

Memory is Fallible

Some oral history interviews make it clear why multiple perspectives and additional documentation are sometimes necessary to supplement each other. Personal memory is fallible, especially as time marches on. Alumni who are recollecting stories and events through the filter of multiple decades will inevitably have some faulty memories here and there. One example from our collection is an interview with an alumnus from the Class of 1946, Denny McLeod, who praised the shift of Cal Maritime from an independent institution to a campus within the California State University (CSU) system. However, he misattributes the work of that transition to the incorrect campus president. McLeod names Dr. Bill Eisenhardt (president 2001-12) as the driving force behind the school's incorporation into the CSU, but it happened two campus presidents earlier, with the efforts of Dr. Mary Lyons (president 1990-96).

I was struck by this slip and found an insight from Portelli relevant here: "The importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in... 'errors' sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts" (1981, p. 100). Mary Lyons, who led the Academy to join the CSU system, is the only female president in the Academy's history. She was brought in to weather a period of instability after the institution was scrutinized by the California State Legislature and the federal Maritime Administration (MARAD) for problems of sexual harassment and discrimination. Although Lyons' accomplishments during her six years as president of the Academy include securing the future stability of the institution by joining the CSU and obtaining a new training ship to replace the very old previous training ship (Reichard, 2020), her name does not come up in the oral history interviews as much as other campus presidents. This could be for a variety of reasons, but it is worth noting that her gender and background in higher education, rather than the military, may have marked her as an "outsider" in the perception of narrators represented in the current oral history collection.

Conclusions

The Cal Maritime Oral History Collection provides a unique window into an aspect of higher education and the maritime industry that is generally under-documented. There are countless publications and documentaries that exhaustively cover the experience of military veterans, but merchant mariners are often left out of these accounts. The collection presents a trove of material that can be used by researchers and integrated into classroom instruction on campus.

There are several examples of assignments and activities that combine oral history and curriculum. Some, such as the original student project that began this collection, involve the students in the development, interviewing and recording process of oral history (Hattwig et al., 2015). Others make use of existing oral history interviews (DeZouche, 2018; Gradowski & Gould, 2012), which is the direction that

this collection could now take. As stated by Gould & Gradowski, “Creatively designed multimedia projects based on video oral histories are uniquely suited to engage millennial students in authentic research” (2014, p. 1), and there are many resources for pedagogical design (Ardemendo & Kuszmar, n.d.; Wood, 2001)

Future plans include a collaboration with a History professor on campus. We have been discussing the initial stages of formal plans to contribute additional oral history interviews to the collection so that it stays as a living collection and doesn't become stagnant. Our plans are to incorporate more recent alumni who represent a variety of student experiences, as well as faculty, staff and administrators with multiple perspectives.

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